Between the real school and the ideal school: another step in building a teaching identity

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During their teaching practicum future teachers become acquainted with the rights, duties and obligations of their profession in their trajectory of building a teaching identity. In this process, they go through a number of critical incidents, where we observe that student teachers struggle to integrate the meaning of these incidents with their ideas about the imagined teacher and their own perceived identity. The detailed analysis of discourse generated by two pre-service teachers, grounded in the theory of Communities of Practice and in the theory of meaning called Positioning Theory, allows us to understand how a crucial period in the building of a teaching identity evolves through the seeking of creative solutions to the dilemmas and conflicts they face in their daily interactions with students, teaching colleagues, and the practicum supervisor. In this article we argue that the imagined professional identity that the next generation of teachers forges, far from making them more vulnerable, can become a powerful impetus for innovation and educational change.

\textbf{Keywords:} teacher education; teaching identity; communities of practice; positioning theory; narrative inquiry; imagined professional identity

\section*{Introduction}

Learning transforms our identities. (Wenger 1998, 227)

In recent years there has been a profound change in teaching conditions, and this has affected the roles teachers play and thus how their teacher identity is shaped. Being a teacher is no longer a profession where one studies and then goes on to spend one’s professional career transmitting the knowledge learned to the younger generations. The relentless increase of new knowledge and its cyclical lifespan, the complexity of new competencies, the overabundance and ease of access to information, and the emergence of new technologies present genuine breaks with the ideas of permanence and stability, not only in terms of knowledge but also in emotional terms, making lifelong and lifewide (Dede 2011) learning a necessary value and skill for transforming and adapting to new and unpredictable contexts (Hargreaves 2003).

Various social, cultural, and technological changes are placing new demands on teachers and schools. Being open to these new experiences multiplies learning opportunities, and if learning transforms our identity, as Wenger (1998) states, then

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this multiplicity and heterogeneity of contexts reconstructs our identity, forcing us to abandon a conception of identity that is categorical, coherent and unified in order to adopt new global, complex, polysemous and fragmented models.

What makes the topic of building teaching identity interesting and important, particularly to schools of teacher education? The desire to be a teacher and the kind of teacher one wants to be are essential components of a teaching identity, signaling teachers’ motivations and later satisfaction with, belonging to and participating in certain educational contexts. Some authors (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2003; Day 2006) believe that innovation and the change in the concept of school are closely related to teaching identities and the process of their construction and development. For Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004), “professional identity” contributes to the perception of self-efficacy, motivation, commitment and satisfaction in carrying out the work of a teacher, and it is a major factor in becoming a good teacher. Korthagen (2004) pointed out that initial teacher education should not only focus on changing behavior and transmitting the professional competencies necessary for teaching and beliefs about teaching and learning, but it should also take into account the development of a teaching identity as future teachers exercise their profession as well as their mission as teachers.

We are experiencing rapid changes in the demands made on schools and in the rights and duties assigned to teachers. Educational contexts have evolved, and the role of education and the role of the school have been transformed, leaving behind the teacher identity that changes little and is associated with stable social contexts and lasting characteristics. The increase in their functions and responsibilities has redefined teachers’ professional profiles (Van Huizen, Van Oers, and Wubbels 2005), which inevitably affects their professional identities.

The aim of this study is to describe, analyze and interpret the ideas, representations and experiences that go into building a professional teaching identity through an analysis of how future child education teachers build their sense of what it is to be a teacher. There is much debate surrounding the challenges of building a different kind of school and the needs of teachers, which can lead to changes and innovations (Hargreaves 2001). In this sense, perceiving the type of teacher one wants to become can be a powerful impulse for transforming the school of today.

The ultimate goal of this research project is to illuminate the process of building teaching identity at the initial stage, particularly during the teaching practicum. We believe that schools of teacher education should pay close attention at this point of the teaching career, making serious efforts to provide contexts where student teachers are allowed to imagine other performances and other scenarios. Imagination, we propose, far from being a weakness, can turn into a powerful tool for future professional development.

Identity

We have seen renewed academic interest in the concept of identity of late from a variety of perspectives and disciplines, such as gender studies (Butler 2004; Weedon 1997), sociolinguistics (Niño-Murcia and Rothman 2008), language teaching and learning (Block 2007; Warriner 2010) and pedagogy and teacher education (Varghese et al. 2005; Flores and Day 2006). Despite the disparate disciplines that the earlier-mentioned studies come from, all of them adopt a post-modern view of identity. Far from the naturalistic and essentialist approaches that consider identity to be something
that persists over time and is unified and internally coherent, the studies cited earlier understand the construction of identity as a process that gives rise to multiple identifications and disidentifications, or alignments and disalignments, that reinforce or weaken each other but are at the same time organized in such a way that they give the sensation of a degree of coherence and permanence. Moreover, identity is defined as a “way of doing”, a “performance” or staging, to use a term taken from the visual or performing arts. These performances tend, therefore, to be contradictory, changing, and under continual construction. Discourse is the primary way in which identities are constructed and negotiated given that it is always performed with others, and those others are the ones who are able to legitimate a given identity.

In this study, following authors such as Wenger (1998), Gergen (1992) and Kincheloe (2001), we adopt an approach to the study of identity from multiple perspectives, as a construct that is changing, co-constructed, crucially contextualized and limited. Identity, according to Wenger (1998), is a way of speaking about the change that learning brings about in who we are and a way of creating personal histories about becoming within the context of our communities. This definition is both complemented and also reinforced by the contributions of Positioning Theory, since this theory reveals the dynamic and agentive nature of identity, as framed in discursive cultural contexts. The mutual complementarity of the two theories, Communities of Practice (CoP) and Positioning Theory, is particularly clear in Linehan and McCarthy (2000, 449), who propose that “Positioning Theory offers a useful complement to community of practice (given the practice focus on the re-production of social structure) by highlighting the manner in which individuals’ positioning are mutually emergent from particular discursive spaces”.

Professional identity and teaching identity

In this paper we limit our focus to the professional identity of the future teacher, which we assume is built through their situated experience at school and at university. These learning contexts are socio-politically regulated by laws, values, norms, duties and cultures, be they implicit or explicit. For Kelchtermans (1994), “professional identity” seems to function as a structure for personal interpretation of professional conduct. This applies to both new and experienced teachers. Professional identity is not fixed and it is never “completed”; instead it is a dynamic process, a reality that evolves and develops both individually and collectively (Marcelo 2009).

Various studies show that future teachers enter teacher-education programs holding pedagogical beliefs that reflect their own experience as students and their internalized teaching models (Lortie 1975; Hollingsworth 1989; Bruner 1996). These studies on the attitudes, practices and interpretations of teachers and future teachers seem to indicate that teaching identities are not only formed from theories and content related to their profession, but they are also strongly supported by perceptions, interpretations and knowledge that encompass their personal and subjective domain and have a significant influence on their professional practice. The formation and evolution of a professional identity is a process of personal maturation that begins to develop informally before professional training and continues developing progressively during the university years, then broadening at the start of a teacher’s professional career and continuing to develop with experience in the profession (Chong, Ling, and Chuan 2011).
The communities or contexts in which the education of future teachers occurs become a significant creator of meaning as they facilitate reflection and allow meaning to be shared or negotiated, in the sense given by Lave and Wenger (1991, 51). In this way communities provide access to participation as a situated process of negotiating and renegotiating meaning in the world.

**Building identity in communities of practice**

The social learning theory of CofP, as well as the related concept of legitimate peripheral participation were originally proposed to account for learning in informal contexts, such as Yucatan midwives, native tailors, navy quartermasters, meat cutters (Lave and Wenger 1991), as well as insurance claims processors (Wenger 1998). Nevertheless, as it has been shown in previous education research (Clarke 2009; Niesz 2010; Yandell and Turvey 2007; Woodgate-Jones 2012) and despite some limitations (Linehan and McCarthy 2000), the theory turns out to be a useful tool for analyzing processes that occur in formal environments as well. In particular, we believe that it is a powerful lens that allows us to uncover the dynamics that are at play in the complex process of becoming a teacher.

In this theory, learning cannot be dissociated from the social situation in which it occurs. It is social participation that shapes not only what we do but also who we are and how we interpret what we do. Through a process that the authors call “legitimate peripheral participation”, newcomers, those who are learning, interact with old timers within the community and gradually become more experienced in the practices that characterize the community. The theory of learning as participation in and identification with CofPs emphasizes that learners are members of historical social collectives and not isolated individuals, as other views of learning seem to assume. Lave and Wenger (1991) make us pay attention to the practices of a community, recognizing that some groupings can either limit or facilitate movement towards full participation. For these authors, being involved or participating actively and fully “is” learning.

In addition, Lave and Wenger (1991), as the concept of legitimate peripheral participation seems to suggest, claim that the identity of the novice is built through performing tasks and internalizing and reflecting upon new concepts and activities. According to Wenger (1998), the sources of coherence in a community are mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. The meaning of belonging to a community is negotiated in practice through participation in a dynamic that is characterized by social interaction among participants through the contribution of their competencies and personal experiences. This negotiation is a fundamental feature of identity since it involves both the creation and adoption of meaning. We assume that the linguistic and semiotic uses that the future teachers employ in creating narratives of their stories, memories, discussions and reflections not only reflect their emerging identities but also contribute to their formation.

As Gergen and Gergen (2006, 118) point out, narratives are not only cognitive structures or schemas through which we understand the world, but they are also, from a constructionist perspective, “discursive actions” that are used to build and establish relationships. Furthermore, the act of positioning (cf. the positioning theory of Harré and Van Langenhove, 1999, see later) takes place within discursive actions such as narratives. All the actors position themselves and others according to what they consider to be a narrative that is coherent with the activity that is developing at a given time and place.
Finally, we believe that another key concept that defines identity is that of “imagined communities”. Following Wenger (1998), imagination is an essential component of identity construction. For Wenger: “[t]he concept of imagination refers to a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves. Imagination in this sense is looking at an apple seed and seeing a tree” (1998, 176). Returning to pre-service teachers, their idea of the teacher they want to become or they want to reject is a strong engine that drives change and teacher identity building. Greene (2005), as well as Denzin (2007), propose that imagining alternative teaching actions and utopian educational scenarios, free from the roles attached to the teacher in a traditional school, is the first step in fighting, resisting, decolonizing, and transforming schools.

**Positioning Theory**

The metaphorical concept of role, borrowed from the classical dramaturgical model (Goffman 1959), has been commonly used in social psychology, but as Harré and van Langenhove (1999) have convincingly proposed, the more nuanced concepts of position and positioning can explain the way people cope with the situations they usually find themselves in. In Harré et al. (2009, 9), positions are defined as “clusters of beliefs about how rights and duties are distributed in the course of an episode of personal interaction and the taken-for-granted practices in which most of these beliefs are concretely realized. (...) ‘Positions’ are features of the local moral landscape. People are assigned positions or acquire or even seize positions via a variety of prior implicit and explicit acts which, in the most overtly ‘rational’ positioning acts, are based on personal characteristics, real or imaginary”.

In this theory, in order to give meaning to a set of utterances or a conversation, one has to examine a mutually determined triad: the position, the storyline and a relatively determinate speech-act. When a person opens up a conversation he or she adopts a position. Both the storyline and the illocutionary force (Austin 1961) of the speech act are jointly constructed by the conversants and in this process the initial position can be accepted or rejected, and in the unfolding of the conversation it will possibly change. Finally, it must be repeated that in Positioning Theory, the content of a position is defined in terms of rights, duties and obligations of speaking with respect to the social forces of what can be said.

But what is the relation between identity and the different positions a conversant can adopt? What you are, your identity, is partially constituted by how you are positioned (self-positioned or positioned by others) and according to this theory, this amounts to the duties and rights you can exploit. Positioning Theory emphasizes that is through discourse that our identities emerge.

What both the CofP theory and Positioning Theory have in common is that the meaning of a given action has to be socially constructed. The following definition by Eckert (2006, 1) emphasizes this social aspect of the CofP: “A community of practice engages people in mutual sense-making about the enterprise they’re engaged in, about their respective forms of participation in the enterprise, about their orientation to other communities of practice and to the world around them more generally”.

**Methodology**

We adopt the narrative (Flick 2004; Denzin and Lincoln 2003; Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Gubrium and Holstein 2008) as our methodological approach in this study.
Following Connelly and Clandinin (1988), MacLure (1993), Alsup (2006), Clandinin et al. (2006) and Cohen (2010), we note that research into teacher narratives tries to identify the reflexive and analytical processes that shed light on how a professional teaching identity is built through discourse. Reflecting on past experiences and analyzing the contexts in which they occurred are fundamental strategies that teachers and professors use to situate themselves in the “professional knowledge landscape” (Connelly and Clandinin 1996). In the narratives of the future teachers in this study we identify and discuss key passages, ones that constitute critical incidents. Crucially, we understand that in those key moments, that is, through the personal narratives and extended discourse they engender, professional identity is being questioned, while at the same time it is being built in a dynamic and interactive process. For Day (2006, 134), critical incidents are events that are indicative of biases, motives, structures, patterns and underlying values that are produced at key moments in our life and our work, and are translated into important personal and professional changes. They are events, then, from our own experience that capture our attention and motivate or cause us to reflect. In our study, the narrative thread of the critical incident as presented by the student and commented upon by their discussion group has allowed us to situate, contrast and explore the different meanings that the education majors ascribe to their present as well as their future work in schools.

As part of the data gathered, 14 education majors were required during their practicum period to explain in an online forum an incident they experienced that caught their attention. During the six weeks of the practicum, the future teachers participated in discussion groups of no more than six people. Each participant had to open a discussion on what was deemed a critical incident and also participate in discussions on the incidents posted by the other members of the group. When presenting a critical incident to the group, student teachers recorded the event experienced or observed, identified the emotions involved, and noted their assessment of what had occurred. They also described the professional interventions observed in the school and detailed what was learned from the case, following a critical incident presentation model that was provided in a rubric with guidelines. Under this rubric student teachers were asked to write between 500 and 600 words in their presentation of the incident and around 200 words in the subsequent posts. In addition, the student that initiated the report had to summarize the whole discussion in around 250 words.

In the first case discussed here, there were five responses to the critical incident: four from the other students and one from the practicum supervisor. There were three additional response postings from students and a summary posting from the student who presented the critical incident, as the rubric required. In the discussion of the second critical incident there were five response postings and four additional ones, two coming from two different practicum supervisors. As required by the rubric, the student who presented the critical incident posted her final conclusions.

Although the 14 threads or topics selected and discussed by the students were amenable to analysis and elaboration, we followed Polkinghorne’s (2005) “purposive selection” and chose two participants and their respective critical incident. “The purposive selection of data sources involves choosing people or documents from which the researcher can substantially learn about the experience. Patton (1990) has said that it is important to select ‘information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposive sampling’
(p. 169)” (Polkinghorne 2005, 140). Thus, the data collected in this study came primarily from two online forums, where the participants were six students and the practicum supervisor. In one of the forums a practicum supervisor talks from her former identity as a practicum instructor, which adds an additional dimension to the construction of meaning, as will be explained in detail later. The dialogical nature of the data was guaranteed by requiring that all group members engaged in each forum at least once.

The relevance of the two cases that we present later was evaluated by the research team, assessing its resonance (Conle 1996). This phase of the study led us to interpret and reconstruct meaningful experiences with respect to social and cultural discourses without forgetting that the narrative is a form of research (Clandinin and Connelly 2000); it is not simply a form of representation, it is also a form of searching. Relating experiences is how the search begins, and it is ultimately through this process that the research derives its own meaning (Conle 2000).

Finally we should note that we researchers are also university teachers, and crucially, practicum supervisors, thus moving through various roles. We recognize our tensions and contradictions, and in these changes in position we recognize that our place is both privileged and vulnerable, since we are analyzing a topic that involves the assessment of our own teaching activities.

**Leyre and the affective-emotional component at school**

Leyre was about to receive her teaching certification. In her autobiographical sketches she portrays herself as a good but shy student. She talks about her untroubled experience going to a religious school that was demanding and transmitted very clear ideas about what was good and what was bad.

Nevertheless, now that Leyre is about to join the labor market, this shy and somewhat docile person is rebelling and being critical of the scholastic reality that she will have to deal with. Quite aware of how diversity and the disadvantaged are treated, she claims that the professors’ training goals:

shouldn’t only be to learn to perform teaching duties better but to also teach teachers to be mavericks within the prevailing educational system, looking for a way to improve and change the established order, transmitting what they’ve learned to other teachers, starting with changing oneself and starting a chain reaction that could change a whole educational community. (Education Major Leyre)

However, throughout the course of a study events occur that are not on the road map but that the researcher should take advantage of and incorporate into the study. Something like this happened when Leyre visited one of the researchers who was acting as the practicum supervisor. From the researcher’s field notes we took this text:

Leyre came to my office and asked a trivial question about the task that she was doing at that moment. After I answered the question, she walked towards the door hesitantly and I saw that she was leaving upset, as if something was worrying her. I felt that she wanted to tell me something, that she needed to talk. Simply and directly, but without forcing it, I asked her what was wrong, if there was anything else she wanted to say. And then she told me. She told me what had happened, and again that afternoon she told me other things that defined the context of the school where she was doing her
student teaching. A difficult situation, complicated, awkward. Later on we encouraged her to discuss this critical incident with the group. (Practicum supervisor and researcher 1)

When Leyre opened the discussion by sharing the critical incident that she had already told us about, she began by describing what had happened in the schoolyard of the public pre-school and elementary school where she was doing her third year student teaching. The public school in which she had chosen to do her student teaching had students from various ethnic populations, including Gypsy students. Here is Leyre’s narrative:

Last Thursday, while we were in the schoolyard, I saw a boy furiously make his way towards a girl and then he grabbed her by the neck and started shaking her. I ran to them and Carmen and I separated them. While Carmen spoke with the boy (Antonio) to find out what had happened, I tried to protect the girl (Saray) from the aggressions of Antonio’s cousins. Because we saw that the situation was somewhat unstable, Carmen decided to remove Saray from the courtyard in hopes of ending the conflict.

Then I asked Antonio what had happened. He said that Saray had sworn on his dead, and that is a sacred thing for the Gypsies, while he let loose with a whole series of insults and threats towards her.

Soon after that other teachers arrived, and Carmen returned to the schoolyard with Saray, who was very scared and cried inconsolably. Given that the situation was still not resolved, Carmen took Antonio and Saray sat next to me, looking for affection and consolation. It was in this moment that I found myself with a conflict. What should I do? I looked at the other teachers, looking for a clue as to how I should act, but they didn’t look at me. Meanwhile, I put my arm around Saray, but only part way. What was wrong with me? I don’t have any problem being affectionate with others. Now I think and I am aware of all the variables that were running through my mind in that moment: How will the more experienced teachers see me if I get too close? Should we present a cold and distant image or do we need to take the needs of the student into account? As you can see, a sea of doubts. (Education Major Leyre)

We can observe that Leyre was debating between what she wanted to do – hug the girl – and what her idea of the ideal teacher says she should do. She was not sure whether showing her emotions was appropriate or coherent with her image of herself as a teacher, and she was worried that her public image (Goffman 1959) as a teacher would be lowered if she were seen showing affection. As Wenger (1998) points out, an identity type is the nexus of or connection between different memberships: the student teacher sees herself as an affectionate person; it is part of her identity. But this conflicts with her membership in the CoP of the school teachers. Her idea that teachers should keep their distance is corroborated when she looks to the other teachers in the schoolyard and she sees that they do not react. Her emerging identity as a teacher does not completely match with her identity as an affectionate person who shows her emotions.

In terms of Positioning Theory, Leyre positions herself as student teacher whose duty is to protect the child, although she does not think that she has the right to display her affection in public. This moral dilemma is framed as a speech act of asking for advice from her peers. In effect, she receives the advice requested from other student teachers. The action of hugging a child becomes a symbolic act and a debate on how to deal with emotions opens up. Another future teacher wonders
whether the teacher identity should have an emotional component. Like Leyre, she sees that other established teachers in the community do not approve of her getting too close to the students:

As a student teacher I am kind of a strange figure for the children. On the one hand you want to get close to them, so they get to know you and you get to know them. On the other hand they follow the dynamic of the classroom in which the teacher leads (even though the children are working on their own) and nobody has introduced you. I go around the tables answering questions. When you talk a bit with the students it seems like the teacher looks at you like “let’s not go there” and the children pick up everything. I mean, I feel a bit like you. (Education Major Begoña)

Another student teacher, Esther, has the same perception of the imagined teacher, in the sense that a teacher should not get very close to students, and she adds:

I understand that internal debate you had, wondering how much to get involved. (Education Major Esther)

The three student teachers felt the pressure to conform, and by looking at the experienced teachers they conclude that some emotional distance is part of the duties of the imagined teacher. From this, we can conclude, as does Wenger (1998), that becoming a member of a community requires that you give up part of your identity, which in this case means not showing your emotions towards the students. Nevertheless, the conversation takes a different turn. The practicum supervisor decides to position himself as critical of a school where emotions have boundaries. As a supervisor, he has the right to criticize the school in abstract.

I was moved at discovering that your story addressed heartfelt things, problems and uncomfortable moments that only life can teach us. The traditional school has created an unavailable pedagogical individual, without emotion, where the student and teacher only relate to each other through stereotyped rituals that are strongly focused on listening and repeating. (Practicum supervisor and researcher 1)

After this intervention, Leyre adjusts her position somewhat. She repositions herself by allowing not only her right, but also her duty of offering affection to the students. Crucially, this move is triggered by the supervisor’s previous positioning from above. Again, an imagined CofP where emotions are valued is depicted by the practicum supervisor and immediately adopted by the student teachers:

For this reason, we teachers should be an example of the social and emotional world since there’s no way to learn it by studying. I think we have the duty to show the children that there are other ways of seeing and doing, besides what they see in their lives outside school. (Education Major Leyre)

Alba repeats the same idea, although she tries to integrate what she sees in her own CofP, the school where she is doing her practicum, with the proposed imagined school. In that regard she says:

I only wanted to add that, yes, of course we teachers have lots of responsibility in the students’ emotional and social environment, and that we’re role models for them […]
At my school I see, at least in the teachers I am closest to, that at 16:30 they close the folder and tomorrow’s another day. (Education Major Alba)

At the onset of the discussion, Leyre states that everybody agrees that emotional aspects play an important role in the lives of the people that make up a school, and she thinks that it has to be possible to combine emotions with teaching. Encouraged by the direction of the discussion, she puts forth her imagined teacher and the corresponding CofP:

I know that I have a very idealistic idea of what working at a school should be, but shouldn’t all teachers and future teachers be idealists and utopian in order to make school a better place? A place where children felt free, protected and secure enough to be who they are. (Education Major Leyre)

**Begoña and her relationship with her practicum instructor**

Begoña joined the teaching program through a vocational training course. With professional experience in special education, she participated heavily in the study, actively collaborating in the discussion sessions and in completing the tasks. In her presentation of her critical incident, she talked about a student who was a Romanian immigrant and who she thought was excluded from the school system. When she described the case, she complained that the special education teacher, the practicum instructor, did not listen to her suggestions. She proposed to the instructor that the boy be given easier tasks, that he be allowed to use the computer and go to the library. None of these suggestions were adopted. Another student in the discussion group, Ane, shared a similar situation and lamented the lack of attention given to her ideas and proposals in her CofP:

We’re continually relegated to the background where our opinions, ideas and/or contributions are rarely taken into account, and I say it because of comments that I’ve heard in the school where I’m doing my student teaching. (Education Major Ane)

Both Begoña and Ane express their discomfort because their participation is peripheral and they crave to be fully involved. The rejection of their proposals makes them painfully aware that they are student teachers, and that therefore they lack the legitimacy to make decisions about the students they interact with. Obviously, being on the periphery and having to work from that position gives rise to resentment and frustration.

At this point the discussion becomes a space in which the student teachers complain about the differences between the new teachers and the old teachers. One of them, Adriana, brings up the topic of the differences between “them”, the legitimate teachers and “us”, the student teachers. She highlights a teacher identity type that she sees in some “old” teachers, and she dislikes it. It is a CofP that she does not want to belong to:

I think something like that is what happens to some teachers, when they start to act like bureaucrats, giving priority to their schedule, salary and their rights regarding the work they have to perform. I don’t mean to say that they shouldn’t consider their rights as workers, don’t misunderstand me, but I think that when a teacher starts to
see her work as a traffic cop does, for example, I think that’s the moment that person needs to ask herself or himself some questions. I know that it isn’t easy, but I think it’s necessary for teachers, both old and new, to fight to keep the prevailing educational system from absorbing us, so we don’t end up doing just as we are told, giving up the dreams that led us to choose a path like this one in order to one’s bit for the world. (Education Major Adriana)

Given the turn in the topic of discussion, the two practicum supervisors step in. One of them asks Begoña to re-establish and improve communication with the instructor at the school. This supervisor tries to reposition Begoña as a valuable member of a previous CofP and highlights past successful teaching experiences:

It seemed to me that your text pointed more towards your own self-concept and professional motivation and your difficulties in making a place for yourself. To sum up: Have you tried to speak with the special education teacher? Don’t you think that your strength could become your weakness? And by strength I’m referring to all your previous experience, your activism, your dedication, enthusiasm and practical knowledge … couldn’t that become an obstacle to having an educational dialogue with the practicum instructor? (Practicum supervisor and researcher 1)

The second practicum supervisor disagrees and opts for a deliberate self-positioning. Although she is a practicum supervisor, she repositions herself as an instructor. From this position she has the right to describe a different storyline, and thus to defend a CofP, the school she worked at and where she has frequently received student teachers. She adds that she believes that this school was not an exception, warning future teachers against making snap judgments:

In my case, I like to talk with whoever comes to student teach, give them a leg up, push them to be motivated about developing the personal resources that sometimes they intuit they possess, take an interest in their point of view, their experiences … I am not an exception at all. Many of my colleagues share this perspective.

But I don’t like to be with somebody who, having only been at the school for three or four weeks, forgets that it’s often difficult to really understand what seems to be happening if they don’t make an effort to think in depth about what they are seeing …. (Practicum supervisor and researcher 2)

Faced with these two comments, three students from the forum, Begoña, Adriana and Ane, agree, and instead of further negotiating their proposals, they uncritically accept the two supervisors’ comments. Nevertheless, Begoña once again expresses her frustration with her practicum experience, bringing out the difficulties she had communicating with the instructor:

I’m grateful you told me that, because you are completely right. My strength is absolutely my weakness. I am unable to maintain a dialogue with the practicum instructor, in addition to the fact that it’s never the right moment, because when I start I can’t stop, and that’s not what I want. I would like to talk with her about the cases that we share since she’s organized my student teaching as if I were a colleague. I would love to be able to work as a team. But there is a wall between us, I don’t know if she built it, I did, or we both did. And I am probably pretty harsh. I recognize that my text maybe isn’t clear because I wanted to disguise my criticism a bit so it wouldn’t be so harsh, but I see that I didn’t manage to do so. Thank you very much for your input,
I’ve found myself discouraged at times during the student teaching, I think because of the great feeling of frustration I’ve felt. (Education Major Begoña)

We found that, at least in these discussions about Begoña’s critical incident, the relationship between new and old teachers is contentious, and that negotiating with the instructors ends up being difficult and costly. However, with the practicum supervisor-researchers, the student teachers feel protected and supported, which is why they tend to accept their authority with little criticism. There is a deliberate self-positioning as students, deprived of power and eager to accept the hierarchy inherent to the university. Paradoxically, the student teachers say that it is the supervisors more than the instructors who show them “the real school” and who help them develop a more abstract discourse, which they seem to value:

It’s good to know the perspective of an experienced person, who gives us a warning so we try to have a fuller idea of what school really is. (Education Major Adriana)

I appreciate the warning because in my case I think I have focused more on the individual cases than on the school as a whole and what that entails. (Education Major Ane)

On the journey that these student teachers are undertaking towards full participation as legitimate teachers, one of the things they expected was to engage in the practices of the CofP. When this expectation was only partially met, student teachers felt frustrated. The frustration of being on the periphery grew to the point where one of the student teachers, Begoña, said that she hoped that after the student teaching period they could all get together physically, alluding to the obvious fact that virtual interactions are insufficient for being able to express the emotions that the student teachers were overcome with. Practicum supervisor 1 self-positions himself as the mediator between the CofP of students and the CofP of the school. Supervisor 2 added another perspective, that is, an alternative narrative, by deliberately positioning herself as a former instructor. Thus, the function of the narrative is appealed to in order to enable the resolution of conflict (Gergen and Gergen 2006), providing the student with other useful perspectives in order to remedy the exclusion that they criticize and that is blocking their participation — albeit peripheral — in the CofP. In this sense, we observe how the university practicum supervisor can facilitate the students’ journey from the periphery by relying on the negotiation and the renegotiation of their identity as situated processes of identifying with or of rejecting the CofP of the school.

Discussion and conclusions

Throughout the description and analysis of the two critical incidents posted by future teachers Leyre and Begoña, we have been able to unveil the complex process of building a teaching identity through their observation of and identification with the CofPs where they do their practicum. However, despite the strength of the CofP’s dominant discourse in shaping the participation and identity of its members, in the discourses just analyzed some degree of resistance was observed.

In the case of the incident posed by Leyre, building her own teaching identity means suppressing her emotional ties. Her imagined teaching identity is at odds
with her emotional identity, and thus the student teacher feels the need to negotiate and put limits on her affectionate self. The critical incident triggers a necessary reflection on teachers having to control their emotions. All of the forum members seem to agree that emotions are necessary but that schools and the university hide and suppress them. Leyre is about to give up her ideal teacher and adopt the model that she observes in her CoP. Thus she presents herself as distant and suppresses her desire to be affectionate. However, the practicum supervisor-researcher’s intervention challenges the sanction on emotions and opens the discussion about whether or not we value a school without emotions. Returning to the idea of imagined CoPs, the practicum supervisor has the group propose a more humanized school community in which emotions are not suppressed. It has been observed that novel teachers seem to attribute a prominent role to the students (Nias 1989). This has also been perceived in our student teachers’ discussions.

The second critical incident can be framed in the Wengerian concept of legitimate peripheral participation. It illustrates the difficulties that the student teachers experience, given that they are not full or core members of the CoP in which they are participating. As student teachers, their ability to make decisions is limited, which creates resentment. Begoña brought up the conflicts between the old teachers, the ones who are criticized for their uninnovative behavior and who turn a deaf ear to the suggestions of the novices but still have administrative authority. Once again, the participation of two of the practicum supervisors neutralizes the resentment. The practicum supervisor repositions herself as an instructor and with the right to give her opinion, which this new position bestows on her. She states that many practicum instructors are grateful for and incorporate suggestions from student teachers. This opinion is in agreement with Woodgate-Jones (2005, 155), who finds that “student teachers are appreciated for bringing new teaching ideas and approaches into their placement schools.” In this way, this second case illustrates how the CoP can be fueled by the new members who, in turn, reformulate and renew teaching practices in a continuous and necessary negotiation with older participants.

Framing the analysis of the critical incidents in the CoP theory and Positioning Theory allows us to identify and explore the meaning that student teachers give to their present and future role in the schools. The critical incidents narrated by the student teachers has permitted us to situate the process of identity building, as well as to describe the type of teacher they want to become by exploring the dilemmas they face, their difficulties in the school, their fears and their frustrations regarding other members of the CoP. The group discussion helps us understand how student teachers experience this phase in their trajectory to become teachers and to determine its importance and meaning in the identity building process. The shared online debate on enduring teaching problems is one more step that helped student teachers build their professional identity, since it forced them to clarify and imagine the type of teacher they want to become. At the same time, the actual design of the practicum helps student teachers overcome the loneliness and sense of isolation previously identified by Lortie (1975) and Grossman (1990).

This article has underscored the reflexive power of dialogue among future teachers, as well as the complex role of the university instructor in mentoring and guiding the process of becoming a teacher. Johnson (2003) pointed out that there is probably no stronger relationship than the relation between a mentor teacher and a student teacher. In the two cases described, and particularly in the case of Begoña, we have seen that this relationship can also be very problematic and that the role of
the university teacher or the supervisor has been beneficial since it mediated between the two. Our research underscores the importance of mediating and the complex role of the university teacher, who is neutral in that she is not a member of the community of student teachers or the community of the schools and yet is able to advise the students from a position of power.

In the analysis of our discussions we have intentionally focused on the emotional aspects of becoming a teacher. In the first case we analyzed the acceptance or refusal of a behavior, such as showing affection towards the children, and in the second case we examined the frustration and isolation involved in teaching from the periphery. Learning to become a teacher does not only imply goodwill and motivation, but also the capacity to imagine oneself as a future teacher. The dilemma between a caring climate versus a formal climate, as was discussed in our first case, has been recently identified by Shaphira-Lishchinsky (2011). Hargreaves (1998, 2000, 2001) and Zembylas (2003), Zembylas (2005) have also underscored the need to discuss emotions in the first years of teacher education and subsequent teaching. The practicum is a particularly emotion-laden phase in a students’ trajectory, as the analysis of these narratives has revealed.

In sum, we have followed the journey of a group of education majors throughout their student teaching, documenting one of their first contacts with the profession of teaching. The critical incidents they narrated have been analyzed in light of CofP theory, thereby observing that the initial teaching identity gradually becomes more explicit and that the “uncomfortable” moments that the student teachers relate are where we see the budding of both accepted or rejected and imagined identities. In addition, Positioning Theory has unveiled the different positions adopted by the discourse participants: sometimes acting more as students and sometimes more as teachers. In our analysis we reported that the student teachers found themselves in transition between two identities, between being students and starting to carry out the responsibilities of a teacher. Their narrative reflects this learning trajectory from the periphery, however legitimate, to the center of a given CofP, the school where they will be full but novice teachers.

The consideration and detailed analysis of students’ narratives can provide valuable information about their professional development and the aspects and conditions that drive or block it. Schools of teacher education and practicum designers and supervisors should be aware of the potential of these narratives in unveiling the relevant topics that shape a given teaching identity. Flores and Day (2006) underscore the lack of impact that teacher education programs have on the building of a teaching identity and claim that these programs could be strengthened by establishing connections between education majors’ life experiences and reflexive practice in the classroom. This is exactly what we have tried to do in this study by examining through the lens of narrative research the critical incidents that allow us to begin to understand the complex interrelation between the identity of education majors, the CofP that they enter when they do their student teaching and their imagined teaching identity.

Student teachers’ first experiences at the university as well as in the various CofPs in the schools often follow models that are not suitable for facing the challenge of preparing future teachers for constant change, creativity and contexts of high uncertainty. Instead, these models reflect a student teacher that uncritically executes orders, making the future teacher vulnerable to and defenseless in the face of professional socialization processes. The role of the faculty member responsible for the teaching
practicum is decisive in filling the gap between the imagined school and the perceived teaching context, helping the student overcome the problems related to “reality shock” or “unlearning what was learned” (Flores 2002) through years of schooling. Practicum supervisors play a major role in mediating in order to solve or at least soothe the practical problems and emotional conflicts regarding student teachers’ praxis. Nevertheless, we have identified yet another relevant role of practicum supervisors, which is to encourage imagination, so that student teachers can envision the apple trees that are to emerge from the seeds, where alternative ways of teaching and learning are performed and discussed. By supporting, encouraging and applauding different “performances” in the schools, practicum supervisors can regain the power of utopia associated with the vocation of teaching.

The debate on the critical incidents selected by the students, which blended different positions and representations, allows them to develop what has been called “critical imagination”. “[T]his imagination dialogically inserts itself into the world, provoking conflict, curiosity, criticism, and reflection” (Denzin 2007, 134). The group discussions analyzed in this article have opened the door to imagining an alternative school, where new professional identities for future generations of teachers can bloom.

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Notes
1. This article was funded and is part of the research project EDU2010-20852-C02-02 (2020–2013) entitled “Building the identity of pre-school and primary education teachers during initial training and the first years of work”.
2. We will use the terms “education majors”, “student teachers” and “future teachers” to refer to the participants in this study. We will refer to the university faculty member that is in charge of coordinating the student teaching as “practicum supervisor and researcher” and the person that oversees the student teaching at the school as the “practicum instructor”.
3. By “student teaching” or “practicum” we mean a period of six week during students’ third year of college in their teacher education program. During this practicum students observe, participate and teach with different degrees of responsibility, depending on the schools and the assigned practicum instructor.
4. All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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