

Processes in the Formation of Student and Professional Identities – A Study of Education Degree Students in a VET institution

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Abstract: A growing body of research in education shows that students' opportunities for academic identity development impacts their academic achievement (Vassallo 2014). However, despite a recognition of the importance of identity development and the myriad of initiatives to enhance students' identity development and sense of belonging, the latter continue to fail to obtain an academic identity (Farrell 1990). Unfortunately, this is so to the extent that many report a negative or insecure academic self-concept and identity, hence shortchanging students in their preparedness when entering increasingly complex professional workplaces. Jensen and Jetten (2016) argue that the inability to develop a professional identity limits students' understanding of the relevance of their studies and leads to uncertainty, stress, and poor academic achievement.

Professional identity is comprised of two distinct professional paradigms: social, which is characterized by doing, and psychological, which is characterized by being. As such attitudes, behaviours, and ethics are as necessary as knowledge, skills, and competences. One without the other presents an incomplete conception of professional identity (Crigger and Godfrey 2014; McCammon and Brody 2012).

This paper focuses on the first stage of a three-year research study and looks into the students' positionalities and perspectives of current and future self as they embark on a three-year education degree programme. The researchers use a qualitative approach to understand the students' academic and/or professional identities and the life trajectories which led to their current self, with primary data being collected from life histories, reflections, and focus groups. Inductive qualitative content analysis revealed that personalities and lifelong trajectories impact students' perceptions and positionalities on a personal, academic, and professional level and that these may limit or enhance growth. Engaging in reflexive practices enhances awareness, leading to liberation and further growth.

Keywords: personalities; life trajectories; identity; identity formation; prospective educators; reflection

Introduction

A growing body of research in education shows that students' opportunities for academic identity development impacts their academic achievement (Vassallo, 2014). However, despite a recognition of the importance of this and the myriad of initiatives to enhance students' identity development and sense of belonging, students continue to fail to foster academic identity (Farrell 1990), to the extent that many report a negative or insecure academic self-concept.

In addition to this, while several studies focus on the development of students' academic identity as a factor to ease transition into university, very little research has been done on students' professional identity development (Trede and Bridges 2012). In the current and future scenarios, where the demand for students to be optimally prepared when entering increasingly complex professional workplaces, this is highly unfortunate and is shortchanging students in their preparedness. Jensen and Jetten (2016) argue that students feel the need to develop a professional identity to appreciate and understand the relevance of their studies, and the inability to develop it leads to uncertainty, stress, and perceived poor academic achievement.

Professional identity is comprised of two distinct professional paradigms: social and psychological. The socialization process is characterized by doing, while the psychological process is characterized by being. As such, attitudes, behaviours, and ethics are as necessary as knowledge, skills, and competences. One without the other presents an incomplete conception of professional identity (Crigger and Godfrey 2011; McCammon and Brody 2012).

This paper, which focuses on the first stage of a three-year research study, analyses the students' positionalities and perspectives of their current and future self as they embark on a three-year education degree programme. The main research question being addressed in this paper is "What contributes to the formation of student identities as academics and as future professionals?" In particular, the authors, seek to understand:

1. What are the students' current identities?
2. What impacted the formation of students' predominant academic and/or professional identities?
3. How did the students form their current identities?
4. How do the students perceive themselves in the future?
5. What are the students' perceived challenges to reach their future goals?

Literature Review

Introduction to Identity

Identity denotes the meaning individuals attach to themselves through the perceptions of self and others. Eccles (2009: 78) discusses how identity is linked to questions such as: "Who am I?, What am I about? What is my place in my social group? What is important to me? What do I value? What do I want to do with my life?"

Identity is a complex subject and one can have multiple identities pertaining to the personal, social, academic, and professional spheres they occupy (Ibarra and Petriglieri 2010). Eccles (2009) conceptualises identity in two sets of perceptions: those related to skills, characteristics and competences; and those related to personal values and goals. Exploring one's skills and commitment to values is necessary to a healthy identity development (La Guardia 2009).

Development of Identities

Identities develop throughout life's trajectory, but the process is neither simple nor linear nor progressive. It is in fact complex and fluid (Izadinia 2013) and, in an educational context, is continually negotiated throughout the life of the student, graduate, and established professional. In the case of academic identity, this is often determined by self-evaluated positive or negative experiences. The complexity of identity formation is substantiated

further by Turner and Tobell (2017), who posit that students dealing with past, present, and future identities find it psychologically challenging. This can be even more challenging when students experience transitions in their academic journey, such as moving from secondary education to higher education.

Identity in the Context of Higher Education

In the context of higher education, Jackson (2016) refers to the transition to a professional identity as the pre-professional identity (PPI) which encompasses “feelings of personal adequacy and satisfaction in performing the expected role” (Paterson et al. 2002: 7). Self-esteem (Henkel 2005), a positive attitude (Confederation of British Industry 2011), confidence (Nicholson et al. 2013), the ability to reflect on experiences (Yorke and Knight 2004), being self-aware (Klenowski et al. 2006), and being a critical learner (Trede and Bridges 2012) are other core elements that contribute to the formation of a pre-professional identity. Bridgstock (2009) identifies having a keen interest in personal development and lifelong learning as important contributors, together with having a sense of meaning (Henkel 2005) and a broad understanding of technical knowledge (Reid et al. 2008).

Hence while academic identity supports feelings of belonging in higher education, professional identity supports feelings of adequacy in understanding how to perform in future jobs and, together, they strengthen the motivation and the purpose for learning. Kaplan and Flum (2009) and McCaslin (2009) highlight that motivation affects the identity of the self and vice-versa. Jensen and Jetten (2016) argue that identity processes are essential for strong academic achievement and should be given their due importance throughout the study journey. Therefore, professional identity development should be regarded as a distinct process for students and education institutions, and those responsible for academic curricula must pay attention to and support this process towards high achievement. Holmes (2013: 549) asserts that a student becomes a graduate not simply by formally achieving a degree award but by acting “in ways that lead others to ascribe to them the identity of being a person worthy of being employed”.

While students may create many possible future selves, achievement of this may be determined by expectations about appropriate and feasible future images and models, as such the interactions with significant professionals in the field have a significant impact. Farrell (1990) found that, in practice, within programmes of study, little conversation was specifically addressing students’ academic or professional identity, resulting in difficulties in describing themselves as students in general and also in developing unrealistic ideas about themselves as future employees.

Role of Educational Institutions in Students’ Formation

Educational institutions play an important role in students’ identity formation and transitions from secondary education to universities are discussed by a number of researchers. Lowe and Cook (2003) discuss how student study habits from secondary education remain evident in the students’ first semester at university, indicating that the transition to university is indeed challenging. Furthermore, they also suggest that students who struggle academically will either drop out of university or lack academic satisfaction and fulfilment.

Incorrect assumptions by education institutions may denote that students are already autonomous and do not provide the necessary support to truly become so (Turner and Tobell 2017). This can be particularly problematic at the early stages of a degree programme. Besides autonomy, Murtagh (2010) also highlights the difficulty students encounter with assessment processes once students join university. Another misalignment

was highlighted by Crisp et al. (2009) who argue that students' expectations may be different than universities' practices. The authors propose that university staff initiate discussions with students to better understand their expectations and try to address gaps to improve students' satisfaction (Crisp et al. 2009), which in turn affects their identities. Murtagh (2010) places more onus on the students and suggests that these should be informed about the university's expectations and needs. One effective way of identifying and working on identified gaps is through reflection.

Opportunities to Reflect in Degree Programmes

In the context of higher education, reflection is regularly associated with "self-awareness, professional practice and identity" and is concerned with the "analysis of one's own beliefs and ideas" (Ryan and Carmichael 2016: 155). Reflection is, nowadays more than ever before, an expectation for students, including those in higher education (Ryan 2011). Besides enabling students to grow personally, reflecting leads to acting upon feedback provided by lecturers and peers, and improving their performance in assessment.

In the context of initial teacher education, being able to reflect is even more necessary. Kelchtermans (2001) considers reflexivity to be instrumental for teachers as this underpins effective and transformative teaching practices and leads to professional development. Furthermore, prospective teachers will themselves be expected to teach their students how to reflect, making it more important for students following initial teacher education to master this competence.

Education institutions, including those offering degree programmes, have an opportunity to include well-planned learning activities where students are expected to reflect. This can be facilitated by several tools, one of which is the reflective journal (Ryan and Carmichael 2016). Yancey (2015) suggests a social aspect to reflections in degree programmes, where students share their own reflections with others. This practice enables students to understand themselves even more.

Connection Between Professional, Personal, and Social Identities

In a review of higher education literature on professional identity formation, Trede and Bridges (2012) concluded that while most articles discussed professional, personal, and social identities, connections between them were not made explicit, and evidence on how they could be reconciled and integrated was missing.

In view of the findings in the literature, this paper seeks to look at the connections between personal, social, and professional identities of students within an education degree programme.

Methodology

A summary of the methodology adopted in this research is depicted in Figure 1.

The researchers' philosophical approach was situated within the interpretivism paradigm which "argues that truth and knowledge are subjective, as well as culturally and historically situated, based on people's experiences and their understanding of them" (Ryan 2018: 8). The idea was to "understand the world" of the participants, their positionalities, hence drawing on their reality as experienced by them at the specific point in their trajectory. Therefore, a qualitative methodology, more specifically an inductive approach, was adopted to provide "an understanding of meaning" by developing themes and categories from raw

data (Thomas 2003: 2). The participants' experiences, perspectives, and emotions were taken as the primary sources of data.

This philosophical approach reflected the positionality of the researchers, who both have a background in the teaching profession and experienced first-hand the impact of academic and professional growth and transformation through lived experiences. Life experiences affect the interpretations individuals give to whatever they read, hear, and experience around them. Hence, perceptions and positions are in constant flux which is the result of individuals being "always outfitted with some particular lens" (Ferrero 2005: 430).

The research study focused on a specific audience within a particular context, hence a qualitative methodology, more specifically a case study, was adopted. Since the research study looks at the identity formation and transformation of students following an education degree programme, a three-year longitudinal study was necessary. However, this paper is based on the data collected and analysed during the first stage (first year) of their degree. Methods used in this first stage of the research study include: focus groups, life histories, workshops, participants' reflections, and verbal narratives.

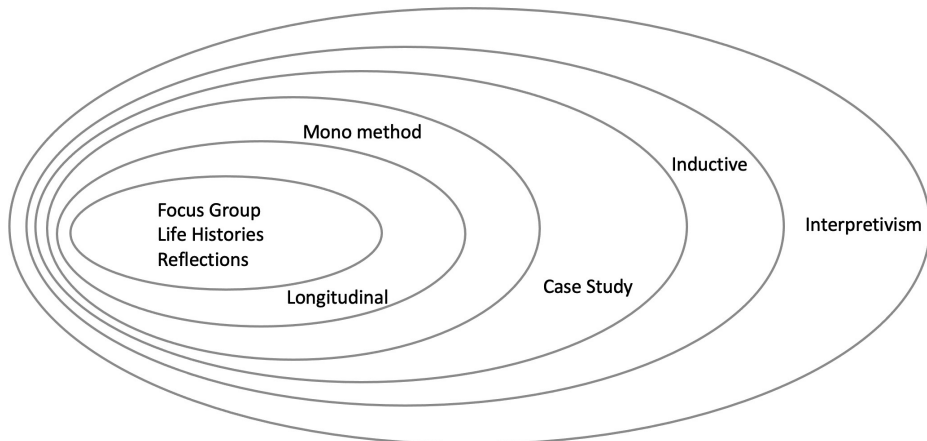


Figure 1: *Onion Research Model adapted by Saunders et al. (2016)*

As mentioned above, the context was an education degree programme at a vocational institution. The participants consisted of five female students, who all accepted to participate in the research study. Cautious of the fact that students might have felt coerced to participate, the researchers highlighted that participation was on a voluntary basis and students were constantly reminded that they could withdraw from the research at any time. Participants were constantly consulted and consent was sought at every stage of data collection.

An additional measure taken by the researchers to seek utilitarian-beneficial goodness (Santa Clara University 2014) was to ensure that participants would benefit through participation in the research study. Hence, choices made with regard to methods used also reflected research skills that the students would be needing as part of their studies. This enticed the students to participate since this was also an opportunity for them to experience first-hand research processes which is an important aspect of the third year of

their degree programme. Furthermore, the researchers opted to participate in the study by sharing their life histories and experiences contributing to the workshops.

Life History Method of Data Collection

Goodson (2001) presents life history as a method in research that helps us to respond to the *why* and *how* aspects, as well as the *what* dimension of empirical data, while Ward (2003: 28-29) states that:

“It addresses the interactions that ultimately direct the participants’ line of thought and subsequent courses of action, enabling the researcher to identify and comment upon the genesis of the directions being reached”.

The life history method of data collection was particularly important in this research since while the context under study was in education, as argued by Bullough (1998), individuals carry with them a public and private life that cannot be separated. This is also true for the participants of this research. The life history method of data collection allows for greater depth to the participants’ perspectives (Ward 2003) as lived experiences leave an imprint on who a person becomes (Bloome 2012).

Focus Groups

In this research study, focus groups, in the form of workshops, were the first method of data collection used as part of the research design to “explore a topic or collect group language or narratives” (Gill et.al. 2008: 293). A benefit of focus groups is that participants can respond to each other’s’ replies by agreeing, disagreeing, or adding to what has already been said (Rubin and Rubin 2012). Interestingly, this method helped not only to generate primary data but also to build a *community of learning* between the participants and also with the researchers.

Ethics

The research was submitted to the MCAST Research Ethics Committee and, upon clearance, information letters and consent forms were sent to students who eventually participated in this study. The information letters provided information on what the research was about, what was expected from participants, and how data was to be collected. The information letter also highlighted that participation is voluntary and that participants could withdraw from the research at any stage. The consent forms were used to get consent from participants to use primary data collected from this research. Furthermore, participants were informed about data protection measures taken to preserve their identity.

During the data collection activities, participants were once again reminded about the content of the information letter and consent forms. Furthermore, the participants were reminded that while the data to be collected was useful for the research project, the researchers were making their utmost so that the data collection activities also served as a learning experience for participants as they make a transition from students to educators.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used for this research project since the researchers were interested in students reading for an education degree. Since the cohort in this degree programme was very small, all students were informed about the research project and asked if they wished to participate.

Data Analysis

Following the data collection stage, discussions recorded through the focus groups were transcribed. These transcriptions, together with the reflections and life histories, were then used for the inductive qualitative analysis process to extract the main findings of the research.

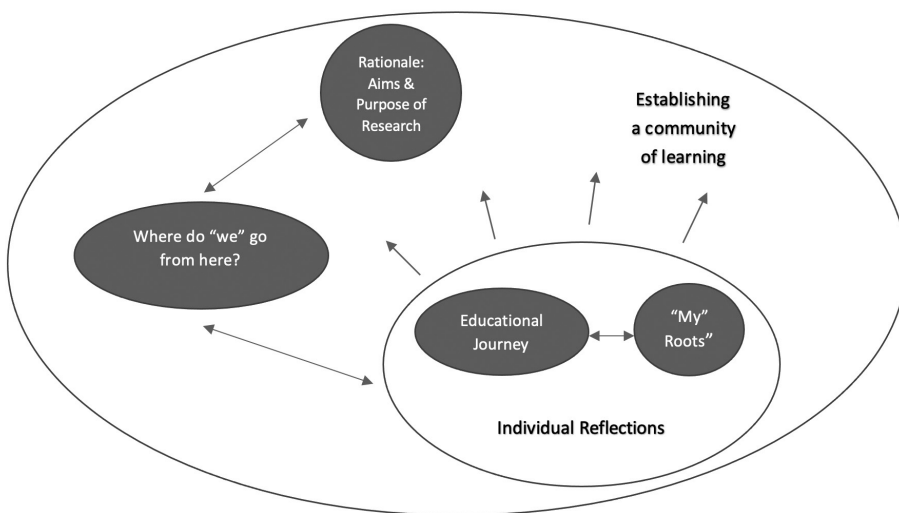
Analysis and Findings

Introduction and Context

Five female students, whose age ranged from 18 and 45 years, participated in the first stage of this research study. It is worth noting that these were all the students registered on the education degree programmes. The participants' trajectories towards the degree programme varied significantly and this is discussed as part of the analysis since, in each case, the education journey and lived experiences have impacted the students' self-perceptions which are key in determining identities.

The objectives of the first workshop were various and included: students getting to know each other to establish the group as a community; to start students off on the journey of self-reflection; and to understand their positionalities and enhance their awareness of their identities at the beginning of the study. This required that the workshop, which included specific activities referred to in Figure 2 below, be organized as early as possible within the first year of the degree.

Reflective Process for the recognition of initial participant positionalities



(Muscat & Vassallo, 2021)

Figure 2: Reflective process for the recognition of initial participant positionalities

The specific activities, which are represented in Figure 2, ran in the following order.

1. Discussion of aims and purposes of research study
2. Ice-breakers
3. Individual reflections:
 - i. My Roots
 - ii. Educational Journey
4. Where do I go from here?

The participants were re-introduced to the aims and purposes of the three-year research study. The researchers reminded that, considering the qualitative approach of the research, students were considered as 'active participants', not only contributing to the generation of data, but influencing the research stages that followed (Creswell and Creswell 2018), while benefitting from exposure and experience of research processes.

Once a rationale on participants' and researchers' information sharing was agreed upon, participants and researchers engaged together in a number of ice-breakers which facilitated personal introductions, thereby mitigating inhibitions that the participants might have had. These also served to establish a power balance between participants and researchers while creating the needed safe space for the sharing anticipated in the activities that followed.

The first reflection intended to focus on current identities and 'multiple' roles in life. To stimulate thoughts and reflections, the researchers introduced the idea of trees with a bark, leaves and roots, as shown in Figure 3. Using this imagery, the participants and researchers engaged in an individual reflection on memorable positive and/or negative experiences that had an impact on them. This led to the recognition that wherever participants and researchers were 'positioned' at that particular time was the result of multiple encounters and lived experiences.

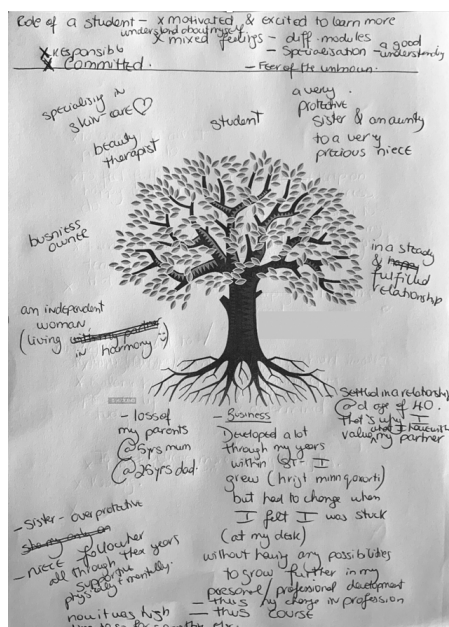


Figure 3: Example of participant self-reflection using imagery

Following this, participants were prompted to reflect on their individual trajectories in education. Once again making use of imagery, namely the idea of a road, participants were invited to consider both positive and negative experiences that marked educational outcomes as they progressed from entry into education up to the education degree programme. At the end of this reflection, participants reflected on how they perceive their current student identity. This was important as a lead-up to the activity which followed, where participants had to plan the upcoming educational journey.

Finally, after two intense sessions of sharing—by participants and researchers equally—participants were asked to focus on personal and professional goals they were setting for their future. At this point, they were invited to reflect on their own strengths; to acknowledge areas which they felt needed improvement; the challenges they might encounter in this process; and what could be done to overcome these challenges in order to reach the set goals. Once again, participants shared their personal thoughts and reflections, which helped to bring the participants and researchers closer, rendering this newly formed group a community of learning.

The workshop ended with feedback from participants to gauge their feelings and emotions during these activities and to listen to any propositions they had for future research events that were to follow in the same academic year. This was important to give them a voice and consolidate power sharing between researchers and participants, which further enhanced the safe space that was created.

Results

For the purpose of this particular paper, inductive qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Bengtsson 2016; Maxwell and Chmiel 2014) was adopted. This entails the decontextualisation stage, where a critical, in-depth reading of the responses, in this case the life histories and contributions in the workshops, is done to gain an overall familiarisation with the data. Following the first reading, the text is broken down into *meaning units* or themes and eventually coded. This leads to the second stage, the recontextualisation, when the original data is re-examined alongside the codes and mapped to some of the initial set objectives of the study, in this case namely:

1. Establishing the students' roots;
2. Exploring the students' educational journey;
3. Identifying students' future personal and professional goals.

In the third stage of the analysis, the categorisation is done, whereby sub-themes are clearly identified and overlaps between the different groups are eliminated. Once the categorisation is complete, the compilation stage starts and this involves the analysis and writing-up process.

In this particular study, conclusions drawn from this process—and which are summarized in Table 1—were strengthened by having both researchers analyse the data independently and discuss the outcomes.

Initial Set Objectives of the Workshop	<i>Students' Roots</i>	Students' Educational Journey	Students' Future Goals
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<i>Condensed Meaning Units</i>	Current Self-perceptions	Student Identity	Professional
	Family Background (social, economic and cultural)	Influences	Personal
	Life Experiences	Motivation	Challenges
	Educational / Professional Experiences		Strengths
			Areas for improvement

Codes and sub-themes (inductive analysis)	Journey	Struggles	Attributes & Characteristics	Lived Experiences
	Awareness of Self	Intrinsic and Extrinsic Influences	Reasons for Teaching Profession	Professional Goals
	Areas for Improvement	Social Interactions	Insecurities	Personal Goals

Themes	Lifelong trajectory	Personalities	Liberation	Growth
	Reflection			

Table 1: Analysis process to identify the major themes emerging from the workshop data

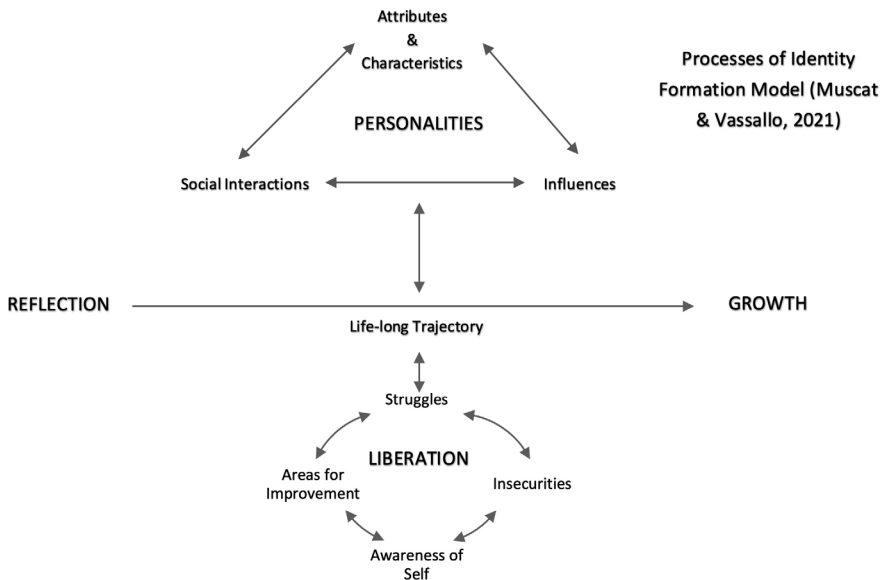


Figure 4: Process of Identity Formation Model

Following the inductive qualitative content analysis of data collected, five main themes emerged and were identified as being interlinked through all the data, namely lifelong trajectories, personalities, liberation, growth, and reflection. Each theme is analyzed separately, however, overlaps were strong in the data. It was also clear that although in this paper the presentation is linear as the researchers present one theme after the other, identity formation and growth are constantly impacting and being impacted by interactions, lived experiences, and related processes. The researchers represented this process through a model as depicted in Figure 4.

Lifelong Trajectories

Participants in the study were of different ages and came from different walks of life, bringing to the study rich evidence of lived experiences that marked whom they had become and the vision and purpose they held for their future. Common to all participants at the start of the first encounter for the workshop was the decision to further their education and to embark on an education degree programme.

As the participants embarked on the first activity of introducing themselves, it became immediately clear that lived experiences within their personal, social, academic, and professional spheres had taken them on different paths, giving them roles and identities as they journeyed in life (Turner and Tobbell 2017). They all acknowledged that they are on an ongoing journey. Interestingly, driving forces moving them forward on this journey were and continue to be different for each one of them.

Journey

Resonating Bridgstock (2009), Participant A gives importance to personal development and considers herself on a journey to become “more complete”. She intends to do this by closing the gap created due to her abrupt stop in education to work and assist the

family after the death of a parent. Her interrupted studies affected her “possibilities to grow further both at a personal and professional level.” Participant B wishes to establish herself academically, not only to seek independence but also to prove her abilities within a family where education was always prioritized and attaining a degree is paramount. The choice to establish herself academically entails that “every day I am trying to overcome tiny obstacles, whether small or big ... I want to overcome [insecurities]”. The participant stated that “this is huge for me ... my parents always wanted the best for us and that we reach high levels [of education] and also because both siblings chose the medical field.”

Participant C explained how difficulties within her family led to special relations with her grandparent. Furthermore, her belonging to the LGBTQ+ community was also important to her, which proved beneficial to gain the necessary strength to voice her activism. According to her, this “had a huge impact because I learned that different people ... can be born into different groups which can put them at a huge disadvantage. I met a lot of people who didn’t give up for the world.” Similarly, Participant D stated that she wants to “get out of my comfort zone, not giving up on my dreams, making mistakes, and telling myself that if others can do it, I can do it.”

Participant E’s journey has been affected by her challenging experience of teenage pregnancy, stating that “the fact that I was pregnant at a young age drove me to mature faster.” This participant has taken ownership of her future to create the necessary experiences to succeed and “to face situations with determination and strength to overcome rather than be overwhelmed by difficulties.”

Lived Experiences

Journeys are affected by lived experiences which in turn influence decisions and new directions taken both in personal as well as in professional spheres. Clearly, lived experiences do not happen in isolation but through social encounters which affect and are affected by contexts, personal attributes, struggles, and insecurities (Kaplan and Flum 2009). This was evident in the participants’ reflections and their reflections related to family, friends, and educational experiences. Work and educational experiences, bullying experiences at school, loss of parents at a young age, teenage pregnancy, mental health issues in the family, overbearing family influences, and gender identity were predominant challenges that marked the journey of participants up to this point in this research study.

Experiences of major impact also emerged in the way the participants presented themselves, putting first those experiences that marked them the most. Participant A introduced herself as a “beauty therapist, business owner” and then as a student. Understandably, the beauty therapy course was a turning point in her professional life. Of significant importance to Participant A was her family, positioning herself as a “protective” sister and aunt, since, following her parents’ death at an early age, she took the role of the mother in the family.

Participant B revealed how the overbearing influence of her parents and mental health issues in the family fill her with concern for herself and for her younger sister, whom she feels needs to be safeguarded from going through her same challenges of self-confidence and self-doubt. Although she spoke positively of school and academic achievement because she is good at “theory”, she realized at a later age that the lack of freedom of thought in school affected her performance at post-secondary level. Referring in particular to self-confidence, she points out that at “the mention of having to present ... I feel like dying.” The mismatch between practices in compulsory education and what is expected in higher education often leads students to experience academic struggles when independent learning is necessary (Crisp et al. 2009; Lowe and Cook 2003; Murtagh 2010). Other

references to family and cultural influences included her being a “Roman Catholic” and her “spirituality”, which she considers as sources of strength.

“Artist and illustrator” was how Participant C presented herself. The artistic aspect took prominence over other aspects of the self. This resonates with her statement that “art.... helped shape me as a person” since she often resorted to creativity and art to project her thoughts during reflections. An important reality she lived through at a young age was coming to terms with sexuality and gender. As a result of encounters revolving around this, she highlights “feminism” and “activism” in general as an integral part of her identity. Acquiring a strong voice is how she reacted to being labelled as “lazy” in compulsory education when struggling with learning difficulties.

Family influences were again evident in Participants D and E. Participant D introduced herself as an “only child”, hence her relationship with parents, their advice, and also learning from “other people’s actions” were deemed important to her. When talking about her education journey she highlighted episodes of bullying to the extent that “when I used to ask [questions], they used to laugh at me...both in primary and in secondary school.” This had a significant impact on her self-confidence. Participant E became a mother in her teenage years. Being a young single parent, she explains how the presence of her mother who had also brought her up on her own served as a “role model.” On the other hand, the fact that no one in her family had progressed to higher levels in education created inhibitions and affected her self-confidence as a student. This is constantly compensated for with a strong awareness of determination to improve and provide a better life for her child.

Personalities

Another important theme that emerged was that of personalities, which are key to social interactions. Personalities are the result of personal attributes and characteristics which influence and are influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

As discussed above, students’ personalities determined how they reacted to the lived experiences and social interactions, which led to how they perceived their positionalities up to the time of the workshop.

Social Interactions

The participants held various identities pertaining to the distinct roles they occupy in their life. The major roles that emerged were positioned within the immediate and extended family, educational contexts, friendships, social groups, and places of work. Within the family, participants in this study occupied different roles which included those of daughter, granddaughter, sister, aunt, and mother. Within the professional sphere, while Participant A was an established “successful beautician”, the other participants had limited or no experience at all. In the case of friendships and social groups, these played a fundamental role in the lives of Participants B and C (e.g. LGBTQ+ community and religious group) and contributed to establish a stronger identity within that role.

The different social interactions influenced the participants’ identity development and, in turn, the way they see themselves and behave in particular roles they occupy. When the role necessitated owning action, participants’ confidence was enhanced. This was true for Participants A and E who acted as leaders in their family and Participant A who set up and managed her own business. On the contrary, when involved in social interactions, participants B, C, and D were more passive and allowed others to predominate (in particular within family and school contexts), with the lack of self-confidence being evident.

Attributes and Characteristics

Activities in the workshop enabled participants to reflect on attributes and characteristics that impacted their personal and professional identities. These attributes and characteristics were the result of lived experiences, social interactions, and inherent qualities.

An attribute that was common to all participants was caring for others. Other attributes and characteristics identified included commitment and perseverance, determination, spirituality, compassion, active learning, being supportive, creativity, patience, empathy, being respectful, responsibility, and optimism. Participant A stated that “I put my heart in all I do ... I am always determined, I know what I want, and I commit myself in all that I do.” Participant C referred to active learning in wanting to “achieve goals” and how she would like to “take every opportunity to learn and study and explore and experience.” What motivates Participant E is finding the positive in each situation and persevering irrespective of the challenges faced.

This exercise was important for participants to recognise their attributes and increase self-awareness, thereby consolidating their positive self-perceptions. Findings in this study reflected outcomes in Henkel (2005), the Confederation of British Industry (2011), Nicholson et al. (2013), Yorke and Knight (2004), Klenowski et al. (2006), and Trede and Bridges (2012).

The newly acquired awareness was critical since participants are on a journey to become educators where confidence about professional identity is necessary to also serve as role models to their prospective students.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Influences

Innate characteristics as part of personalities play a significant role. In the context of lived experiences, these give rise to intrinsic and extrinsic motivators influencing individuals' outlook on life, their choices and decisions.

Data from the workshop revealed that a number of intrinsic and extrinsic influences impacted the choices and decisions that participants were taking in their life, and in particular in their educational and professional journeys. A common factor for all participants was to establish a better life for themselves (Eccles 2009). The participants' main needs in relation to this were to secure their independence, including financially, and to invest in their own families. The latter was even more significant to Participant E who referred to her daughter as the main motivator behind choices made.

Liberation

The researchers were aware that in order to progress in a journey, one has to take stock of past experiences and present realities, and how these affected whom the participants have become up to that point in time. This new awareness is essential for participants to set realistic goals and make informed decisions to reach the set goals. Hence, reflections on life trajectories were necessary. The deep reflections in which the participants and the researchers engaged included past positive experiences as well as struggles which possibly could be sources of insecurities still experienced today. Self-awareness helped participants to recognize their insecurities and constructively come to terms with areas for improvement and the necessary actions as a way forward. Hence, a process for the participants' liberation started (La Guardia 2009).

Awareness of Self

During the ice-breakers while introducing the workshop, it was evident that some participants questioned the extent to which they were *fitting in* as degree students. Their main concern was a possible lack of background academic knowledge. Participant A voices these concerns strongly and states, “I may not be up to the level required for a degree ... so these are strong concerns.” However, the researchers were aware that the successful completion of a degree goes beyond knowledge content, but also requires well-developed transversal skills, including strong intrapersonal skills. Hence, the researchers identified the need to encourage participants to start a process of self-awareness to identify strengths and weaknesses, and in turn make the necessary plans to invest for successful completion of the degree, and more importantly a more fruitful personal life (Henkel 2005; Reid et al. 2008).

Researchers introduced the first task on self-reflection, conscious that this was just the beginning of a long journey of constant reflexive practices required to ensure the participants' personal growth and eventually secure constant professional growth as active practitioners in education.

Struggles and Insecurities

It was evident that the struggles faced in life by the participants caused several insecurities with which they may still be battling with today. Lack of self-confidence was observed in all participants. Some experiences that may have led to this include: “bullying at school” and overprotective parents (Participant D); “lack of role model in education” (Participant E); “high expectations from parents” (Participant B); and “terrible social skills” and negative school experience (Participant C). Furthermore, Participant A shared her doubts regarding her ability to succeed as a student, even though she has managed to lead a successful professional life.

Areas for improvement

Interestingly, in spite of the level of study and their ages, the areas for improvement highlighted by participants were mainly transversal skills, in particular “time management and self-confidence” (Participant D); “work-life balance” (Participant A); “organization skills and social skills” (Participant C); and “confidence, self-doubt and public speaking” (Participant B). On a positive note, the fact that the participants identified areas for improvement, and were ready to share and discuss them with peers was a sign of raised awareness and preparedness to plan and take the necessary steps to move forward. This led to the next task where participants had to focus on what drove them towards the education profession and to set the goals needed to reach their objectives. This workshop was particularly important since it was carried out at the beginning of the first semester of a three-year degree programme.

Growth

In a fast-changing world, where the only constant is change, prospective education professionals need to have the necessary skills to make sure that they can adapt and remain effective in their work and innovative in their approaches. It was clear for the researchers that, since the profession of educators is highly demanding in terms of the mixed realities found in classrooms and constant structural changes in education, an objective of the initial workshop had to be that of focusing on the participants' motivations when choosing the degree programme.

Once motivations were identified, the participants could set short-, medium- and long-term personal and professional goals that would get them to reach their targets and dreams. Reflection throughout the journey, especially upon the achievement of the set goals, outlines a clear direction and stimulates perseverance when challenges are faced. This helps the participants to become more aware of their strengths, their successes, and their personal and professional growth (McCaslin 2009).

Reasons for Teaching Profession

An attribute that was common to all participants was caring for others and the urge to make a difference in the students' lives. Participants B, D, and E highlight that they want to do this in terms of school experiences. Participant C wishes to "be teaching art" since art is a hobby for her and helps her find herself when facing struggles in life. This element of sharing resonates with Participant A, who has experience in industry and would like to "share the knowledge" that she had acquired.

Hence, for all participants, the education profession goes beyond leading the students to employment but helps them to influence the development of, and to empower, the students in their care.

Personal and Professional Goals

Personal goals of participants were various and are centred around two main aspects: a vision of life as a whole and self-development. Goals addressing how the participants envision their "dream" life (Participant A) in the future, besides becoming professional educators, included having: "a business" (Participant B); "a family" (Participants B, C, D and E); and "financial stability" (Participant B). On the other hand, goals addressing self-development included: "succeed in all that I put my mind to, to feel fulfilled and happy with what I choose to do" (Participant A); "independence" (Participants B and C); "becoming a reliable and supportive person" (Participant C); and "the most important is that I don't care about people's thoughts about me" (Participant B).

These findings confirm that focusing on content knowledge only does not provide what is necessary for holistic growth, since both personal and professional goals were identified by participants. Furthermore, the personal goals identified are required for the 'life as a whole' goals to be met and hence to facilitate success in achieving professional goals. This mirrors findings by Holmes (2013) where programme qualifications together with personal worthiness are deemed equally important for employment.

Conclusion

Analysis of the data led to reflection, lifelong trajectory, personalities, liberation, and growth as being the main themes that emerged. The researchers also noted that the connections between themes were also worth noting. A closer look at the data allowed researchers to develop a model where the interplay between themes could be afforded the prominence it deserved. This model reflected the processes of identity formation for students in their journey to become educators.

It became clear that personalities and lifelong trajectories impact students' perceptions and positionalities, both at a personal and professional level, and these may limit or enhance growth. In addition, engaging in reflexive practices enhances awareness leading to liberation and further growth.

An objective of the researchers was to ensure that participants benefit from the activities of the workshop. Feedback received from participants was positive as they saw this as “truly therapeutic”, “reflective”, “useful”, and “insightful”. Most importantly, they reported that this has put them “at ease”. This served to consolidate the community of learners, setting the right environment for them to progress together on their journey and be supportive towards each other.

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers have a number of recommendations that can lead to more meaningful learning experiences being offered to students enrolled in education degree programmes.

The first recommendation is for education institutions to design degree programmes that are more balanced in terms of knowledge, skills, competences, attitudes and behaviours, thus ensuring room for students to experience a more holistic development. This can be achieved not only through a review of the content, but also through well-planned activities.

Secondly, education degree programmes should include more interactions between students themselves, and between students and lecturers. These interactions should not be limited to the encounters during formal lectures but also extend outside the lecturing venues. Activities which can lead to such interactions include: weekend seminars, extra-curricular activities, visits to schools, debate sessions, workshops, group assessment, and more, where students and lecturers are present and engaged in the respective activities. Such interactions lead to multiple benefits which include the development of a proactive community of learning that strengthens togetherness.

The third recommendation is to plan continuous opportunities for students to reflect as they progress in their initial teacher education. These opportunities should be integrated with courses and should also form part of the students’ assessment. This should enable students to improve their competence in reflective practices as they embark on a journey to become professional teachers. Furthermore, critical reflection will allow personal growth and professional identity formation as students and lecturers accompany each other, along the learning trajectory, with continuous feedback and support.

A final recommendation is for education institutions to provide specific training to lecturers involved in initial teacher education. The relationships established between lecturers and students are fundamental to the students’ experiences as they embark on and progress through a journey to become professional teachers. Lecturers should be adequately trained to support students in being aware of their personalities and life experiences which led them to their current selves. They should also give students ample opportunities to reflect on their strengths, insecurities, and areas that require improvement. On a regular basis, lecturers should encourage their students to prepare and revisit personal plans to be liberated from their challenges and insecurities, and thus grow on a personal and professional level.

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