Examining Teacher Identity and Possible Selves

During a Worldwide Pandemic

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In this qualitative study, we used possible-selves theory to explore how teachers in the northeastern US made sense of their professional identity and possible selves during the forced school shutdowns that occurred because of the COVID-19 pandemic. We collected data through an initial questionnaire, weekly reflections, and semi-structured interviews, and used thematic analysis to gain insights into teachers' experiences. Our findings revealed that the challenges posed by school shutdowns during the pandemic disrupted teachers' actual identities and prompted them to draw on identity-related supports and possible selves. We used quotes from our participants to illustrate how they navigated these challenges and adapted to changing circumstances. Overall, our study sheds light on how teachers shape and reshape their identities in response to challenging situations. This knowledge can be used to support teachers' identity development in times of uncertainty and change.

Examining Teacher Identity and Possible Selves during a Worldwide Pandemic

The forced shutdown of physical school buildings and the move to remote instruction in the US due to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic posed many challenges to teachers: new methods of teaching, lack of physical human interaction, and technological demands. These challenges influenced the sense of self; specifically, teachers' current and future professional identities. This shutdown differed from previous school closures because teachers needed to employ an unfamiliar remote model of instruction to deliver lessons and engage students in learning. The shutdown caused many teachers to feel as though "a rug had been pulled from under you," leading to a reassessment of their professional identity (Kim & Asbury, 2020, p. 1062). We used possible-selves theory (e.g., Hamman et al., 2013) to understand four teachers' identity shifts while navigating their experiences during the early phase (March-July, 2020) of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Relevant Literature

We defined *teacher identity* as a sense of professional self that is shaped through experiences, and develops over one's career (McKeon & Harrison, 2010). Teachers' professional identity influences their motivation for teaching including self-efficacy and professional commitment (Day et al., 2005; Ramarkrishna & Singh, 2022). For example, policy shifts, such as a focus on high-stakes testing, provided a context for elementary teachers to experience identity tensions as the expectations from the administration were at times in opposition to their existing identity (Cross Francis et al., 2018). The experience of these tensions influenced teachers' motivation and commitment leading some teachers to disavow their existing identity to implement the required policies and others to reflect on and reform their identities in response to these contextual influences.

If changes in school policy and reform influence teachers' professional identity, then it is reasonable to suggest that teachers' experience of the collective trauma of the Covid-19 (Sanchez-Gomez et al., 2021) pandemic may also have an influence on their identity. While not addressing teachers, a 2020 special issue of *Adolescence* entitled "Trauma and identity: A reciprocal relationship?" illustrated the complex associations of these constructs in that one's identity relates to how trauma is experienced and responded to; while at the same time one's experience and reaction to trauma informs identity change and development (Berman et al., 2020). This perhaps explains why teacher identity is neither fully static nor fluid, rather it develops and is negotiated through experiences (Sachs, 2005) or, as Maclure (1993) described it, involves a "continuing site of struggle" (p. 313). This reciprocity is illustrated in Kim and Asbury's (2020) qualitative study of 24 practicing teachers in the UK experiencing the first 6-weeks of the COVID shutdown. The authors reported that teachers drew upon their identity as a source of resilience, by focusing on their core beliefs about teaching and supporting their students. At the same time these teachers experienced threats to their identities through feelings of uncertainty and the need to find their way in this unknown terrain. Thus, there is theoretical support and empirical evidence that teachers' identities may be influenced by their experience of the school shutdowns.
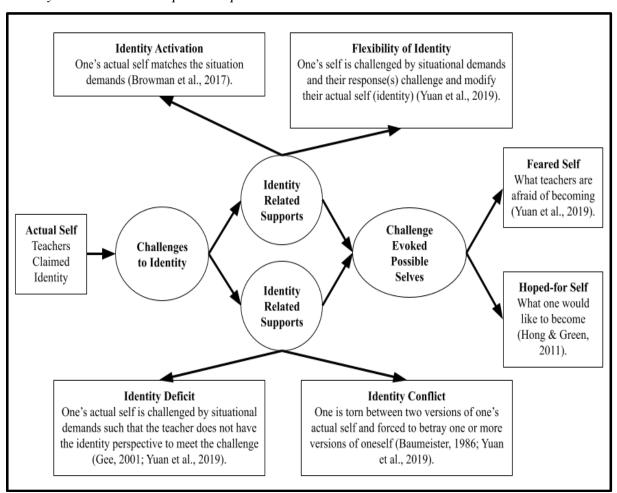
Jones and Kessler (2020) described teacher identity as socially constructed, involving both reflection and forward thinking. Possible-selves theory positions identity construction through the ongoing consideration of who teachers are at present and who they may become as teachers in the future (e.g., Hammon et al., 2013; Kavrayici, 2022). Teachers' response to the shutdowns likely involved both reflective and forward thinking, therefore possible-selves theory

may provide a valuable lens through which to study if and how teachers' identities were implicated during the pandemic.

Figure 1 provides a conceptual map of several interrelated constructs associated with teachers' identity: actual self, identity challenges, and possible selves. Beginning at the left of the figure, we see teachers' *actual self,* their current, claimed identity, and attributes teachers believe they actually possess (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Yuan et al., 2019).

Figure 1

Identity Constructs Conceptual Map

Beuchamp and Thomas (2009) described actual self as the identity that "currently prevails" and reflects "the more personal aspects of the individual self" (p. 179). Moving to the right, we

identify challenges to identity which may be brought on by situational demands. The nature of the challenge and teachers' actual self may lead to identity related supports or identity related problems. *Identity related supports* reflect the use of one's identity to meet challenges experienced and move forward; these supports include identity activation (e.g., Browman et al., 2017) and the flexibility of identity (Yuan et al., 2019).

When a teacher's actual self matches the demand of a situation, they experience *identity activation* which brings the identity to the forefront (Browman et al., 2017). For instance, Hathcock et al. (2020) examined four science teachers' professional role identities during an 8-day reform-oriented professional development institute. They found that as different role identities were activated, (e.g., self as learner, self as teacher) they responded to the learning experience in more or less availing ways. For instance, one teacher's (Barbara) identity as a "professional student" was activated during the institute which allowed her to embrace the learning experiences. When teachers negotiate their identity and navigate through challenges, their identity may be modified to include changes to their practice and a newly constructed teacher identity, demonstrating *flexibility of identity* (Yuan et al., 2019). Continuing with Barbara, as the institute progressed, she was challenged as she realized her actions as a teacher (teacher-self) did not align with her beliefs about learning. In navigating this challenge, she demonstrated flexibility of identity in her ability to reframe and change her teacher-self (Hathcock, et al., 2020).

If teachers are unable to meet identity challenges through activation or flexibility, they experience identity-related problems, including an identity deficit and/or identity-related conflict, which can inhibit teachers' professional growth. An *identity-related deficit* occurs when one's actual self is challenged by situational demands such that the teacher does not have the identity

perspective to meet the challenge (Yuan et al., 2019). If teachers' actual identity reflects beliefs about a lack of adequate skills, challenges could lead to increased resistance (Yuan et al., 2019). Teachers may experience an *identity-related conflict* when they are pulled between two versions of their actual self that require actions that are incompatible to each other (Yuan et al., 2019). When teachers experience identity-related conflict, they have difficulty harmonizing different parts of their identity, often leading to stress and negative emotions (Yuan et al., 2019).

Whether teachers experience identity supports or problems in the face of identity related challenges, they evoke teacher possible selves. The construct of possible selves provides a framework for making sense of one's past and current experiences, and plays a critical role in identity exploration and development (Lutovac, 2020). *Possible-selves theory* suggests that human motivations are influenced by the types of self that teachers hope and fear becoming (Hong & Greene, 2011). *Hoped-for selves* reflect teachers' aspiration or desire for who they want to become as teachers (e.g., Hong & Greene, 2011). A *feared self* reflects what teachers are afraid they might become (Yuan et. Al, 2019). Both types serve as motivational forces, with hoped-for selves serving as a goal that could be pursued and feared-self as something to be avoided. In a study by Narayanan and Ordynans, (2022) three teachers, impacted by the pandemic and school shutdowns, shifted their conceptions of possible future selves which resulted in a better sense of their teacher identity. Therefore, understanding the organization and interaction between teacher identity and possible selves is important because it can help us understand how teachers navigated school shutdowns and adapted to new models of teaching, specifically during a worldwide pandemic.

Research Question

The research question that guided our inquiry was: How do teachers describe their identity during the initial school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, to what extent were their actual identities and possible selves challenged, and how do they respond to those challenges?

Method

We employed a comparative case study approach, because as recommended by Stake (1995) and Yin (2009), we were interested in exploring teachers' experiences in real-life contexts. Case study research allows for rich descriptions of participants' experiences and beliefs, using their own words to convey the complexity of the phenomena studied.

Context

On March 18, 2020, public schools in New Jersey, United States were physically closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of our study, New Jersey had a student population of 1,404,287 in public and charter schools, with 118,214 full-time classroom teachers across 584 districts (NJDOE, 2019). In the absence of specific guidance from the state, each district implemented its own remote learning plan. These plans varied in terms of the timing and frequency of lessons (e.g., synchronous or asynchronous; daily or weekly).

Procedures

We sent email invitations to professional contacts of our research team members and asked them to forward the invitation to other teachers they knew. Interested teachers followed a link to the consent document and initial questionnaire. Through this process, 25 teachers agreed to participate in the study. Participants responded to weekly reflection questionnaires and participated in at least two semi-structured interviews. We collected weekly questionnaires until

June 30, 2020, but conducted some interviews in July to accommodate teachers' schedules. As a research team, we met weekly to review teachers' responses to the weekly reflection questionnaires. During these meetings, we read each response together and identified any that required follow-up interviews for elaboration or clarification. We then arranged for team members to conduct recorded interviews using a video-based online tool.

Participants

We used purposeful sampling to select four participants for this investigation. We chose these teachers in an effort to reflect diversity in terms of teaching experience and school districts. Natalie, a Latinx-American, was in her third year of teaching K-4 English as a second language (ESL) and 4th grade math in a charter school in a high need district. Jack, a Biracial American, was in his tenth year of teaching in a large suburban high school. He was a special education teacher who co-taught 9th grade world history in addition to resource and inclusion classes. Stella, an Anglo American, was in her thirteenth year of teaching high school biology and environmental sciences in an affluent suburban district. Kelly, an Anglo American, was in her twenty-fifth year of teaching as a special education educator in a suburban district.

Data Sources

We used a background questionnaire (BQ) to collect demographic (e.g., age) and background information (e.g., years of experience) from teachers. The initial questionnaire (IQ) consisted of 16 open-ended items asking about teachers' experiences with school closures and their school or district's policies. Teachers submitted weekly reflections (R), responding to 13 prompts about their experiences during the pandemic (e.g., virtual class attendance, contacting parents), as well as their social and emotional well-being. We conducted two 15–50-minute semi-structured interviews (I) with each participant. During these interviews, we asked

participants to elaborate on, explain, and provide context for the responses they provided in their ongoing reflections. In our findings, we reference our data sources using a standard format that includes the participant's first initial, the data source, and the date. For instance, (N_I_06-10), indicates that the data referenced is from Natalie, during an interview, on June tenth.

Data Analysis

We conducted our thematic analysis in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process. In the first phase, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reviewing it and making initial memos. In the second phase, three members of our research team utilized inductive coding to generate initial codes for each idea unit. We revised and re-coded until satisfied with our codebook, presented in Table 1. To ensure consistency and transparency in the coding process and provide confidence in our final analytic framework, we conducted an intercoder reliability analysis (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Three team members independently coded approximately 10% of the data units, which equaled two background questionnaires, three weekly reflections, and two semi-structured interviews, selected to achieve maximum variation. This percentage was chosen because it was sufficient to reveal any reliability concerns and to identify issues with code definitions (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). The intercoder reliability for this portion of the data was 87%, which was established when all three researchers coded the same idea unit in the same way. After extensive discussion and group practice, the team felt confident in moving forward with independent coding of the remaining data units.

Table 1

Codebook

Code	Definition	Example
Actual-Self	One's current claimed identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Yuan et al., 2019).	"I consider myself a very independent person and an independent professional to where I don't like being micromanaged." (J_IQ_03-28)
Evoked Possible Selves:		
Feared	One's feared self which may lead to avoidance (Yuan et al., 2019).	"If teaching like, would be like that forever, I don't see myself doing it." (N_I_06-10)
Hoped for	One's aspiration or desire to become (Hong & Greene, 2011; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987).	"I have my administration degree from Montclair State University and up until now I have not seriously been looking for more of a leadership role - I know that it is something that I have always wanted to do but now I have started to look more seriously. This experience of teaching virtually and sharing my experiences for this study has made me realize I am hungry for more of a leadership role when the right opportunity comes along." (S_R_05-04)
Identity-related problem:		
Identity Deficit	One's actual self is challenged by situational demands such that the teacher does not have the identity perspective to meet the challenge (Gee, 2000; Yuan et al., 2019)	"I feel frightened, disconnected, helpless, incapable of doing my job the way I know I can do it and I am so damn tired. Even after 10 to 12 hours a day at the computer, I am still not done." (K_R_04-06)
Identity Conflict	One is torn between two versions of one's actual self and forced to betray one or more versions of oneself (Baumeister, 1986; Yuan et al., 2019)	The only thing I would change from this experience is being able to focus more on my children during the week." (S_I_06-22)
Identity-related supports:		
Identity Activation	One's actual self matches the situation demands (Browman et al., 2017)	"This is simply a digitized version of what would do regularly in the classroom." (J_R_04-20)
Flexibility of Identity	One's self is challenged by situational demands and their response(s) challenge and modify their actual self (identity) (Yuan et al., 2019).	"It was definitely very different because the math curriculum is very difficult and we had to water down the lessons so that the students can succeed." (N_R_05-25)

In the third phase, we employed deductive coding to re-analyze our data with specific codes from our codebook and identified themes. In the fourth phase, we reviewed the data for coherence within each theme, accuracy, and disconfirming evidence. In the fifth phase, we defined and named our themes. In the final phase, we composed a narrative related to our research question.

Findings

Teachers' Actual Selves

Throughout their initial questionnaire, ongoing reflections, and interview responses, participants provided examples and descriptions of their actual selves. For instance, Natalie saw herself primarily as a mentor to her students. She stated: "I went into teaching because I wanted to mentor kids ever since high school. I worked in summer camps and have always loved being around and mentoring kids" (N_I_06-10). Mentoring was how she envisioned her actual self.

Being seen as a positive adult figure to his students was important for Jack and his perception of his actual self. This sentiment was echoed in Jack's words: "I think for me, my aim was always...about the personal connection, you know, and being a positive adult that they could have in their life" (J_I_07-01).

Stella's actual identity was that of a person who thrives on challenges and enjoys pushing herself to her limits. This aspect of her identity was evident when she wrote about her ability to work well under stress and her enjoyment of challenges. She stated: "I work very well under stress and I enjoy a challenge so I have been facing each day with a 'Bring it!' attitude" (S_IQ_03-28).

In contrast, Kelly saw herself as a caretaker who was responsible for the learning and well-being of her students. She prided herself on her ability to build strong relationships with her students and to provide them with the support they needed to succeed. For example, Kelly remarked: "I pride myself on trying to have a good relationship, a solid relationship with all my students, I try anyway" (K_I_05-02). In summary, Natalie saw herself as a mentor to her students, Jack as a positive adult figure, Stella as a person who thrives on challenges, and Kelly as a caretaker responsible for her students' learning and well-being.

COVID-Related Challenges to Identity

During the COVID-19 pandemic, all teachers expressed challenges to their actual identity while teaching, particularly during the mandated school shutdown and remote instruction. Natalie, for example, referenced how it was difficult to find ways to motivate and stay connected to her students and be herself as a teacher. She stated that both she and her students were losing motivation and that it was stressful for her explaining: "I feel like everybody lost their motivation. It was just like dragging…so…not only was I losing motivation, but the kids were too. That was stressful" (N_I_06-10). Natalie also described how it was difficult to be herself as a teacher and mentor her students through a computer. She said that she barely had conversations with them on Zoom and that it was more "like chatting with them while still trying to keep them motivated" (N_I_07-08). These statements show how Natalie's actual identity as a mentor to students was challenged because she felt unable to connect with them during remote instruction.

Jack struggled to maintain his identity as a positive adult figure to his students during the COVID-19 pandemic. He attributed this struggle to the lack of interaction with students due to remote instruction. Jack explained: "This is a period [time of the year] where many students have difficulty staying on task and finding the will to finish the year out strong, so not being in the

building with the faculty present to support them makes this even more difficult (J_R_06-01).”

Throughout his reflections, Jack routinely mentioned how difficult it was to maintain his role as

a positive adult figure to students when his interactions with them were so limited.

Stella, who identified as a teacher who welcomed challenges, found herself overwhelmed

during the COVID-19 pandemic. As she attempted to educate her students remotely and care for

her children who were also learning from home, she struggled to balance her responsibilities.

Stella explained that the situation was challenging for her indicating:

> I was opening up my folder for a class and checking attendance and work that was due
>
> for a class when my six-year-old needed help with her math, my four-year-old needed
>
> help with his matching assignment, and my one-year-old wanted me to read a–book - all
>
> at the same time and my husband was on a work call! I actually stopped everyone and
>
> took a picture of me trying to work with the 1 year old on my lap and the other 2 children
>
> next to me asking for help. I just felt that it needed to be documented...somehow I got
>
> through it all! And I sent the picture to my parents and said "What is your superpower?"
>
> (S_R_05-11).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Kelly struggled to maintain a close relationship with

her students as remote teaching put a strain on her identity as a caretaker. Her students faced

numerous challenges, including attendance issues, family hardships, and other obstacles related

to the pandemic. Kelly felt “helpless” and “disconnected” from her students due to her inability

to be there for them in person and provide them with the support they needed (K_R_04-06). As a

result, Kelly believed that she was moving away from her teacher identity and becoming more of

a motivator or tutor. She wrote about how this shift in her role was “not really who she was” and

that she was simply trying to "fulfill her responsibilities as a teacher in any way she could"

(K_R_06-01).

Identity Activation and Flexibility

During remote instruction, teachers found ways to activate their current identities and

demonstrated flexibility by making necessary adjustments to overcome challenges. For example,

Natalie continued to mentor her students despite the difficulties of remote instruction. In one

reflection, she stated: "I have also taken on the students that have been struggling with following

directions and listening to their teachers. I've been working with them on a one-on-one basis to

ensure they are completing the project correctly" (N_R_04-27). Despite the challenges, Natalie

persisted in her efforts to mentor her students.

Jack discovered that the time he spent alone during the pandemic allowed him to be more

innovative and flexible in his teaching methods. Before the pandemic, he wanted to explore

different teaching practices but often found himself too drained or lacking the time to do so.

However, in isolation, he found himself more creative and motivated to try new platforms and

content ideas. He wrote: "I find that in isolation, I have been more creative. I have more energy

and motivation to try new platforms and content ideas I otherwise would have never gotten to,

due to a lack of time, and honestly, exhaustion" (J_R_04-27). Jack also demonstrated flexibility

in his approach to covering content. He wrote: "Their last quiz grades were a little unsatisfactory

so I felt it best to dial back," (J_R_05-18) and later commented: 'I have actually dialed back on

new content and am in the process of giving my students review material in preparation for my

current unit's cumulative test, which will be open notes" (J_R_06-01). In summary, Jack used

his time in isolation during the pandemic to explore new teaching methods and demonstrated

flexibility in his approach to covering content.

Despite encountering numerous obstacles, Stella demonstrated a strong desire to thrive in the face of adversity. In her initial questionnaire, she wrote: "I work very well under stress and I enjoy a challenge" (S_IQ_03-28). This statement illustrates how her identity was activated to meet the challenges presented by remote instruction. Among the teachers in this sample, Stella displayed the greatest degree of flexibility. She made compromises with her students regarding their classwork and the use of technology, and even altered her approach to administering tests. These actions demonstrate her willingness to adapt and make necessary adjustments to overcome the challenges of remote instruction.

Kelly's identity-related supports often connected to tasks she performed as a caregiver in school prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, she wrote: "I still spend a great deal of time emailing students, parents, guidance counselors, and child study team members that [students] are not turning in work or they are totally MIA [missing in action]" (K_R_06-01). This statement illustrates her continued efforts to support her students despite the challenges presented by remote instruction. Kelly also demonstrated identity activation through her commitment to caring for her students. In one reflection, she wrote: "I love my students and I am bringing everything I can to them in spite of the situation" (K_R_05-11). Thus, despite the challenges of remote instruction, Kelly demonstrated her commitment to caring for her students and providing them with the best possible support.

Identity Deficits and Conflicts

During the COVID-19 pandemic, all teachers expressed challenges to their actual teaching identity. Natalie indicated an identity deficit in her ability to be herself as a teacher and mentor her students through a computer. She said that she barely had conversations with them on Zoom and that it was more "like chatting with them while still trying to keep them motivated"

(N_I_07-08). This illustrates Natalie's actual identity as a mentor to students was challenged because she felt unable to connect with them during remote instruction.

Jack found it difficult to fulfill his actual identity as a positive role model for students due to the manner in which his administration handled the pandemic. He explained:

This week I've reflected on some of the resentment– I feel - that teachers aren't financially rewarded for this work [remote teaching] in a way that's adequate. Now an average workday takes so much out of me, physically and mentally. It's hard for me to do what I did in school, teaching on the computer (J_R_04-27).

Here we see how the change in interaction with students revealed a deficit in how Jack perceived himself to be as a teacher.

Kelly experienced a similar identity deficit as a result of the transition to remote instruction. As time passed, she grew increasingly frustrated with the limited support provided by her school administration and the overwhelming workload. She wrote:

I am trying so hard but we are given limited instruction and just have to figure it out as we go along…and no matter how much work I do, it feels like I haven't even put a dent into it. This is more than I can take. I am frustrated" (K_R_05-18).

Kelly identified herself as a caregiver to her students and was committed to supporting them. However, her perception that students were taking advantage of relaxed rules during the pandemic made her question how much leeway she should give them. She added:

The thing about this that really frustrates me is that I have several students who know beyond the shadow of a doubt that they will be given their diplomas, even though they were admittedly out partying and hanging with friends instead of doing school work. We

cannot give zeros at all even if we have not heard from a student for three weeks. At this

point, we may as well just pass everyone and call it a wash (K_R_05-27).

This approach of employing 'tough love' in her interactions with students represented a

significant departure from the manner in which Kelly initially described her relationship with her

students at the beginning of the study.

Stella, who identified as a teacher who welcomed challenges, found herself stretched

across her multiple identities during the COVID-19 pandemic and illustrated a clear identity

conflict. She described her attempts to educate her students remotely and care for her three

children who were also learning from home; she struggled to balance her responsibilities given

the newly situated nature of her work at home. Stella explained:

I will say that I have come to realize that it is much easier for me to detach from my work

when we are in school physically. I am working much longer days now and I have

trouble walking away from my work at the end of the day since I am not getting in the car

and going home to take my kids to their after school activities (S_R_06-15).

Here we see the conflicting identities of Stella's teacher-identity and mother-identity. We

describe this more in the next section.

Evoked Possible Selves

Through their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, Stella, Jack, and Kelly

contemplated various possible selves and questioned the direction of their careers. For instance,

Stella expressed a desire to pursue a future as an educational leader. She explained: "this

experience of teaching virtually and sharing my experiences for this study has made me realize I

am hungry for more of a leadership role when the right opportunity comes along" (S_R_05-04).

Stella revealed that she possessed an administration degree and had not previously considered

actively seeking a leadership role until this experience. She added: "It has made me realize that I can still be a good mom and take on more of a leadership position; it doesn't have to be one or the other" (S_R_05-11). While Stella experienced identity conflict between her roles as a mother and teacher, this experience evoked a possible self as a future educational leader.

The experience of remote teaching prompted Jack to express significant discontent with the teaching profession, to the extent that he expressed a desire to leave the profession altogether. He stated: "[Teaching is] just not for me anymore" (J_I_05-28) due to the increased directives and micromanagement from the administration that he experienced while teaching remotely. He believed that the context in which he was teaching had changed so drastically that he felt as if he was "being a caricature of himself as an educator" (J_R_06-01). These statements suggest that Jack was experiencing an alternative possible self, recognizing that the context created by remote instruction limited his ability to enact his developed teacher identity. As a result, he found himself questioning his career path and contemplating alternative options.

Kelly also articulated an alternative possible self, expressing concern that she was unable to continue teaching in the manner necessitated by remote instruction. She described feeling "frightened, disconnected, helpless, [and] incapable of doing my job the way I know I can do it" (K_R_04-06). By July, Kelly had reached the point where she stated: 'I need to retire at some point because I've worked my whole life since I'm nine years old and this [teaching remotely] has made me so damn tired (K_I_07-20). These statements suggest that Kelly was unable to adapt her professional identity to the new circumstances presented by remote instruction evoking a different possible self.

Discussion

Our research uncovered that the difficulties brought about by school closures during the pandemic disrupted the actual identities of teachers and prompted them to rely on identity-related supports and possible selves. Of note, our participants spanned all six of Day and Gu's (2007) professional life phases, recognizing this may help to better target identity supports for teachers across the professional continuum. Natile was at the end of Phase 1 (0-3 years) where the central goal is learning how to teach which supports the generation of an identity and basic competence (Day & Gu, 2007). The added challenges associated with remote instruction seemed to push her to consider additional possible selves while still maintaining her current actual identity (Day & Gu, 2007; Hamman et al., 2010). In these reflections, we saw Natalie shift from a teacher who did not value technology to one who planned to find new ways to integrate it in the future - as a possible future self, while at the same time she expressed a feared self in that she did not think she could continue as a teacher if remote instruction were to continue. Looking further out, Natalie began to consider additional roles for herself in education such as an administrator. In some ways, it seemed that as Natalie considered other possible selves she was re-engaging in Marcia's (1966) identity moratorium, where individuals put identity formation in abeyance to explore possibilities. Perhaps the challenges associated with changes to Pk-12 schools allowed for teachers to reexamine their possibilities.

Jack was in Day and Gu's (2007) phase 3 which entails defining a work-life balance. In their investigation, Day and Gu (2007) found that teachers in phase 3 may also demonstrate demotivation as they come to struggle with "increasingly complex personal, professional, and situated (workplace) scenarios" (p. 436). Jack seemed to lean more toward a demotivated state as remote instruction continued. However, it is not clear whether this was due to challenges

managing the complex relationships described by Day and Gu (2007) so much as a frustration with circumstances, particularly the administration's demands, that often seemed counter to his own perceptions of what would be best for his students and consistent with his identity. Jack self-described as being "tech savvy" and the move to remote instruction actually afforded him the opportunity to fully activate this portion of his identity and explore how to use these tools to best help his student learn - similar to the engaged teachers who sought to fulfill their call to teach (J_IQ_03-28). Jack's data in comparison to Day and Gu's (2007) findings illustrates the complexity of teachers' experiences of identity-related challenges and their reaction to them. Moreover, the challenges to identity that emerged during the pandemic provide unique insight to what might happen to any teacher when faced with an unexpected crisis that is outside of the typical developmental patterns suggested in Day and Gu's (2007) work.

Stella was also in phase 3, however, her data told a different story from Jack. Day and Gu (2007) found teachers in phase 3 who reported continued engagement with the profession sought professional learning related to future goals and/or to continue to develop their teaching knowledge and skills. Stella exhibited a high level of engagement, as evidenced by her expressed desire to advance from her current position as a classroom teacher to a role in administration. It is important to note that Stella's personal identity aligns with this ambition, as she has consistently demonstrated a willingness to embrace challenges. However, we also saw in her data the struggle to deal with issues of work-life balance while teaching from home with three young children. Still, her actual self - someone who likes challenges - seemed to help her tackle the obstacles of remote instruction.

Day and Gu (2007) reported that teachers in phase 5 are faced with a primary need to adjust to change due to shifts associated with developments in educational practice, content, and

socio-cultural changes in students, family expectations, and new policies. Kelly expressed multiple challenges to her teacher identity as she was pushed to adjust her teaching practice and expectations to meet the demands of remote teaching. It may be that while already experiencing the challenges associated with needing to adjust her practice, the additional push due to the pandemic may have exacerbated this challenge. Kelly articulated challenges to her identity such that she experienced identity deficits almost immediately and few instances of identity flexibility, feeling decreased motivation and commitment.

Limitations

It is important to consider that the participants in this study were not randomly selected, but rather chose to participate of their own accord. This self-selection may have introduced underlying biases that influenced their responses. Furthermore, our data collection began in March, coinciding with the start of remote instruction. As a result, we are unable to compare their identity-related experiences before and after this transition. This means that we do not have direct information about the psychological needs or experiences of the teachers prior to March.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The findings of our study illustrated qualitative differences in teachers' changing identity across the professional life stages identified by Day and Gu (2007). Future research is needed that examines the effectiveness of identity-related supports for teachers across the professional continuum, and how these supports can be targeted to meet the needs of teachers in different professional life phases. Baker (2021) described strategies for supporting pre-service teachers' well-being during the pandemic that might prove helpful for use with practicing teachers. In particular, Baker (2021) advocated for prospective reflection which focused preservice teachers on their future selves and illuminated their long term goals which teacher educators could then

help to facilitate. In another study with preservice teachers, Maddamsetti and Yaun (2023) described the use of personal and shared reflections based in metaphors to support pre-service teachers' reflection on their present and possible selves. The viability of these strategies for work with practicing teachers across the professional continuum needs to be examined through research.

Although some view the pandemic as an isolated event, the US continues to experience unexpected crises, therefore future research that examines ways to better prepare teachers for when unexpected crises occur is needed. Future research could focus retrospectively on how teachers managed complex personal, professional, and situated scenarios during the pandemic, and how this knowledge can be leveraged in the event of future unexpected crises. Specifically, it would be valuable to compare the experiences of teachers with different profiles, and to investigate how their personal identities and perceptions of their work environments influence their reactions to the challenges brought about by unexpected crises. Additionally, studying how unexpected crises, such as the pandemic, disrupt typical developmental patterns for teachers, and impact their identity formation could provide valuable insights for supporting teachers during times of crisis.

As more scholarship about teachers' identity during the pandemic surfaces, comparative research will also be needed to summarize and make sense of the varied findings. Of note, our searches for this literature revealed the common trend in teacher education research - a focus on preservice rather than practicing teachers (e.g., Baker, 2021; Duan et al., 2022; Kavrayici, 2022; Lutovac, 2020; Maddamsetti & Yuan, 2023; Çamlıbel-Acar & Eveyik-Aydın, 2022). While important, teachers spend the majority of their professional life not in preservice preparation but in the enactment of their career across their lifetime and, as such, ongoing professional learning

is essential. To provide research based professional learning experiences and content for practicing teachers about their developing and changing identities in response to crisis, future research needs to include practicing teachers as participants.

School leaders and teacher educators can use lessons learned during the school closures to better prepare for supporting teachers' identity development during times of uncertainty and change. One approach to supporting teachers' identity development is to educate them on the various aspects of identity. Professional learning experiences that focus on identity, identity challenges, and possible selves provide teachers with the knowledge and vocabulary to discuss their own identities. A second approach is to offer opportunities for deep reflection on their professional identities. Encouraging teachers to engage in explicit reflection on their identity, mission, and core qualities at an early stage can help them to articulate possible selves within this context that are congruent with their identity and practice (Korthagen, 2004). Providing explicit guidance in core reflection is a powerful way to assist teachers in focusing on their fundamental mission and goals (Korthagen, 2004). Of note, Stella shared in her reflection that the experience of being in this study gave her space to reconsider her possible self as an administrator. This illustrates the importance of inviting teachers to reflect in meaningful ways. A third approach is to consider what teachers need during uncertain or changing times to support their identity. Half of our participants reported a lack of administrative support, which led them to feel conflicted and uncertain about how to proceed. For example, administrators can organize regular meetings to discuss challenges and share best practices, provide resources and training for remote instruction, and offer flexibility and understanding as teachers navigate new teaching environments.

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