

# Professional Identity Assignments to Support Beginning Teachers' Growth into the Profession

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## Abstract

Developing a professional identity is a key element of the transition into the teaching profession. Limited research exists on professional development activities and ideas that support beginning teachers' development of their professional identity in practice. For this study teachers participated in an induction programme that focused on beginning teachers' professional identity. This study reports on the development and testing of three online professional identity assignments with 46 beginning teachers from 11 secondary schools. These assignments were based on research findings regarding the influence of 'significant others' and 'stories to live by' on teachers' professional identity development. Analysis of the results reveals that the assignments each provide valuable input for doing identity work with beginning teachers in view of their further professional development. It can be concluded that the assignments we developed are useful for beginning teachers to reflect on and make sense of who they are and want to become.

**Key Words:** Teacher identity, Beginning teachers, Induction phase, Identity work, Identity assignments

## Introduction

Newly qualified teachers are in a phase of their career in which the development of their identity as a teacher is strongly influenced by personal, interpersonal, and contextual aspects. These three dimensions of professional identity development are interrelated and depend on each other (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). The way all kinds of aspects associated with these dimensions interact with a teacher is a personal and internal validation and sense-making process resulting in an 'image-of-self-as-teacher' that expresses one's teacher identity (Cobb, 2020). This identity also filters how new experiences are gained and processed. The interplay between aspects of these three dimensions in combination with internal mental processes of making sense of experiences makes the development of an identity as teacher complex, dynamic, and to a certain extent also unique (Beijaard et al., 2004; Cobb, 2020). Developing a professional identity is a key element of an effective transition into the teaching profession. Particularly the professional identity of beginning teachers continually changes based

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on interpretations and re-interpretations of experiences (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999). More specifically, aspects of the personal dimension of a teacher's professional identity pertain to personal characteristics, own learning history, previously developed beliefs about teaching and learning, and norms and values with regard to education. Aspects like these strongly influence what teachers find important for themselves for becoming and being a teacher (Alsup, 2005). They strongly determine the perception and appreciation of aspects of the other two dimensions as well (cf. Olsen, 2008). The interpersonal dimension refers to teachers' interactions with others; particularly students, colleagues, school managers, and parents are 'significant others' to them (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Olsen, 2010). These significant others are real 'critical reality definers' for how teachers professionally see themselves (Beijaard, 1995). The social dimension encompasses teachers' school contexts as well as the broader socio-cultural and historical context of schools and expected roles belonging to these contexts with their own norms, values, practices, beliefs and discourses (e.g., Vähäsantanen & Billet, 2008; Zembylas, 2003). It is teachers' professional landscape which can be metaphorically understood as storied landscapes with so-called 'stories to live by' (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988; Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009). 'Stories to live by' can pertain to a specific or dominant way of teaching and learning in a school or broadly accepted conceptions in society about 'good teaching'. Stories teachers live by (and tell) are reflected in their professional identity and thus also influence its development.

Much professional identity research has been done in the last three decades on the influence of aspects of these dimensions – separately as well in combination – on teacher identity and its development (cf. review studies by: Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Izadinia, 2013; Rodrigues & Mogarro, 2019). Whilst teacher identity is currently considered to be a priority, only few studies have provided ideas and concrete professional development activities to support the professional identity development of beginning teachers. In this study we make use of insights from research for the development of professional identity assignments in the context of an induction program. More specifically, this study investigates the implementation of professional identity assignments for beginning teachers regarding 'significant others' and 'stories to live by'. From the results we hope to learn about the added value of such assignments for identity work with these teachers.

## **Theoretical Background**

### **Significant others**

Interacting with significant others, i.e., students, colleagues, school leaders and others, particularly parents, is inherent to being a teacher. One of the main concerns of teachers is building and maintaining a good relationship with these significant others. In their work with students, they want to be recognized as a competent teacher. By

colleagues and school leaders they want to be heard, accepted, and have the opportunity to share their concerns with them. When relationships are well, teachers feel they have the authority to make their own voice heard and to position themselves in ways they want to (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Olson & Craig, 2001). Conflicts between how teachers want to position themselves or what is possible in reality, may cause serious threats to the development of a positive professional identity. For example, being negatively judged by others, especially by students but also by colleagues, can be devastating for teachers' professional self-esteem, their confidence and wellbeing. This triggers intense emotions like discomfort, uncertainty, powerlessness, frustration and vulnerability (Hargreaves, 2000, 2001; Kelchtermans, 1996; Zembylas, 2003). On the other hand, emotions like joy and satisfaction occur when interactions with significant others go well, which fuels feelings of being a successful teacher (Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2020).

Teacher identity is communicatively constructed through interaction with significant others in moments of contact (Arvaja, 2016; Cohen, 2010). The way these moments of contact unfold determines to a great extent how teachers see themselves and how they act accordingly. Moments of contact are intrinsically linked to ways teachers position themselves in different situations with different significant others (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011).

### ***Moments of contact***

In moments of contact with students, teachers strive to be 'a certain kind of teacher' by enacting their personal ideals, professional values and goals that are directly related to their inner motives regarding teaching (Flores & Day, 2006; Korthagen, Atema-Noordwier, & Zwart, 2014). Moments of contact are interpersonal and may enhance a deeper awareness of oneself. Moments of contact can be understood as the intersection of the inner selves of teachers, i.e., their core values about teaching and personal feelings, and those of the students, making these moments crucial for building good relationships (cf. Korb, Gorrell, & van de Riet, 1989). Moments of contact with students are essential for the development of teachers' professional identity (van der Want et al., 2015). Teacher-student relationships have been the object of study already for decades (e.g., Wubbels, den Brok, van Tartwijk et al., 2012), but not much is known about teachers' personal interpretations they attach to these moments from an identity perspective.

Studying beginning teachers' interpretations of moments of contact provides us with insight into their awareness of key factors like personal and professional values and feelings that play an important role in their professional identity development.

### ***Positioning towards significant others***

The ways teachers position themselves in their work and specific I-positions they

take for that, ideally coincide with ‘who they are’ (Akkerman, Admiraal, & Simons, 2012). Akkerman and Meijer (2011) wrote about the different positions teachers take depending on the situation they find themselves in and the people in that situation (see also Zembylas, 2003). Experienced teachers, for example, combine their I-positions as subject teacher, mentor, colleague, and pedagogue into one professional self-image and also reconcile that with other roles they fulfill, such as their role as parent or trainer at a sports club. These positions or roles can complement and reinforce each other, but also conflict and thus lead to identity tensions. Learning to reconcile and deal with such tensions can be quite a challenge for novice teachers (Pillen, Beijaard, & den Brok, 2013; Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore et al., 2004). The positions they have to take and can take as a teacher are interwoven with who they are as a person and professional and often have a great impact on the development of their professional identity (see also Hermans, 2001). Teachers’ I-positions are strongly interwoven with and guided by their personal beliefs and expectations regarding teaching and learning (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017). For example, teachers who want to be caring teachers for students might position themselves as non-authoritative and patient teachers (Arvaja, 2016). The I-positions teachers take may vary and depend on different situations and their interaction with various groups of significant others (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). For example, teachers can move from an internally driven caring I-position to an externally evoked and more authoritative I-position when needed in a situation characterized by disruptive student behavior (Arvaja, 2016).

For teachers it is not only important to know who they are in the midst of others and the different I-positions they take, it is also important to be recognized by those others as the teachers they are and want to be (Leijen, Kullasepp, & Anspal, 2014). Through reflection on I-positions, teachers can define or redefine positions that are in line with who they are and correspond with their deeper personal identity level (Alsup, 2005; Meijer, Korthagen, & Vasalos, 2009). Because of the important role I-positions are considered to have in teachers’ professional identity, this study will give us insight into the various I-positions beginning teachers take towards significant others (students, colleagues, and school leaders) and how these positions coincide or conflict with each other and hinder or promote the development of their professional identity.

### **Stories to live by**

In the domain of narrative research, Clandinin and Connelly worked over many years and with various other researchers to develop narrative understandings of life in schools (e.g., Connelly & Clandinin, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Based on this research ‘stories to live by’ refer to expressions of commonly shared beliefs, views, and values about teaching and education; they are collective stories shaped by traditions of schools and the place of schooling in society, i.e., the professional landscape that metaphorically can be understood as a ‘storied landscape’ in which teachers

live and work (Connelly & Clandinin, 1997). Teachers draw on ‘stories to live by’; they use them as frames of reference for their interpretation of personal and social experiences and, through that, make sense of themselves as teachers (Leeferink, Koopman, Beijaard, & Ketelaar, 2015; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). In fact, teachers compose their work and lives as teachers in the midst of these stories (Clandinin et al., 2009). They may, for example, prescribe what limits what is understood by the school one works in as ‘good education’ or, more generally, what counts as authorized knowledge and how we become to know it (Olson & Craig, 2005). ‘Stories to live by’ can therefore be persuasive, demanding, and restrictive; for example, when a generally accepted narrative of what constitutes effective teaching does not or only partly match the ideals that beginning teachers wish to pursue. However, ‘stories to live by’ can also provide valuable guidelines for teachers’ relationships with significant others, their teaching, the way they deal with educational policies, etc. (Clandinin & Huber, 2005). For example, the story told and shared with beginning teachers that they often bring many new ideas and insights with them when they enter the school, may have a very positive effect on how they see themselves both as a person and as a professional. Although ‘stories to live by’ matter, they are not often openly discussed in schools. In this study we want to gain insight into the kind of stories beginning teachers ‘live by’, how they relate to these stories, and what their impact is on their professional identity.

### **Assignments for identity work**

Working on their professional identity might be a deep sense-making process for beginning teachers enabling them to (re)define, craft, maintain, and strengthen their perceptions of who they are and what they find relevant in their work, as well as to negotiate a meaningful relationship between their (emerging) identity and their work (Vähäsantanen et al., 2020). Only few studies examined professional development activities or assignments to support the professional identity development of beginning teachers. In line with the sections above, our study focuses on three professional identity assignments regarding ‘significant others’ and ‘stories to live by’ to learn about the added value of such assignments for identity work. The overall question we wish to answer pertains to the potential of designing such assignments for identity work with beginning teachers. Each assignment is distinctly examined to learn about its unique features.

## **Methodology**

### **Context**

This study focuses on identity work as part of a three-year lasting induction programme in the Netherlands. The Netherlands have no mandated programmes for the induction of beginning teachers. With governmental support, a programme was designed that consisted of several professional development activities next to measures taken by

schools that support beginning teachers' well-being and growth into the profession (cf. Feiman-Nemser, 2012). Induction programmes often attend to rather 'general' teaching deficiencies in coping with a challenging context within one school (i.e., coaching the beginning teachers to increase their teaching skills) (Beijaard, Buitink, & Kessels, 2010). The identity perspective taken within this study implies a different theoretical and practical approach in coaching beginning teachers across schools to construct a realistic professional identity. For this identity work, assignments were designed and tested, being the first steps of design-based research using narrative-like analyses.

### Participants

The participants in our study were beginning teachers in schools that closely cooperate with the teacher education institute of the authors of this study in the southern part of the Netherlands. This institute was responsible for organizing the above-mentioned induction programme together with schools in this region. As a result of this collaboration, the schools ensured that their beginning teachers took part in the induction programme. One cohort of 46 beginning teachers from 11 secondary schools voluntarily participated in our study, 22 men and 24 women ranging in age from 21 to 49 years old (mean age: 28). They differed in level of teaching degree (none – bachelor – master), years of teaching experience (0-3 years) and subject taught (all school subjects were represented by the participating teachers). They all agreed with carrying out the assignments of this study and gave their permission to publish about the results.

### Assignments

The teachers carried out three online writing assignments (see Table 1). For each assignment they were requested to write approximately 400-600 words in a document and to upload it in an online and password protected platform.

Table 1.  
*Summary of Assignments*

Assignment 1: contact with significant others	1) <b>Aim:</b> to get insight into a moment of contact with students. 2) <b>Description:</b> teachers describe a moment of contact with students using these topics: intentions, personal factors, contextual factors, and tensions and feelings of success.
Assignment 2: positioning towards significant others	1) <b>Aim:</b> to get insight into a how teachers position themselves towards students, colleagues, and school leaders and why. 2) <b>Description:</b> teachers choose pictures to symbolize their positioning towards students, colleagues, and school leaders and reflect on each picture.
Assignment 3: stories to live by	1) <b>Aim:</b> to get insight into teachers' 'stories to live by' on their professional landscape. 2) <b>Description:</b> teachers write one story pertaining to 'teaching students in class' and one to the 'out-of-classroom area'. They also explain what the stories mean to them professionally.

## Procedure

In advance of the assignments, all 46 teachers took part in an introductory workshop to explain the online platform and to further introduce the assignments. The participants were requested to complete and upload the first assignment text two months after the workshop, the second again two months later, and the third three months later. Table 2 shows the number of teachers who completed each assignment. Not all assignments could be used for analysis, because some teachers were too short or limited in making notes using the topics (assignment 1), did not include a picture to symbolize their positioning (assignment 2), or completed the assignment in an unexpected way (assignment 3).

Table 2.  
*Number of Completed Assignments*

	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Assignment 3
Total	43	36	30
Suitable for analysis	28	34	14 in-class stories 20 out-of-class stories

## Analysis

All texts that the teachers uploaded were considered by us as narratives. These narratives were analyzed qualitatively. For the organization and interpretation of the data of all three assignments we made use of matrices (cf. Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2019). Because the three assignments differ in content, we analyzed the texts of each assignment differently as will be explained below.

### *Assignment 1: contact with students*

We sorted and summarized relevant text fragments per topic in a matrix. Topics of the columns in the matrix were: intentions in contact, person-related factors, context-related factors, tensions and feelings of success (see Table 1). For example, the following summary of a text fragment was labelled as belonging to the column with the topic ‘intentions in moment of contact’: ‘[this teacher’s] *goal is to be close to students because they are more open in that way and I get to know them better*’. Next, we described the findings per column.

### *Assignment 2: positioning towards significant others*

First, we summarized participants’ descriptions of their positioning per group (students, colleagues, and school leaders). Second, summaries were placed in a matrix. Each row in the matrix represented one teacher. The columns represented summarized descriptions of positioning towards students, colleagues, school leaders, and explanations of all positions. Third, we categorized each column by positions taken: above

others, next to others, being compliant with others, or being alone. Fourth, within each of these positions we identified specific themes. For example, some teachers were ‘compliant with colleagues’; within this position taken we identified the theme ‘seeking for the right position to take’. The following statement is an example: *‘The team I work in is like a puzzle and I am not sure what my position is. It is hard to know what piece fits in this team. Therefore, I find it hard to figure out which piece of the puzzle I need to be.’*

### **Assignment 3: stories to live by**

The aim of the analysis of the ‘stories to live by’ was to determine overarching story themes. The themes emerged from the data by following a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1994): the research team (all authors) read, compared and discussed preliminary themes found, and reread the data until consensus was reached on the identified themes. Three themes of ‘stories to live by’ in class were determined: (1) need of new ways of teaching, (2) difficulty of keeping students responsible for their own learning, and (3) pressure to meet high standards. The overarching themes for ‘stories to live by’ out-of-classroom were: (1) troubling state of Dutch education, (2) being part of transition in education, (3) continuity and relevance of certain school subjects under debate, and (4) relevance of cooperation with colleagues. For example, the following metaphorical ‘story to live by in class’ was placed within the theme ‘need of new ways of teaching’: *‘I see my landscape in class as a park and my students are trees within it: they are all different, they only grow with sufficient nourishment. Some trees only need a small ray of sunlight to blossom, others try very hard and barely can keep their leaves. I find it hard to take into account all these differences especially when just results seem to count and the process of growth is ignored.’* In this story the teacher expressed wanting to optimize and improve each student’s learning outcomes and personal growth.

Second, the researchers reread the stories listed under each theme in order to discuss and describe the essence and to understand the impact of each theme on teachers’ personal and professional selves. To create an overview, the descriptions of each story theme and their impact were put in a matrix. For example, the general impact of the theme in the above-mentioned example (the need of new ways of teaching in class) was ‘the need to design personalized curricula’. The impact on the teacher was ‘experiencing feelings of inadequacy’.

### **Reliability of the study**

The first author conducted the analysis of the data. All decisions made during each analysis step were discussed with and consented by both the other authors who also checked the findings on their accuracy. To further ensure reliability of the study, we illustrated the findings with primary data, i.e., representing quotes of the teachers (cf.



Maso & Smaling, 1998).

## **Findings**

The findings are described per assignment in line with the analysis of the data of each assignment separately: assignment 1 according to topic (intentions, person-related factors, context-related factors, experienced tensions and success), assignment 2 according to positions taken towards the significant other group, and assignment 3 in terms of overarching themes.

### **Assignment 1 - Contact with significant others**

#### ***Intentions in moments of contact***

Overall, teachers expressed intentions to create a positive learning environment or to really pay attention to (individual) students. Teachers who intended to create a positive learning environment, also wanted to activate student learning and to ensure discipline. To activate student learning, teachers wanted to adopt a coaching or guiding role instead of an instructor role, by actively encouraging, motivating, and reassuring students in how they are doing: *'I always intend to emphasize admirable traits in a student. I try to strengthen self-confidence by explicitly pointing out my confidence in their capabilities and by complimenting on good behavior and the way work in class is conducted.'*

To ensure discipline, teachers were focused on being the authority on the one hand and maintaining the relationship with students by making them feel understood: *'By weighing my words carefully, I hope to connect with my students, show them I understand them and make them feel understood. At the same time, I want to be clear about what I want to say, because I don't want to be overruled by my students.'*

Teachers who intended to really pay attention to students expressed doing so by guiding them and making a personal connection and giving them sufficient space to express themselves: *'Next to being a teacher I am a social worker and a psychologist. I help students with telling about their personal problems at a deeper level. At the same time, I share things about who I am.'*

#### ***Person-related factors***

Person-related factors reported by a number of teachers as important in moments of contact with students are as follows: wanting to be open in approaching students, not being authoritarian, and establishing mutual contacts with students. To do so, these teachers talk with students informally. At the same time, they want to be clear about rules and boundaries and challenge students with difficult tasks: *'My biggest challenge is to react empathetic and be efficient, to challenge her to come with a plan and at the same time giving her space to tell what she thinks and feels.'*

To establish mutual contact, some teachers showed their students who they are.

Although a mutual relationship requires a certain closeness between students and teachers, teachers also described the need to keep professional distance.

### ***Context-related factors***

Context-related factors pertained to factors that make it harder for teachers to be successful in teaching. For instance, having an overcrowded class prevents from giving individual attention to all students or using interactive teaching methods. Other context-related factors include having to anticipate to specific needs of all students, and not being able to start lessons properly due to malfunctioning devices.

### ***Experienced tensions***

All teachers described one or more tensions in their chosen moments of contact with students, most of them caused by discipline problems in class resulting in feelings of incompetence as a teacher or feelings of uncertainty about how to react to students' behavior. Teachers also experienced problems in trying to balance their personal goal of having a good relationship with students and to correct their behavior at the same time: *'I want to be relaxed in contact with students, but students in turn don't take me seriously if there are no strict rules.'*

### ***Experienced success***

Teachers described feelings of success in moments of contact in terms of satisfaction, fulfillment, positive energy, enthusiasm, being content, being useful, being happy, and being self-confident. Particularly when the contact with students is mutual and is characterized by exchange of personal information. One teacher stated: *'When I get [personal] input from students, then I feel I can tell something personal as well. This sort of connection gives me the feeling to accomplish a lot in my profession.'*

Teachers further experienced positive feelings when a good relationship has been established and students are learning actively as illustrated by the following quote: *'During the explanation of theory I feel that the students really pay attention and are cooperative. I enjoy this and feel like a real teacher then.'* A harmonious relationship with a class creates a certain 'looseness', meanwhile meeting teaching goals and students keeping on working at the same time. A teacher wrote: *'There are certainly moments where contact with students is fun and that feels good. At that point I feel I can walk around in class, help students individually and we can make jokes.'* Teachers also feel successful when difficult relationships with students improve or when bonds grow, for instance, when students start co-operating in class or share personal information. Teachers feel they can really make a difference.

## **Assignment 2 - Positioning towards significant others**

### ***Positioning towards students***

Teachers who positioned themselves next to students aim at fostering students' responsibility for their own learning. Some of these teachers explicitly strive for a coaching role in their teaching. They adapt to students' needs and do not impose strict rules. A small group of teachers positioned themselves above students. Some of them felt responsible to bring stability to the group, others wanted to be the driving force behind students' learning routes. One teacher stated: *'A teacher is the center of the class. He takes care of safety and discipline in the classroom. Students need to trust their teacher completely.'* Some teachers' positions were not congruent with their desired positions, because of problems with classroom management or due to contextual conditions like having full classes and demands to teach in a certain way. These teachers expressed feelings of discomfort.

### ***Positioning towards colleagues***

I-positions teachers took towards colleagues were 'next to colleagues' or 'being alone'. Teachers who positioned themselves next to colleagues expressed to learn from colleagues, to feel free asking for advice, bring in their own opinions, bring forward innovative ideas, and talk about frictions. A teacher wrote: *'Working with my colleagues is very pleasant. I was immediately accepted as a member in the group. I feel free to voice my opinion and I am taken seriously. I feel valued by my colleagues.'*

A small number of teachers positioned themselves as alone. They expressed feeling lonely and having a low status in the group. Some of them did not feel free to express their own opinion. One teacher stated: *'Towards colleagues I am not able to be myself and I am always searching for the kind of person I have to be.'* All teachers in this position expressed feelings of discomfort.

### ***Positioning towards school leaders***

One group of teachers who positioned themselves next to school leaders, wrote they collaborated with them and expressed their innovative ideas. A teacher wrote: *'Towards my school leader I show I want to participate in building 'the general construction' of the educational system in which students in my school participate.'* These teachers mostly felt to be a driving force in the school and being able to express who they are.

Another (smaller) group of teachers positioned themselves as being compliant with school leaders and described not to express their opinion until they were sure about their jobs or when explicitly asked. Still other teachers described their positioning towards school leaders as being cautious, indecisive, or without strategy. Several of these teachers did not have any contact with school leaders, while others felt too insecure and uncomfortable to seek contact.

### **Assignment 3 - stories to live by**

#### ***'Stories to live by' in-classroom***

##### *Need of new ways of teaching in class*

In this theme, teachers expressed the constant change towards more personalized learning with a focus on students' autonomy. Teachers need to change towards teaching small groups in a differentiated manner using pedagogies that activate student learning and give more individual support. One teacher, for example, drew a picture in his story of the changes he and his colleagues are making and what they think education will look like in the future: *'We create new projects and assignments to get students more involved. We let them work together, go out and explore things by themselves. For me it feels great to be in a guiding role and have personal interactions with students. My colleagues and I agree that education is on a turning point and is growing towards a project-based setting in which the focus lies on activating students' learning.'* In several 'stories to live by' within this theme, teachers also expressed to create educational programs that optimize and improve each student's learning outcomes and personal growth.

The impact of these stories on the teachers' professional selves appeared to be positive. Teachers were excited to implement new and different ways of teaching. One teacher wrote: *'Changing education in a way that takes into account every student's needs would mean much for all students. At this moment, school is too much like a factory where every student is taught the same.'* Some teachers expressed such a 'story to live by' as having a negative impact on their selves as teachers: *'Students don't know how to take responsibility for their own learning. I am not allowed to give a general explanation to the whole group. At this moment I work against the general policy, because when I do give an explanation, I seem to help the children.'*

##### *Difficulty of keeping students responsible for their own learning*

Stories within this theme tell how difficult it is nowadays to get students concentrate on school matters and take responsibility for their own learning. A language teacher wrote: *'Education is like a funfair. It is up to me to guide the students past popular attractions, I have to let them experience several rides, train them and let them attain skills to throw the rings or drive bumper cars. I hope to teach them which attractions are helpful and which distractions they better avoid. I find it hard to let them go, because sometimes I see students fall for the temptations of gambling games or visit the same unhelpful attractions over and over again. The trick is to get these students back on a more sensible route without rigidly enforcing it.'*

By guiding students and caring for their progress, the teachers who told these stories try to create a strong and also personal bond with students enabling them to help students to stay focused and active in their studies. The impact on their selves as teachers is positive, because they strongly care for the wellbeing of their students.

These teachers feel strengthened when students share personal stories and listen to their advice.

*Pressure to meet high standards*

Within this theme teachers not only expressed the high pressure put on them to meet expectations held by others, but also about high teaching expectations held by themselves. For example, they expect themselves always being capable to support students in the right way. They also expect their teaching to be nothing less than excellent. A language teacher stated: *'For me, the professional landscape in class is one of high mountains and deep valleys. I am very happy when I succeed in giving an excellent lesson. However, I find myself to be sad and annoyed when lessons do not go well. Therefore, my mood might shift every hour of the day, which is very exhausting.'*

Such stories may have a negative impact on teachers' professional selves. Some teachers wrote they have withdrawn from what they find important in teaching in order to prevent themselves from burning out. A teacher wrote: *'I force myself to be satisfied with 'less than outstanding quality' in my teaching.'* Another teacher, for example, decided to resign one day from his full-time job. He stated: *'If my lesson is less than optimal, then I accuse myself of not working hard enough and I feel that the student is the victim of that.'*

***'Stories to live by' out-of-classroom***

*The troubling state of Dutch education*

This theme refers to teachers experiencing the current educational system as 'lagging behind' (technical) innovations and, as such, failing to address students' future needs and preparing them for the demands of modern society. One teacher wrote: *'A school should be a place where students wonder about the world. In our schools this is not the case, and even worse is that students are not well-prepared to enter society.'* This theme with its stories is also widely present in the media and social debates about education. A Dutch language teacher wrote: *'Lately there is a lot of discussion in the media: classes should be smaller; teachers should be teaching in a more differentiated manner; teachers are on strike for better salary, teachers feel strained and suffer from burn out, students allegedly have unequal opportunities in the educational system, etc. etc.'*

The impact of stories within this theme on teachers differ. Some teachers accept the current negative image of education, while others see it as an opportunity for improvement. One teacher wrote: *We should make sure Dutch education is innovative, which allows to re-instate the status of the teaching profession.*

*Being part of transition in education*

In line with a number of 'stories to live by' in class, the stories within this theme

portray education as being in a transitional phase and teachers as being in the center of change. Much effort is put nowadays in developing curricula that focus on students' interdisciplinary competencies and their autonomy. These curriculum changes seem to match societal developments and teachers' desires to innovate. An arts teacher told how these changes are accompanied by practical problems and struggles: *'In a big school like mine it [change] is hard to pull off. Next to that there are other problems like money shortages, full classrooms, and students with behavioral problems (...). Change is difficult and takes a lot of time and effort.'*

On some teachers these stories appeared to have a positive impact, because they want curricula to become more personalized and educational change to proceed faster. Other teachers are more hesitant, because demands about 'how to teach' are becoming unclear. One of these teachers wrote: *I want to teach students to take on greater autonomy, but I was requested to teach in a more traditional manner.'*

#### *Continuity and relevance of certain school subjects under debate*

This theme's stories are about relevance and value of teaching certain school subjects. It is questioned whether teaching specific school subjects match innovative goals, how they prepare students for good citizenship, and how they contribute when measured against economic outcomes. A history teacher wrote: *Nowadays there are people who want to abolish history as a school subject. It is a subject that does not lead to economic success. In society people ask what kind of use it serves in current times to learn about the past.'* He strongly disagrees with this 'story to live by' and redefined the value of history as a school subject by placing it in the center of innovative education.

More teachers felt the same as this history teacher but agreed with the notion that education should first of all aim at optimizing students' performance, personal development, and good citizenship. Some of these teachers appeared to innovate by redefining the relevance of their school subject. One teacher of 'visual arts', wrote to be searching for ways to change her teaching from product-focused to more student-focused with the aim to contribute to a growing awareness of students' creativity and personal learning goals. She explained: *'For me the goal of educating visual arts is to prepare students for cultural and artistic citizenship. By letting students see which artistic experiences they encounter in their everyday lives, I try to broaden the way they see arts.'*

#### *Relevance of cooperating with colleagues*

This theme represents two sides. One side pertains to teachers who collaborate well and develop new curricula together. These teachers seem to experience feelings of success and being able to perform on a higher level than working alone. The other side of the theme pertains to teachers working individually without mutual consultation or

contact, accompanied by feelings of disappointment. One teacher wrote: *'I need my colleagues to cooperate with me, but I encounter a lot of resistance. I find it hard to get past that resistance.'*

## **Discussion**

This study operationalized theoretical insights about 'significant others' and 'stories to live by' into professional identity assignments. Below we discuss the results of these assignments in view of their value for identity work with beginning teachers.

### ***Contact with students as significant others***

Our study showed, based on their underlying intentions, that teachers differ in ways they wish to build and maintain meaningful relationships in their contacts with students. For example, some teachers need to create personal bonds with students, other teachers need good relationships to build positive learning environments or to activate student learning. Only some beginning teachers felt unable to create such contacts with students.

It is not yet well-known how teachers precisely build positive contacts with students in terms of mutual relations, strong bonds, and deep connections. We also do not exactly know what teachers can do to make students responsive to them. The picture that emerged from the contact assignment indicates that teachers build diverse relations with students, each in their own unique way.

In identity work, this assignment can help teachers to reflect on their relationships with students, i.e., how these relationships match their core values about teaching and, through that, make their personal and professional intentions that underlie moments of contact explicit. This kind of identity work should be characterized by dialogues not only emphasizing the diversity of teachers' relations with students and that they create person-bound relationships with (individual) students, but also do justice to accompanying feelings or emotions, because creating and maintaining good relationships with students – and others in the work environment – is shown to be a deeply felt professional value that means much more than just having positive interactions (Korthagen et al., 2014).

### ***Positioning towards significant others***

Most beginning teachers in our study did not show problematic positions towards students and took strong and equal positions towards colleagues and school leaders. Their positioning appeared to align with who they are and want to be both as a person and professional. Striking was that so many beginning teachers felt valued in working together with others, which conflicts with the general picture presented in a number of research studies in which beginning teachers are often described as being vulnerable and struggling with identity issues, meanwhile trying to get their unfolding profes-

sional identity confirmed by their colleagues (e.g., Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Pilsen et al., 2013). Only few teachers in this study were not able to position themselves according to who they are or want to be. These teachers resorted to playing a role, experienced low status or felt unhappy.

Identity work focusing on explicating taken positions is a reflective practice of becoming aware of differences between desired and actually taken positions (cf. Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009). Our results indicate that all kinds of positions, their impact and accompanying feelings are relevant to discuss in this type of identity work. Sharing and discussing strong or positively experienced positions adds to identifying professional strengths and successes. Discussing unclear or negative positions adds to identifying professional frictions. By transferring negative frictions into positive ones, identity work can contribute to how to get involved and feel valued.

### *Stories to live by*

Very distinctive in both in-class and out-of-class stories was that innovation and change appeared to be a source of inspiration for most beginning teachers. Living by such stories makes most teachers feeling eager to contribute to and be part of new developments. Shifting and changing educational landscapes are often portrayed as a threat to sustaining identities (e.g., Clandinin et al., 2009). Apparently, relatively many teachers in our study have found ways to navigate on changing landscapes and sustaining themselves in shifting ‘stories to live by’.

Our study revealed also themes based on in-class and out-of-class stories that reflected experiences of high work pressure and exhaustion, such as stories about the demand to all teaching in the same way, heavy workloads, and not being facilitated for change. The impact stories like these had on the teachers in our study differed. Some teachers stood up for themselves and decided to deal with the story as a challenge, but other teachers, for example, showed signs of exhaustion, reacted negatively, or reduced their working hours. Several teachers used their negative stories to live by to weigh their personal needs against professional expectations.

The professional landscape assignment showed many common themes in the stories to live by (and told) on teachers’ professional landscape. Although these themes are real, teachers are not always aware of them and the impact they have. It seems relevant that all these stories need to be heard and be the object of reflection, because they profoundly influence (beginning) teachers’ work experiences and the development of their professional identity. The themes identified in teachers’ stories can be used as a possible starting point for identity work, for example, for identifying which stories represent ‘stories to leave by’ and ‘stories to sustain by’ (Schaefer & Clandinin, 2019). The stories regarding educational changes might function as valuable stories of inspiration. More negative stories i.e., potential ‘stories to leave by’, might be used as triggers to learn from, cope with, or even transform a ‘story to leave by’ into a ‘story to



sustain by'. Through writing, sharing and telling each other stories, teachers not only become aware of the stories that influence and impact their identity as teachers, they also learn how to think narratively about their professional contexts (Clandinin et al., 2009; Connelly & Clandinin, 1997; Doecke, Brown & Loughran, 2000).

### **Value for identity work in induction programmes**

Most schools, though differently, provide support for their beginning teachers through induction programmes. However, these programmes often ignore the support needed for the construction and sustaining of professional identities (Vähäsantanen et al., 2017). Assignments like those we developed for our identity work can be powerful tools for beginning teachers to explicate and reflect on their underlying perceptions and feelings about the kind of teacher they are and the kind of teacher they want to be in different situations or contexts. The foci of the assignments that we developed were carefully chosen for this purpose and inspired by research on professional identity issues that beginning teachers face. These issues are hardly discussed and reflected on in induction programmes but have a strong influence on how beginning teachers see themselves as professionals and the teachers they can or wish to become (Beijaard et al., 2004). Reflective dialogues about the impact of these issues provoked by the assignments, for example with peers in the same induction programme or the teacher educators involved, may lead to insights into tensions, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities that support them in the development and enactment of a realistic professional identity. Identity work that supports the development of a realistic professional identity has an impact on what and how teachers learn which most likely affects their teaching practice positively.

Our assignments furthermore indicate that teachers who enter the profession after their teacher education do not specifically need support with improving teaching skills or classroom management advice. Except for a few teachers, most teachers in our study did not draw back on such aspects when explaining their choices in the elaboration of their assignments, neither in their explanations of moments of contact with students nor in their in-class stories to live by. Instead, and next to uncertainties, most teachers in our study reported having good relationships with students, colleagues and school leaders as well as feeling successful in maintaining these relationships. Identity work based on such experiences and evoked by assignments may be a valuable impetus for developing a strong teacher identity.

It is crucial to take time for this, sharing and discussing the experiences in safe intervention-like environments, and not being focused on immediate use in practice. Identity work is more about achieving a longer-term goal, i.e., supporting teachers in their development of a realistic, strong, and positive professional identity, than only or mainly trying to achieve short-term solutions for practical problems and enhance effective practices by guiding teachers with intervention-based support systems (Kurz,

Reddy & Glover, 2017). Identity work in schools requires expert coaching or guidance, because the answer to the question about ‘who you are’ or ‘what kind of teacher you want to be’ can touch upon deep personal feelings and beliefs. Kelchtermans and Hamilton (2004, p. 801) called this a learning process that is doing justice to the full complexity and richness of being a teacher that goes beyond the level of surface action to the level of underlying beliefs, ideas, knowledge, and goals.

### **Limitations and lessons learned**

A limited group of beginning teachers who participated in our study did the three assignments. We used the assignments for a first time and, on closer inspection, appeared to focus too much on the outcomes of the assignments and too less on how to guide the teachers in working on the assignments from an identity work perspective. Consequently, not all completed assignments could be used for analysis. This, as well as the pioneering phase of operationalizing insights from professional identity research in assignments to support identity work in practice, limits our claims about the value of such assignments for this type of work with beginning teachers. Nevertheless, we believe that our findings give rise to further developing and investigating these and other assignments and what the impact of identity work based on these assignments might be on teachers’ identity development on the short and the long term. It is also relevant to know how, and under what conditions, this identity work with beginning teachers in schools works best.

### **Conclusion**

The professional identity assignments developed and tested in this study, were based on the interwoven personal, interpersonal, and contextual dimensions that all play a role in developing a teacher identity. As argued before, it is a perspective that underlies much teacher identity research. Through the assignments, examples of different kinds of experiences, perceptions, and feelings of beginning teachers emerged from ways in which these three dimensions interact. We therefore conclude that the assignments we developed are useful for beginning teachers to reflect on and make sense of who they are and want to become. The assignments can function as a starting point or a source of inspiration for further development of meaningful identity work in induction programmes for beginning teachers.

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