Negotiating Authority, Identity, and Gender: Stories of Pre-service English Teachers Challenging Stereotypes in Chilean Classrooms

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of gender stereotypes on the development of teaching identity among pre-service English teachers at a public university in Chile. The main objective was to understand how entrenched stereotypes influence identity construction, self-perception, and classroom authority during the formative period and the professional teaching practice. Data were collected from two cohorts: the 2024 cohort, comprising 6 participants, and the 2025 cohort, comprising 13 participants. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of a qualitative research design, during which participants shared their experiences regarding the influence of gender stereotypes on their professional identity. Data were analysed through thematic coding with the assistance of Atlas—ti software. The findings show that participants experienced significant identity shifts. Initially, they reported insecurity and challenges in asserting authority due to gender-based biases. Over time, reflective practice and classroom experience contributed to increased self- confidence and a more defined professional identity. However, challenges remain, particularly the tendency of students to respect male figures more readily than female teachers, which undermines classroom management and authority. The study contributes empirical insight into the intersection of gender, language teaching, and identity in the Chilean ELT context. It highlights the need for gender-sensitive strategies and curricular reforms to support the professional development of female English language teachers and foster more equitable teaching environments.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, gender, professional identity

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Introduction

Teacher identity is a key concept in understanding the professional life of teaching staff. Initial training, as outlined in the university curriculum, has a profound impact on the formation of this identity. However, it appears to be a process that begins long before entering higher education, with the formative experiences that teachers received during their own student years. The university provides content, humanistic training and practical opportunities that contribute to the construction of identity; however, there is an unavoidable process that every teacher must undergo, and this can be conceptualised in terms of a holistic, dynamic and situated understanding of oneself, as well as the role one is expected to play at school. Only through this process do teachers acquire a more nuanced understanding of their values and aspirations, as well as their work, which enables them to navigate the complex world of school with greater confidence (Protassova et al., 2021). Indeed, both Cole et al. (2022) and Shimony et al. (2022) highlight the relationship between deficiencies in the reflective process and teacher identity, as well as burnout and dropout from the school system. Everything seems to indicate that the greater the reflection and knowledge of one's own identity, the greater the chances of remaining in the system, providing quality teaching and achieving better student performance (Cuadra-Martínez et al., 2021).

Most authors conceptualise identity as a dynamic interrelationship between personal narratives and professional roles. It is fluid, constructed and depends on the context of each teacher, which highlights the ability of everyone to negotiate with the environment and the expectations of the institutions in which they work. It is shaped over time, a balance between vocation, formative experiences, and confrontation with the reality of the classroom, which, in some cases, can lead to crisis, especially if reality is very dissonant.

Gender is a fundamental factor in the construction of teacher identity, as social norms and stereotypes related to gender roles affect how authority is manifested in the classroom, the emotional involvement of teachers, their professional recognition, and the tension between meeting social expectations and resisting assigned roles. While the literature on teacher identity is robust, relatively few studies have systematically examined the influence of gender on the development of professional identity. Some studies, such as those by Pinzón Varilla (2017) and Gkonou and Miller (2021) demonstrate, for example, that female teachers face significantly more intense emotional challenges than their male colleagues; this is partly because they are often required to perform caregiving roles, which increases the risk of burnout. Tamayo Garza (2016) warns that, in some Latin American countries, the figure of the "sacrificial teachers" has become normalised. Generating pressures that affect self-care. In addition, Makarova et al. (2019) demonstrate how gender stereotypes influence perceptions of the professional capacity of female teachers, who, although recognised by their students, are required to demonstrate their knowledge and training constantly.

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the development of professional teaching identity among English pedagogy trainees at a public university, with a particular emphasis on gender perspective.

Specific Objectives

- Characterise how teacher identity develops in teacher trainees from cohorts 2024 and 2025 from a gender perspective.
- Compare and contrast the views and perceptions about teaching identity that emerge in each of the cohorts.

Literature Review

Research findings from literature sources demonstrate that identity exists as a wide-ranging concept which encompasses multiple aspects. The concept of identity can be characterised as a dynamic, complex dimension which people construct through their life experiences, professional environments, and personal development paths. The process of identity development operates as a dynamic system, resulting from the continuous interaction between personal identity and educational practice. A person's professional self-concept represents their understanding of their professional identity.

The literature review enables us to identify and categorise five different conceptualisations of what professional identity is, as described below.

Identity as a Sociocultural and Situated Construction

According to this perspective, the social environment and cultural background of an individual determine how their teaching identity develops. According to Olsen (2008), teachers construct their identity through their work environment, which in turn helps them understand their personal identity. The analysis of personal narratives is considered the most effective method for studying teacher identity, according to Barkhuizen (2021), as it reveals how gender, social class, and institutional values influence this concept. The current conceptual framework includes Lawrence and Nagashima (2020), Chang et al. (2020), Sánchez-Martín (2022), Karimi and Mofidi (2019), Nguyen and Ngo (2023), and Ulla et al. (2024), who demonstrate how social norms, cultural expectations, and dominant ideologies shape professional identity development. The research by Aguirre-Garzón et al. (2023) examines student and teacher stories which develop because of school environment conditions and power dynamics and institutional requirements.

This conceptualisation explicitly incorporates the variable of gender because it is constructed from personal interaction, with life stories and personal experiences in relation to the environment.

Gender appears as a relational, socially constructed dimension that intersects with other factors such as race and social class. In this way, a dynamic construction emerges that has an impact on teaching and on the way teachers are perceived and experienced.

Identity as the Integration of the Personal and Professional

Another conceptualisation or theoretical system for understanding professional identity is that proposed by Izadinia (2014), Pennington and Richards (2016), and Beijaard et al. (2022). In this approach, identity is a construct that arises from the interaction between personal narratives and professional roles. This approach emphasises vocation, formative experiences, and

confrontations and tensions in the classroom. It shares with the sociocultural approach the fact that teacher identity is dynamic and evolves over time.

However, unlike the first approach, what seems to change and energise the concept of professional identity is the internal, more motivational aspect that each teacher possesses and the relationship they establish with the classroom. A fascinating study in this line is that of Wang and He (2022), who analyse how teachers integrate a new professional dimension: that of being researchers, within the framework of collaborative university-school communities. Although the gender variable is less visible than in the sociocultural conceptualisation, it is an important element, mainly because gender stereotypes and social norms have a significant impact on how teachers perceive themselves, especially female teachers, and how they view their authority in the classroom and their professional abilities.

Identity as a Metacognitive Phenomenon

A third way of conceiving and explaining professional teaching identity is through metacognition, which could be defined as the ability of individuals to monitor and control their cognitive processes or to think about thinking (Yuan & Zhang, 2020). According to these authors, metacognition is crucial for developing a teaching identity because it enables identities to be managed, regulated, and strengthened. Three key components are distinguished in this perspective: metacognitive knowledge, strategies, and metacognitive experiences. Metacognitive knowledge refers to the knowledge that teachers have about their own learning and the factors that affect it, such as the tactics that help them achieve a learning goal. For example, writing a personal journal could be a good way for some teachers to monitor their internal progress when they set themselves a goal. Personal factors such as motivation or personality, which obviously affect learning about oneself, could also be considered part of metacognitive knowledge. Likewise, judgments about one's own abilities, personal goals, and one's own disposition toward specific topics are part of metacognitive knowledge.

Identity as Perception of Role and Social Expectations

This approach focuses on how society perceives and defines the role of teachers, and how these expectations influence teachers' self-perception and performance of their duties. Unlike the first conceptualisation reviewed, which perceived identity as a dynamic, holistic, and constantly evolving process, this conceptualisation explores how identity is constructed through the internalisation of external social expectations of individuals or groups, such as family, school, community, and society in general. The main proponent of this theory is Kenea (2021), who considers professional identity to be a response to social expectations of what it means to be a teacher and to teach. In this sense, Gaete Silva et al. (2017) report on how teachers leave the profession due to a dissonance between what is expected of them and the actual conditions of teaching. Similarly, Barreto Junca (2024) points out that historically, teachers have been controlled and monitored for their political ideas or their ability to guide young people, creating tension between the roles expected of teachers and what teachers really are and want to be. Likewise, Coppe et al. (2024) show how teachers internalise and negotiate roles assigned by the education system, such as being innovative, resilient, and efficient.

Identity as Expertise and Skills

This approach defines teacher identity in terms of mastery of knowledge and the development of specific professional skills. The key areas to consider are content knowledge and pedagogy.

From this perspective, the definition of professional identity emerges through this process. A teacher who understands their subject matter and teaching methods develops a strong professional identity. The ability to create learning activities, implement them, and evaluate their effectiveness (Mosquera-Pérez & Losada-Rivas, 2022), together with classroom management skills, student motivation techniques, and conflict resolution abilities, forms the basis of a professional identity (Herrera-Espinoza et al., 2024; Pérez-Gracia et al., 2022). The integration of technology (Paz Saavedra & Gisbert Cervera, 2023; Romero Martínez et al., 2023; Verdú-Pina et al., 2023), along with leadership abilities, conflict resolution skills, empathy and self-efficacy (Llorent et al., 2020; Soria-Aldavero et al., 2023; Yataco Valdez et al., 2022) play significant roles in professional development. The quantitative scale developed by Tan et al. (2017) assesses professional identity growth through three components: professional self-image, values, and skills.

Methodology

The research employs qualitative methods because they are well-suited to studying personal interpretations of human matters and the emotional aspects of professional identity development. In fact, qualitative research provides crucial insights into the complex nature of professional identity development. Regarding the research design, this study employs phenomenological-interpretive qualitative methods, also known as narrative inquiry, which are helpful because they view the narrator as an active agent in the story and allow researchers to analyse the realities lived by participants. Narrative inquiry constructs professional history narratives of participants through interviews, which are then used as data for analysis and interpretation. The goal is to provide insight into the process of identity construction during teacher formation.

Participant Demographics

The research was conducted within the English Teacher Education programme at a public university in Chile. Two cohorts participated in the study. The 2024 cohort comprised six students out of a population of 46 5th-year trainees; all participants were female trainees undertaking their professional teaching practice. The 2025 cohort consisted of 13 participants, all of whom were 4th-year students doing their intermediate teaching practice, comprising 11 female trainees and two males out of a total of 50 students. Both cohorts shared similar socioeconomic profiles, reflecting the Chilean educational landscape and patterns of social stratification. The average age in both cohorts was 23 years old, whereas 85% of the participants attended subsidised or municipal schools, and 70% identified as working class. Participants came predominantly from working-class neighbourhoods, including la Granja, San Bernardo, and Puente Alto.

Data Collection Process

In the 2024 cohort, two semi-structured interviews were used—one at the beginning of the study to explore early professional identity formation and gender awareness. The second semi-structured interview took place in the middle of the year, with the objective of examining the evolution during the professional teaching practice. At the end of the year, a focus group session was organised to collect insights regarding professional identity and gender. In the case of the 2025 cohort, as this is a longitudinal study, only two semi-structured interviews were conducted in the first year; the remaining interviews will take place in 2026 and 2027.

Results

2024 Cohort

The thematic analysis revealed that, in the 2024 cohort, professional identity was constructed in three different ways, aligning with three of the conceptualisations described in the literature review. The first one was Identity as a sociocultural and situated construction. The participants viewed their identity as a product of their social experiences, institutional settings, and cultural norms. Narratives reveal that teaching is lived as an ethical and transformative practice rooted in situated experiences. This aligns with Olsen (2008), Barkhuizen (2021), and Aguirre-Garzón et al. (2023), who argue that identity emerges relationally and contextually. Gender is deeply embedded: Participants repeatedly narrated how stereotypes of women as soft, maternal, or caregivers influenced their legitimacy and authority.

The other conceptualisation that was relevant in this cohort was identity as integration of the personal and the professional. Many participants discussed the interplay between vocation, personal experiences, and professional growth. Insecurities at the beginning evolved into confidence and empowerment, reflecting the dynamic negotiation between personal history and professional role. Firm ethical commitments reveal how personal biographies motivate professional trajectories. This matches Izadinia (2014) and Pennington and Richards (2016), where self-image and inner motivation are central.

Finally, Identity was also conceived as role perception and social expectations in the 2024 cohort. The gender axis highlights the weight of social expectations: female teachers were positioned as maternal, caregivers, peacemakers, while authority was more easily granted to male teachers. Participants explicitly struggled with these stereotypes, showing tension between desired authority and externally imposed roles.

2025 Cohort

The 2025 fourth-year students demonstrated a predominant focus on expertise and skill management, with a strong emphasis on developing an empathetic teaching identity.

The thematic analysis revealed a professional identity with a strong emphasis on disciplinary expertise, such as English language fluency, for effective teaching and student modelling. It also emphasised pedagogical innovation, focusing on professional knowledge in planning, active methodologies, and technology for authentic language practice. These participants also stressed the importance of understanding the student context, creating psychological safety, and maintaining respectful relationships.

The second conceptualisation that was present in this cohort was identity construction based on role perception and social expectations. Gender stereotypes became important here, particularly the feminisation of teaching and maternal expectations. The 2025 participants perceived teaching as a female profession with barriers for male entry, especially in early childhood education. They also labelled and identified issues with authority when females tried to exert authority, while males faced no similar criticism. The maternal expectations were also present in the cohort because the female trainees realised they were expected to be "second mothers" with additional care burdens beyond academic responsibilities. There was also an expectation of a trust bias because they realised their students preferred to seek help from

female teachers, reinforcing caregiving stereotypes. The 2025 cohort identified the roles imposed by society and realised how challenging it was to deconstruct them.

Discussion

The study confirmed that in both cohorts, the female pre-service teachers faced limitations derived from societal stereotypes. These preconceptions often link authority and leadership primarily to masculine attributes. This is consistent with theoretical frameworks acknowledging that women frequently face implicit gender stereotypes and that gender biases can affect their perceived self-efficacy and authority.

In the Chilean context, these biases often manifest as prejudices that obstruct the consolidation of female teachers as recognised figures of reference in the classroom. The challenge requires individuals to handle external pressure while coping with their own personal sense of unease. The way society views professional achievement affects success, as research shows that women who match male academic achievements still face lower recognition rates.

Despite the difficulties, this research suggests that participants are eager to create positive changes in educational settings, which aligns with a critical pedagogy formative model, where the teacher is seen as an intellectual figure and a transformer of society, capable of confronting ideological pressures and social injustices.

Conclusions

The research provides essential knowledge about how pre-service English teachers develop their professional identities in an environment where gender stereotypes predominate. The main discovery suggests that teachers develop their professional identity through a continuous process of negotiation between their initial education, personal characteristics, and social environment.

The participants are eager to connect with their profession and show practical teaching skills. However, gender stereotypes still hinder their authority in the classroom. Research shows that students face persistent internal distress caused by frustration and vulnerability, arising from the gap between their ideal beliefs and the real political challenges they encounter, such as opposition from students and caregivers.

The analysis confirms the importance of pedagogical practices that specifically target the integration of subjective and objective knowledge. Teacher identity formation is supported when future teachers have opportunities for reflection, collaboration, and applying agency which allows them to interpret and validate their learning experiences against their desired self-image as educators. When these conditions are met, greater levels of professional identification are achieved.

Implications and Recommendations

Curriculum Reform With a Gender Perspective

The study strongly implicates the need to integrate an explicit gender perspective within initial teacher training. This requires systemic revision of curricula and policies to embed gender sensitivity in pedagogies and teaching materials, actively working to eliminate biases.

Strengthening Self-Efficacy and Emotional Support

Teacher education programs require establishing methods to address the internal distress and identity problems which future teachers may face. The process includes emotional, professional, and pedagogical support through dialogue and attentive advisors who can help students develop self-efficacy through internal reflection.

Explicitly Teaching Identity Work

Educational programs need to establish specific teaching approaches which help students discover their professional identity through active exploration of their unconscious identity development process. One of these methods can include using reflective writing techniques, such as journaling, narrative writing, and focused dialogues, to connect their life experiences with their core values and educational principles.

Promoting Agency and Dialogue

Programs should establish organised chances for pre-service teachers to take action through course development and professional growth activities, which help them experience themselves as active participants instead of passive recipients of education. The ability to facilitate reflective dialogue and negotiation skills stands as a vital requirement for managing the intricate tensions which exist within the workplace.

Future Research

Further research on this topic may require longitudinal methods to observe professional identity development as it progresses normally throughout different time periods. Researchers may continue to use qualitative and narrative methods. However, they could also incorporate some quantitative tools, which would enable the access to information from a larger number of participants. Finally, given the affective nature of teaching, continued exploration of how teachers' emotions and metacognitions intersect with identity crisis and construction should always be present.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and redefining language in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The authors further declare that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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