

**Woman in the Mirror: Making the Change, Professional
Identity Development in K-20 Teachers**

Amy L. Sedivy-Benton, Katrina M. Leland, and Landon A. Pinneo

Abstract

Teacher education is a field that is often under scrutiny as a field whose professionals are underqualified or being staffed by individuals who do not care. This work explores the experiences of three teacher educators, how they came to their profession, and how they found both their communities of practice and their professional identities. Their notions of self and their professional identities are far from solidified and still unfolding, suggesting that professional identity is a cyclical process, rather than linear. Key themes that emerged in their trajectories include critical incidents, resiliency, and transformational learning.

Keywords: Professional Identity, Teacher Education, Higher Education

**Woman in the Mirror: Making the Change, Professional
Identity Development in K-20 Teachers**

Learning to teach is quite difficult. It is also a very personal process. Teacher educators (those who teach in pre-service, pre-teacher-licensure programs) have gone through this experience and do their best to guide new candidates through the process. This process of becoming an educator is something they have experienced. The development of their professional identity comes from not only their own assumptions about the profession, but also how they worked through these assumptions. Such a transformational process included critical incidents, mentoring, experiences and beliefs, all of which helped to establish their professional identity. This work explores three case studies and discusses the implications of participants' choices and how their professional identities shifted and changed when presented with a critical incident.

Literature Review

Several aspects of a professional's experiences shape their career trajectory as well as their identity. Some of these aspects are planned and anticipated, such as enrolling in an institution to obtain a specific degree or participating in an internship with the hope that they will be able to secure a professional position within an organization of their choice. However, there are also experiences that they do not have control over that also come into play when developing a professional identity. These experiences often produce transformative learning and develop resiliency for teachers to continue to forge ahead in their chosen profession. These experiences include professional identity, transformational learning, and professional resiliency, as expanded on below.

The Professional Identity of Educators

The professional identity of an educator can be a bit complex beyond the eye of the observer. To the casual observer, it may seem that the educator's responsibilities are solely to transfer knowledge and manage an educational environment, but an educator's professional identity extends beyond teaching and classroom management. The educator's professional identity also

entails a significant amount of customer service to students, colleagues, the community, and the organization. Regardless of the position that an educator has in the K-20 field, most serve in roles beyond teaching. This service is comprised of student advocacy, community advocacy, as the educator serves as guidance counselor, role model, and institution booster.

Educators routinely provoke their students to excel in every area of their lives (Teach.com, 2017), and they serve as role models. Unlike the celebrities, students may also admire and aspire to become, educators are the role models that students can see, touch, and hear each day. To establish rapport with students, educators share stories about their lives with their students. This transparency can help students see the educator's humanity and inevitably provide a model of inspiration (Jones, 2016). As professionals, these educators must work to strike the fine balance between being human and retaining a professional persona; they do not want to share too much of their own personal life and can find themselves in a struggle to balance the two.

The educator's professional identity will undergo a trajectory of growth throughout their tenure in the profession. During their initial years in the profession, opportunities to serve are always accessible in the profession of education. This profession needs selfless educators who are willing to serve others unconditionally, learn from the transformative process, and develop resiliency. This can be a challenge, but it reaps many benefits.

Transformative Learning in Education

As novice teachers enter the field, they move into their first positions with the assumptions of what their classrooms and experiences will be like. They will take the time to tend to every student and make sure that their needs are met. They will differentiate and accommodate, and each student will succeed in their classroom. This narrative plays over and over—until the narrative no longer holds true, which presents the novice teacher with the dilemma that their assumptions about the profession were inaccurate. Based on the narrative, novice teachers have two paths they can take: leave the profession (Guha, Hyler, & Darling-Hammond, 2017) or revise their assumptions about the profession (Cranton, 2016).

Mezirow (2012) noted that transformational learning allows the individual to move past previously held beliefs and create a new system that allows them to have perspective from their experiences that further shapes professional growth and identity. No longer does the teacher fully believe that each student will be reached, and they no longer feel that all will succeed in the same manner. This learning process also feeds into the idea of who these educators are as professionals (Cranton, 2013). Until something disrupts the educator's experiences and transforms them, the narrative for their profession will continue. When this disruption does occur, the self-reflective component that these educators once learned about in their prior curricula presents itself. This reflective component is where these assumptions will begin to be challenged. Boden-McGill and Kippers (2012) indicated that this is not merely a simple reflection of what might need to be changed, but rather a critical self-reflection. This reflection can include relationships in the workplace, interactions with learners, and considering how their emotional state of mind is relevant in their transformation.

As teachers begin to develop their professional identity, their experiences in the classroom and their assumptions of what it would be like can become challenged when the two do not align.

The self-reflection and adaptation all occur in a variety of fashions. These experiences challenge the educator's assumptions, and as a result, transformative learning occurs.

To revise these assumptions, these educators must first decide who they will be as a professional. Consider the rates for teachers leaving the profession within the first three to five years: More than half elect to leave the profession completely (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014). Analyses of these teachers indicated that those who chose to stay in the profession had more focus on long-term goals and were able to adjust their expectations within the classroom as well as develop "grit" in the profession. They were able to self-reflect in their profession and develop a resiliency to their surroundings. The combination of the passion to their professional identity, transformational learning, and resiliency led them to continue down their career path.

Professional Resiliency

Transitioning into a new and challenging career requires a change in professional identity. Without this, personal and professional identities may be at odds, leaving the person with an internal conflict. If this conflict is not resolved, professional identity transformation does not occur, leaving the person in turmoil. Some with this experience may leave the profession to resolve this turmoil. Yet others power through, transforming their professional identity in order to reconcile any conflict with their personal identity. Resiliency is imperative for transformative learning and reconciliation of personal and professional identities to occur.

One's personal and professional experiences merge to form the narrative of the individual (Unrath, Anderson, & Franco, 2013). Identities are not set in stone. Instead, a transformative process happens when changes in the person's personal or professional experiences occur. Novice teachers, whose expectation of the teaching professional is not realized, illustrate identity conflicts and the need for resiliency. Education is notorious for its low novice teacher retention. Fifty percent of new teachers leave the profession within five years (Beiler, 2013). While there are many factors contributing to this phenomenon, identity conflict and its mitigation will be the focus of this paper. The three main mitigations are teacher mentorships, reflection of practice, and shared core values. Each factor contributes positively to transformative learning and thus teacher retention.

Case Studies in Education

From Classroom Teacher to University Professor (Katina's Story)

Chasing my dream. Ever since I was a timid fourth grader, I aspired to become an educator. My fourth and sixth grade teachers ignited the flame in my heart to teach. I remember these teachers vividly because they emulated the qualities of an effective teacher in my immature eyes. They also established rapport with all of us as well as our families. They were honest, loyal, and smart. Upon graduating from high school, I enrolled in a four-year institution of higher education and began my journey in an educator preparation program. My excitement increased when I applied the acquired knowledge in clinical experiences. Feelings of trepidation entered upon graduation and certification. The time had come for me to manage my own classroom without the guidance of a clinical teacher or university supervisor.

Classroom teacher. Teaching first grade became a passion for me. I taught first grade for four consecutive years. I enjoyed teaching the curriculum, the developmental stages of the students, and the confidence that I gained. During this time of my career, I was confident enough to mentor teacher candidates during their clinical experiences. During this time, I also decided to pursue a graduate degree to enhance my knowledge of teaching on a profound level. I was unsure of my next move, but one day a peer of mine asked me if I was ready to leave the classroom and try a different task in education. This decision led to a significantly different opportunity in my career.

Teacher educator. When I was hired to be a teacher educator, I experienced mixed emotions. I never aspired to teach adults, but I planned to attack the challenge with tenacity. I soon discovered that my structure for teaching elementary students was also effective with adult learners. Teaching adult learners has become a joy for me. In addition to teaching aspiring teacher candidates in my new role, I was expected to complete service in the community, institution, and profession. As a teacher educator, I have advocated for literacy by reading to students in the local schools, judging reading and science fair projects, and sharing literacy strategies with other educators at professional development sessions. Serving in these various capacities has allowed me to grow significantly in my profession.

From Surgical Technologist to Classroom Teacher to University Professor (Lundon's Story)

There is one unifying theme within my unique career path: education. It began with my pursuit of a medical degree and led me to my current position as a visiting instructor in the College of Education. Having taught in the medical and grades 7-12 education fields, my professional identity has undergone continual shifts. Applying what I had learned from my past experiences and my relationships with valued mentors helped guide my transformative learning (process).

My professional career began as a surgical technologist, where I was employed at a teaching hospital. I often had students of surgical technology, nursing students, and surgical residents under my instruction. I enjoyed every minute of teaching. Through this process, I found that adult learners need to feel autonomous, responsible for their actions but given the proper information. When possible, I would have my students watch me do a case followed by an opportunity for the student to then lead the same procedure with the same surgeon for another patient: see one, do one. Little did I know, I was beginning to build my teacher identity through these experiences.

Teaching the surgical tech and medical students offered a new challenge and provided an opportunity to share my passion with others. Thus, I enrolled in the Master of Education program later that week. The education courses were a natural fit. I had always enjoyed all things science but teaching, I found, was my calling. My peers and I fervently discussed everything from pedagogy to policy. In this group, I had found my colleagues. More importantly, I had found the profession that aligned with my personal identity.

Brenda and Lorie (both pseudonyms) had more than 30 years of teaching experience combined. Brenda was a math teacher, assigned to me by my district to meet novice-teacher state requirements. Lorie was the head of our science department and fellow biology teacher. Daily, I would plan lessons, labs, and activities with Lorie. My novice-teacher ideas were sharpened by

her experience and wisdom. As student engagement increased, so did productivity and rapport. This transformation would not have occurred without my relationships with my mentors. Through their support and my purposeful reflection, I remained resilient and redefined my professional identity.

Another piece of a teacher educator's professional identity exists through navigation of campus politics, research, and publications. Armed with the realization that mentors greatly contribute to resiliency, I have again reached out to respected colleagues. Thankfully, one colleague in particular took on the role of mentoring. Through my discussions and collaborations with her (such as this publication), I find much-needed support. Having survived the first year, I have begun to reflect upon my experiences. Through these reflections and her support, my professional identity is being redefined.

From Research Methodologist to University Professor in Education (Amy's Story)

My career as an educator started out as well...I wasn't one! I didn't have the dream where I wanted to be a teacher; I didn't have a calling to work with kids. In fact, I didn't even know what I wanted to do when I started college. Business seemed like a good fit. After a few days of sitting at work, I fell back to what I liked about graduate school and realized that it was the experience of writing my master's thesis and the process of conducting research. That is what I wanted to be as a professional—a researcher. I knew what I wanted and set the goal to get there.

The program I chose was a wonderful fit for me. At the time it was housed in the School of Education, and the crux of the work that I was doing regarding coursework, research, and analysis was around the world of K-12 education, both at the student level as well as the teacher level. By chance, I was placed with a mentor who was also in the public schools conducting research; the urban locale of Chicago allowed me to become part of classrooms that I never once considered. Through this research, my focus shifted from just being a researcher to being an educator. This project soon led to others, and I was traveling all over the United States working with teachers and teaching kids. It was the perfect mix of everything I wanted professionally. As I became more entrenched both within a university setting, while still having a foot in the schools, I began to fully realize who I was professionally and where I still wanted to go.

This transformation for me came from a critical incident that happened with children in the classroom in Detroit. It was here that I knew I could make a difference, and a shift happened as I attempted to ensure that all children had the same access to schools and resources. The conditions of the school, as well as the training of the teachers, were unlike anything I had ever seen before. The daily interactions with these teachers and kids, as well as how grateful they were for these small exchanges and different views in the classroom, had an impact on me as much as it did them.

These experiences in these schools allowed me to reflect and consider where I wanted to go and who I wanted to be as a researcher and an educator. As my tenure as an educator has continued, it has been a constant process of self-reflection and realization. I aspire to navigate the professional world both within the community of practice in K-12 and within in higher education as well. Even now, my professional identity is a cyclical process and continues to adjust as I reflect. I can fully say that I'm no longer just a "research methodologist" but now part of

something that is much bigger. The community I work within academically provides support and direction to further my professional growth.

Common Themes Related to Professional Practice

Critical incidents. The particular incident will vary by individual, however in each of these stories it is clearly identifiable where these incidents happened, from being in surgery and the desire to being someplace else, to being in a classroom with children who are in need, to assuming a new educational path. These critical incidents began to push these three individuals toward their transformational learning. They began to self-reflect and adjust their belief systems when it came to who they were professionally.

Transformational learning (challenging of beliefs). In each of these cases there was a shift where the belief systems of the educators were challenged through this reflective process. As they experienced their critical incidents, their belief systems were challenged and adjusted. They began to see themselves professionally in a different light than they had before. This caused a shift in their professional identity as they began to assume these new roles.

Resiliency and self-efficacy. Without resiliency or self-efficacy to reconcile personal and professional identities, teachers often leave the profession. One major contributor to resiliency, as demonstrated in the three case studies above, is mentorship. Each of the teachers, who are now teacher educators, underwent transformative learning with the guidance of a mentor. These mentors bolstered self-efficacy and encouraged a positive transformative learning experience that lead to an altered professional identity. This resiliency can also be associated with the term “grit” that suggests that this innate characteristic contributes the most to an educator’s success and ability to adjust and react to situations. As noted by Robertson and Duckworth (2014), these individuals have the passion and focus on their long-term goals and are able to deal with adverse and changing situations.

Conclusion

Critical incidents, transformative learning, and resilience all contributed to the teacher educators’ professional identity. Each case presented the individual with a situation where professional identity was challenged, requiring reflection on who they were professionally, to decide the next step to take. These situations were often not within the control of the educator and often conflicted with personal identities. Critical incidents are unique to each educator, but they seemed to trigger the transformative learning process and create a fork in the proverbial career road.

This process of navigating the formation of one’s professional identity is often comprised of many factors, such as critical incidents, mentors, grit and self-reflection. Successfully navigating critical incidents helps to create a professional identity for teacher educators. Each woman has seen herself in the mirror during each stage of her career path in education. It is imperative that the woman educator does not become hindered by failures but perseveres to accomplish something greater in her career. The professional identity for each woman is a reflection of how she sees her worth in her career.

References

- Beiler, D. (2013). Strengthening new teacher agency through holistic mentoring. *The English Journal*, 102(3), 23-32.
- Boden-McGill, C. J., & Kippers, S. M. (2012). *Pathways to transformation: Learning in relationship*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Cranton, P. (2016). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning: A guide to theory and practice* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Guha, R., Hyler, M. E., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). The teacher residency: A practical path to recruitment and retention. *American Educator*, 6(2017), 7.
- Jones, P. (2016, August 7). What are school teachers for? *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, p. 3H.
- Mezirow, J. (2012). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In E. Taylor, P. Cranton, & Associates (Eds.), *The handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 73-95). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Price-Mitchell, M. (2015, September 11). *Empathy in action: How teachers prepare future citizens*. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/8-pathways-empathy-in-action-marilyn-price-mitchell>.
- Robertson-Kraft, C., & Duckworth, A. L. (2014). True grit: Trait-level perseverance and passion for long-term goals predicts effectiveness and retention among novice teachers. *Teachers College Record*, 116(3).
- Unrath, K. A., Anderson, M. A., & Franco, M. J. (2013). The becoming art teacher: A reconciliation of teacher identity and the dance of teaching art. *Visual Arts Research*, 39(2), 82-92.
- Teach.com. (2017). *Teachers as role models*. Retrieved from <https://teach.com/what/teachers-change-lives/teachers-are-role-models/>.

Dr. Amy Sedivy-Benton is an Associate Professor in the Teacher Education Department at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Dr. Sedivy-Benton's work focuses on teacher quality and policies surrounding teacher and teacher education. She often offers her methodological expertise on articles. She has authored conference presentations, book chapters, and articles.

Dr. Katina Leland is an Associate Professor in the Teacher Education Department at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Dr. Leland's work focuses on best practices of clinical experiences of teacher education candidates, and she is very active in the local K-12 community. She has authored conference presentations, book chapters, and articles.

Lundon Pinneo is a visiting professor in Teacher Education at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and a doctoral student at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. She has experience working in both the medical field as well as secondary education. She is currently preparing to receive her Ph.D. in science.