Understanding new teachers’ professional identities through metaphor

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1. Introduction

Professional identity in teachers has recently become of considerable interest to educational researchers (Bullough, 2005; Flores & Day, 2006; Riopel, 2006; Watt, Richardson, & Tysvaer, 2007), in part as a way to understand and promote the "professionalization" of teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Klein, 1999; Sachs, 2001, 2005). One difficulty for new teachers is coming to a greater understanding of the range and entirety of professional identity as it applies to teachers in today’s society. Changes on a global scale in terms of expectations of public education require teachers to anticipate new roles in an attempt to keep up with constant diversification in society, development of knowledge and increases in access to knowledge. In many countries of the world, schools are now expected to fulfill functions of socialization that were once the jurisdiction of families, religious organizations or the workplace. In a rapidly transforming global society, teachers, regardless of the country in which they work, are experimenting with their roles and recreating their professional identities in relation to the contexts that surround them, contexts that are shifting, sometimes in unexpected ways. This reality can make the development of a strong professional identity even more complex for new teachers. The study presented here looks at ways in which new teachers describe their professional identities through the metaphors they choose to represent their teaching selves, and compares the metaphors chosen by new teacher graduates during the summer immediately following graduation with those they use during the spring of the their first year of teaching. The changes noted provide insight on the development process that these inexperienced teachers are undergoing as they adapt to their new professional roles.

1.1. Studying the development of professional identity

Some teacher education programmes and ministries of education outline goals for teachers in terms of identity (c.f. Quebec Ministry of Education, 2001), but few studies have looked at the process by which teachers come to develop their professional identity. Developing a strong sense of a professional identity as a teacher may be crucial to the well-being of new members of the profession. Recent interest in the identity of teachers, professional and otherwise, stems from earlier work on the professional lives of teachers (Zeichner & Liston, 1996), and their narratives (Connelly & Clow, 1999). The development of a professional identity has been defined as “an ongoing and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one’s own values and experiences” that may be influenced by personal, social and cognitive factors (Flores & Day, 2006, p. 220).

Teacher education literature clearly emphasizes the development of identity in the path a becoming teacher follows (Britzman, 2003; Hammerness, 2006; Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford, 2005; Sachs, 2005). We believe that the process of envisioning the self as a professional is a crucial stage in the
development of an effective teacher identity, but that this process is not fully researched. We have drawn on ideas about the self as an ideal, an actuality and an expected phenomenon proposed by Lauriala and Kukkonen (2005). They see that teachers might have different notions of their “selves”: as the self that actually exists; as one that might stand in the future as the self to strive toward; and as a construction of society or the world around them, an “ought” self, that represents what is expected of them, the role they must fulfill according to common societal views of teaching. These various notions of their “selves” might be in conflict for new teachers who are influenced strongly by their teaching environments (Flores & Day, 2006). In addition, perceptions of the self must be understood in the close connection between the personal and the professional self (Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999). For a teacher, the self encompasses not only notions of “who am I?”, but also of “who am I as a teacher?” This tight connection, perhaps even an inseparable one, confirms that there are intricate and complex dimensions to identity development, making it difficult to articulate and explore. One approach to examining aspects of identity that are difficult to articulate is through the use of metaphor.

1.2. Definition of metaphor

Metaphor can be defined as “an implied analogy which imaginatively identifies one object with another” (Holman, 1980, p. 264). Massengill Shaw and Mahlios (2008) explain metaphor as “...analogic devices that lie beneath the service [sic] of a person’s awareness and serve as a cognitive device... as a means for framing and defining experience in order to achieve meaning about one’s life” (p. 35). Yob (2003) agrees, stating that, “...a metaphor is employed when one wants to explore and understand something esoteric, abstract, novel or highly speculative” (p. 134). In a large-scale study of teacher as metaphor, Oxford, et al. (1998) suggest that metaphor “involves employing a familiar object or event as a conceptual tool to elucidate features of a more complex subject or situation... (p. 4). The seminal study of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explores the way individuals make meaning of their lives through regular use of metaphor as a mechanism for understanding experience. They write that “A large part of self-understanding is the search for appropriate metaphors that make sense of our lives” (p. 233). A further explanation comes from Zhao, Coombs, & Zhou (2010), who write “Metaphors are not just figures of speech, but constitute an essential mechanism of the mind allowing the modeling and reification of prior experience. Thus, metaphors can be understood of (sic) as a psychological modeling experience leading to new forms of conceptual insight” (p. 381). The important connections between metaphor and culture have been noted by Alger (2009): “Oftentimes these metaphors are conventional, meaning that they are prevalent in the culture and their meaning is shared by the culture” (p. 743). Our experience with eliciting metaphors from new teachers showed us that although metaphors can provide insight into ways in which people conceptualise experience, they are also culturally bound, which can limit meaning and interpretation, rendering the accompanying explanation crucial.

1.3. Using metaphors to explore professional identity

A large number of studies have examined the metaphors used by either pre-service teachers or practicing teachers to represent their beliefs about and/or experiences with teaching, children, and various subject areas (Massengill Shaw, & Mahlios, 2006; De Leon-Carillo, 2007; Goldstein, 2005; Knowles, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; McGrath, 2006; Mahlios & Maxson, 1998; Martinez, Sauleda, & Huber, 2001; Munby, 1986; Sumson, 2003; Vaughn Greves, 2005). The metaphors pre-service teachers use to represent their professional thinking were examined by Saban, Kocbeker, & Saban (2007) to learn more about their conceptions of teaching and learning. In a study of teachers and literacy, Massengill Shaw and Mahlios (2008) also examined pre-service teachers’ metaphors. They write “By soliciting pre-service teachers’ literacy metaphors, we investigated how teachers frame the language arts experiences and define meaning for their students” (p. 32). Metaphors have also been helpful for understanding changes in pre-service teachers’ beliefs: “…the changes in pre-service teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning that come about as a result of engaging in the normal activities associated with the education programme in their respective institutions” through the identification of “pre-service teachers metaphorical representations of teaching” (Leavy, McSorley, and Boté, 2007, p. 1221). In addition, “The study of teachers’ metaphors has proven productive as researchers seek to understand the complex processes of teaching and working in classrooms. ...Moreover, the metaphors that beginning teachers bring with them to the classroom and school arenas are grounded in their personal histories as students in schools and in their childhood experiences of family” (Knowles, 1994, pp. 37–38).

Gillis and Johnson (2002) state that “Because they [metaphors] reveal our educational values, beliefs, and principles, they contain information essential to our growth as professionals” (p. 37). The qualities of metaphor for demystifying and making explicit personal knowledge so that it can be articulated to others are an additional aspect that has been explored:

For myself, as well as in facilitating reflective practice for others, I have found that the exploration and articulation of one’s use of metaphor is an important element in the process of demystifying the passage of personal ‘intuitive’ knowledge into professional practice. In my experience, metaphor is a vehicle uniquely well-designed to negotiate and make sense of the creative space between what is personal and what becomes public. (Hunt 2006, p. 317.)

Our use of metaphor in this study of the development of a professional identity was intended to encourage novice teachers to frame their professional experiences at the end of their teacher education programs and again in the middle of their first year of teaching, and define meaning(s) they discovered about their identities in terms of the profession in an alternative way to a straightforward description.

2. Objectives

The findings referred to in this article are part of a larger study which examines how new teachers view the emergence of their professional identity from the time immediately following their graduation to the spring of their first year of teaching. Participants were asked to describe how they viewed their present and future identities with relation to the teaching profession. In this article we will focus only on the section of the study which relates to identity in terms of a metaphor, although the interviews conducted included other questions (see Appendix 1).

The overall objectives of the larger study referred to in the previous paragraph are to examine the development of a professional identity in new teachers from the time they complete their teacher education program to part way through their first year of teaching. The specific objective for this section of the study where we examine the new teacher participants’ metaphors for their professional identity is to learn whether providing participants with the opportunity to use metaphorical language to talk about their professional identities is a helpful and revealing way to discuss this complex subject. The guiding questions for this section of the study are:
1. What differences can be observed in the metaphors chosen by new teachers during the summer following their graduation from teacher education programs and part way through their first year of teaching?

2. What patterns (if any) exist among the metaphors new teachers use to describe their teacher selves?

3. What do the metaphors reveal about the new teachers’ sense of their professional identities and the way they develop a professional identity?

The particular points in time for the interviews were deliberately chosen so as to be able to track the changes in the way in which participants saw the development of their identities as new teachers. For ethical reasons, the first interview took place during the summer after graduation when the participants were no longer students at the institutions where the researchers worked, but before they had started their first jobs as teachers. We wanted to know how new teachers see themselves in their new roles once their education is complete, but before they have officially begun to teach. The timing for the second set of interviews, which took place at the end of March or in April, was deliberately set up so as to permit participants to share their views on their professional identity while in the midst of their first year of teaching. We saw this time as a critical point in a new teacher’s journey and wanted to record the participants’ impressions at that time, rather than at the end of the school year, when their perspectives may have changed.

3. Methodology

3.1. Context

The study took place over three years, involving a total of 45 participants in three cohorts who were recent graduates of two Canadian four-year teacher education programmes in the Eastern Townships region of Quebec, using a maximal variation sampling strategy (Creswell, 2002). It is important to note that in Quebec all teacher education programmes are four-years long and include at least 700–900 h of student teaching in schools. This means that Quebec students of education take courses in their subject area specialty concurrently with their courses in pedagogy and methods. These beginning teachers had graduated from both elementary and secondary programmes. Because one of the programmes prepared teachers to teach both levels, it was decided not to make a distinction between elementary and secondary teachers, although clear distinctions between these two groups have been found in other studies (Gohier, 2007). There were 45 participants, 41 women and 4 men, ranging in age from their early 20’s to their mid 40’s. Approximately half of the participants were not native speakers of English, although all of them had just completed a university degree in that language. The former students of Bishop’s University had completed a Bachelor of Education in either elementary or secondary teaching, while the former students from the Université de Sherbrooke had completed a programme to be specialists in teaching English to francophone students at both elementary and secondary levels. The interviews took place in English, with the agreement of the participants.

3.2. Data collection procedures

After graduation in May a message was sent out by email inviting all recent Education graduates from the programmes mentioned above at the two universities to volunteer for the study. Any former student who contacted us to indicate an interest in being interviewed became a participant after giving informed consent. Ethical approval was sought and obtained by both universities before data collection began. Participants were interviewed individually in person during the summer following graduation and again in the late winter of their first year of teaching. Despite the fact that the participants had already completed their teacher education programmes, we were careful not to interview our former students to avoid possible ethical dilemmas or influence the responses. For that reason, the researchers each interviewed the former students from the other participating university. During the interviews, both before beginning teaching and part way through their first year, the participants were asked nine questions in a semi-structured interview designed to elicit information about their views of the development of their professional identities as teachers. We also collected information about the backgrounds of the participants, such as gender, programme of study such as elementary or secondary, subject area specialities, and previous experience in either teaching or another profession. The interviews were audio taped and then transcribed by a research assistant who also attributed a codename to ensure anonymity. Due to the amount of data collected in this study, we elected to examine responses to some questions separately. In this paper we look only at the responses to the question: “What metaphor would you use to describe yourself as a teacher at this time?” Discussions of other parts of the study have been published elsewhere (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2007).

3.3. The methodology of metaphor

Along with the complexity of teaching, the complexity of identity can be revealed through metaphor. It is not easy to describe one’s identity when asked to do so in so many words. Our research (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2007) has found that direct questions about identity tended to elicit responses related to roles one fulfills or activities one engages in, “the what” rather than “the who.” Eliciting new teachers’ notions of metaphor in a qualitative study of professional identity permits both participants and researchers to examine the difficult concept of identity development in vivid and insightful ways. The opportunity to step back out of everyday language and into the poetic language of metaphor allowed the participants in our study to be descriptive about their developing identities in alternate, sometimes simplistic but often highly descriptive ways. An invitation to use a metaphor to describe one’s teaching self in this research brought the response back to “the who,“ and permitted an enlightening glimpse into the complex and multi-faceted notion of identity. However, not all participants were able to come up with a metaphor and many did need an explanation of what we were looking for. Goldstein (2005) has pointed to the difficulties that pre-service teachers may have in constructing metaphors on their own and suggests providing a sample to choose from in her study. Mahlios, Massengill-Shaw and Barry (2010) describe three studies where pre-service teachers were given an instrument to describe their beliefs about teaching. They note that “Respondents to the survey have the option of self-reporting their own metaphors or choosing from the lists provided... In our experience with the instrument, we have found that most respondents work with the metaphors provided...” (p. 51).

We elected to suggest that the participants come up with their own metaphor, but we gave an example and used the same definition each time: “A metaphor is another way of saying who you are using an object or a role to represent the way you see yourself as a teacher. For example, you could say that I am a gardener because I help children grow.” Using the same definition with each participant does mean that they were each influenced in the same way, which could have both a positive and negative influence on the data: positive, in that each participant received the same information; and negative, in that there was likely a limiting factor.
introduced when participants heard metaphor described in that way. In addition, metaphors are highly reflective of personal interpretations of phenomena, which are influenced by the lenses of class, gender, race, ethnicity and educational and life experiences through which one sees the world. We did not question any of the participants’ choices, although we did ask them to elaborate on their ideas. The question was intended to provide additional, alternative information on the ways new teachers might describe their developing professional selves, which would permit the researchers to gain a deeper and more complete picture of the way the participants view this abstract concept. At the same time we acknowledge the limitations with this technique in that the students/teachers were not always ready with a metaphor during the interview, and sometimes responded with somewhat trite metaphors that did not allow for deep exploration of their identities.

3.4. Data analysis process

We coded the data by hand due to the small numbers of participants. We began by separately identifying the metaphor from each participant. Using an iterative approach we then grouped the metaphors according to themes about professional identity that emerged, as possible categories from the responses. As much as possible, we used “in vivo codes, that is the exact words of the participants as labels for the categories” (Creswell, 2002, p. 448) during this open coding phase. We are conscious of the fact that the way in which we have categorized the metaphors may not entirely reflect the original intent of the participants, but by using the participants’ own words as much as possible we have attempted to overcome the difficulty of speaking for others. As Fontana and Frey (2003) write, “The use of language, particularly the use of specific terms, is important in the creation of ‘a sharedness of meanings’ in which both the interviewer and respondent understand the contextual nature of specific referents” (p. 86). The data from the two interviews were treated separately, but in a similar fashion. To build reliability into the analysis, each of us worked on grouping the metaphors according to emergent categories separately, and we then compared results in terms of the groupings made and the categories used. We found many similarities in terms of the ways in which we had grouped the metaphors and the categories we had each named individually. When we had a difference of opinion as to how to best code a metaphor, we were able to come to a mutually agreed upon decision through discussion. Once all the data were coded and charted, we re-read the transcripts and re-examined our thematic categories. A high level of consistency was found, apart from the difficulty of placing the metaphors which fell into the “other” category. The process was repeated for the second set of interviews, and the two sets of data were then compared to check for evidence of change, in particular whether it was possible to determine growth and/or change in the development of a professional identity, and if so, in what ways. We did not look for change in terms of the metaphors suggested by individual participants, but checked to see if there were broad elements of change across the range of metaphors from the two interviews.

4. Findings

As in the Irish-American study carried out by Leavy et al. (2007), we discovered a difference in the metaphors used by teachers at different times in their professional development. Leavy et al. (2007) looked at the different metaphors used by pre-service teachers at the beginning and the end of their teacher education programme. In our study the metaphors used by the participants to describe their professional identities were found to differ in a variety of interesting ways between the time they graduated from a teacher education programme and part way through their first year of teaching. In response to our first research question: What differences can be observed in the metaphors chosen by new teachers during the summer following their graduation from teacher education programs and part way through their first year of teaching?, we found that the metaphors collected during the first interview focused on supporting future students, nurturing, protecting and helping them find their way. Examples include

- The captain of a boat; I have to take these people (students) somewhere and there are storms and high waves.
- The offensive line in a football team. The teacher protects the classroom, and the students in the class.
- A coat hanger. Everything hangs on you and you need to support everything and everyone. If not, it falls.

The second interviews found the participants more focused on themselves and their own experiences in the classroom: challenged, facing changing and unpredictable situations, and focused on survival. Examples of metaphors from these interviews include

- a survivor of the Titanic but who didn’t have a lifeboat and had to swim to shore
- a gerbil on an exercise wheel who is eager to make efforts but going nowhere

Some metaphors presented this idea but in a qualified way, acknowledging the changeable nature of the job and the fluctuations in emotional reactions to it.

- Some days you have really calm waters, you love being out there and there are other people on the ship that really help you out. Other days you feel like you are on that ship all by yourself, the water is rocky and you wonder, “Why am I on this boat? I didn’t sign up for this.”

It should be noted that the majority of the participants work in districts where mentoring projects of various types have been implemented, usually involving the assignment of an experienced teacher to be available to the new teacher. We mention this fact because mentoring programmes have become very popular in recent years as a means to smoothing the way through the induction process (Gold, 1996; Margolis, 2008; Wiebke & Bardin, 2009). However, our study shows that more and perhaps different kinds of support are needed, including opportunities for new teachers to come to terms with their new professional identities in supported ways.

In response to the second question: What patterns (if any) exist among the metaphors new teachers use to describe their teacher selves?, we found several patterns among the metaphors used by the participants. For the metaphors from the first interview, the researchers determined five different themes into which nearly all of the responses fell. They are, in order of most common to least common, “supporting the student,” “often changing,” “transformed from the beginning of the teacher education program,” “flexible or being moulded by others,” and “uncertain.” The sixth theme was labelled “other,” and contains those which do not fall into one of the other five.

Supporting the student was by far the largest group, with over one third (19) of the 45 responses falling into this category. Some examples of this category are a clothes hanger, tree roots, a wave of positive energy, the offensive line on a football team, the sun, the captain on a boat, and part of the village that it takes to raise a child. The responses indicate that these participants viewed their
relationship with their students as an integral part of their professional identity. At this early stage in their careers, they see their role as being centered on the students, rather than on the curriculum or on themselves in their teaching role. Providing support to the student can take different forms. A female participant sees her identity as a combination of roles:

- I'm a guide and a mother. I will guide my students toward knowledge of science, plus the mothering part of teaching.

In focusing on the students in terms of their metaphors, these participants are anticipating future relationships with students and making a direct link between the identity of a teacher and the ways in which teachers interact with students.

Twelve responses were coded as changeable or often changing, such as a waterfall in the summer or a magician having to adapt to different audiences. Other examples that fall into this category include a never-ending road, coming out of a cocoon, and a kayak on a river. These participants emphasized the variety of roles that teachers play, and the challenge of adapting to these roles. The female participant who gave the metaphor of a waterfall to represent her teaching identity explained it as

- Sometimes it's fast and sometimes it's really, really slow.

These participants were obviously focusing on the multi-dimensional and constantly evolving nature of a teaching identity. Some of them are expressing doubts about their abilities to keep up with the perceived demands.

- I'm an entertainer: I sing, I dance, I run; I do everything to be inspiring. I don't know if it will work all year.
- A kayak in the river: it's in a river that gets bigger and bigger as we know more about the teaching profession, and it's like we end up going from the river to the sea where we're kind of lost.

Others are more positive about being able to cope with the demands. One participant noted that she was like a marathon racer at the halfway point:

- Having reached half the race I have more power and motivation than I had at the beginning of the race.

Another stated that she was a never-ending road,

- I'm constantly learning and developing and it's winding because I am changing, but it's consistent because I move forward although I change along the way.

On the whole, the responses in this category were more positive than negative, indicating that although the participants felt hesitant in some ways about their new identity, they also felt capable of overcoming the challenges.

Three participants spoke about having been transformed by the teacher education program, for example, a frog: Something that has been transformed from something quite different; a butterfly: They are free — they have changed a lot and adapted a lot to get to where they are, and a traveller traveling into oneself: Everyday I feel that I learn a bit more about myself. As teacher educators, we are interested that only a few participants thought to relate their professional identities to their teacher education programmes, although it should be noted that they were not asked to do so. One of the overall findings of this study indicates that it would be helpful to new teachers if more time was spent on focusing on the development of a professional identity in the teacher education courses, particularly those associated with the practicum. The participants indicated that, for the most part, they had not considered the development of their professional identities during the time they were students, mainly because they were never asked to.

There were three responses in each of the categories of being flexible/moulded by the experience of teaching (a rubber band, play dough, Gumby), and being uncertain about one's current position or future path:

- I am a key ring with keys to unknown doors,
- I am a person at a crossroads unsure of which route to take.
- I'm going to be challenged on what I know and I'm aware that I'm young.

While it is somewhat surprising that more participants did not choose a metaphor that would represent them in this way given that most did not have a confirmed position for the fall, the sense of self-confidence about their future roles was prevalent among the majority of the participants at this particular time, in contrast to the second interview period.

The “other” category contained two diverse metaphors. One participant described herself as a wild horse that has been caught and forced to do things a certain way, a reference to the constraints she now feels working in an institution and having to follow a number of rules and guidelines she does not necessarily agree with. The other participant was unable to offer a metaphor beyond

- Just myself; my identity as a human is just the same as my identity as a teacher.

This participant was adamant throughout the interview that her teaching identity was instinctive and inherited, and that she had been able to maintain it despite the requirements of the teacher education programme she had just completed. In contrast to the previous participant, this new teacher believed that she was finally free to be the teacher she had always been, without having to conform to university standards and expectations that she does not agree with.

In terms of the patterns that could be identified, the themes that emerged from the second set of interviews were different from the first in several significant ways. This time the category with the most metaphors is one that can be seen as “multi-faceted”. One example is:

- Sweet and sour food; the sweet is the way I thought it would be and I know I can have an impact on a student's life. The sour part is the fact that in order to achieve that I have to be a military person, which is not natural for me.

A close second was the category “challenged” with the metaphors reflecting the great challenges the participants were encountering in their first year of teaching. There were five out of 46 entries in this category, with examples being

- A soldier; I have my battles.
- One of those big, heavy grey mops you have in hospitals, and the more you get into it the heavier you become, and you have to do the same job over and over.
- A duck; you know, above the water it all looks calm and collected, and under the water the feet are paddling like crazy. Only this duck looks frazzled above the water too.

At this stage in their careers, part way through their first year of teaching, the new teacher participants in this study were reacting to their experiences with the demanding nature of the multifarious
roles of a teacher. While their reactions are not surprising, we are nonetheless concerned that graduates of our four-year programmes with the very heavy emphasis on practicum experience (700–900 h, including a three month intensive culminating internship) would still express this degree of difference between the summer before entering the profession, where participants did not express these perspectives in their metaphors, and six months into it, where this sentiment is the most common. Clearly, the additional time provided for practice teaching in a four-year education programme is not enough to adequately prepare new teachers for the challenges of the first year.

Four responses referred to relations with students, such as “a rock: being a constant right now for my kids; something central and solid for my students and me.” Three other metaphors related to growth, such as a tree, and a building under construction:

- I'm in the basement and there are things that are needed in order to build, to complete the building. These will come with experience.

Two responses mentioned difficulties but included a sense of accomplishment at the same time and were coded “difficult but not impossible.” These were an elastic band (being pulled in all directions but not breaking while meeting the needs of everyone), and a mountain climber (there is no such thing as a mountain that you can't climb if you try hard enough.) Two of the metaphors mentioned being part of a team, such as

- Just another tree in the forest.

The second set of interviews had a larger “other” category than the first, with six metaphors that did not seem to relate to the others in a clearly definable way. These included

- A book; an open book, one that is there for the kids to look at, like an encyclopaedia, yet one that has white pages in the back, ready to be filled in through experience and the things I continue to learn.
- Molasses; not wet and not dry, but what sticks the whole recipe together, and adds sweetness
- A bird flying high overhead, looking down at the classroom from a distance; I am floating around looking down. I see it all happen, but it's distanced from me. I'm just watching it happen.

This variety of metaphors reflects the broad range of perspectives that new teachers bring to a discussion of the development of their professional identities and serves to remind us that identity is a dynamic, ever-evolving concept. It is also a very personal one that merits exploration during initial teacher education. We see that despite their best intentions of focusing on students, many new teachers quickly become preoccupied with their own survival. The fact that they were unprepared for this shift appears to make the challenges they face in terms of becoming a confident professional all that more difficult to accept.

5. Implications for teacher education

The connection between the way new teachers see themselves and their perceptions of their success as a teacher is another topic that merits exploration during initial teacher education. Clarifying the process of professional identity development during teacher preparation could be very helpful for better preparing new teachers for the challenges of their first year. The use of metaphors in this study provides a means for exploring the development process that new teachers go through, allowing the researchers to focus on the teacher ("the who"), rather than on the role or roles that teachers assume, which can be too closely related to context. With examples of metaphors taken on two specific occasions at the start of a new teacher's career, we were able to see that the paths that teacher identity development can take are not necessarily smooth but often fraught with periods of self-doubt and questioning. This information should be made available to pre-service teachers so that they will have a clearer idea of what to expect in terms of the process of identity development in the early years of their careers.

This study clearly indicates that metaphors can be a rich and stimulating way for new teachers to talk about the experience of their first year of teaching that is very revealing for teacher educators and researchers in teacher education. We have come to the realization that the development of a professional identity does not automatically come with experience, and that some form of deliberate action is necessary to ensure that new teachers begin their careers with the appropriate tools to negotiate the rocky waters of the first few years. The findings of the study suggest that more attention needs to be paid to raising awareness of the process of professional identity development during teacher education programmes, although further research is needed to determine what form that might take. Rodgers and Scott (2008) have pointed
out that much current research into the development of teaching identities does not indicate how identity develops and how teacher educators might influence this development. It is highly likely that the adaptation period to a profession such as teaching will remain demanding, but the more we as teacher educators can learn about the process of developing a teaching identity, the better we can help future teachers prepare to meet these demands in a positive and professionally satisfying way. One important finding of this study has been the realization that inviting the participants to come up with metaphors has given them an opportunity to consider their professional identities in more personal and profound ways. Participants noted that although it was difficult to find words to express how they saw themselves as teachers, they enjoyed participating in the study and appreciated the chance to reflect aloud with the interviewer. We speculate that these participants would concur with Hunt (2006) when she writes:

Engaging in the processes of reflective practice has certainly given me what might be termed an ‘embodied recognition’ (i.e., directly experienced and not simply acknowledged intellectually) of the importance of metaphors/visual images and the ‘sensings’ from which they emerge. For better or worse, my professional identity has now self-evidently been shaped by my attempts to make these processes public (p. 238).

The results of this study have led us to believe that there is a strong case to be made for engaging pre-service teachers in a variety of dialogues, including the use of metaphors, about the development of their professional identities as part of an effective approach for preparing them for the complex and demanding profession they have chosen.

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Appendix 1

List of questions for the larger study from which the findings presented in this paper were drawn.

Becoming a professional: Development of a teaching identity from student to new teacher in Eastern Townships schools

Questions from the first interview, undertaken immediately following graduation:

1. How has the teacher education programme affected your perceptions of teaching? What specific aspects of the programme (courses, practicum, etc.) influenced your perceptions?
2. Is there anything you would like to say about how your image of yourself as teacher has changed during the programme?
3. Do you think imagination has played a role in the way you see yourself as a teacher?
4. What metaphor would you use to represent yourself as teacher at this time? Could you explain?
5. How do you imagine your first year of teaching?
6. Do you have a vision of the kind of teacher you would like to be?
7. How do you think you will reach this ideal?
8. What changes might you anticipate in your image of yourself as teacher? What might influence these changes?
9. Is it helpful to imagine how things might work in advance? Does thinking ahead about your future practice help you to see yourself as a professional?

Questions from the second interview, undertaken midway through the first year of teaching:

1. Now that you have taught for part of a year, how do you perceive your identity as a teacher? Who are you in this role?
2. Can you name any specific changes in your sense of a teaching identity since you began teaching?
3. What aspects of your practice have influenced this change?
4. Is there a metaphor you would use to represent your teaching identity?
5. What is your present vision of the kind of teacher you would like to be?
6. How do you think you will reach this ideal?
7. How does a teacher develop a professional identity?
8. Does your subject area have any influence on your identity as a teacher?
9. As you reflect on your experience in a teacher education programme, what would you now consider the most helpful aspects of this programme in the development of your identity?
10. What suggestions would you make for teacher education programs to enhance the development of a teaching identity in student teachers?
11. Is there anything you would like to add about developing a teaching identity?

References


