Examining Novice Teachers' Professional Identities

A Longitudinal Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this longitudinal study was to follow three teachers from their university teacher preparation programs into their first 3 consecutive years of teaching to better understand their teacher's professional identities. One of the reasons they were invited to this study was because they were strong candidates in their student teaching. The findings reveal that all teachers continued in the profession despite the obstacles they faced during their first 3 years of teaching. While they were all persistent, each persevered in a different way, depending on their beliefs, context, and relationships with their peers and administrators. Understanding their experiences and the ways they found success has implications for teacher education and induction as well as research on teacher development.

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Introduction

When beginning teachers transition from universities to their first classrooms, it is a major life event that involves reframing the knowledge acquired during their teacher preparation programs (TPPs) into a real-life setting. Novice teachers may also be navigating other challenges associated with early adulthood (e.g., moving and marriage). This intense period is characterized by positive changes but also many trials and stress, which impacts a teacher's development (März & Kelchtermans, 2020).

Teacher development is dynamic and complex (Cochran-Smith et al., 2014). During the first few years, teachers must adapt to the school climate and work to gain acceptance from colleagues and administrators (Gavish & Friedman, 2010). As teacher educators, we want to ensure that future teachers feel confident and prepared for the realities of the classroom.

Although many studies have investigated early-career teacher retention, this study contributes both a longitudinal approach spanning 3 years and consideration around the role of teacher professional identity negotiation in persistence in the profession. The purpose of this study was to follow three teachers from their TPPs into their first 3 consecutive years of teaching. Using the lens of teacher professional identity, we address the need in the literature for increased attention to teacher identity development (Izadinia, 2013). Our research question was, across the first 3 years of teaching, how do three novice teachers narrate their teacher's professional identities?

Relevant Literature

To better understand the professional identities of the teachers in this study, we draw on literature specific to novice teachers' growth and development as well as their persistence in the profession.

Novice Teacher Growth and Development

Linear conceptualizations of teaching expertise began in the early 1980s with the notion that teachers were autonomous decision makers (Raduan & Na, 2020). However, Strom et al. (2018) suggested that a major paradigm shift has occurred. Instead of seeing educators as autonomous decision makers, recent research has suggested that teachers have "a network of beliefs, preservice learning, experiences, and personal qualities" (Strom et al., 2018, p. 23), therefore their autonomy is likely limited by these factors. Some researchers have suggested that there should be a graduated approach to teachers' autonomy. Grant et al. (2020) suggested that teachers at the level of beginning proficiency should have their lesson plans reviewed, attend mandated professional development and other activities, and they also suggested that more experienced teachers be given more choice in lessons, methodology, behavior systems, and so forth, the argument being that this graduated approach could serve to improve teacher autonomy.

With experience, novice teachers begin to transition from just surviving to growing confidence in their teaching methodology (Vonk, 1989). They develop pedagogical intuition and become more flexible and responsive to the needs of their students (Weber et al., 2016). Dack (2019) described early teaching as a time to practice the "gross motor skills" of the profession that, with support, ultimately evolve into the "fine motor skills" of responsive teaching. This does not happen initially, however. Factors like learning to navigate new spaces, adapting to meet the needs of students, and learning about the school community take time, during which support and autonomy for all teachers should be balanced (García-Carrión et al., 2020). For teachers to transform from novice to expert, regardless of years of experience, they must develop an ability to reflect on their thinking, planning, and teaching.

Challenges Novice Teachers Face

As novice teachers develop their expertise and professional identities, they encounter tensions, including how to bring learning from their preservice preparation into their K–12 settings (Wetzel et al., 2018). Several factors, such as beliefs, characteristics of students, and the school's leadership, shape what novice teachers can do pedagogically (Strom et al., 2018). In addition, they encounter situations where determining what is "best" for a student may feel overwhelming (Coughlin & Dotger, 2016).

New teachers may feel frustrated when they recognize that not all students progress in the ways the assessments and curriculum expect them to (Capitelli, 2015). Certain aspects of school environments, such as student behavior or insufficient school support, are also often cited as reasons that teachers abandon their preservice preparation and conform (Wetzel et al., 2018), change schools, or even leave teaching (Zhang & Zeller, 2016). Understanding these challenges may improve teacher retention efforts.

Retention and Persistence

Some school districts offer support to novice teachers, including appointing mentors (Clark et al., 2013). Such support is imperative for novice teachers to process experiences in the first few years (Mansfield & Gu, 2019). Another way to retain novice teachers, according to Weber et al. (2016), is to make sure mentors are trained to facilitate reflection. With support systems in place, novice teachers may persist when facing challenges related to their new roles.

Levin and colleagues (2013) wrote that when teachers "know what they believe, value, and are working to accomplish, they are likely to be better positioned to lead . . . and to question mandates or policies that run counter to what they believe is best for children" (p. 215). Research has suggested that novice teachers were able to persist with support from professional learning communities, peer mentors, grade-level teams, and workshop and/or in-service experiences (Clark et al., 2013).

This review of the literature briefly described novice teacher growth and development, challenges associated with this stage of a teacher's career, and strategies for persistence. Examining how teachers see themselves helps us understand how they navigate these challenges.

Theoretical Framework

We undertake this work using the theoretical lens of teacher professional identity, defined as a "subjectivity or situated identity relevant to an individual's professional life and necessary for the successful meeting of her or his professional responsibilities" (Alsup, 2006, p. 206). Our understanding is that, in addition to developing teaching knowledge and skills throughout their careers, teachers engage in identity work that shapes how they make meaning of their professional experiences and beliefs and how they situate themselves within their professional communities. We consider teacher professional identity within the larger conceptualization of identity described by Holland et al. (1998), who posited that "people tell others who they are, but more importantly, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are" (p. 3).

In an investigation of teacher professional identity development of science teachers, Leuhmann (2007) derived four key principles shaping teachers' identity work within professional communities: (a) Identity is socially constituted, (b) identity is constantly being formed and re-formed over time, (c) identity is considered to be multifarious or to consist of multiple interrelated ways one is recognized in one's community, and (d) identity is constituted in interpretations and narrations of experiences. As described in the next section, these tenets guided the methodology of this longitudinal study, including the use of multiple extended interviews (i.e., opportunities to narrate experiences) and the open-ended questions in interview protocols (i.e., opportunities to access multifarious or interrelated ways of being in one's community). Like Izadinia (2013), we believe that identities are dynamic, influenced by context, experience, and personality.

Mockler (2011) further suggested that negotiating teacher professional identity, particularly through narration of experiences that connect theory with practice, is a process of creating congruence between one's personal and professional values, purposes, and actions. This professional identity does not exist in a vacuum but is contextualized by a teacher's personal experiences, professional context, and external political environment. Therefore, as we connected and reconnected with novice teachers from the time of graduation through the first 3 years in the profession, the theory of teacher professional identity led us to offer narrative opportunities for beginning professionals to articulate their emerging self-understandings as teachers.

Methods

To capture the experiences of three novice teachers across time, we designed a

longitudinal qualitative study, initiating the research at the conclusion of the TPPs and gathering data through interviews and email correspondence over the first 3 years of their teaching careers. We used phenomenology as the methodological approach in this research. Creswell and Poth (2018) described the phenomenological study as a process that "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 75). In this study, participants experienced the same phenomenon, professional growth across their first 3 years of teaching, but the journey varied for each participant as they engaged in different contexts providing a range of support, opportunities, and challenges over the years.

Participants

Cate, Ellen, and Margo (pseudonyms) graduated from their TPPs in 2016 as part of two cohorts of teacher candidates educated in two different states. They were recruited for this longitudinal study on the recommendation of their instructors because of their outstanding academic and clinical work.

Margo taught third grade in the same school where she completed her student teaching experience. Cate began her first year in an instructional support role and later transitioned to a long-term substitute teacher in second grade. In Year 2, Cate transferred to a different school and taught fifth grade. At the end of the school year, her position was eliminated, so she taught fifth grade at another school. During the time of the study, Ellen taught third grade.

Data Sources

In Creswell and Poth's (2018) discussion of phenomenological studies, they asserted that "data collection procedures typically involve interviewing individuals who have experienced the phenomenon" (p. 77) and discussed the importance of conducting multiple in-depth interviews. Consistent with this description, we used interview data and email correspondence to examine novice teachers' experiences across 3 years: at the conclusion of their TPPs and then three times throughout their initial years of teaching, once at the beginning, once in the middle, and once at the conclusion of the year. Years 2 and 3 of this study followed the same interview schedule.

We, the researchers and authors, all teacher preparation faculty, developed semistructured interview protocols (Schensul et al., 1999). Some sample items follow:

1. Tell me about who you are as a teacher.
2. What, if anything, has changed in terms of your instruction since our last interview?
3. What have been your challenges and strengths, and how do they differ from the past?

4. Has your attitude and/or practice of teaching changed over the years? If so, how?

5. What is one thing you wish you could tell yourself looking back to when you started teaching?

The interviews encouraged teachers to reflect on their identities, consider their current experiences, and discuss shifts over time regarding their professional growth and perspectives related to teaching. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. In addition, between interviews, participants engaged in reflective email correspondence with us. These emails allowed the teachers another way to document their experiences. The participants determined the email topics.

Data Analysis

We coded data using procedures for conducting phenomenological research. Creswell and Poth (2018) prioritized examining important sentences and quotes that represent how the participants experienced the phenomenon. After each interview was completed and email correspondence was collected, two researchers open-coded the data, chose important quotes, and annotated how the data aligned with the experiences of the participants related to the research question. After initial coding, the research team met to discuss the codes. This process helped researchers to understand how the individual participants experienced the phenomenon of being novice teachers. These conversations also allowed the researchers to discuss any discrepancies that were resolved by revisiting the data.

Because the phenomenon of being a novice teacher varied for each participant, the researchers clustered meaning from important quotes in the interviews and email correspondences into categories, such as support, opportunities, and challenges. Each category was reexamined, redefined, and combined with other similar categories until initial themes for each participant emerged. The researchers then further nuanced each individual theme by writing descriptions of what the participant experienced within Years 1, 2, and 3.

After creating these descriptions, we went back to the data to reexamine instances and evidence that illustrated professional growth using the theoretical lens of teacher professional identity. In this way, Leuhmann's (2007) four principles shaped analysis at the thematic level. We noted how participants framed their identities as socially constituted when they discussed their fit and instructional decision making within the context of their administrators, colleagues, and students, acknowledging that the boundaries and impacts they perceived from others in their school communities influenced how they made sense of their own identities.

As we constructed the overarching theme of each participant's journey, as detailed in the findings, we looked to the ways the teachers formed and re-formed their novice teacher identities over time. By returning again and again to the data across the 3 years, we noted shifts in how the teachers interpreted their professional identities. For example, teachers were recognized differently in their schools as

they moved from being brand-new, first-year teachers to experienced teachers. As they took up new roles outside of school, as married people or as graduate students, their professional identities were reshuffled. Lastly, given the nature of data sources, which prompted repeated narration of topics over time, we noted teachers' explanations of their beliefs, practices, roles, and instructional considerations as they grew in the profession.

Findings

Novice teacher identity develops over time as teachers consider how to be, how to act, and how to understand their work (Sachs, 2005). The data suggest that each of the three teachers in our study traveled on her own identity journey: Margo toward autonomy, Cate toward confidence, and Ellen into adulthood.

Margo: A Journey to Autonomy

Year 1

Examining the data from Margo during her first 3 years of teaching, her journey to autonomy was a theme that rose to the surface. Margo defined *autonomy* as having personal freedom and trust placed in her to teach in a way that *she* knows is best rather than following demands of the district, micromanaging administrators, and/or a required curriculum sequence plan. Thus, for the purposes of this study, we used the same definition. The first time Margo brought up autonomy was during the interview before she graduated from the university. She mentioned looking forward to having her own classroom. During her first year of teaching, Margo's quest for autonomy was difficult. She said, "I always thought testing wouldn't get in the way, testing wouldn't dictate this, wouldn't change that." Margo struggled with her desire to be the teacher she imagined herself to be due to having to teach in certain ways that went against her own philosophies.

Although Margo did not feel like she had autonomy specific to testing, she tried to focus on areas of her instruction where she was in control and could do what she knew was best for students. This often meant making different choices than the seasoned teachers on her grade-level team. Margo credited her relationships with students, feeling like she truly knew them, what interested them, and what they needed as a driving force to make decisions she felt were in their best interests. She said,

> I think that relationships are the foundation of any kind of academics that happen in school. They need to trust you and they need to know that you trust them in order for a healthy academic struggle to happen and learning to occur.

In this way, Margo demonstrated autonomy by making student-centered instructional decisions, rather than following traditional or standardized pathways, and credited students' academic success to the fact that she as "their teacher, knows

them so well." In her first year, Margo described how her teaching identity was relational to her students, which we interpreted as being what Leuhmann (2007) described as socially constituted.

A self-described perfectionist, Margo began to realize that she wanted autonomy to achieve her version of perfection in teaching. She said,

> It's just a lot of moving pieces and they aren't the way I want them to be set yet. But I'm learning and I know I have to go through this to learn exactly what I want because it's trial and error.

She wanted control over her instructional day. By the end of the first year, she explained, "It went from me not knowing what to expect to finally figuring out the way I fit it all in on a given day." Thus her teacher professional identity was re-formed over time as her skills and knowledge of her context developed.

Year 2

Margo began her second year of teaching with high hopes, saying, "Last year at the beginning I was drowning, but this year I'm floating. I don't have everything organized like I want to but at least I've done it before, I know the material." This comment illustrated Margo's narrations and interpretations of her teacher professional identity, specifically her reinterpretation of events from different temporal vantage points. In her second year, the type of students in Margo's classroom shifted dramatically. Ten out of 27 students required additional support, which challenged Margo's autonomy specific to her instructional planning and teaching. She now co-planned with two special education teachers, and two special education teacher assistants spent all day in her classroom. Margo discussed in her interviews how difficult it was to switch from being the one in control of all the planning and instruction in her first year to then having to collaborate with others who do not always have the same instructional beliefs or ideas. She explained, "I have a lot of help. . . . It is different, getting used to all those extra hands." Again, Margo narrated her teacher professional identity against the backdrop of those other social players within her space. Whereas in Year 1, she took up identity narrations in relation to students, in Year 2, she considered her position alongside both students and other professionals sharing the classroom.

During her second year, Margo reflected on the autonomy she began to feel as a person beyond her job. She shared, "I know it sounds crazy right now, but I would literally work eight hours on Saturday and Sunday and then have ten-hour days Monday through Friday." She summed up the difference between her first and second years by saying, "This year has been much better. I have a home life this year; teaching isn't my whole world." Looking back on her first year, Margo wished she could have given herself permission to have autonomy over her time. She admitted,

> I am more of a realistic teacher. I don't mean that negatively, but I feel like when I left college, I wanted to change the world. But if that is your overall goal, then you don't have an outside life.

Margo realized in her second year that to be the best teacher for her students, teaching cannot consume her entire life. She said,

> I try to tell myself teaching is a rewarding, fulfilling job and you have to give 150% and make 1,000 decisions every day, but it's a job and I need to have a life outside of it. I can't be a super teacher.

Thus Margo's identity was multifarious as she recognized that her out-of-school communities were personally valuable, and she made moves within her professional space to prioritize elements of life beyond school. Margo moved toward autonomy over her time as she sought work–life balance, prioritizing her teaching identity while also nurturing the other roles in her life.

Year 3

By Margo's third year of teaching, she found a way to focus her use of time and energy, fueling her sense of autonomy. Initially, Margo struggled to meet the expectation of "what your district requires, what your school requires, plus what you think your kids need." By Year 3, she made peace with the realities of testing, reflecting, "I am always the most prepared and organized for my students, but there are certain things beyond my control." Margo recognized she could not fight every battle. She shared, "Someone who has never experienced a classroom would have a hard time understanding how emotionally draining and exhausting teaching is." Margo explained that ensuring this balance with a life outside of school, allowing herself time to decompress, and reprioritizing teaching demands were key to remaining in the profession.

By her third year, Margo's sense of autonomy had grown significantly, which impacted how she interacted with colleagues. Margo was very proud of the respect she gained from other teachers in her building, describing how she had become someone to whom her colleagues came for ideas. Over time, she and the other teachers reconciled "different teaching styles and that there are different ways to get to the same goals." Margo shared innovative math practices and was pleased that veteran teachers even tried out several of the strategies despite having taught math the same way "for many, many years." In this way, Margo's teacher professional identity was formed and re-formed over time as her role shifted and she took up higher-status positions compared to a new teacher. At the conclusion of the study, Margo felt she had used her autonomy to gain confidence and respect from colleagues, the authority to navigate instructional decision-making, and a better work–life balance.

Cate: A Journey to Confidence

Year 1

Cate began her first year of teaching with big ideas and positive expectations. For the purposes of this study, we defined the theme of *confidence* as the extent to which the participant felt self-assured in her teaching abilities. In her initial interview before graduation, Cate's confidence was high as she anticipated the upcoming academic year. She shared that her strengths were her excitement for teaching and the creativity she brought to the classroom with activities that provided students opportunities to learn in ways that would actively engage them in the process.

However, Cate quickly began to feel the tensions between school-based expectations and the initial confidence she held related to her teaching beliefs. During Cate's first year of teaching, she shared how it was difficult to include creative activities because she was required to use the provided teaching manual. Cate's confidence and enthusiasm for creativity in the classroom started to wane as reality settled in early in her first year. Cate realized that the values of her administration and her school were different from her own. For example, Cate felt it was important to provide individual reading time for her students, but she shared how her principal did not approve of this in class because he felt it was lazy. Thus we understood Cate's teacher professional identity to be socially constituted as she compared her value for creativity and independent reading time against the administrator's expectations.

Throughout her first year, in several instances, Cate pushed against the school expectations. At one point, she was told to introduce two new books every 3 days to her students, but instead she chose to spend longer with each book because this plan did not provide enough time for students to engage deeply. As Cate continued to push back, her confidence increased. She shared, "I think it is changing. I definitely feel more confident and assertive. I feel like if I want to not do something the team is doing, I can feel OK to do something that is different." Cate's teacher professional identity was formed and re-formed across her first year as she interpreted her identity against the backdrop of school-based values. While Cate's confidence eventually led her to bring new ideas to her colleagues, she overwhelmingly felt that the school at which she taught her first year did not align with her identity and beliefs as a teacher, and therefore she chose to leave.

Year 2

Although Cate's confidence had wavered during her first year of teaching, Year 2 provided more sturdy footing for her. In discussing her decision to leave her school, she described how her new school aligned with her identity and beliefs. She shared,

> I think a lot of it has to do with who your administration is and their view on

> education. . . . I'm glad that I left because I thought that was the norm. Because I was a first-year teacher, I didn't know what else could be out there.

When discussing how her identity shifted as a teacher from Year 1, Cate shared, "I think I said this before but just more confident and definitely flexible." She recognized that she didn't have to feel anxious when she strayed from the rigid plans others had set. Instead, she could pave her own way for her students. If what she tried did not work, she could be flexible in adjusting her plans. In this way, Cate's teacher professional identity was constituted not only by her experiences but also by her interpretations and narrations of those experiences. With the passage of time, she assigned new meanings to prior events.

Cate felt her administrator's perspective helped to give her greater confidence. She shared,

> I think to have that trust from your principal . . . I can go to him with questions, and it helps. So, there's never "I don't want to see this." It's more like "try it, and if it doesn't work, let us know, and if it does, let us know so we can tell everybody else."

Cate began her teaching career identifying as a good teacher, but her first school diminished her confidence. She recognized the difference in school contexts, sharing, "I left last year thinking like, is this what I want to do? When you feel micromanaged, you feel they doubt your abilities." In her new school, Cate had a positive support system that allowed her to grow and her confidence to increase. Therefore her teacher professional identity was socially constituted; she saw herself in a new light when her social context was more aligned with her values and practices. However, at the conclusion of her second year, owing to position cuts, Cate was transferred to another school.

Year 3

Despite changing schools, during Cate's third year of teaching, her confidence flourished. Even though she was in a new school, this was the first year she taught the same grade level as the previous year. Cate shared, "Now I know what I'm doing. I know what's coming next." In addition, she stated, "I think back to that first year and I'm like, oh my God, why did I even stay there that long?" During her third year, Cate realized that context was important to her success and confidence in the classroom. In this way, Cate's teacher professional identity was formed and re-formed over time, specifically as she saw herself in different social contexts and narrated her experiences and the evolving meaning she made of those experiences.

Over time, Cate felt confident in her beliefs and learned how to advocate for them with parents. In one of her interviews, Cate discussed how parents sometimes had anxiety about the activities she did in her classroom. They questioned the reading and writing workshop model because they wanted "concrete evidence" of their student learning with tests based on books. To this, Cate shared, "We are taught

to teach the reader and not the book. I am teaching them, and they are learning, and the text is a tool." Although they were not direct participants in her classroom, parents influenced how her teacher's professional identity was socially constituted.

Cate began her teaching career confident in her ability to be creative and to provide space for students to be actively engaged in learning. In her first school, her creativity was stifled by her principal and some of her colleagues. At that point, Cate did not always feel confident enough to stand up for her ideas; however, by her third year, she was comfortable in her abilities. At the conclusion of her final interview, she shared,

> I am most proud of the creativity that I bring to the team. For the argument and advocacy unit, another teacher and I came up with the idea of having the students make TED talks to present on an issue. Some teachers felt uncomfortable because it's not what they usually do. But . . . I want them to enjoy learning and enjoy coming to school. I think a lot of times kids say, "Why am I here? Why do I have to do this?" I never want my kids to feel like that.

Cate's confidence gave her the opportunity to advocate for her students and the kind of instruction in which she believed. By her third year of teaching, she was no longer afraid of backlash from her principal, her peers, or her students' parents. Instead, she found ways to show how her teaching identity and beliefs were valid and to teach in a way that aligned with what she believed about students and how they learn.

Ellen: A Journey Into Adulthood

Year 1

The theme of journey into adulthood surfaced in Ellen's data. We defined the theme *adulthood* as a time when an individual is expected to take responsibility for their actions. The day before student teaching ended, Ellen interviewed and was hired as a third-grade teacher at a school in her hometown. She reflected, "I did the lesson that I taught in student teaching, so I did the main idea. It was really fun. . . . I wasn't nervous the second time around." Ellen was 1 of 11 third-grade teachers, the rest of her team are veterans with at least 10 years of experience. "I am the baby, so that is kind of nerve-wracking," she explained. As Ellen returned after college to the town where she grew up, she grappled with shedding her youthful role and undertook a journey into adulthood. We understood her teacher professional identity to be both socially constituted as she considered her changing position relative to members of her home community and formed and re-formed over time as she returned from college to participate in community as a young adult and professional rather than as a K–12 student.

In her first year, Ellen negotiated relationships with students, colleagues, and supervisors. She expressed relief at being partnered with a fellow teacher who,

although experienced, was transitioning into the general education classroom after years as an English as a second language teacher. "We are both in the same boat," Ellen explained. "We're both finding our own way—I feel like if I was with someone who was more experienced, I would just be a clone of them and do exactly what they do." Discerning her own path as a teacher and a professional was a frequent topic Ellen discussed, and in this way, her teacher professional identity was socially constituted as she took up the idea of having a mutually supportive relationship with a teaching partner who was traversing a similar professional path.

Ellen wanted to appear authentic to her students and seemed to resist taking on an authoritative position. She explained, "I want to seem like a real person to them—I want to be a friend, and their teacher." Her years as a camp counselor shaped her desire to be both "a friend and a teacher." She coached a running club for girls and stated, "The girls are so fun, and I actually have three of my students on my team. It is really fun to not be the teacher, so I am the coach and the friend." In her first year, Ellen's role was socially constituted, and she had to reconcile her vision of herself as a near peer to students versus an adult professional.

As Ellen worked to shrink the hierarchy between herself and her students, she struggled to take on an adult role with parents and administrators. She reflected,

> It was really difficult as a first-year teacher to talk to parents that are older than me. It was kind of awkward. And, how to talk to administrators. You think it would be common sense, but sometimes it could be kind of hard.

Ellen seemed most comfortable aligning herself with students and other beginners seeking support from those with greater experience, thus her teacher professional identity was socially constituted as she negotiated her position within the community.

Ellen was challenged to take up a professional role when she requested a personal day and was questioned by her principal over approval for the absence. "It was a really, really hard position because I did not want to, like, make myself seem like a bad person, and I didn't want to be defiant towards her." She talked through the situation with her father, a fellow district employee, and shared, "He was not happy, at all. He wanted to call [the administrator] the next day and talk to her. He was so mad. I was like, 'Dad, no, I can handle it.'" Eventually, Ellen resolved the issue, but she seemed shaken by having to navigate this ambiguous professional space. However, she did push back on her parent's desire to intervene, thus taking up an adult professional role. In negotiating her position against students, colleagues, administrators, and her own family, Ellen worked to make sense of what it means to be an adult professional during her first year. Situations demanded that she reimagine her social position within the community and confront her multifarious identity as simultaneously being an adult professional and a child of another professional in the community.

Year 2

During Year 2, Ellen started to move away from positioning herself as inexperienced and sought more professional and authoritative roles. She talked less about seeking administrators' approval and more about making instructional decisions for her students while not running afoul of school leaders. For example, she explained that during student data analysis meetings, "the administration kind of guides us to what they think we should be doing, but I kind of feel like they don't carry out what they say they are going to do. So [we] just end up making our own instructional decisions." She explained that she did not directly contradict administrators' expectations but made decisions based on her assessment of students' needs. Rather than striving to follow rules from authority figures, Ellen reflected, "I have learned from many people that it is just better to do what you think is best and then just ask for forgiveness, than to ask for permission and then get denied." Although Ellen took on more confident professional roles with instructional planning and delivery, she remained tentative as an employee. In her final interview of Year 2, she recalled the confrontation with the administrator about the personal day, noting, "I still feel like I have to be a perfect angel because I am scared." In this way, Ellen reframed her professionalism regarding instruction but still felt subservient to administrators as an employee. In this way, Ellen's teacher professional identity was shaped by her narration of past events, situated against more recent events, and the interpretation she made of her prior experiences.

Over the summer, Ellen began a graduate program in curriculum and instruction that would lead to endorsement as an instructional coach. She reflected that she "wouldn't mind eventually being the elementary math curriculum head" for her school. Motivated by her coursework, Ellen adopted a critical stance toward testing expectations, noting,

> At our math grade-level meetings I've been pushing that we need to sit down all together and grade them all the same so that they are really common. And that we need to sit down and really make them more student friendly.

Ellen became increasingly outspoken with teammates and, while still collegial, no longer positioned herself as a novice. In this sense, her teacher professional identity was multifarious, her in-school actions being shaped by her burgeoning identity as a graduate student and future instructional leader.

Ellen also began to shift her orientation toward parents. She saw the home-to-school connections as important and cherished the kind notes she received from parents. She reflected, "I'm really proud of that. Like, just the community that I build—everyone is respectful of each other. . . . This year I also focused more on communicating with parents." Ellen spoke less often about feeling wary around parents and more about herself as the leader of her classroom community. As Ellen aged and gained experience, she reinterpreted her social status relative to parents in her community and re-formed her teacher's professional identity over time.

Ellen described her interactions with a new, younger teacher, explaining, "I just told her that last year I was really focusing on *what* I was doing and nothing else and now this year I am focusing on *how* I am doing it." Offering advice to the new teacher placed Ellen in a more adult role. She reflected that, although she valued her experience as a student and as a student teacher, she now had a richer understanding of the role of the teacher. She shared, "Being a 4.0 [grade point average] student doesn't mean you're going to be a great teacher because you have to be comfortable with yourself and making mistakes and being vulnerable and being in front of the kids." Her teacher professional identity was socially constituted as she took up a mentoring role for a newer teacher and set aside her previous identification as "the baby." In her second year of teaching, Ellen seemed to develop a deeper sense of herself as a professional, as an instructional and classroom leader, and as a teacher with wisdom to share.

Year 3

By her third year, Ellen no longer referred to herself as a novice. In fact, her position as a relatively new teacher in a school with many veterans sometimes caused consternation. She pushed against colleagues who still saw her as new or young. She wanted to introduce more contemporary teaching practices in her classroom but had to confront "trying to have other people take you seriously even though you're younger." Whereas Ellen originally described herself as more comfortable in a subservient or childlike position, she later pushed against these social expectations.

Ellen continued to value having fun in her classroom, but she no longer positioned herself as needing to be a friend to her students. Instead, she saw herself as a facilitator who orchestrated learning activities in which students could be independent and collaborative with their peers. Ellen explained, "I like it when the kids are really active, so I guess that's how I would describe myself. Energetic. Fun. And the kids take control over their learning." In this way, Ellen's discussion shifted from centering herself as a friend and refocused on student learning instead. As she narrated her experiences over time, she reinterpreted the purpose of her value for an active and fun classroom environment.

In addition to leading in her classroom, Ellen sought authoritative professional roles. For example, a curriculum coach was recruiting teachers to serve as district professional development leaders. Whereas 2 years earlier, Ellen had not felt confident taking on authoritative roles, she put herself in the running for this leadership opportunity. She explained,

> They're looking for two more teachers from my building for this committee. And I'm like, "Should I do it? I don't know if I know enough. But this is what I want to do eventually!" So I emailed him. I said, "I think I'm interested."

Although Ellen still worried that she would be seen as too young or inexperienced, she mustered the confidence to pursue this adult leadership role.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that all teachers persisted despite obstacles they faced during their first 3 years of teaching. One of the reasons they were invited to this study was because they were strong candidates in their student teaching and showed that they were able to overcome challenges throughout their experiences. So, although their success was not a surprise, it was interesting to see how they persisted in different ways, depending on their beliefs, contexts, and relationships with their colleagues and administrators.

Their persistence was consistent with the literature, affirming that novice teachers adapt over time and are better able to persist through challenges as they gain more experience. The literature has also suggested that as teachers develop over time within their contexts and learn the cultures of their schools, their teacher professional identities are impacted (Premont et al., 2020), which is important because strong identities can enhance teachers' practice. We see this with Margo, Cate, and Ellen as their identities develop across their first 3 years of teaching and we consider this development through the lens of our theoretical framework using Leuhmann's (2007) four tenets of teacher professional identity.

Identity Is Socially Constituted

From all three participants' early interviews, we saw that their TPPs impacted their beliefs and how they identified as educators. The participants brought these identities into their own classrooms in their initial years of teaching. In bringing these identities into the social contexts of their schools and classrooms, they had to negotiate their identities within these spaces and at times shift who they were or hoped to be to fit within the expectations of their schools. We saw this with Margo as she handled testing pressures and with Ellen as she navigated being the youngest teacher in her grade level. Cate seemed to struggle the most with this identity shift, particularly as she taught in her first school, where she felt many parts of her teacher identity as a creative were stifled. Changing schools her second and third years proved to be a different kind of negotiation where, based on her social context, she was able to gain confidence to be the teacher she wanted to be. These findings reveal that while teachers do take on particular identities in their preservice programs, these identities shift tremendously as they navigate and learn within new contexts. The nature of the school setting and the relationships with other stakeholders also shaped the participants' identities as they journeyed into autonomy, confidence, and adulthood.

Identity Is Constantly Being Formed and Re-formed Over Time

The journeys in which the participants engaged showed how their identities were formed and re-formed. Ellen went from referring to herself as a "baby" teacher to identifying as capable and experienced, sharing that she could see herself becoming an instructional coach and giving advice to new teachers. Similarly, Cate was able to name her confidence, sharing how she always felt that she knew how to do her job, but with experience and within a new context, she felt better equipped to showcase this knowledge. She described herself as having developed the "guts" to speak out about her ideas. Margo also shared a shift in her identity, stating that by her third year of teaching, she saw herself as a leader and felt seen as a leader by her colleagues. The findings reveal that none of the participants' identities were static; each year, we saw shifts in who they were and how they identified and showed up within their contexts as increasingly experienced teachers.

Identity Consists of Multiple Interrelated Ways One Is Recognized in One's Community

Although their identities as teachers were important to all the participants, they also wanted to be recognized in other roles. For example, Ellen discussed being seen as a friend and a coach after school. It was important in her interviews to talk about school and the curriculum, but she also discussed her life outside of school. She worked to navigate the push and pull of interrelated identities, not wanting to be seen as just one thing but instead seeing herself in all these roles interwoven to shape her identity. Margo also shared how it was important for her to have a life outside of being a teacher, recognizing that her career was a large part of her identity, she also wanted to embrace being a newlywed, adopting a dog, and buying a first home.

Identity Is Constituted in Interpretations and Narrations of Experiences

The nature of this study provided space for participants to narrate their experiences to the researchers. In their interviews, they discussed how they benefited from talking to us over the course of the 3 years they were in the study. Narrating their experiences was a space for identity work as they reflected on how their beliefs, ideas, actions, and experiences changed over time. In these discussions, they were able to analyze how they were changing based on their contexts and experiences. Within this space, they shared and interpreted how their new identities were being constructed. This is an unexpected implication and led us to consider how new teacher induction may be missing responsiveness and nonevaluative conversations in interactions with beginning teachers.

As participants reflected on who they were becoming as educators and the role of their identities in their everyday practices, they were able to grow from their

experiences and challenges. Gaining membership into a new community required that participants make strategic, and often ethically complicated, decisions. However, it was their ability to know when to accommodate the norms of their school communities and when to resist in their first years that was a surprising finding of our research. This resistance came because of participants' identities and strongly held beliefs. Eventually, in their second years, this gave them the freedom to enact models of practice that were more closely aligned to the models they tried on in their TPPs. Although their practices were not replicas of these models, their practices were now based more on their knowledge, beliefs, and identities as teachers who embraced autonomy, confidence, and adulthood. They creatively worked against and within school norms (Cochran-Smith, 2008) to align their practices and beliefs (Wetzel et al., 2018, p. 106) to teach in a way that was authentic for them and their students.

Implications and Conclusions

This study highlights that novice teachers' stories are valuable and need to be heard not only by those in their buildings but also by those of us whose job it is to prepare them. Margo, Cate, and Ellen were excellent teacher candidates. However, their first 3 years were hardly effortless. Understanding their experiences, how they persisted, and the ways they found success has implications for TPPs and induction as well as research on teacher development.

Like Strom and colleagues (2018), we found that the growth educators make from their TPPs to classroom practice is nonlinear and that this learning is impacted by many events. Closely weaving together initial teacher preparation coursework and classroom practice will aid in lessening the shock that many novice teachers encounter as they struggle to enact their preprofessional learning amid the actuality of teaching. We realize that it is impossible to prepare future teachers for every situation that will occur in their first few years, but we agree with Coughlin and Dotger (2016), who suggested that teacher educators should intentionally situate teacher candidates within multiple challenging and uncertain learning experiences so they have opportunities to engage within situations that represent the uncertainties they will later encounter.

Furthermore, teacher induction needs to address *more* than the negotiation processes that take place in the first year of teaching. Our study highlights how novice teachers found value in narrating their experiences across the 3 years of the study. They looked forward to talking about teaching with a trusted other in addition to sharing major life events. Perhaps narrating their experiences provides another way for novice teachers to navigate the transitions and tensions that Smagorinsky et al. (2002) described as "learning to dance the acquiescence, accommodation, resistance waltz" (p. 211).

As teacher educators, we rarely connect with students after they graduate. Our research suggests that former university instructors can and should play a role in

the teacher induction process. Our conversations allowed the teachers to reflect and attempt to understand their evolving beliefs of what it means to be a teacher. This is essential, as Kohnen (2019) noted, because novice teachers often find themselves caught between the visions of what kind of teachers they can be and what kind they should become.

Asking novice teachers to reflect on what mattered most three times a year for the first 3 years of teaching generated insights into their professional lives and identities. Their journeys (to adulthood, to autonomy, to confidence) imply that the ways teachers need support vary for each individual and depend on the context of the school. Recognizing and taking this diversity into account will help those who work with novice teachers to better support the continued development of their teacher expertise (Louws et al., 2018).

As former classroom teachers, the longer we are in higher education, the further removed we are from K–12 schools. Allowing novice teachers space to narrate their experiences impacted them as they began defining themselves as educators, and it shaped our understanding of the need for systematic and continued support if we hope to interrupt the challenges novice teachers face. The idea that not all teachers are on a similar developmental trajectory suggests that there cannot be a singular approach to working with novice teachers (Thompson et al., 2013). Induction can and should be tailored to different developmental trajectories of teachers, and we believe that university teacher educators can play a valuable role in this process.

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