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A trajectory of teacher development in early and mid-career

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ABSTRACT
Scholars in recent years have studied the professional development of teachers, identifying stages or phases that teachers characteristically experience during their careers. Little research, however, has focused specifically on the professional development of teachers during early and mid-career (years 1–10), which is the aim of the present study. An understanding of such development is important for school administrators and teacher educators if they are to respond effectively to teachers’ professional needs and help them achieve their full potential as practitioners. Our study is based on interviews we conducted with 53 teachers who had graduated from a particular 5-year teacher education programme in western United States over a 10-year period. They taught students ages 5 through 13. Through analysis of the interviews, we identified six themes that, we argue, reveal a trajectory of professional development teachers experience as they become increasingly able practitioners. We explain how the themes are related to the concepts of teacher identity and teacher agency, and we suggest ways that administrators, inservice teacher educators, and policymakers can better support teachers during their early and mid-careers. The study adds a new dimension—that of a multifaceted trajectory—to current theory on teacher development.

Introduction
This article is based on a study of the professional development of teachers during early and mid-career (years 1–10). We situate our research among similar studies of the development of teachers over their careers. Huberman (1993), in his seminal study of the lives of French Swiss secondary teachers, identified five stages that teachers appear to pass through during their career. He also created a set of models showing variation in the developmental paths the teachers followed. Levin (2003), using a case study approach that privileged teachers’ perceptions of their development in the area of pedagogy, followed the careers of four teachers from their entrance into a teacher education programme until their 13th year in the classroom. Beck and Kosnik (2014) carried out a longitudinal study of teachers who graduated from a teacher education programme 5 and 8 years earlier; the authors identified eight goals of teacher growth (e.g. understanding the key goals of schooling, making learning relevant, having a...
strong sense of professional identity), against which they analysed their participants’ development.

Day, Simmons, Stobart, Kington, and Gu (2007) reported on their VITAE project, a large-scale, mixed-methods study of primary and secondary teachers in England. Among a plethora of findings, they identified six professional life phases that teachers characteristically experienced during their careers. Other researchers have focused on the professional development of individual teachers (Bullough & Baughman, 1997; Muchmore, 2004). Many of the studies above identified patterns of teacher development, while acknowledging the powerful role that context (the school, external demands, the teachers’ personal lives) plays in shaping such development.

Our study has also been informed by research on teacher identity, in particular, its close relationship to continuing professional development. Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) identified features they considered essential to the concept of teacher identity: ‘[It is] an ongoing process . . . it is dynamic, not stable or fixed’; [it is] a process that ‘implies both person and context’; and it includes teacher agency, meaning that ‘teachers have to be active in the process of professional development’ (p. 122). Later researchers, notably Olsen (2008) and Battey and Franke (2008), also emphasised the ongoing interaction between person and context in teacher development and highlighted the concept of teacher identity as a useful perspective for examining such development. Olsen writes: ‘Teacher identity is a useful research frame because it treats teachers as whole persons in and across social contexts who continually reconstruct their views of themselves in relation to others, workplace characteristics, professional purposes, and cultures of teaching’ (p. 5).

Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), Toom, Pyhältö, and Rust (2015), and Buchanan (2015) explored the connection between teacher identity and teacher agency.

What may result from a teacher’s realization of his or her identity, in performance within teaching contexts, is a sense of agency, of empowerment to move ideas forward, to reach goals or even to transform the context. It is apparent that a heightened awareness of one’s identity may lead to a strong sense of agency. (Beauchamp & Thomas, p. 183)

These interrelated concepts, teacher identity and teacher agency, provide the overarching framework we used in analysing teachers’ development and change during their early and middle years in the classroom.

While considerable research has focused on the induction and development of new teachers, far less research has been directed at the professional development of teachers who remain in the classroom for 3, 5, 10 years. Yet their development during this period can have a powerful impact on the kind of teachers they ultimately become. We believe that teachers who exhibit the following qualities are best suited to serve their students, their school and community, and their profession: They are accomplished classroom practitioners, highly knowledgeable in curriculum content and pedagogy and deeply committed to the growth and welfare of their students; they understand schools and the larger contexts in which schools operate; they collaborate effectively with teacher colleagues, other professionals, and parents; they are reflective about their work and committed to their own continuing professional growth; and they are autonomous, self-confident professionals whose work contributes substantially to the
effectiveness of their schools. These are the characteristics we had in mind as we studied the development of teachers.

In this article, therefore, we use **professional development** to refer not only to teachers’ continued growth in the knowledge and skills that enable them to operate effectively in the classroom, but of more importance fundamentally, growth in qualities such as confidence (efficacy), identity as teachers—what Kelchtermans (2017) calls self-understanding (p. 14) —resilience in the face of ever-changing demands, sense of agency (willingness to take action to fulfil core beliefs), and moral commitment to work conscientiously with students, fellow teachers, and parents. In his definition of professional development, Kelchtermans emphasises the role of context, ‘which needs to be understood not only as context in space but also as context in time. In other words, one’s present being influenced by experiences in the past and expectations for the future’ (p. 13). We too acknowledge the important role context plays in the professional development of teachers.

In order to plan and implement suitable professional development measures for early and mid-career teachers, school administrators and teacher educators must better understand the nature and characteristics of such development. Our study aims to provide some of this information. It identifies a set of overlapping themes or characteristics that reveal a trajectory of professional development for teachers in the first 10 years of their career, and it offers models delineating how this trajectory unfolds. Further, it shows how the themes and trajectory are related to the concepts of teacher identity and teacher agency. The study draws on the experiences of a set of 53 teachers who worked with students ages 5 through 13. These teachers had completed the same 5-year teacher education programme—a programme whose basic structure and content remained constant over this 10-year period.

**Theoretical basis**

This study is grounded in the following theoretical assertions drawn from the research literature cited above:

1. The professional development of teachers follows certain discernable patterns characterised by identifiable stages or phases (Day et al., 2007; Huberman, 1993).
2. This development is driven not only by the personality and previous experience of the teacher, but also by other contextual factors, i.e. the school and its administration, external demands (e.g. accountability standards), and personal life events (e.g. marriage, birth, illness, death) (Buchanan, 2015; Day et al., 2007).
3. This development is characterised by increasing clarity and coherence of teacher identity (Beck & Kosnik, 2014; Levin, 2003) and often a concomitant manifestation of teacher agency (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants in this study were 53 teachers who had graduated from a 5-year teacher education programme. The programme was offered at a medium-sized liberal arts
university on the West Coast of the US. It was designed specifically for students who knew upon entering the university, or shortly thereafter, they wanted to be teachers of students ages 5–13. They completed a broad liberal arts major during their undergraduate years, which included many hours working in classrooms, and began coursework for their teaching credential. During their 5th (graduate) year they completed their formal student teaching and earned a master’s degree. After graduation, they accepted teaching positions in public and private schools, mostly on the West Coast of the US but also as far away as Alaska, Texas, and Mexico.

Design and procedures

This study was based on a qualitative design. We sent a letter inviting graduates of the teacher education programme (N = 103) to participate in the study. Fifty-three graduates signed the IRB consent forms and agreed to be interviewed by one of us. Using a protocol (see Appendix 1) and follow-up questions, we interviewed all of the teachers. The first three phases of Day et al’s (2007) framework—teaching years 0–3, 4–7, and 8–15—provided a structure we used for examining the development of our participants during their early- and mid-careers. Twenty-one of the teachers were in phase 1, 19 were in phase 2, and 13 were in phase 3. We focused primarily on the participants’ view of their development as teachers and encouraged them to freely recount their stories. The interviews were conducted at various sites—a teacher’s classroom, a library, an office on the researchers’ campus; several were conducted by Skype. The interviews characteristically lasted between 40 min and 1 hour.

We audio-recorded the interviews and made transcriptions. Each of us—the two researchers and a doctoral student involved in the analysis—read each transcription several times, identifying prominent recurring patterns (Straus & Corbin, 1990). At times we focused, in our analysis and discussion, on teachers from a particular phase. We shared the patterns we had uncovered individually, discussed them at length, then returned to the transcriptions to follow up on each others’ findings. Through a deliberate, iterative process of discussion, reflection, and reviewing transcriptions, we came to agreement about significant themes that characterised these teachers’ development. In our search for themes, we were likely influenced by our interest in teacher identity and teacher agency.

Results: emerging themes, teacher identity, and teacher agency

In this section we identify the themes that emerged from our analysis of the interviews and explain their role in the teachers’ development as professionals, and we comment briefly on how the themes characteristically developed over the years. We also show the development of teacher identity and teacher agency in our participants and touch on the way these concepts and the themes are interrelated.

The following emerged as important, overlapping themes in the professional development of the teachers: validation, collaboration, relationship with students, continuing professional engagement, leadership, and balance. The themes represent areas in which many—but not all—Phase 2 (4–7 years) and Phase 3 (8–15 years) teachers showed growth as they gained classroom experience. Each theme was characteristically present
in each phase but manifested differently therein; and each theme was related to the broader themes of teacher identity and teacher agency. While shaped in part by working conditions and other contextual factors, the themes, taken together, suggest a trajectory of continuing teacher development. We have included an illustration (Figure 1) that depicts the themes as branches of a tree representing teacher identity and agency and that shows trajectories of teacher development within each of the themes. (See Appendix 2 for information about participants quoted in the article.)

**Themes**

**Validation**

*Validation* in this study refers to teachers being acknowledged as competent classroom practitioners. Teachers’ need for validation changed notably during their early years in the classroom. Predictably, beginning teachers needed considerable support if they were to develop the confidence they were performing satisfactorily in their chosen profession. Thus, phase 1 teachers often craved validation, particularly from administrators, fellow teachers, and parents. As Sarah reported:
I just feel very much more valued here, which I think makes it such a happier, more rewarding place to be. Yeah, knowing that the principal supports me in whatever I do, I feel a lot more confident in the way that I communicate my ideas and my thoughts.

Sarah had not enjoyed this kind of support from her previous principal during her first year of teaching. A number of our beginning teachers reported similar lack of support from their principal. We call this lack of validation, a condition that clearly undermines the ability of new teachers to feel competent at a time when they need support the most. A particularly notable example of lack of validation was reported by Crystal, looking back at her first year:

It was the second day of school when my principal, at 7 o’clock at night, sends me an email with a long list of things that I did incorrectly that day … She said I was very imprudent in my actions and the way I handled [a bullying issue], and she talked about the way I dressed … [though] I was covered head to toe.

Rebecca, another phase 1 (third-year) teacher, related how she and her partner were ‘pulled into the principal’s office’ and asked what they were doing that was ‘magical in the classroom.’ Despite lavish preparations for that day’s St. Patrick’s celebration, one parent complained that the class was too academic and the children were not having much fun. Not one parent had said thank you, and Rebecca did not feel supported. Even for a teacher in her third year, support from the principal and from parents was clearly important.

As the teachers developed their skills in the important areas on which professional competence is judged—e.g. lesson planning, instruction, classroom management—and particularly as they developed an ever stronger and clearer sense of their identity as teachers, they grew less dependent on overt acknowledgement by others of their competence. The validation they sought was more subtle, e.g. a recognition that their students were performing well.

Ultimately most teachers reached a threshold where they knew they were competent, knew they could effectively handle the myriad demands they encountered on a daily basis. We call this self-validation; such teachers did not need overt acknowledgment by administrators, fellow teachers, or parents. As Sylvia (phase 3) expressed it: ‘Where I’m at now in my teaching, I don’t crave that direction … from the principal any longer … now, we [teachers] take care of it’. Being largely self-validated, however, does not mean that experienced teachers did not enjoy being acknowledged when former students returned to express their appreciation. As Bella (phase 2) reported: ‘My sixth graders, they graduated last year; and they actually reached out to me … they’re like, “Mrs. M, you were the best teacher we ever had.”’

Sometimes validation came in the form of more-public kinds of recognition. One phase 3 teacher reported: ‘I was nominated by my colleagues to be the Teacher of the Year for my school. They voted for me, and I was very honored’ (Selena).

The trajectory that the participants seemed to follow in validation as they moved through the phases is illustrated in Figure 1.

Lest it be thought that we are arguing that all teachers moved inexorably through phases clearly marked by different experiences of validation, it is important to understand that what has been described is a general pattern of teacher development observed with this particular group of teachers. Some of these teachers might not have exhibited
self-validation in phase 3 or experienced agency. Moreover, as noted above, even highly experienced teachers enjoyed being acknowledged as excellent (i.e. being validated) by former students—and by administrators and fellow teachers as well.

**Collaboration**

I think that I’ve learned the most from my peers and I think that collaboration is key … the strongest teaching teams I’ve been on have been teams that really collaborate and have honest discussions about instruction and about the students, and about themselves as teachers, and that can open up their classrooms to each other and be open to developing professionally … I think collaboration is a really big part of teaching. (Cynthia, phase 2)

*Collaboration* in this study refers to teachers’ work with others—particularly other teachers—in carrying out their teaching responsibilities. It includes everything from informal exchange of ideas or materials to deliberate planning and joint implementation of new curricula. In the early years, teachers appeared to have a largely dependent relationship with their colleagues, seeking advice and help to address the daily demands of their classroom. A first-year teacher recalled having a conversation with an experienced colleague: ‘Hey, what are you doing for this? … I’m doing this. Here take this, have this—this will help you’ (Veronica, phase 1).

One characteristic that began to emerge among phase 2 teachers was a sense of responsibility for new teachers, an indication, perhaps, of an expanding sense of teacher identity. As one teacher expressed it: ‘I can’t wait to someday… give back more, give back to future teachers’ (Gretchen). Another phase 2 teacher reported: ‘There are a few new teachers at the school I’m at right now; so they have actually come to me, … I’m like, ‘Oh, okay, roles are reversed.’ I am starting to become the mentor’ (Leyla).

**Figure 1** shows the trajectory teachers often exhibited in their collaborative work with other teachers as they moved through the phases of their development. As the figure suggests, phase 3 teachers, aware of the benefits of collaboration not only for their own classroom but for school renewal, often deliberately sought out collaborative involvement with colleagues. A phase 3 teacher described a new collaborative venture she had embarked on:

I was the third grade lead for my classroom for about five years …. As the leader of … your grade level, … you’re the one providing support and kind of administering things. But I felt like I wasn’t really learning from my colleagues at that point. So I decided to switch grade levels. And now I am in the first grade, where I’m not the lead …. I am learning not just about the grade level, but I’m also learning from my colleague that is the lead. I’m learning from different people. (Selena)

What we see here is the story of an experienced practitioner, who, confident of her identity as a teacher, exhibited agency in voluntarily giving up her leadership role in order to further her continued professional development through collaboration—and perhaps to enable others in the school to assume leadership roles.

Meaningful collaboration, however, was not a practice found in all schools. Across all three phases we found examples of lack of collaboration or even of what one might term anti-collaboration. As one phase 2 teacher plaintively observed about the rare meetings she had with her colleagues: ‘My group … have been there 10, 15 years; and so
my own thoughts and ideas are seldom welcome. And so it’s not a productive meeting’ (Madeleine). Another phase 2 teacher described the trying situation she endured as a new teacher: ‘And one teacher was not very nice to me; so I had to just kind of work through that, . . . but that was hard’ (Laura).

Overall, it is clear that for these participants effective teacher-teacher collaboration contributed substantially to their professional growth, helping to shape their identity as teachers and leading, in some cases, to a heightened sense of agency.

**Relationship with students**

I spent eight years as a teacher . . .. Every year I ran my classroom and taught differently than I did the year before, always striving . . . to focus more on the individual students that I had in the room over time. It really became more to me about what are the students actually learning—how can I help each child move? versus maybe in the beginning when you’re so focused on just planning good lessons and what the materials you were going to use and, you know, what is my classroom going to look like? (Craig, phase 3)

**Relationship with students** refers to the way teachers perceived and interacted with students. For participants in this study, relationship with students stood out as an integral part of their professional identity. As one phase 2 teacher expressed it: ‘I think . . . [our students are] . . . one of the most significant populations that really affect . . . where you as a teacher need to grow and change day to day. I think they’re a huge contributor to the need for growth’ (Kelly).

In their relationship with students, new teachers tended to focus on planning good lessons, as noted in Craig’s opening quote, or on maintaining discipline. Discussing her emphasis on discipline for new kindergarten students, one phase 1 teacher stated: ‘If I’m going to teach you anything, . . . you have to put your hands on your lap, and you have to listen’ (Lucia). Another phase 1 teacher, however, moving beyond a focus on discipline, discovered the vital importance of establishing good relationships with her students. She described her discovery in moving terms:

I reached this point, where I realized that I wasn’t able to teach them . . . because . . . I didn’t make the time to make relationships or build relationships with them. . . . I didn’t make it a priority. . . . Once I was able to recognize [this], . . . I changed it. . . and that’s been . . . a huge turning point. (Etna)

Phase 2 teachers characteristically focused on what individual students were actually learning, rather than just what the curriculum contained:

No matter what I’m teaching, . . . [it’s] looking at the kids first and seeing where each kid is individually; and then no matter what happens to the standard, you can get them there by looking at them as a child, [an] individual child, rather than just seeing them as a number. (Dana)

As teachers gained experience, they often exhibited an interest in and concern for their students, present and prior, that went beyond school-based learning. As one phase 2 teacher expressed it: ‘I care about their entire well-being . . . I try to help in ways and try to . . . provide extra support . . . letting them know I’m there if they need to talk’ (Frances). At times this concern took on the flavor of genuine admiration. As one participant—a classroom teacher for nine years and now a principal—expressed it: ‘I
have been humbled by the students I’ve worked with—completely humbled by their love, by their constant giving, their willing[ness] to not give up, . . . [they] have that kind of zeal and . . . resiliency’ (Renata, phase 3).

Figure 1 shows the developmental pattern a number of early and mid-career teachers exhibited in their relationship with students over the years.

**Continuing professional engagement**

Last year I had the opportunity to do a culturally linguistically relevant teaching [activity] . . . [The Center came to my school and took a] cadre of teachers, and they . . . [went] through like a two-round process of different seminars about the different aspects of culturally responsive teaching. [The Center] did some observations . . . some coaching and mentoring . . . So I had the opportunity to get to do that last year, and that idea intrigues me. (Ursula, phase 2)

I always joke that Pinterest is like my best friend. It’s my professional development because I’m constantly on Pinterest, looking for new ways to teach something, looking for new ways to challenge my students, . . . send them home excited about school. (Gretchen, phase 2)

In this study continuing professional engagement refers to the formal and informal activities participants engaged in to further their knowledge and skills as teachers. Formal professional learning activities include university coursework (sometimes as part of advanced degrees or certificates) and district- or school-sponsored activities, e.g. workshops, lectures, training sessions, and scheduled work with other teachers (which overlaps with collaboration). The first quote above (from Ursula) provides an example of formal, school-based activities. Informal activities include many individual undertakings, such as reading, study, exploration of internet resources, and curriculum-development work. The second quote above (from Gretchen) provides an example of such an activity—a teacher’s use of Pinterest to find interesting resources to engage her students.

In phase 1, teachers were primarily concerned with professional development that would help them with their immediate concern—being competent classroom practitioners. As one second-year teacher acknowledged: ‘I am still a new teacher, and I need to kind of remind myself [of] that . . .. There’s lots of things I still need to learn, especially with classroom management’ (Crystal).

Phase 2 teachers often demonstrated a strong interest in their continuing professional development, as Ursula’s quote above suggests. One such teacher emphasised the power of learning on one’s own or from other teachers: ‘I find what I seek out on my own or what other teachers and colleagues share with me to usually be more official than the big trainings that the diocese puts on for us. . . .’ (Erica).

Phase 3 teachers who were dedicated to their continuing growth as professionals often exhibited a great deal of autonomy—one might even say agency—in their selection of professional development work. The account below of one such teacher, reflecting on her continuing development, reveals this autonomy at work:

And every time I’ve gotten into a lull in my profession, like my professional development, I think, ‘Well, I need some kind of change, but . . . I’m not ready, you know, to move schools or anything. Um, what can I do?’ And so I take on a new challenge each year. (Paola)
One of the challenges that Paola took on was to undergo training to become a National Board Certified teacher, which she achieved.

A number of participants from different phases stated that all teachers, however experienced, need to keep growing: ‘I think teachers can get stuck and think they know it all, and that’s when they’re bad teachers. They need to continue to improve, even if they’ve been at it for 30 years’ (Clarissa, phase 1). A similar idea was expressed by a phase 3 teacher: ‘Well I think, you know, as a professionals, you’re always striving to grow and change … always striving to learn new things, to be better’ (Craig).

Figure 1 shows a characteristic trajectory of participants’ continuing engagement with professional development activities as they moved through the phases.

Leadership

Leadership in this study refers to teachers’ taking on formal or informal leadership roles beyond their classroom; also, to their actively sharing their knowledge, skills, and insights with their school community. Phase 1 participants were not typically involved in leadership activities, but phase 2 participants were: They served, for example, on grade-level teams, school committees, and task forces. As one phase 2 teacher observed: ‘I’m not just a teacher, but I’m also doing other things for the school. Like I’ve been on our technology committee … [and] our leadership committee … I actually run our intervention math programs’ (Kristina). Another phase 2 teacher reported enthusiastically: ‘I’m now actually a mentor for BTSA [a new-teacher support program] myself… It’s exciting… I’ve always helped other teachers and, you know, provided support; but coaching is so much different than helping’ (Ursula). Sometimes leadership activities, like BTSA, extended beyond the school to the district or to a professional association.

Phase 3 teachers typically took on a variety of leadership roles, mostly of their own choosing and not infrequently beyond their own school, while remaining fundamentally classroom teachers:

And so, as the years progressed I got more involved in the schools …. Like, if my principal is at a meeting, I’m usually there with her … I’m on Site Council… I’m on the PTA …. I’m the … chair for our grade level…. So, you know, all those things, I feel like, have really helped me grow professionally. (Debora)

Noteworthy in Debora’s statement is the clear connection she made between her leadership activities and her professional growth.

Figure 1 presents the trajectory that participants often followed as they assumed greater leadership roles over the course of their early and middle teaching career.

Balance

I also felt like we had a lot of extra work…. A detailed lesson plan … [was] due every Saturday by 5:00, along with a data report from an assessment that … we had given that week, broken up by standard and color coded … [It] was a struggle for me, … being able to have a life outside of that … I felt like if I had continued to work there that I might burn out as a teacher. (Wanda, phase 1)
Balance has to do with teachers’ ability to effect a satisfactory allotment of their time
and energy to professional responsibilities and to personal interests and demands (e.g.
health, leisure, family). In phase 1, teachers like Wanda often worked long hours,
including weekends, to prepare and prove themselves. Looking back at her first year,
a phase 3 teacher recalled:

I mean, there were nights, my first year, that I didn’t sleep. I was up all night. And I know
that one of my other colleagues [had a] . . . similar mindset, like I’ve got to get this done—
I’ve got do more, I got to be better. And not taking the time for yourself is, you know, is
not so good. (Eleanor)

Although teachers often understood that they needed more balance in their lives, it was
not a goal they could easily achieve, judging by comments of several phase 2 teachers.

I don’t even have time right now to go to the gym after work every day or make dinner
every night. But again, that’s me needing to draw a line. ‘Okay, this is how it’s going to
be. I can’t do everything perfect all the time.’ That’s one of my biggest flaws as a teacher:
It’s not being able to draw the line between professional and personal time. (Kelly).

Gradually over the years, however, teachers seemed to get a better grip on how to
balance their professional and personal lives, as revealed in the comments of several
phase 3 teachers:

Some days I’ll work really late at school, and I don’t mind it; but definitely my weekends I
try to keep free because that’s just a way to refil myself, and you need that. You can’t be at
work constantly. (Debora)

I have a four-year old . . . and a one-year old at home; so right now my priorities are, you
know, different. I put a lot of effort and a lot of work at school, but when I come home, I
want to be with my daughters. (Selena)

Stress attributable to lack of balance in a teacher’s professional and personal lives is
often associated with burnout, a condition that the participants were well aware of
(apparent in Wanda’s opening quote). As Clarissa, a phase 1 teacher, reported:

They put a lot on my plate and I wasn’t comfortable saying no…. it was a lot of teams, a
lot of after-school time; and I got very stressed that way…. And I didn’t want to burn out;
I wanted to teach …. So I started saying no to things if I was overwhelmed. I made sure I
went to the gym and did my yoga … and talked to other teachers … because they can
really understand the stress that comes with the job.

And a phase 2 teacher commented: ‘There’s burnout where people just kind of leave
teaching, but there’s also burnout where they just keep doing it. And it’s not beneficial
for the students’ (Stephanie).

Participants in this study showed clear growth in their awareness of and ability to
maintain balance in their professional and personal lives, as captured in Figure 1.

Teacher identity and agency: overarching concepts

In addition to the themes that emerged from the interviews, the participants revealed
insights into their constantly evolving identity as teachers and the ways they exhibited
agency.
Well, the major surprise for me was really having to find your own identity as a teacher—I guess because my first year I really felt that I had to follow my mentor’s instructions exactly and be really subscribing to everything that she was doing in her classroom . . . [After the first year] I felt like I can do things that would be more mine with how I present the material. . . [It’s] just that it’s important to find your own identity and your own way of handling situations or presenting materials, engaging the students. (Vidya, phase 1)

Finding their identity as teachers was a pursuit that seemed to have occupied the participants’ thoughts and concerns during their first years in the classroom. The process began early, as Vidya’s quote above suggests, and continued to evolve.

One phase 2 teacher (Dana), after relating her experience with a negative administrator, concluded:

And I really saw the effects of what an administrator can do to a teacher and whether that would be a positive thing or a negative thing. So I would say . . . [the] administrator is really [what] shaped [my identity as a teacher] in a positive way or a very negative way.

And finally we have the case of Craig, a phase 3 teacher, who declared: ‘It’s very much who I am as a person. You know, [Craig] the person and [Craig] the teacher are really one and the same.’

Figure 2 shows the trajectory the participants seemed to follow as they developed their identity as a teacher. The note below the figure, however, supplies an important caveat: The shape of a teacher’s identity at any time is strongly influenced by context, as researchers have consistently reported.

Teacher agency, we found, appeared in decisions made and actions taken by participants in support of their values and despite differences with others (administrators, parents, fellow teachers). Agency also was exhibited in decisions to leave teaching positions that did not reflect the participants’ core beliefs and values.

We would note that not all participants, even those in phase 3, demonstrated agency. On the other hand, some of the participants exhibited agency in phase 1. Sylvia, a phase 3 teacher, was looking back on experiences as a beginning teacher:

And so, I was like, ‘Let’s do a rocket launch.’ And the whole grade level was like . . . ‘I don’t know. That’s a lot of work . . . We have to get a permit from the fire department.’ And it got to the point where I started saying, ‘Okay, here’s the day I’m going to do it. I’m going to get all the paperwork filled out. If you’d like to join me, you may.’ . . . I had to do that on a couple of occasions. Same thing [with field-trips]. So, I did a couple of trips by myself. And then other parents from the other classrooms started complaining, because I was going and they weren’t. And then they [the other teachers] finally jumped on board.

Figure 2. Trajectory of participants’ development of teacher identity.
Sylvia’s was a case of a newer teacher exhibiting agency, planning activities she thought would benefit students and then carrying them out on her own. Ultimately, because of her independent action, other teachers joined in, thus affecting the curriculum of the whole grade level.

At times, exhibiting agency brought a teacher into direct opposition with an administrator or a school or district rule. As Cynthia (phase 2) explained:

I’ve had administrators that I’ve really had to learn how to defend my teaching [to], you know. And that . . . [has] taught me that there are things that are important enough to me, and I am going to stand up for them . . . even if it means that I need to have a hard discussion with an administrator.

Erica (phase 2) likewise had to defend her professional values, in the case of parents’ expectations that the school take full responsibility for the children’s learning. ‘Now I have the confidence to say, “These are things that need to happen at home.”’

Paola (phase 3) described a situation that occurred during her early years of teaching third grade:

In the years that we weren’t allowed to teach science and social studies, the third grade team . . . were really close and worked really well together. We developed the whole year-long pacing guide for ourselves that kind of integrated . . . science and social studies units, which we still use now.

On their own, without the permission of administration and in apparent violation of district policy, Paola and her team were making a powerful display of agency, developing and implementing an integrated curriculum consistent with what they thought was best for their students.

The examples above demonstrate teacher agency carried out within the school, often with a lasting effect on school practice. There were times, however, when a teacher’s agency resulted in severing her or his connection with the school. Cynthia (phase 2), for instance, who was teaching in a public school in the Southwest, realized the unrelenting emphasis on test scores and external standards ran contrary to her values: ‘I was so frustrated with it as a teacher that I just didn’t feel like it was going to be a good fit for me.’ So she resigned from her position at the end of the year and returned to a private school in Mexico that did not emphasize narrowly focused standards.

Doris, a phase 3 teacher, explained why she left a private school where she had taught for more than 10 years to accept a position in a public elementary school:

[There is] that whole Common Core piece. I feel there’s a big change in education right now, you know; and I felt like if I stayed at private school, I was not going to be part of that. And I want[ed] to be part of it.

Unlike Cynthia, Doris was not motivated to leave her private school because of dissatisfaction. Rather she was changing jobs—demonstrating agency—because of her desire to continue to grow professionally.

To summarise, in our results section we have reported our findings, pointing out the kinds of professional development our participants characteristically experienced within each of the themes we identified and in the overarching areas of teacher identity and teacher agency. We also showed in a number of instances how the themes and the overarching areas were interrelated. In the section that follows, we will provide further
analysis of these relationships and a visual that attempts to capture the interplay. We will also discuss what our study contributes to the research literature and theory, and will trace the implications of our findings for schools, administrators, teacher educators, and policymakers.

Discussion: how the pieces fit together

As noted in several places in the results section, the themes we identified were often related to each other and to the overarching concepts of teacher identity and teacher agency. Teachers’ growth in validation, for example, coincided with an increasing understanding of their identity as teachers, which often involved a growing sense of empowerment in their profession and, for some, an enhanced sense of agency in their relationships with others, including teachers, administrators, and parents. Collaboration among phase 2 and 3 teachers was almost invariably associated with continuing professional engagement, as were leadership roles, especially at the school level. Teachers’ quest for additional professional knowledge was often fuelled by concern for their students.

Looking further into teacher identity, we find many examples of participants’ concerns in this area. Recall the case of Vidya, a phase 1 participant who recognised the importance of establishing her own teacher identity; or Dana, a phase 2 participant who realised the threat to her identity induced by a non-supportive principal; or Selena (phase 3), secure in her identity, who left her position as lead teacher to become ‘just a member’ of a team at a different grade level so that she could continue to learn. Clearly their identity as teachers had a powerful influence in the participants’ professional lives.

We believe that the concept of teacher identity incorporates the six themes we have identified in our analysis. As teachers develop professionally—assuming they do—in areas defined by the themes, they are developing concurrently in their identity as teachers. The pie-shapes in Figure 3 offer a way of visualising the relationship of the themes to teacher identity. The size of the circles represents the extent to which teacher identity has been developed: i.e. it is smaller (less developed) in phase 1 and relatively larger (more developed, coherent) by phase 3. The individual segments suggest the magnitude of particular themes in a teacher’s identity. Thus in the first circle validation is quite large—representing the importance of external validation for the new teacher’s sense of identity. Balance (i.e. unbalance) is also large, as newer teachers often fail to leave time for their personal lives; and relationship with students is prominent too, as the teachers try to meet the expectations of the school in regards to student behaviour and learning. Leadership, on the other hand, represents a small piece of the new teacher’s identity pie. In contrast, we find greater balance across themes and a more-developed sense of teacher identity among phase 3 teachers, though leadership and collaboration, as shown, might play a more important role in the teachers’ identity.

And how does teacher agency fit into this scheme? As Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) have observed: ‘It is apparent that a heightened awareness of one’s identity may lead to a strong sense of agency’ (p. 183). (See also Beijaard et al., 2004.) Overall, teacher agency seems to be a capacity that can develop over time in conjunction with a clear, highly refined sense of teacher identity, which emerges more decidedly and consistently in more-experienced participants.

Again we must emphasise, as other researchers have in the past, the powerful role that context has in shaping teacher development, including teacher identity and the
components (themes) of which it is comprised. So while we argue that early and midcareer teachers naturally develop along a predictable trajectory in the theme areas we have identified, we do not undervalue the impact that contextual factors such as administrators, other teachers, external demands, and issues from teachers’ background and personal lives affect this development.

**Significance: contribution to the research literature, theory, and educational practice**

In identifying themes that represent important components of teachers’ professional development during their early and middle years and in proposing that these themes, taken individually or as a whole, reveal a pattern or trajectory of such development, this study is contributing to the knowledge base and theory developed by Huberman (1993) and extended by Bullough and Baughman (1997); Levin (2003); Day et al. (2007); Day and Gu (2010); Beck and Kosnik (2014); and others.

Our study also contributes to findings on teacher identity and teacher agency as described by researchers such as Beijaard et al. (2004); Olsen (2008); Beauchamp and Thomas (2009); and Buchanan (2015). We argue that our study reveals a close relationship between teachers’ development in each theme area and their growing identity as a teacher. Take the case of Debora (phase 3), who, after being transferred from a middle-income to a highly diverse low-SES school, developed a notably richer and fuller understanding of her identity as a teacher: ‘Where I am now, I really am teaching . . . I feel like I’m a way better teacher. I understand, like, what’s going on and those kind of things; so I feel like that development has been an eye-opener.’ Debora went on to identify specific ways she had grown in self-validation, collaboration, leadership, balance, and professional development, and how she manifested agency in the operations of the school. Often, as was the case with Debora, growth in teacher identity
also involved growth in agency—in the teachers’ realisation that they could act autonomously and at times forcefully, in accordance with their values and beliefs. The study also reinforces the proposition that teacher identity (Olsen, 2008, p. 5) and agency are powerful tools for examining and understanding teacher development.

Insights offered by this study will help IHEs and school districts better support teachers’ professional growth. If educational leaders are aware of the patterns of teacher development suggested by the themes, they can provide richer opportunities for their teachers to grow in these areas and more fully develop their professional identity and agency. For instance, principals—who clearly play a powerful role in helping teachers develop their identity—can influence teachers’ sense of being competent (validation), can provide them with leadership opportunities, and can enhance their ability to collaborate with other teachers. This study reminds us of the mindfulness principals must have if they are to effectively help early-career teachers. Indeed, the critical role that principals play in teachers’ professional development suggests that administrator-preparation programmes should pay more attention to this personal dimension of principals’ responsibilities. Teacher educators who work with in-service teachers should try to individualise their programmes to the greatest extent possible so as to better meet the needs of teachers in various stages of their development.

Policymakers (legislators, school board members, government agencies) should consider that effective teaching, the most powerful factor influencing student learning, is enhanced when teachers have the opportunity to develop their professional identity to the fullest and to exhibit agency in setting direction for their students and their schools. This means that instead of establishing policies that judge teachers on their students’ performance on standardised tests, policymakers should provide a framework and resources that support teachers’ continued development as professionals in the areas we have identified.

Follow-up research to this study could further investigate the themes we have identified and further elucidate their relationship to teacher identity and teacher agency. Indeed, additional themes might emerge as components of a cluster of characteristics that illuminate the trajectory of teachers’ professional development. Other researchers, perhaps drawing from the theoretical work on personal sense-making (Kelchtermans, 2009; März & Kelchtermans, 2013; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), might examine the process through which participants from different phases made sense of the experiences they had within selected themes.

**Summary and conclusion**

This article reports on a study we conducted on the professional development of a group of teachers during the first 10 years of their career. Through our analysis of interviews with 53 participants, we identified six overlapping themes—validation, collaboration, relationship with students, continuing professional development, leadership and balance. We argue that these themes, taken individually and as cluster, reveal a trajectory of professional development that participants experienced as they gained classroom experience. We further argue that the concept of teacher identity incorporates the six themes and develops concomitantly with them. Like other researchers, we find that a teacher’s highly developed sense of identity characteristically results in enhanced agency; and, based on examples from our study, we reaffirm the strong influence that context has on teachers’ professional development. Our study thus adds specificity (the themes, the development trajectory, the focus on the first
decade of teaching) to research and theory on teacher development (Huberman, 1993; Day et al. (2007) and provides new insights into the studies of teacher identity and agency (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Buchanan, 2015; Olsen, 2008). Finally, we have suggested implications of our findings for principals, teacher educators, and policymakers.

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_Susan H. Marston_ is a professor of education at the Kalmanovitz School of Education of Saint Mary’s College of California. Her research focuses on teacher development, with special emphasis on the voices of teachers.

References


**Appendix 1 Interview protocol**

1. Tell us your thoughts about teaching and your development as a teacher.
2. In reflecting back on your __ years of teaching, how (in what ways) have you grown professionally?
3. Were there any critical incidents that marked turning points—for better or worse—in your development as a teacher?
4. As a graduate of the programme, you wrote a thesis based on classroom research. Do you think about that process and use the research skills you developed in your present work as a teacher? In what ways has the thesis experience influenced your thoughts about teaching and your development as a teacher? Explain.
5. There are many pathways to becoming a teacher. You received your preparation through the ______ programme. Can you talk about this five-year programme and any strengths or weaknesses you can remember about it? To what extent did your undergraduate preparation prepare you satisfactorily for your work as a beginning teacher?
6. In these times of educational change (e.g. Common Core Standards), what has remained consistent (stable) in your views about the teaching profession and your work as a teacher? On the other hand, what views about your work as a teaching professional have changed for you? What have been your most rewarding experiences as a teacher? And, conversely, what experiences have been the most depressing or discouraging?
8. Do you have any role models or mentors that have influenced your thoughts about teaching or the way you work as a teacher? Explain.
9. Have your relationships with any of the following groups of people, which I will name, influenced the way you think and work as a teacher? If yes, explain how they have influenced you. [Name the groups one by one.]
   • your fellow teachers?
   • your administrators, especially your principals?
   • your students?
   • parents of your students?
   • others? _______________
10. What advice might you give to new teachers entering the profession or individuals thinking of becoming a teacher?
11. Are there any other comments or observations you would like to make about your work and development as a teacher and/or your views of the teaching?
## Appendix 2 Participants Quoted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Years Taught</th>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Grade*</th>
<th>Public/Urban/Sub-</th>
<th>Where Quoted</th>
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<td>Val</td>
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<td>Val</td>
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<td>Val</td>
</tr>
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<td>Col</td>
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<td>Val/Col/Bal/Dis</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2 ***</td>
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**a** = grade taught at time of interview (= other grades taught). In US schools, students are generally age 5 in Kindergarten, 6 in grade 1, etc., and 13 in grade 8.

# Note: 7 of 8 private school teachers were in Catholic parochial schools.

* = not currently teaching; taught K, 4, 6; ** = not currently teaching; taught 4, 5, K for 8 years; *** = taught 5th grade, private school for 10 years; NA = information not supplied.

Themes: Val = validation; Col = collaboration; RS = relationship with students; CPE = continued professional engagement; LD = leadership; Bal = balance; ID = teacher identity; AG = teacher agency; Dis = discussion section.