

Practicum as a Space and Time of Transformation: Self-narrative of a Physical Education Pre-service Teacher*

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Understanding the role of the practicum in the PI (professional identity) construction and reconstruction within a pre-service teacher is crucial, since this is a remarkable moment in their initial training. This moment provides new feelings and challenges, and it represents the transition from students (pre-service teacher) to teachers (in-service teacher). Although there are some studies about this subject, the perspective of a self-narrative of the PI construction had not been hitherto unveiled. In this paper, the authors try to capture the contributions of the practicum to the PI construction based on the analysis of the Practicum Report and the Board Diary. The confrontation with the real context of school and teaching is noticed as critical, and the importance attributed to the practicum is one of the most emphasized aspects. The pre-service teacher remarked the necessity to be able to (re)construct and (re)adapt methodologies. The idea that PI is constructed in community, to enhance the importance of group work, was also noticed. All in all, the most notorious contributors to the PI (re)construction were engaged with aspects that can only be experienced “in loco”, raising new questions about the importance of the context of the practicum to the PI construction.

Keywords: PI (professional identity), pre-service teacher, practicum, self-narrative, physical education

Introduction

All across the Europe, teachers' initial training had suffered some changes that eventually have real consequences in the way pre-service teachers construct their PI (professional identity). The organization of the curriculum, the duration of the initial training, the context and duration of the practicum are only a few examples, which can really affect the development and construction of the PI. On the other hand, roles and responsibilities in school are increasing, demanding teachers to do more work. Indeed, there are a lot of changes occurring in social agencies, namely, multiculturalism, greater influence of the media and technology on education.

As schools and teachers find themselves placed more and more often under the microscope of a critical society, new teachers in particular struggle with assuming a professional identity that both respects their personal ideologies and

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functions in the professional arena. (Alsup, 2006, pp. 191-192)

In Portugal, physical education initial training has changed from five years with practicum (last year) to three years without practicum, followed by the master (two years) in physical education teaching with practicum (last year). Changes are also visible in the international context, and advocate for a new vision for school science, comprising principles, standards and practices that are grounded on research in the learning sciences (Jurasaite-Harbison, 2005). Thus, not only how the school is experienced has changed, but also it emerges a PI with a new twist, for the reason that the PI is historical, situational and relational (Luehmann, 2007). Consequentially, the authors believe that these changes affect the way that, pre-service teachers perceive and experience their multiple roles and tasks in school, playing a major part in the construction of PI. Schools are changing and so does PI.

Pre-service teachers have a clear image of what it means to be a teacher, with different values, concepts about teaching, and these images are often created, while they are students in school (Chong, 2011). This previous image of what it means to be a teacher will play an important role in the construction of PI and with the confrontation with the learning and teaching process during the practicum, which will change some of these pre-concepts.

In this paper, the authors discuss how does a pre-service teacher constructs his/her PI during the practicum in confrontation with new challenges. Hence, the authors scrutinize the Practicum Report and the Board Diary, organized in a self-narrative form, trying to attribute the meaning to the lived experience and the voice of the pre-service teacher during the practicum. It seeks to gain a deeper understanding of this process lived with such intensity by the pre-service teacher.

Theoretical Framework

Costello (2005) said, "... one of the characteristics that distinguish the professions from other occupations is that their members are expected to develop professional identities" (p. 17). So, as it can be seen, people who have a certain profession usually tend to develop a sense of belonging and start to identify themselves as part of the specific group who has certain professions. Usually, PI was understood as a complex and dynamic concept, which was continuous, not static, and was constructed in the relationship with the self, students, context, and community during the whole professional path (Dotger & Smith, 2009; Chong, 2011; Smit, Fritz, & Mabalane, 2010; Cattle, 2007). But besides this usual understanding, there are many possible definitions of this concept and each one has a valuable contribution to the knowledge concerning this matter. For instances, Dubar (2006) defined identity as:

The result of a dual language operation: differentiation and generalization. The first is to define difference, what makes the uniqueness of someone or something in relation to something else or someone else: identity is a difference. The second is that which seeks to define the common point to a class of all different elements of another right: the identity is the common property. (pp. 8-9)

In the perspective of Lopes (2001), PI is a particular social identity among other social identities of a person, which has its origin in the position that a certain profession has in the society. The author also claimed that the most important feature of PI is that it has a special place in the personal identity and in the life style of the actor. In relation to teachers, PI seems to be the outcome of an interface between the personal experiences of teachers and the social, cultural, and institutional context in which they function on a daily basis (Day, Flores,

& Viana, 2007). A process that begins before higher education (anticipatory socialization) (Cornelissen & van Wyk, 2007; Flores & Day, 2006) was followed by socialization during initial training (higher education and professional training), continuing along the career path. So, becoming a teacher involves, in essence, the (trans)formation of the teacher identity, a process described by Sachs (2001) as being open, negotiated and shifting that was a great improvement at professional training. In fact, at the end of the practicum, all pre-service teachers graduated and had officially developed a PI. Nevertheless, this is not enough to be considered as a part of this professional specific group, neither to be accepted by employers, peers, and clients (Costello, 2005).

When pre-service teachers begin a new profession, they need to learn how to behave like a teacher, recognize their values, appropriate their specific language, and incorporate all that in their daily life. As Dotger and Smith (2009) stated, the construction of teacher identity took place, when the pre-service teachers were learning to become an expert and learning about the process of being a teacher and the rules, boundaries and specific contents of this profession. Sometimes, when pre-service teachers learn how to be a teacher, they need to reconfigure their ideal and previous thought of what means to be a teacher, which were commonly created when they were in school as students.

It has been accepted that the earlier experiences in school, the values and principles that each pre-service teacher has will have a capital influence on the teaching perception, on the understanding of what is being a teacher, and on the practicum process. For example, Walkington (2005) referred that every pre-service teacher has a certain concept of teaching, because she had spent many years on observing teaching in her own school. However, new challenges, findings and experiences lived during the practicum process, as well as sharing their daily teaching life with other teachers and pre-service teachers brought changes to the way this process is understood and to the PI construction. In fact, the practicum process is not only about the teaching itself in a classroom. For instance, it engages the relationship established with the community, with peers and parents, with the media, and it involves a lot of bureaucratic work, and all of this aspects have a foremost influence on PI construction.

Regarding this matter, Whelan (1999) said that:

As a teacher who has experience these multiple pathways, recognizing and naming these differences, I am able to see the significant influence the out-of-classroom place has had on my in-classroom practice and on my evolving teacher identity. (p. 20)

Therefore, it can say that when pre-service teachers incorporate the specific content of teacher profession, they can be recognized like a teacher. Thus, according to Dubar (2006), PI represented a way to identify each other in professional contexts. Moreover, for Irwin and Hramiak (2010), the teacher identity construction was a really important step in the teacher profession. As Costello (2005) added, even if a student absorbed all the knowledge and skills, she/he would not be successful as a professional without developing a PI. In this context, "The professional identity is generally held to be necessary for both ethical and practical reasons" (Costello, 2005, p. 29).

Taking these authors into account, they can argue that the practicum represents a key step to construct a PI, especially because during the practicum, pre-service teachers have to constantly change their designation role from student to teacher. These continuous changes provide several opportunities for the pre-service teachers to construct a new and more realistic idea of what represents to be a teacher. Lopes, Pereira, Ferreira, Silva, and

Sá (2007) in the concluding thoughts of one research claimed that:

The transition from student into a professional life appears like a decisive stage for the respondents, given the contradictions between the education concepts broadcasted by their training (patents in their vision of themselves and as a professional) and the professional practice. (p. 76)

In this scenario, the authors identify one more constrain in the PI construction process: the dual positions occupied by the pre-service teachers: students and teacher.

During the practicum, pre-service teachers are still students, learning from their supervisor, from their cooperating teacher, from their colleagues, from other teachers in school, and so on. In this way, they are required to share and talk about their classes and the assessment, and they have someone responsible for them. Additionally, they are teachers and are responsible for a group of students, so they have to prepare materials for classes, they have to go to staff meetings, they have to prepare exams and assess every student.

In this regard, Dotger and Smith (2009) stated that this constant change may produce feelings like instability and self-doubt in the pre-service teachers.

Even though these feelings may occur, they usually can be substituted by more confident and joyful ones, once the pre-service teachers gain experience in the field and develop a more proficient ability to reflect upon their actions as a teacher.

In fact, the reflection process allows the pre-service teacher to think about all the events that occur during the practicum, and due to this, the pre-service teacher can attribute meaning to new experiences and overcome some possible doubts and fears. So, reflection has been mentioned as a powerful tool in the construction of the PI for the reason that it allows the pre-service teachers to think about their actions, the students' feedback, the methodologies that they are using, the mistakes that they might be making, their responsibilities, and their difficulties, and most important, to reflect about solutions for their own problems and about new ways of teaching. Through reflection, pre-service teachers learn to attribute meaning to their experiences and attitudes. Indeed, as Schön (1983) argued, the reflection represents a way of dealing with practice problems, and by thinking about new possibilities that emerge in the real context, teachers are able to understand their teaching process, enhancing their competence to identify problems and implement solutions.

Additionally, as Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) remarked, reflection has a key influence when shaping PI. The authors also referred that emotions, contextual factors, stories, and discourse are really important aspects, when trying to explain the PI. Nevertheless, it has to be highlighted that critical reflections cannot be learned isolated. Instead, they need to apply them to larger and abstract discourses of teacher identity that will represent a crucial landmark in students' capacity to reflect, and as a result, they will affect their development as teachers (Alsup, 2006). So, at practicum context, it is necessary to encourage students to reflect constantly in a dynamic way, within the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), as a true learning community, sharing problems and solutions concerning the learning process with their colleagues and supervisors.

This sharing process usually begins during the practicum, the pre-service teachers are learning to be a teacher and they are becoming a part of a professional group. In this way, the practicum represents the final step in starting a new profession, so it can consider that the construction of a situated PI begins in this process, because during the practicum, the pre-service teachers will learn new contents, new rules and boundaries, and also a specific language, with very specific terms. It is important not only to learn about the things that deeply characterize teachers' profession, but also to learn how to incorporate this in their daily life. The practicum is

the first opportunity for the pre-service teachers to experience the real school and to deal with real students. It is during the practicum that the pre-service teachers will begin to shape PI. It is also true that this is a continuous and dynamic process, which will continue during the entire professional life.

To highlight the PI construction, namely, the details and meanings of the practicum, the narrative, specifically the self-narrative, were referred as useful (Parker & Howard, 2009; Pennington, 2007). In her study, regarding the expectations of pre-service teacher, Hastings (2010) also used this methodology, referring that it was the better way to access to their feelings, memories and perceptions.

The aim of this study is to capture the contributions of the practicum to the PI construction of a pre-service teacher based on the analysis of the Practicum Report and Board Diary.

Methodology

Great understandings about the PI construction have its origins in exploring and understanding teachers' discourses and their narratives. In fact, according to Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), narrative and discourse have a dual relationship with PI, since both have responsibility in shaping each other.

Taking the validated contribution of this kind of methodological approach into account, the narrative about lived experiences, the corpus of this study was a self-analysis of the Practicum Report and the Board Diary of a pre-service teacher in the Faculty of Sport, University of Porto, on the academic year of 2010-2011, about the meaning attributed to the lived experiences during the practicum.

The Board Diary was digital and maintained during the entire academic year of 2010-2011 on a Website, which access was only done by the subject under study and the investigators.

It is important to underline that the Board Diary reports events not only related to the teaching process, but also with all preparation process for classes, meetings, events outside the school, portfolios' creation and others. The entries in the Board Diary were daily, made in a calm and peaceful environment at the end of the day and with the duration of, approximately, 20-30 minutes.

The data were submitted to discourse analysis, from which emerging themes were gathered.

The first step was to examine the data, to compare similarities and differences, and to develop a number of themes. The authors refer to this as "open coding". Strauss and Corbin (1998) mentioned that open coding was the analytic process, through which concepts were identified and their properties and dimensions were discovered.

Then, the themes that the authors have defined were refined, and they tried to create more precise explanations regarding them. The purpose of this process—axial coding—is to reassemble the data that are broken down during open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

It is important to notice that the data were not forced into a theme already defined, when new data aroused, which was not perfectly fit to an already defined theme, new themes were created. The themes and their pertinence were discussed among all authors.

The authors also employed a member-checking technique in the development of this study. In that sense, the participants of this study received a transcribed copy of the initial interpretations, and he/she was asked about the accuracy of the interpretations, he/she resolved any misinterpretation enunciated by the participant.

As Hall and Chambers (2012) argued, "Discourse analysis does two things simultaneously: It draw attention to the language used and it draw attention to the social dimension of its use" (p. 296). The same authors also noticed that discourse was not only just about writing things, it was also about actions and ways of

being in daily life. Moreover, as they highlighted, in discourse analysis, it was never neutral or naive.

All of the procedures related to the confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, so the authors decided to attribute a pseudonym to the pre-service teacher—Kate—which the authors used during the whole paper.

Finally, the authors would like to say that in this paper, they only present excerpts of the Board Diary and Practicum Report that are directly related to the aim of this paper.

Findings

The importance attributed to the practicum is one of the most emphasized aspects by the pre-service teacher along Kate's speech. Kate perceived the practicum as a singular moment of learning and a crucial one in her process of the PI construction. Kate claimed that the practicum year represented the culminate point in her initial training, because now she had the opportunity to apply all the things that she has learned, to knowing the real context of school and to being a teacher. This can be seen in the following excerpts:

This is the year that we all expected, the year when all these scenarios revisited in our mind can become true, the year when we will be put at test, are we good enough?

It is funny to realize how during my whole initial training I was waiting for this moment, after all this is the materialization of everything I have learned.

From the previous quotes, it is possible to perceive that the practicum year causes great anxiety in Kate, since this is the first time that she will be responsible for an entire class, the first time that she will be teaching. It can be concluded that there is another side of the practicum: a frightening one. Nevertheless, this is also considered as an opportunity to grow as a teacher.

Despite of the fact that everything seems idyllic in my mind, wonderful and desirable, there was an intimidating side of the practicum. It is that the practicum was, also, wrapped up in fear, anxiety and compromise, in a direct confrontation between what I know and what I do not know, with my adaptation capacity, with the construction of a competence that I desperate desired—Will I be a good teacher?—And all that I can say is that the practicum is a moment of vulnerability, with everything good and bad that it carries, putting us to the test in every moment, making us much more than we used to be.

Concerning the key importance of the practicum, the pre-service teacher additionally claimed that this process was an amazing opportunity, because she was working within a “safe net” (the cooperating teacher and the supervisor) that will help her, whenever she needs and she considers that the pre-service teacher as much as to learn from them, as it can observe in the next excerpts:

Above all, I considered and still do that this is a valuable year, an unrepeatable one where I would have the privilege of having two wingmen, a cooperating teacher in the school where I would teach, and a practicum supervisor in my faculty that would help me obtaining new knowledge, knowledge that they have obtained along their experience years, knowledge that allows them to notice that what is asked to the ones that browse in the teaching waters is not so linear as it might seems.

Thereupon, the relationship established between the practicum, the pre-services teachers, the cooperating teacher and the supervisor is crucial, so that the previously established goals can be achieved.

Kate also stated that during the practicum, the constant need to reinvent herself was constant, because everyday new challenges and discovers emerged. The need to learn more and improve was endless. The confrontation with the real context of school and teaching is noticed as critical, since she needs to learn and incorporate specific knowledge that characterizes the teacher profession. Kate stated that:

One thing is thinking about the many possible situations theoretically, another, completely different, is living them.

Theory does not have a point without practice and, on the other hand, practice does not have foundation without theory.

If we did not make this distinction, we would be decreasing the importance of plasticity in the teachers' life and we could fall into the tight reductionism of technocracy.

In many ways, this knowledge was very different from the one Kate learned in the initial training. Kate believed that it was crucial to learn how to combine all the theories learned in the faculty with the real context of school. These theories provided a reference to deal with real concerns, while one was teaching, not withstanding this cannot provide concrete answers to one's questions and problems. Kate said that:

It will be necessary a great effort of adaptation, since the situations that appear in the real school context clearly distinguish themselves from some theories learned in the initial training years.

Thus, Kate remarked the necessity to be able to (re)construct and (re)adapt methodologies learned during the initial training taking the context, the focus in the essential and the hierarchy of priorities about the things that are necessary to be able to teach into account.

It was in this year that I realized, truly, about the veracity and pertinence to focus in the essential. Now, I talk about this at least once a day, but it is really true!

I am already preparing the field: I am studying the literature and I am reading again and reviewing the model, I have looked for opinions among my colleagues and I have been building the materials that I will use.

In the beginning of that week, I have made the same questions to my other colleagues. I have started watching their classes. In fact, they were not all about football; they were about all the sports that I could watch. And I still do it. Watching futsal classes is great, seeing another modalities too; I have to reflect about the most important aspects and by doing so, perhaps, I will be able to make the transfer from some collective modalities to futsal.

In the last quotation, Kate talked about a remarkable aspect concerning the PI construction, i.e., reflection. Indeed, to reflect about all the things that happened during the practicum, either related to teaching or to an off-school situation, which is imperative to give meaning to experiences and to develop a greater understanding about the actions as a teacher. For Kate, in particular, reflection had a truly outstanding place for her discovery as a teacher. Kate argued that:

I should safeguard the importance of the reflective act during the practicum. More than "simply" experience the school daily life, I should (must!) attribute meaning to those experiences, learn from them, with their results, difficulties and conquers and have to assimilate those teachings, incrust them in myself, in such a way that they become part of my competences, understand the contribution of all of these learning experiences to the development of a plastic action and thought and, ultimately, I must realize in what way this year, these experiences, this confrontation, contribute to my identity construction as a teacher.

During my practicum, reflection occupied an important position in my training, in my development, and once more, in my professional identity construction.

It was precisely through my reflection, written, thought, dreamed, lived, shared and through my portfolio and, more specifically, through my board diary that I was able to realize the immensity and the magnificence of all of my learning, I was able to realize how I situated myself through some teaching matters, I was able to question myself, I was able to grow, I was able to mature knowledge, wills and ambitions, I was able to involve myself in the constant metamorphosis of my action.

The importance of the other teachers in the school is also much valued in the (re)construction of the PI, given that they provide a safe environment to develop new abilities and they might share their experience and knowledge. This was very important to Kate, for the reason that she was able to learn with other teachers, with

different approaches of teaching, which have complemented Kate learning process. We can observe this in the next quote:

In the same way, I could find support in all the other teachers, namely, in those who constituted the disciplinary area, who help me doing the transition between the two worlds. I have heard many histories and experiences, I was able to draw some conclusions after observing their classes and learn, for example, about school sport, new methods and techniques used by them.

Regarding peer support, it can also be recognized the desire felt by Kate to be acknowledged like part of the teachers group. This is a really important subject when talking about the PI construction: the pre-service teachers need to be accepted among other teachers and they need to be considered as a valuable member of the teachers' class which they are now entering. Part of them become to feel like a teacher, and this begins when the surrounded group recognizes them:

In an almost whispered way, it exists a worry that they accepted and integrated us, the need to hear something like a confidence where they talk about their fears and insecurities, when they were in the same phase that we are, so that we can feel reassured.

But, this need to feel secure and protected does not only appears when Kate is talking about her peers but she also nurtures this feeling towards the school and its representative organs, as we can see below:

In the same way, I hoped that the school welcomed me, recognized me and gave me the tools to develop a good job. I hoped that the school assumed itself as a space to learn, more than physical, confirming my school conceptions, a place where everything should be done, so that students can learn, a place facilitator of new learning, a place that motivate and inspire students to create and maintain work habits, of scrutiny and of incessant searching for excellence, throughout life, which make them responsible for the construction of their learning.

The idea that PI is constructed in community, enhancing the importance of group work, was also noticed.

Along the speech, it can be verified that Kate was gradually feeling more like a teacher, and she had developed competences to teach, to plan, to assess, to talk with the students, to reflect on her teaching methods and results, to overcome difficulties, and so on. Indeed, there was a special moment related with an exam, reported by Kate, when she affirmed that in that moment she was feeling like a teacher:

Tomorrow I will watch the exam of physics-chemistry. Have you ever imagined? Me? Watching? Up till now, I have always been watched. I cannot believe the panoply of experiences I have been living. Tomorrow, I will tell everything.

If the expectations were high, they were not even close to reality of what I actually felt. I know that this seems innocent or even a little bit ridiculous; after all, I only helped watching an exam. But for me, it was not just that, it was all the meaning that this episode encloses; my first time and on top of that, I got to sign the exam sheets and told the hours and my students were asking me things. It is almost like a ritual passage, some kind of mystical for those who are not yet in school, it is almost like signing the schoolbook and write the summary. It is not the act itself, it is what it means, you know?

I loved it, really. I do not know quite well why, or instead, yes I know, because this is what I love to do—being a teacher. But I felt extremely comfortable and happy. I think I was always smiling inside, thinking about the entire path that I have already walked. I was really excited.

The significance attributed by Kate to this event was decisive to her PI construction. There are some moments when Kate talked about the characteristics that she thought that a teacher should have. Kate often thought about, if she had or had not these characteristics. In this context, Kate referred that being a teacher is:

Being a teacher is to make a difference, find the North in times of indecision and contribute with a piece of us to the complexion of others, in the immensity of finiteness. To make a difference is asking: Where is the school failing? To make a difference is to ask: Where am I failing? To make a difference is to ask: How can I improve? To make a difference is to

reinvent us into the light of new challenges, schools and students. To make a difference is to have the audacity to say: Enough! To make a difference is always smiling when we enter our classroom. To make a difference is to be sincerely and to be humble to admit when we are wrong. To make a difference is to maintain the family and the school together, for the sake of our students, of our school and of our education. To make a difference is about keeping us young and rebels when claiming for our rights and in the fulfillment of our duties. To make a difference is to have the boldness of believing in a different, better world, with more education.

Overall, it can admit that for Kate, to make a difference is a major concern, when teaching her students. Kate seemed to believe that the teacher must be someone who is able to guide the students, and promote various moments of learning and reflection. The teacher must also be able to motivate and encourage her students in the persecution of greater outcomes.

Conclusions

Kate's speech evolves naturally with her Practicum Report and Board Diary, showing the evident contribution of the practicum to the construction of her PI. The most notorious contribution to Kate's PI (re)construction were engaged with aspects that can only be experienced "in loco", such as the students assessment, the reflexive process, the class implementation, the sharing process with other teachers, the recognition as a teacher and also the decision-making in the classroom.

Thus, Kate believed that the practicum was a singular moment of learning, in which she could deal with real demands, in a real context, teaching under the most natural conditions possible. Even though practicum is seen as a real gift, there are some moments when feelings like anxiety, fear or doubt prevail, because during the practicum, Kate was experiencing teaching alone and she felt like she was put to the test all the time.

These feelings can be surmounted with the increasing confidence in Kate's capacities, and also Kate felt the support of their cooperating and supervisor teachers. It is also very important to be accepted by their peers and by the school as a legitimate member of the teacher class.

Additionally, Kate felt the constant need to reinvent herself, whenever she was confronted with the real context of school. In those situations, Kate needed to make a good balance between the theory (learned in the faculty) and the practice, and (re)adapt some methodologies.

It is through reflection that Kate attributed the meaning to all of these changes and thought about what really means to become a teacher, enhancing the major contribution of the reflection in the PI construction.

Kate pointed out a specific moment in her practicum—watching an exam—stating that this was the turning point into looking at herself like a teacher.

It can be seen that Kate's PI construction was a truly complex, yet dynamic process. The relationship established with her colleagues, students, and other teachers was very important to understand what means to be a teacher for her and, specifically in the context of her practicum. Also, all the activities that she promoted and experienced among the community were a really eye-opening experience in terms of understanding what kind of teacher she is.

Although it is not the intent of this paper to accompany the career path of an initial teacher like Kate, it can be believed that she will seek for more knowledge and that she will suffer more transformations, since the PI construction is not a static process.

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