

Research Article

The Construction of Professional Identity Among Preschool Student Teachers During Teaching Practicum: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Preschool student teachers are a vital reserve force for the early childhood education workforce, yet their professional identity during teaching practicum remains insufficiently synthesised in the literature. Building on the growing recognition that professional identity is pivotal to teacher retention and quality, this narrative review examines how preschool student teachers construct their professional identity in teaching practicum. Following a three-stage narrative synthesis of peer-reviewed literature on teacher identity, practicum experience, and early childhood teacher education, the review identifies a gradual and dynamic construction process comprising three stages: anticipatory professional cognition, adaptive professional negotiation, and reflective internalization. Authentic participation, mentor support, reflective practice, and emotional experience are highlighted as the key mechanisms shaping this process. These findings offer practical implications for designing practicum and strengthening professional identity in early childhood teacher education.

Keywords

Preschool student teachers, Teaching practicum, Professional identity, Early childhood teacher education, Reflective practice

1. Introduction

Preschool student teachers are an essential part of the future early childhood education workforce. Moreover, Their professional preparation during pre-service education is closely connected to the quality, continuity, and long-term development of early childhood education systems. In recent years, increasing attention has been given not only to what preschool student teachers know, but also to how

they understand themselves as future professionals. This shift has made professional identity an important topic in teacher education research.

Professional identity generally refers to how individuals understand their professional roles, values, responsibilities, and future direction within a specific occupation (Izadinia, 2013). Consequently, For student teachers, professional identity is not simply an abstract belief about teaching. It affects their motivation to learn, willingness to persist through difficulties, confidence in teaching, and long-term career intentions. In other words, professional identity influences not only how student teachers think about teaching, but also whether they are able and willing to remain in the profession over time.

In preschool teacher education, teaching practicum is one of the most important contexts in which professional identity develops (Le Huu Nghia & Ngoc Tai, 2017). Indeed, Compared with classroom-based coursework, practicum places student teachers in real kindergarten settings where they observe experienced teachers, interact with young children, plan and implement activities, and experience the daily complexity of teaching work. During this process, theoretical knowledge is tested against real practice. Student teachers begin to compare their expectations with reality, adjust their assumptions, and gradually form a more concrete understanding of what it means to be a preschool teacher.

This is particularly the case for early childhood education since preschool teaching comprises a unique blend of care, instruction, feeling involvement, developmental sensitivity, interaction with families, and interaction with colleagues. In addition, many student teachers arrive in teacher education with romanticized views of preschool teaching, viewing it as caring for children and arranging simple activities. Student teachers often discover the reality of preschool teaching is much more than this. It involves professional judgment, classroom organization, developmental observation, emotional control, pedagogical flexibility, and ethical commitment. As a result, practicum does not merely enhance skills. Rather, practicum transforms student teachers' views of preschool teaching and of themselves with regard to preschool teaching.

Although a number of studies have explored teacher identity, practicum experience, and the professional development of pre-service teachers, research examining the identity construction of preschool student teachers in practicum remains limited. Some studies explore professional identity as a psychological variable; some examine the role of mentor teachers or pre-service teachers' emotions and self-efficacy; and others address the pre-service teacher population in general rather than early childhood specifically. There is still a need for a clearer synthesis of how preschool student teachers' professional identity develops, what stages this development process includes, and what kind of educational conditions can support this development.

This paper aims to respond to that call by providing a narrative review of the construction of

professional identity among preschool student teachers during teaching practicum. Specifically, rather than viewing professional identity as an inherent trait, this paper considers it as a developmental process through participation, reflection, social interaction, and emotional experience in authentic kindergarten settings. The three questions that this paper attempts to explore are: (1) how is professional identity constructed among preschool student teachers during teaching practicum? (2) what mechanisms influence this process? (3) what implications can be drawn for pre-service preschool teacher education?

By addressing these questions this paper hopes to provide some input into both areas. Theoretically, to illuminate the dynamic process in which the professional identity of early childhood teacher students is constructed. Practically, to provide some guidance for more effective practicum systems, which will help develop not only skills but also a coherent and meaningful professional self.

2. Literature Review

The following review offers a critical synthesis of the literature on professional identity in teacher education, with particular attention to trends, contradictions, and gaps concerning early childhood contexts.

2.1. Professional Identity as a Dynamic Developmental Process

Professional identity has emerged as a key concept in teacher education because it offers a valuable insight into how teachers conceive of themselves and how they position themselves with regard to the profession (Beijaard et al., 2004). Previous studies tended to regard teacher identity as a superficial perception of self. In recent years, however, more and more researchers describe teacher identity as dynamic, situated, and continuously constructed through experience (Rodrigues & Mogarro, 2019). This means that professional identity is not something student teachers simply possess before they enter schools. Instead, it develops gradually through interaction between personal beliefs, prior experiences, institutional expectations, and professional practice.

For pre-service teachers, professional identity begins to form before formal practice starts. Many student teachers enter teacher education with beliefs shaped by their own schooling, social images of teaching, family expectations, and cultural assumptions about the profession. These early understandings often influence how they respond to teacher education, how they interpret practicum experiences, and how they imagine their future career. However, these early beliefs are rarely complete or stable. They are often idealized and may not match the real conditions of educational work.

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that identity formation involves both cognitive and emotional dimensions (Rodrigues & Mogarro, 2019). In terms of cognition, student teachers

gradually construct an understanding of professional roles, responsibilities, standards, and pedagogical values. In terms of emotion, student teachers feel excited, anxious, upset, confident, and committed. These cognitive and emotional aspects affect student teachers' engagement with the profession.

2.2. Professional Identity in Early Childhood Teacher Education

In the area of early childhood, the issue of professional identity has gained greater prominence due to the fact that preschool teaching is typically judged and valued less than other levels of education (Irvine et al., 2024). Preschool teachers' work is frequently seen as mere care or child supervision and its pedagogical, developmental, and professional character is not always appreciated. This general context has an impact on the way in which preschool student teachers conceive of the profession and their level of identification with it.

Research in early childhood teacher education has shown that professional identity in this profession is structured by general teacher education experiences and the work with preschools (Ozbay Ozdemir, 2024). Student teachers have to learn not only how to teach, but also how to care, observe development, communicate with children of different developmental levels, respond to children's emotions, and cooperate with families and other educators. Consequently, their professional identity is formed in the space of pedagogy, care ethics, emotional labor, and institution. Research shows that student teachers in preschool often experience conflict between expectations and experiences (Poblete-Núñez et al., 2025). On the one hand, they may want to enter the profession because they like to be with children or because they appreciate educational work. On the other hand, they may experience problems with workload, social status, emotions, and perspectives on future work. This conflict is particularly significant in early childhood education because a meaningful and satisfying professional identity enables student teachers to commit themselves to early childhood education beyond mere practical convenience.

2.3. Teaching Practicum as a Key Site of Identity Formation

Teaching practicum is one of the most significant components of teacher preparation (Cai et al., 2022). It bridges university study and practical educational situations and offers students opportunities to observe, participate, experiment, and reflect. For preschool student teachers, practicum is the first extended period in which they begin to experience the work of the kindergarten.

By practicum, students look beyond discussion and encounter real teaching situations. They see other teachers in action, take over aspects of routine management, prepare and observe activities, deal with children and cope with unexpected classroom events. Student teachers' conceptions are likely to be shaken and they may have to re-think what it means to teach. In this regard, practicum is more than a training period; it is a negotiation process.

Several studies have shown that practicum affects professional identity through multiple

pathways (Zhao & Zhang, 2017). First, it strengthens or weakens students' confidence depending on whether they feel capable in practice. Second, it changes their understanding of the profession by exposing them to real teaching responsibilities. Third, it influences career intentions by shaping whether they see themselves as suitable for the profession. Fourth, it creates emotionally intense experiences that can either reinforce commitment or produce doubt and withdrawal (Zhang et al., 2025).

2.4. Research Gaps

Although the literature has identified many factors related to teacher identity, there are still the following deficiencies. First, some studies are based on the teacher population and do not adequately discuss the particularity of early childhood education. Second, some studies handle professional identity as a measurable variable without explaining how it varies over time (Chen, 2025). Third, most of the discussions separated cognition, emotion, mentoring and practice, although these two dimensions are closely intertwined in actual practicum. Fourth, there is still need for a clearer synthesis of how preschool student teachers develop stage by stage professional identity during practicum.

In response to these deficiencies, this paper integrates relevant studies and constructs a more clarifying developmental framework: Preschool practicum's professional identity construction can be viewed as a process of progressive movement from anticipatory cognition to adaptive negotiation and then to reflective internalization, which is influenced by practice-based participation, social guidance and emotional experience.

3. Methodology

This study uses the method of narrative review to review how preschool student teachers constructed their professional identity in teaching practicum. Narrative review is an appropriate method for the study because the literature on this topic is conceptually diverse, and includes empirical studies, theoretical discussions, and analyses of contexts. The aim of aggregating the results through statistical methods is not present in this paper; instead, the aim is to integrate key ideas, identify developmental patterns, and build an interpretive framework to explain how preschool student teachers constructed their professional identity in practicum (Rodrigues & Mogarro, 2019).

Following the guidance of recent narrative and systematic review frameworks on professional identity (Rodrigues & Mogarro, 2019), the search was conducted across the databases ERIC, Education Source, Web of Science, and Scopus, using combinations of the terms “professional identity,” “preschool/pre-service teachers,” “teaching practicum/internship,” and “early childhood teacher education.” Inclusion criteria required that studies (a) focused on pre-service or preschool

student teachers, (b) addressed professional identity or closely related constructs (e.g., self-efficacy, commitment), and (c) were published in peer-reviewed journals or as high-quality scholarly works in English. Exclusion criteria removed studies centred exclusively on in-service teachers, on general K-12 contexts without early childhood relevance, or lacking an identifiable identity focus. This transparent retrieval and selection process supports the replicability of the review and directly informs the three-stage analytical design described below.

The review focuses on research related to four closely connected themes: professional identity in teacher education, early childhood teacher preparation, teaching practicum, and identity-related developmental mechanisms such as reflection, mentoring, self-efficacy, and emotional experience. The literature considered includes peer-reviewed journal articles and selected high-quality studies that contribute directly to understanding the professional development of preschool or pre-service teachers in practicum contexts (Cai et al., 2022).

The analysis was structured in three stages, consistent with the narrative synthesis procedure outlined by Rodrigues and Mogarro (2019). First, the relevant literature was reviewed in order to map how professional identity has been conceptualized in teacher education and how early childhood education has been dealt with in that literature. Second, the studies connected to teaching practicum were reviewed to identify how practical participation affected student teachers' conceptions of competence, role understanding, and career commitment. Third, the results were compared and generalized to identify developmental patterns and supporting mechanisms. The aim of this approach is not to make claims about causal relations, but to construct a coherent explanation of the construction process of professional identity in the context of teaching practicum. Through this generalization the paper constructs a three-stage framework to depict the developmental process of preschool student teachers' professional identity.

4. The Construction Process of Professional Identity During Teaching Practicum

Professional identity construction during teaching practicum is not a single turning point. It is a gradual developmental process shaped by repeated participation, experience, interpretation, and reflection. Based on the literature, this paper argues that this process can be understood through three interrelated stages: anticipatory professional cognition, adaptive professional negotiation, and reflective internalization. These stages are analytically distinguishable, but in real practice they often overlap and influence one another.

4.1. Anticipatory Professional Cognition

Typically, just prior to or at the beginning of practicum, preschool student teachers have an

anticipatory cognition about the profession. This initial cognition is shaped by university courses, previous educational experiences, social conversations about teachers, and personal expectations (Ozbay Ozdemir, 2024). At this point, student teachers often have simplistic views of preschool teaching but views that are positive in nature. They might think that the job just involves taking care of children, arranging simple activities for children, and keeping the classroom warm and friendly.

These views are not necessarily false, but they are incomplete. They might fail to recognize the challenge of observing child development, designing developmentally appropriate experiences, handling classroom transitions, communicating with families, cooperating with colleagues, and maintaining emotions in stressful situations. As a result, the beginning of practicum is typically characterized by a gap between expectation and reality (Le Huu Nghia & Ngoc Tai, 2017).

Observation is vital at this stage. Through watching practicing kindergarten teachers organizing routines, interacting with children, and dealing with unexpected incidents in the classroom, the student teachers can have a clearer image of preschool teaching. Such observational learning expands their understanding of what it means to be a preschool teacher. They are introduced to its culture, language, and pace (Cai et al., 2022).

However, their anticipatory cognition is still weak. It is likely that the preschool teaching image they have in their mind is more surface than deep, more like how others do than like what it feels like to be them. They are watching teaching, but they have not yet felt like teachers themselves. That is why the next stage follows.

4.2. Adaptive Professional Negotiation

As practicum progresses, student teachers begin to participate more actively in teaching activities. They assist in classroom management, support children's learning, design or implement activities, and increasingly interact with both children and mentor teachers. Through this transition from observer to participant, their relationship to the profession changes (Cai et al., 2022).

This would be adaptive professional negotiation for two reasons: student teachers have prior expectations and they now have actual experience. They face difficulties that impact on their confidence and assumptions (Zhao & Zhang, 2017) such as getting children to listen, dealing with emotional behavior, handling transitions or doing activities as planned. Getting children to sit still may, for instance, prove extremely difficult, or dealing with disruptive behavior may turn out to be a major challenge. Even getting a simple activity to work as planned can be a struggle in a real classroom. These are not student teachers' faults: they are a necessary part of the identity construction process as they force student teachers to confront reality.

During this stage, student teachers begin to ask deeper questions. Am I capable of doing this work well? Do I really understand young children? Can I manage the emotional and practical demands of

teaching? Do I see myself as someone who belongs in this profession? These questions reflect identity negotiation rather than mere skill acquisition.

Mentor support is crucial at this stage. Positive feedback, encouragement, modeling, and emotional support enable student teachers to make sense of their challenges as professional learning rather than viewing them as proof of their personal incompetence (Zhang et al., 2025). Conversely, minimal support or negative experiences will aggravate their doubt and reduce their professional commitment. As a result, professional identity in adaptive negotiation is greatly sensitive to practicum support.

Reflection is also more valuable at this stage. Student teachers do not merely do; they begin to make meaning of their doing. They reflect on intention and outcome, discover mistakes and question assumptions, and gradually build practical judgment. As a result, their professional identity is less likely to be mythologized and more likely to be based on experience.

4.3. Reflective Internalization

With sustained participation, feedback, and reflection, many student teachers gradually move toward a more stable form of professional identity. This stage can be described as reflective internalization. Here, the profession is no longer understood only from the outside. Student teachers begin to see themselves from within the role of the teacher.

Reflective internalization does not mean that all uncertainty disappears. Rather, it means that student teachers develop a more mature and realistic understanding of the profession and a stronger sense of personal alignment with it. They begin to recognize that effective preschool teaching requires not only affection for children, but also planning ability, developmental sensitivity, emotional discipline, cooperation, and ethical responsibility. At the same time, they increasingly understand why this work matters.

There are multiple signs at this level. First, pre-service teachers become more self-confident in their profession because they can perform practical work more autonomously (Olsen et al., 2024). Second, they have more clearly defined professional values such as children respect, child-centered education, learning and care responsibility. Third, they see teaching as a meaningful future work instead of only seeing it as a future practicum task. The fourth point is related to reflection. Not only do they reflect because teachers ask them to do so, but also because they want to become better future professionals.

Internalization is especially significant in early childhood education because the field depends not only on formal knowledge but also on sustained relational engagement, care ethics, and professional commitment. When student teachers begin to identify themselves as future preschool teachers in a stable way, they are more likely to remain engaged in professional growth and more likely to sustain

long-term commitment to the field.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpreting the Development of Professional Identity

The findings of this narrative review suggest that the construction of professional identity among preschool student teachers during teaching practicum is not a fixed or immediate outcome, but a gradual developmental process (Beijaard et al., 2004). The three-stage framework proposed in this paper—anticipatory professional cognition, adaptive professional negotiation, and reflective internalization—helps explain how student teachers gradually move from an external understanding of the profession to a more stable and internalized professional self. This process indicates that professional identity is formed not only through theoretical learning, but also through continuous interaction with authentic kindergarten settings in which student teachers observe, participate, adjust, and reflect.

This finding also shows that teaching practicum should not be understood merely as a technical training stage. In many teacher education contexts, practicum is often treated as a period during which student teachers apply previously learned knowledge in real classrooms. However, the present analysis suggests that practicum serves a deeper developmental function. It allows student teachers to test their prior assumptions about teaching against the realities of classroom life and to reconstruct their understanding of the profession through actual participation. In this sense, practicum is not only a bridge between theory and practice, but also a central site in which professional identity is negotiated and gradually formed (Le Huu Nghia & Ngoc Tai, 2017). The reason this transition matters is that identity, unlike isolated skills, shapes whether student teachers interpret early setbacks as learning or as evidence of unsuitability (Zhao & Zhang, 2017).

The analysis reveals that the development of student teachers' professional identity is affected by the following factors. Authentic participation (Cai et al., 2022): moving beyond passive observation to confront the practical and affective demands of preschool teaching.

Mentor support (Zhang et al., 2025): framing difficulties as learning opportunities rather than signs of personal failure. Reflective practice (Rodrigues & Mogarro, 2019): translating experience into professional meaning.

Emotional experience (Zhang et al., 2025): fostering confidence, a sense of belonging, and long-term commitment to the profession. All of these factors affect identity development during the entire practicum and have a strong impact on whether the development is superficial or deeper and more internalized.

5.2. Implications for Preschool Teacher Education

The results of this study have the following implications for the education of preschool teachers. First, practicum in teaching should be more than a site for application. It should also be a context for constructing professional identity. Therefore, teacher education programs should offer the possibility for increasing participation in order to enable student teachers to transcend the level of observation and become increasingly involved and responsible in the classroom life.

Second, mentor support should be strengthened in practicum settings. Mentor teachers should not only guide student teachers in teaching techniques, but also provide emotional encouragement, constructive feedback, and reflective dialogue. Since mentor relationships strongly influence how student teachers interpret practicum experiences, effective mentoring can play an important role in strengthening professional confidence and career commitment (Zhang et al., 2025).

Third, structured reflection should be embedded more systematically into practicum programs. Reflective journals, feedback meetings, peer discussion, and guided seminars can help student teachers interpret their experiences more critically and connect practice with professional growth. In addition, stronger collaboration between universities and kindergartens is needed so that coursework, field expectations, and supervision can be better aligned. Such coordination can create a more coherent environment for the development of professional identity.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. As a narrative review, it aims to synthesize and interpret existing literature rather than provide new empirical evidence. Its conclusions therefore depend on the scope and quality of the studies included in the discussion. In addition, although this paper focuses specifically on preschool student teachers, the literature reviewed comes from different institutional and cultural contexts, which means that the process of professional identity construction may not unfold in exactly the same way across all programs or regions.

Future research may extend the findings of this study in a number of directions. Longitudinal empirical studies may track the development of professional identity over different stages of practicum and initial teaching years. Comparative studies may investigate the differences in the development of identity in different stages of early childhood teacher education with different designs of practicum, mentoring models, and institutional support (Irvine et al., 2024). The results will help us gain further insights into the process of constructing professional identity and how teacher education can better serve the long-term professional development of preschool student teachers.

6. Conclusion

This study reviewed the construction of professional identity among preschool student teachers during teaching practicum through a narrative synthesis of the relevant literature. The findings

revealed that professional identity is not constructed immediately, but is built gradually through a dynamic process of anticipatory professional cognition, adaptive professional negotiation, and reflective internalization. Through authentic participation, mentor support, reflection, and emotional adjustment during teaching practicum, preschool student teachers develop more realistic and stable professional self-understandings than idealistic conceptions of preschool teaching. Therefore, teaching practicum should be regarded not only as a stage to apply knowledge, but also as an important context for professional identity formation. This study clarifies how preschool student teachers construct professional identity in real educational contexts and provides valuable references for improving the design of practicum and pre-service early childhood teacher education.

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