



PRE-SERVICE STUDENT-TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY THROUGHOUT COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A CASE STUDY IN GREECE

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to investigate undergraduate students' views regarding how the pandemic is perceived as having had an impact on them as future educators. The sample consists of students in pre-school education who experienced the pandemic and the changes it brought about during their undergraduate studies. The research data was collected through an anonymous questionnaire followed by a thematic content analysis. From the qualitative data analysis pertaining to the way in which the pandemic affected the respondents' perception of themselves as a prospective teacher, four categories emerged: i. Changes and Transformations, ii. Loss/Absence, iii. Long Distance Technology, and iv. Experience. It becomes clear that respondents seem to perceive themselves as educators through coping with the changes they face, through utilizing new technologies, and through gaining experience or even lacking it. However, a notable finding of this research is the future perspective and further capitalizing on the experience the students went through. In some cases, this experience is seen as usable in similar circumstances in the future, while in others it is deemed as an all-purpose tool enabling them to overcome any kind of challenge. This research paper aims to contribute with its own approach to a more profound understanding of how the changes experienced by students in times of change and challenge are seen as something of value in reference to their identity.

Keywords: professional identity, pandemic, COVID-19, undergraduate students, pre-school education, prospective teachers

1. Introduction

The professional identity of teachers is formed and evolved through a dynamic interaction between the ever-changing teaching contexts and the personal interpretive framework developed by each educator in the course of their educational training (Ifanti

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& Fotopoulou, 2010. Kálmán et al., 2020. Kelchtermans, 2009. Van Lankveld et al., 2021). Day et al. (2005) refer to two tensions that teachers experience between the “core” ideal identity of educators, such as caretaking for their students, and one which rises on occasion in the face of adapting to external factors. External factors are defined as the varied changes in education and in the case at hand the impact and repercussions of COVID-19 pandemic (Foreman-Brown et al., 2022).

However, apart from external factors that serve as a reference point in defining and formulating teachers' identity, the time period of students' academic studies appears to be of essence - as emerging in the literature related to this subject. This time period plays a substantial role in the way prospective educators develop their professional identity and it is integrally correlated and pertinent to its construction. To this end, the contribution of academic studies proves of essence providing teaching experience both in theory and in practice as part of the academic syllabus, thus facilitating undergraduate students' professional identity to formulate during their studies (Fotopoulou, 2019; Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2010; Nguyen & Yang, 2018; Schepens et al., 2009).

The nature of the teacher's identity combined with the external influences it receives and through which it evolves and develops, the role of academic studies in undergraduate students' identity along with the new reality emerging during the pandemic comprise a different research approach and perspective of educators and their professional identity (see e.g.: Jones & Kessler, 2020). Prompted by the effects of the pandemic on the formulation of the identity of an educator on active duty (Foreman-Brown et al., 2022), this research aims to investigate how undergraduate students of preschool education view their identity during the pandemic.

More specifically, this research aims to explore how this transition and the ensuing new reality in the everyday routine of academic students, as this resulted from the pandemic circumstances, affected the way students perceive their own identity as prospective teachers.

It is estimated that investigating the research question presented above will aid in better understanding the challenges faced by undergraduate students of preschool education during the pandemic and reveal the impact of attendant changes had on their identity. Furthermore, information will be drawn to shed light on how the identity of new educators is formulated, defined, and redefined in similar times of radical changes and uncertainty (Giner-Gomis et al., 2022).

2. Professional identity of teachers

The professional identity of teachers is founded on a set of beliefs and perceptions that individuals have formulated about their profession (Meyer, 2009; Yuan & Lee, 2016). According to Flores and Day (2006), an identity is defined as an ongoing and dynamic process that encompasses deriving meaning and redefining the values and experiences of individuals. In addition, the identity of educators is largely linked to personal elements, and it refers to the way each individual perceives the concept of a teacher and

of themselves as being one (Meyer, 2009; Yuan & Lee, 2016). Beijaard et al. (2004) claim that the concept of professional identity in the field of teacher training is defined in multiple ways and by different approaches, while a few years earlier Cooper and Olson (1996) pointed out that the professional identity is a concept with varied layers, where multiple factors like historical, social, psychological and cultural come into play when educators perceive themselves as teachers (Cooper & Olson, 1996, in: Chong & Low, 2009:60).

In a similar vein, it is particularly interesting to approach the teachers' professional identity from the aspect of feelings and emotions at play (Day & Leitch, 2001). Beauchamp και Thomas (2009) focuses on emotions to better understand teachers' identity and they claim that they constitute a major factor through which the identity formulates and manifests itself. Feelings and emotions account for a substantial part of teachers' identity, which follows them in their career path thereafter. There is a considerable body of research showing that undergraduate students are confronted with a multitude of emotions in the process of learning to teach, which may bring influence to bear in how they interpret various learning experiences and the process through which they perceive themselves in the teacher's profession. (see e.g.: Flores & Day, 2006; Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2010; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; Timostsuk & Ugaste, 2010; Yuan & Lee, 2016).

Similarly, through a post-structural approach, Foucault (1979) highlights the contribution and the role of emotions in the formulation of identity as an element impacted by the discourse of power and knowledge surrounding teachers (in: Jones & Kessler, 2020). In further analysis, Foucault (1979) supports that the aforementioned discourse encompasses beliefs related to what educators are or are not, beliefs about the teacher-student relationship, and the function of schools in society (Foucault (1979) in: Jones & Kessler, 2020). Educators within the school environment perform their duties as part of a framework with multi-faceted interpretations, requirements, and needs pertaining to their occupation, which puts them in a state of constant negotiation and action. As Zembylas (2003: 224) points out that "*a Foucaultian perspective would argue that teacher identity formation is a by-product of power/knowledge within a context of normalized institutional codes*" as a result of which teachers are obligated to construct their identities with the discursive material made available to them (Jones & Kessler, 2020).

3. Methodological framework

Before the COVID-19 pandemic teaching in tertiary education took place – for the most part – face-to-face. However, for the duration of the pandemic, the situation changed profoundly with the overwhelming majority of academic classes taking place exclusively online, which established a new normal for both teachers and students (Vallee, 2020. Watermeyer et al., 2021). Although Higher education soon reorganized itself to cope with the changes (Giner-Gomis et al., 2022), the extent and the volume of changes that resulted due to the pandemic was tremendous, as was the corresponding difficulty in confronting those changes (Jones & Kessler, 2020). Furthermore, the changes did not leave

undergraduate students unaffected since they had to promptly adapt to those changes which were mainly related to teaching and training methods (Aizenberg, 2022; Carrillo & Flores, 2020).

The present research was designed and carried out taking into consideration the changes the pandemic brought about in relevance to the educational and teaching context which is of concern here. The research was conducted in the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education (hereafter: DESECE) of the University of Patras in the academic year 2022-2023. To refer briefly to it, DESECE of the University of Patras, located in the city of Patras, in West Greece, is a public university, subject to the supervision of the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. Studies here are free of charge and last eight semesters which lead to graduation. Graduates are eligible to work in public or private preschool facilities in Greece.

The research sample is comprised of undergraduate students of the department. The selection of the sample was targeted rather than random on the grounds that the total number of the participants in the research had experienced the transition from a face-to-face teaching to distance learning and the return to normality with their face-to-face attendance in the academic environment after the strict sanitary measures were lifted. An additional distinctive quality of the selected sample is associated with their academic study framework in the pandemic since both theoretical classes and practical training were involved in the course of these transitions from digital to face-to-face teaching modes.

The research material was collected through an anonymous written questionnaire as recommended in investigating experiences and perceptions, while through open-ended questions respondents had the opportunity to illustrate their thoughts, arguments, and experiences analytically (Field & Hole, 2010; Fink, 2003; Maxwell, 2013). Moreover, the specific method of data collection was deemed preferable to a semi-structured interview in order to maintain the anonymity of the respondents, which is ensured through anonymous written questionnaires and contributes to a better quality of data while it is also appropriate for a simultaneous collection of data (Vamvoukas, 2010: 248-249; Kiriazis, 2011: 117-118). The phrasing and clarity of the questions were verified and evaluated prior to the research by using potential respondents who were not included in the final sample of participants in the research. The questionnaire was administered in the sidelines of class time and participation in the research was optional and carried no grading scores for students. The total number of participant respondents was 25 students in the fourth year of their studies and the response rate was 100%. As regards the demographic characteristics of the research, 92% of the respondents are female.

More specifically, the research question on how the pandemic affected undergraduate students in perceiving themselves as teachers was phrased as follows: *"How do you think the pandemic has affected you as pre-service teachers?"*

In the discussion of findings which is to follow, the chosen method of processing the responses was the thematic content analysis on a sentence-by-sentence level. The specific methodology was chosen since it allows for a systematic investigation of texts

and leads to a systematic coding of written speech, which, in the case at hand, is the written research question addressing the students (Kiriazi, 2011: 281-292).

4. Findings

The research data were processed without having axes or categories pre-defined; instead, data findings were determined based on content analysis, which is why the method of deductive analysis was employed and the sentence constitutes the reference point as a recording unit (Kiriazi, 2011). In order to present the qualitative results, respective extracts of responses were selected so as to demonstrate the diversity of views and opinions that participant students expressed. In view of ensuring anonymity as well as to avoid any gender mentions, a standardized grammar was chosen in the wording of the questionnaire and the codification of the participants' responses was done in the form of S00.

From the qualitative data analysis pertaining to the way in which the pandemic affected the respondents' perception of themselves as a prospective teacher, four categories emerged:

- i. Changes and Transformations,
- ii. Loss/Absence,
- iii. Long Distance Technology,
- iv. Experience.

The focus in category i. is on the research participants' attitude towards changes. Students appear to be aware of the changes resulting from the pandemic and in some cases, they realise that these changes constitute solid points of reference in the educational context and that as teachers they may be required in the future to deal with similar ones. At the same time, they identify a teacher's ability to cope with changes as combining with some qualities, such as flexibility and adaptability.

The following excerpts are indicative:

"Surely I was made to think about how I would cope with education under the circumstances." (S06)

"I believe the pandemic helped me understand that as a teacher I will be later on required to cope with different conditions and circumstances each time. I'll have to be prepared to adapt." (S008)

"I think that it has influenced me in that I don't take anything for granted since the circumstances we experience every day can vary any time. So, this experience has helped me to learn to adapt more easily and to be prepared for changes." (S10)

"As prospective teachers, the pandemic helped us realise that things constantly change and we should be alert so as to constantly find solutions to various issues that may ensue each time." (S13)

"[...] prompt and efficient thinking as well as an adaptability and flexibility are qualities that a big proportion of students and teachers have gained." (S14)

"I will know that anything is possible therefore I will be able to deal with a crisis with a greater composure and optimism" (S16)

The next category of findings (category ii.) refers to the impact the pandemic had on the perceived loss/absence of communication and interaction of the respondent students in the context of a classroom mostly:

"[...] the value of applying technology became apparent but also the indispensable aspect of all the children being together in one classroom, interacting and collaborating physically close." (S07)

"It helped me realise the importance of the teaching process and that it cannot be replaced in any way other than teaching face-to-face." (S25)

There are also mentions of absence of experience in reference to their academic studies:

"I believe that we have been affected to a great extent [...] because we experienced unprecedented state of affairs, like distance learning and I think that students of previous years who did not have to deal with such conditions are at a better level than us." (S20)

"With tele-education, the theoretical part of our studies may not have been lost but I believe a huge part of the practical part has." (S23)

The next category that follows (iii.) focuses on associating the pandemic with new technologies and on how these new existing conditions relate with them as prospective teachers. This transition resulted in students familiarizing themselves with new technologies:

"In addition, I got familiar with new technologies which will surely prove useful in the future." (S06)

"[...] despite all the negative impacts, I think the pandemic brought me closer to technology [...]" (S22)

What is more, making the most of new technologies and their contribution to the educational process is pointed out as well as referring to potential use of them in similar circumstances:

"I now think that technology is an inextricable part of daily life. Therefore, with the pandemic, it has become integral in our life more. So, as prospective teachers, we ought to make the most of it in the educational process." (S03)

"[...] we now know how to handle distance learning." (S09)

"I will know how to teach remotely, which is a skill likely to prove very useful [...]." (S16)

"The fact that we familiarized ourselves so much with online education may help us in the future in some situation that we will either choose as a condition or will be imposed on us due to necessity, like in the pandemic." (S17)

The findings in category iv. refer to the experience gained during the pandemic owing to its particular circumstances:

"It is an idea that won't "terrify" me anymore since I saw other teachers how they do the lesson [...]" (S04) και *"[...] it also helped in being ready to find solutions in specific cases"* (S22).

After analyzing and studying these four categories emerging from the responses of the participant students in the research, the following findings were also established: The concept of change and transformation as well as methods to deal with changes is pervading almost all the students' responses in their entirety, regardless of the emerging categories. The process of identifying and recording these two additional commonalities revealed three proclivities among respondents as regards changes and management of these changes.

The first has to do with the competence to cope with emergencies and unforeseeable situations which are to rise throughout the whole professional career of the teacher and the ability to face up to them. The pandemic as a context served as a catalyst for coping measures of the specific change and at the same time as a more general field of speculation about how potentially any change could be dealt with. In the same vein, it becomes apparent that changes and transformations, especially in the context of education, constitute a constant feature. Adaptability and flexibility are skills that the teacher should have in order to cope with any challenge and change irrespective of its particular features (category i.)

The second tendency identified shows that respondents believe they have the proper resources and means to cope with the attendant changes of the pandemic. Adaptability and flexibility relate to them in particular cases which bear resemblance to

the features of the pandemic. Similarly, their familiarization with new technologies proved really effective in conducting distance learning classes and in maneuvering the restrictions imposed due to the pandemic.

However, this familiarization with new technologies seems to be a skill that they can apply in conditions referring to the circumstances that prevailed during the pandemic rather than something more general. In other words, this tendency shows that they do have and do acknowledge the contribution of flexibility, adaptability, and the new technologies in education on the one hand, but on the other, they associate activating and utilizing those skills and those tools in conditions akin to the pandemic (categories iii. & iv.).

The third tendency regards the group of respondents who seem to have reservations about or even negative attitudes towards their function within the changes that came with the pandemic. They believe that the way they experienced those changes harmed them and was of no benefit to them in terms of some skill that could possibly be put to good use in the future; instead, they see themselves as lacking in educational experience which would help them in their prospective teaching career, ergo in formulating their professional identity (category ii.).

5. Discussion

COVID-19 pandemic brought about a host of changes, a number of which related to the teaching process. This article seeks to explore the views of undergraduate students in early childhood education as regards their experiences during their academic studies and the impact the imposed changes had on their professional identity. This research discussion originates from two keynotes, one being that teachers' professional identity is identified, to begin with, their undergraduate studies, and the next looks into the special conditions rising during the pandemic-mostly as regards the academic context of studies-the prevailing feature of which was the transition from live to distance learning. This juxtaposition serves as a reflective springboard in exploring students' identity in the course of COVID-19 pandemic.

The result-findings analysis shows that the pandemic and the changes brought about by it affected to a great extent students and their perceptions about themselves as prospective teachers. The findings revealed four categories regarding the way the pandemic affected their opinions and at the same time, three proclivities transpired relating to their perception of changes or crises to come in the educational domain as well as how to cope with them.

From the sample's responses, it is found that through the pandemic respondents were able to realise that changes constitute a constant point of reference within the context of education, manifesting themselves in various forms and they also pertain to the future. Furthermore, these changes -as they point out- have an impact on them as prospective teachers since they have to be alert and vigilant so as to face up to them in the most effective way possible. In some cases, they appear uncertain of the possibility or

the efficiency of reactions in the face of changes but at the same time, they acknowledge the fact that changes will continue to exist and persistent alertness, flexibility, and adaptability to them is required. This finding is consistent with Foucault (1979), Zembylas (2003), and Christensen et al. (2022), who points out that teachers' identity is easily affected by structural changes within teaching contexts. In the same vein, familiarization, flexibility, and adaptability of students in the face of changes that are implemented at any given time within the school context constitute a particularly significant finding integrated into a broader perspective corroborating the assumption that the profession of a teacher is transformational by nature (Feiman-Nemser, 2012).

A few student-respondents point out that during the pandemic they were deprived of face-to-face communication, which cannot be substituted for by communicating via new technologies. In addition, lack of communication in the context of their academic studies and its impact on the quality of the provided teaching experience constitute negative aspects that cannot be compensated for. Similar results are found in Giner-Gomis et al. (2022).

In order to address the restrictions imposed due to the pandemic, alternative forms of communication were sought out and put to use. Specifically in the education sector, live teaching was converted into digital, distance learning thanks to technology and the benefits it provides. The students participating in the research emphasize the usefulness and the necessity for technology and in their judgment, they think that they managed to grow familiar with it, especially as regards teaching processes. This familiarity mostly refers to the fact that technology enables them to work in class (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020; Giner-Gomis et al., 2022). Additionally, they think they can make good use of technologies in the future in the sector of education in circumstances akin to those of the pandemic.

Another element found from the data analysis pertains to the experience gained by students during their academic studies in the pandemic. This experience can be exploited also in the future and can serve as a point of reference in similar conditions. This belief reveals that despite the restrictions and the difficulties students were required to overcome during the pandemic, they did manage experientially to become aware of, identify, and learn the way in which teachers adapt themselves and their teaching in emergencies or urgent social situations (Allen et al., 2020). Furthermore, the four categories and the three proclivities that surfaced through the research data attest to the fact that despite the restrictions imposed on teaching classes, the pandemic had a beneficial effect on the participants of the research. A similar finding has been reported also by Giner-Gomis et al. (2022).

At this point, it seems appropriate to point out certain limitations as well as future extensions to the scope of the present research paper. The main limitation lies in the fact that it has been designed for an exclusively targeted sample of respondents as mentioned already. It involves a specific sample of undergraduate students examining the experience they went through in the context of their academic studies, which is associated with two dimensions of learning (live and distance) in combination with both the

theoretical and practical components of their studies. In addition, the short time span in which the research was to be conducted aiming to identify the features of the specific sample (in time before their graduation) should also be taken into consideration.

This research aims to contribute to a better understanding of the formulation of the identity of new teachers in the light of a given set of circumstances in time bearing multiple peculiarities, concerns, and implications on an academic- and not only -context. As regards further extensions in the findings of the research, they can offer an interpretative framework regarding the role changes play in undergraduate students' perception of themselves as prospective teachers, and by implication, the impact of changes on their identity. Therefore, the findings can contribute and be put to use as a theoretical framework about how the COVID-19 pandemic can impact the identity of undergraduate students in other departments as well.

Another angle of extensions could also be to explore the beliefs and opinions of more parties involved in the educational process during the period of the pandemic or in other levels of education as well as how the identity of undergraduate students is impacted and formulated in circumstances which are characterized more generally by instability, changes and transformations on a par with those in the COVID-19 pandemic. It would also be of value to carry out comparative research involving undergraduate students of early childhood education experiencing the pandemic in other countries similarly as in Greece.

6. Conclusions

The result-findings of this research paper contribute to a better understanding of the formulation of undergraduate students' identity in times distinguished by intense and extensive changes as was the case with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The contribution of the present research paper is deemed valuable for the following reasons: firstly, it can serve as a reference point for further investigative approaches with the ultimate objective to confirm or disprove the factors that appear to bear a brunt on and influence the identity of new teachers, with an emphasis on time periods of crises and transformations, as was the pandemic period; in other words, an attempt to reveal identical similarities and common references or not with findings of other research on the same subject. Secondly, the present result-findings can serve as a research tool for a comparative approach aiming at a deeper understanding of the identity of an educator. They may comparatively play the role of a springboard for other potential factors that came into play during the pandemic and which had spatial, temporal, cultural, or other kinds of background origins, thus differentiating the revelation of additional factors at play on a research level.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that it became apparent from the research that the pandemic with its attendant changes and transformations in the context of undergraduate studies, which was the subject of the present paper, impacted the way students perceived themselves as prospective teachers to a great extent. They approached

experientially an unusual and unforeseeable aspect of the educational practice and through this process, they contemplated reflectively on some potential challenges that might emerge in the future which they would be called upon to overcome as teachers. They perceived themselves as teachers in a different context and this effort of theirs to rise to the challenge and function as best as possible within the given context as well as in potentially similar circumstances in the future results in their formulating the professional identity of a teacher who can envision such changes and transformations as an opportunity for action and reappraisal within the educational process.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

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