

Inclusive Teacher Professional Identity Development: Theoretical underpinnings of an Exploratory Research Design

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Abstract: The construction of teachers' professional identity is a central theme in contemporary educational research, as it is closely linked to training processes, professional development, and teaching quality (Freeman et al., 2014). The literature highlights how professional identity is a dynamic and multidimensional construct, influenced by personal, social, cultural, and professional factors (Hanna et al., 2019; Day, 2002). Despite growing interest in this topic, studies have predominantly focused on specific disciplines or school levels, while the development of teachers' professional identity from an inclusive perspective remains understudied. In inclusive educational contexts, professional identity is enriched with skills, values, and attitudes geared toward recognizing diversity, encouraging the participation of all students, and promoting educational equity. In this process, initial teacher education plays a crucial role, offering opportunities for critical reflection on their own professional beliefs and practices and fostering the construction of a solid teacher identity (Olsen, 2008; Farrell, 2011). In light of these considerations, this exploratory study analyses the literature on the development of teacher professional identity from an inclusive perspective and presents a research design aimed at investigating the perceptions of primary school students regarding their preparation for teaching in inclusive classes.

Keywords: Teacher Professional Identity Development (TPID), inclusive education, teacher education, Inclusive Teacher Identity (ITI)



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1. Introduction

The development of a teacher's professional identity is a complex and central process shaped by a range of personal, social, and cultural factors. While this topic has been extensively studied across various disciplines and educational contexts, its development from an inclusive perspective remains relatively underexplored. In a time when educational policies worldwide are increasingly oriented toward inclusion (UN General Assembly, 2015; Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education [CSIE], 2024), understanding how teachers' professional identity is formed and consolidated is essential to promoting educational practices that are responsive to diversity.

Within this framework, this paper is intended as an exploratory theoretical study, aiming to outline the conceptual framework and lay the foundation for a broader doctoral research project. More specifically, it represents an initial phase of the process, aimed at clarifying definitions, constructs, and directions of Teacher Professional Identity Development (TPID) from an inclusive perspective. This growing interest reflects a broader recognition of the critical role teacher preparation (Biesta et al., 2015) plays not only in fostering individual well-being but also in promoting social

cohesion and expanding life opportunities. Therefore, this exploratory study seeks to examine key theoretical and empirical contributions that enhance our understanding of the characteristics and developmental stages of teachers' professional identity, with a particular focus on its inclusive dimension. It aims to map the key concepts, highlight salient findings, and identify potential research gaps related to TPID in inclusive contexts. By synthesizing the existing literature, the study seeks to contribute to a clearer definition of TPID for inclusion and to identify the core factors that influence this process. This, in turn, will provide valuable insight into how teacher education programmes actually support and foster this development. Underpinning the study is the belief that high-quality teacher education is both fundamental and indispensable for establishing a solid foundation for inclusive teaching practices.

Within these contexts, professional identity develops through the integration of skills, values, experiences, and relationships, becoming the way each individual defines their role and gives meaning to their actions. From this perspective, the value of inclusion emerges, fostering a diverse understanding of others and thus contributing to a better perception of one's own life (Sibilio in Giaconi & Aiello, 2024).

2. Identity construction

The definition of professional identity finds its roots in the concept of identity and its development in philosophical and psychological studies. Through the works of Mead (1934), Erikson (1968), and Bourdieu (1998), the broad concept is understood as the process through which individuals define themselves, both autonomously and in relation to others and the social context. Identity is seen as a self-representation that develops and takes shape through social interactions (Holland, 2001; Pishgadam et al., 2022). Therefore, having a clearly defined sense of self, composed of goals, values, and beliefs, leads individuals to be fully and unequivocally committed to that identity (Waterman, 1985).

In their proposal of an identity theory, Burke and Stets (2009; 2022) argue that individuals have the ability to observe, define, and understand their identity as if it were an object, thanks to their reflective capacity. By reflecting on past experiences and defining future aspirations, individuals foster the creation of a life path that reflects their self-perception and orientation in the world. Although identity is something internal to the individual, it is shaped by social structures and interactions. The individual possesses an identity, but it is continually negotiated and validated through social relationships. In summary, identity is a self that emerges through social and cultural processes, shaped by life experiences and the communication surrounding them (Harrison & McKeon, 2010). Therefore, constructing a professional identity seeks to give direction to the present by reorganizing the past, asking what meaning the professional path holds in one's life (Biesta et al., 2015).

On the other hand, professional identity refers to the sense of self that a person develops in relation to their profession. This is a process built over time, initially through personal experiences and later through formal education and professional practice (Day, 2002). This view of a complex and dynamic balance between one's personal self-image and the roles professionals feel they must take on (Volkman & Anderson, 1988), moves away from the idea of a fixed and unified professional identity (Coldron & Smith, 1999). It is a process of self-interpretation (Gee, 2001) that offers a framework through which individuals form ideas about how to be, act, and understand their work (Sachs, 2005).

The process of identity construction finds its concrete expression in the professional context, where identity is shaped through the roles and functions individuals perform within society. For teachers in particular, professional identity holds crucial importance, not only for their personal growth and fulfilment, but also for ensuring the quality of teaching and the educational success of students (Hattie, 2003). But how can we define the concept of teacher professional identity? Ample research tends to explain the development process, but its definition remains elusive.

Hong et al. (2024) provide a succinct and timely definition of this concept as it relates to the heterogeneous and complex characteristics of 21st Century classrooms. They define 'TPI as teachers' understandings and beliefs about themselves as teachers in relation to other multiple intersecting identities, shaped through ongoing goal-focused, agentic regulating processes that facilitate the interpretation and re-interpretation of personal and professional experiences which are situated within multilayered, social-cultural-historical contexts (p. 162).

In addition, this definition encompasses the factors and the processes that come at play as teachers progressively shape their own professional profile over time and through experience. In this sense, a teacher's professional identity is built through a process that begins and continues throughout their entire career that starts during their initial professional development (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2006).

3. Teacher Professional Identity Development (TPID)

The considerable body of literature on TPID identifies the factors that influence its construction as well as the emerging dynamics in particularly complex and diverse learning environments (Beijaard et al., 2004; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2006; Day & Flores, 2006; Izadinia, 2013; Hanna et al., 2019, 2020; Wong & Liu, 2022). Indeed, the analysis of existing theoretical contributions allows us to outline the fundamental dimensions of the process and to understand their implications on teacher agency in inclusive contexts.

Among the several socio-cognitive factors, those which particularly stand out in literature are reflective capacity, a sense of control over one's actions, self-awareness, critical thinking, confidence in one's own abilities, and mastery of subject content (Izadinia, 2013; Schön, 1993; Shulman, 1987).

Marked emphasis is placed on the construct of self-efficacy developed by Bandura (1982), which is considered central to human agency and proves especially useful for interpreting the psychological mechanisms underlying professional development. This construct is understood as "the person's perception that he or she can perform the behaviour under a variety of challenging circumstances" (Fishbein & Yzer, 2003, p. 166). This perception is dynamic, situated, and continuously evolving since it is influenced by past successes or failures, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion and physiological states (Bandura, 1982). It is considered as a stable and fundamental indicator affecting multiple aspects of individual behaviour, including self-regulation, resilience to stress, perseverance in the face of failure, intrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy itself (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

Various studies on teacher agency identify teacher efficacy as a significant variable to predict behaviour. This has been correlated to attitudes, beliefs, and concerns among teachers with regards to the implementation of inclusive practices (Malinen, Savolainen & Xu, 2012; Sharma & Jacobs, 2016; Sharma & Sokal, 2015; Pace, 2017). In this regard, the study by Woodcock et al. (2023) highlights that teachers with strong

self-efficacy tend to focus on student success, accessibility, and building trust, whereas those with low self-efficacy are more concerned with behaviour management, often perceiving student differences as challenges. This suggests that confidence in one's abilities significantly influences the construction of professional identity in inclusive settings.

According to several authors (Shulman, 1987; Schön, 1993; Bandura, 2001), a teacher's professional competence does not lie solely in the possession of theoretical knowledge but is closely tied to processes of reflection and self-referential thinking, which mediate the transition from knowledge to action. The studies by Solari and Martín Ortega (2020) propose a sociocultural and dialogical view of professional identity, considering it as a relational and dynamic process. In this approach, teachers' identity is formed through discursive interactions and shared reflections, adapting to the challenges and opportunities offered by inclusive educational settings. It is essential to emphasize that teachers' professional identity in inclusive contexts requires continuous reflection on their practices, strong awareness of diversity, and a constant commitment to improving their skills and beliefs. Reflection on professional identity can enhance a teacher's sense of self-efficacy, strengthening their ability to face educational challenges in a proactive and conscious manner.

Numerous studies aiming to explain how individuals transform and interpret their professional identity, emphasize that this process is highly influenced by personal values, attitudes, emotions, and affective dimensions intertwined with lived experiences (e.g. Day & Flores, 2006; Izadinia, 2013; Hanna et al., 2019, 2020; Wong & Liu, 2022). Thus, in line with this perspective, it is essential to recognize that identity is not merely the result of personal or exclusively psychological factors, nor can it be reduced to the influence of the socio-cultural context. Rather, it takes shape as the product of a constant dialogue between the teachers' internal world and the external environment in which they operate, evolving over time through the interpretation and reworking of experiences and social interactions (Hong et al., 2024).

Within this process, as highlighted by Mockler (2020), the moral purpose that underpins educational action plays a fundamental role by guiding professional choices and significantly contributing to identity formation. As a result, understanding and articulating this identity allows teachers not only to make sense of their actions, but also to actively engage in theorizing their own practice, hence fostering the conscious development of the profession. For example, according to Galkienė (2014), teachers working in inclusive contexts emphasize the importance of creating a supportive and individualized learning environment that promotes the participation of all students. They value qualities such as empathy, understanding, and the ability to build personal connections with students, balancing high expectations with care.

Recent attempts to measure professional identity have grouped the aforementioned factors and variables in a spectrum of domains. These domains help us to better understand how teachers perceive themselves, experience their profession, and relate to the school and social contexts. Each domain highlights a different but interconnected aspect of the professional experience.

In their studies, Hanna et al. (2019) have proposed six main domains. These are:

- self-image, that is, the teacher's perception of themselves in their role;
- motivation, understood as the set of personal drives behind the choice and continuation of the profession;
- commitment, which reflects dedication to the work and to students;

- self-efficacy, or confidence in one's professional capabilities;
- task perception, relating to beliefs about the goals and responsibilities of teaching;
- job satisfaction, linked to the degree of well-being and fulfilment perceived in the school environment.

In addition, Wong and Liu (2022) conducted a study focusing on three key aspects: self-efficacy, commitment to teaching, and professional orientation. The latter, understood as teachers' perception of what they consider important and meaningful in their professional role, has a crucial role in understanding how teachers adapt to reforms and changes (van Veen & Slegers, 2001; 2006; Wong & Liu, 2022).

At the same time, other studies have explored the relationship between teacher professional identity development (TPID), social context and personal experience, with particular attention to periods of continuous change (Suarez & McGrath, 2022; Pennington & Richards, 2016; Sancho-Gil & Correa-Gorospe, 2016).

These theoretical and empirical findings highlight how the professional identity of an inclusive teacher can be constructed through awareness of diversity and a commitment to respond to it effectively. This relational and situated dimension entails engaging in a transdisciplinary field of research aimed at producing knowledge useful for collective learning (Fabbri et al., 2021). Based on such findings and reflections, initial teacher education serves as a catalyst for the development of solid foundations needed for the construction of a strong professional identity (Coward et al., 2015; Wong & Liu, 2022; Hanna et al., 2019; 2020; Olsen, 2008; Farrell, 2011; Goodnough, 2011) to work in inclusive contexts.

4. The role of teacher education in TPID

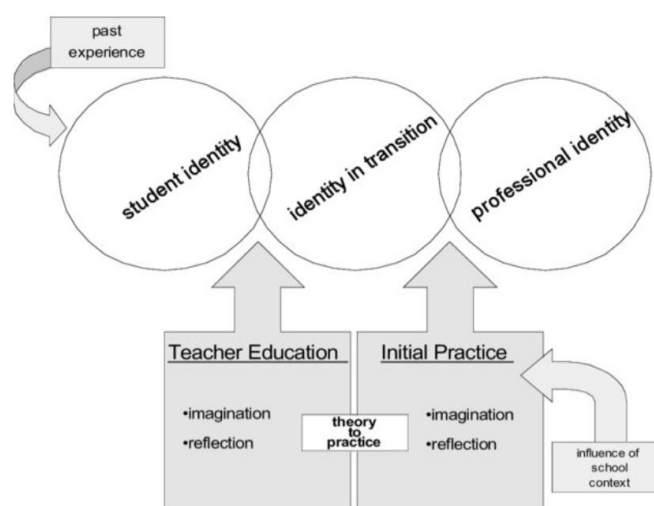
Several theoretical models have been proposed to describe how teacher professional identity develops. Among these, the model proposed by Beauchamp and Thomas (2006; 2009) offers a particularly significant contribution as it provides a useful interpretative lens to understand the dynamics that characterise the transition from student identity to that of a professional teacher.

In line with other theories presented in the previous sections, the authors emphasise that future teachers enter training programs carrying a set of prior experiences as students. These experiences form the foundation of a student identity, which initially shapes their approach to teaching. Within the training process, two key moments can be identified: the first occurs during the initial stages of teacher education when pre-service teachers have the opportunity to reflect on their professional future and to imagine themselves in the teachers' role. The second occurs during practicum placements, where reflection continues but becomes enriched by direct engagement with real school environments. This highlights the pivotal role of reflective self-awareness as a key factor for the development of professional identity, but also to continue growing consciously throughout their educational and professional journey (Freeman et al., 2014).

The shift from student identity to teacher identity unfolds as a gradual process that involves both theoretical training and practical experience. This identity development can be described as a process composed of three stages: the initial identity rooted in personal school experience, an intermediate transitional phase during

training and practice, and finally the development of a conscious professional identity, shaped by the integration of theory and practice.

Fig.1. Development of professional identity in teachers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2006)



5. Developing an Inclusive Teacher Professional Identity

As highlighted in the model by Beauchamp & Thomas (2006), the years of training represent a crucial phase in the development of teachers' professional identity. In fact, the training path for teachers is not limited to a passive acquisition of knowledge but tends towards an approach that fosters self-awareness, critical reflection, and the development of pedagogical practices that respond to diverse needs, contributing to the construction of a strong teacher agency. This process is fully aligned with the principles promoted by the fourth goal of the 2030 Agenda, which aims to ensure quality, equitable, and inclusive education for all.

Italy can be taken as an example considering its longstanding process in reaching the objective of inclusive education for all. Indeed, this paradigm is the cornerstone of the Italian education system and represents a founding element of national regulations, particularly those dedicated to continuous professional development (Sibilio & Aiello, 2015; 2018) and in teacher education. This approach evidences the commitment to building a school capable of welcoming and valuing every student, regardless of their characteristics or educational needs. The concept of inclusion holds a central importance, and the Italian educational system has gained wide international recognition for its pioneering role in integrating students with disabilities, developing personalised educational plans, and progressively establishing inclusion as an essential tool to guarantee quality education for all students (Aiello & Pace, 2020; Pace & Aiello, 2018). However, it is essential to broaden the perspective beyond the dimension of disability to embrace a wider meaning of inclusion that also considers other factors of vulnerability, such as gender, ethnic belonging, socio-economic conditions, linguistic and cultural differences, as well as the diverse abilities and talents of students.

Only through a truly holistic and intersectional approach can the educational system aspire to be equitable, welcoming, and capable of valuing diversity as a resource.

Taking as an example the 5-year degree course in Primary Education, this represents the first formal stage in which future teachers acquire not only theoretical and methodological knowledge but also the ability to critically reflect on their role and on the importance of inclusive education.

In this context, the teacher's professional identity takes on a crucial role: being a teacher today means not only transmitting knowledge but also being active promoters of present, participation, and respect for differences. The construction of professional identity is, therefore, intertwined with the ability to embrace the complexity of contemporary classrooms, adopting inclusive teaching practices and constantly reflecting on one's educational role in an increasingly heterogeneous society.

6. The Research Design

In light of these theoretical premises, a research design was developed to explore how inclusive teacher professional identity is conceptualized, developed, and supported within initial teacher education programs for primary school teachers. This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches within a sequential and integrated framework. The use of multiple sources of data enables methodological triangulation and strengthens the validity of the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A mixed-methods design is particularly suited to the investigation of teacher professional identity, as it is a complex, evolving, and context-dependent construct that requires both the identification of measurable dimensions and an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and interpretations within inclusive educational settings.

In the initial phase, the literature search was aimed at clarifying the concept of teacher professional identity, as well as identifying the main dimensions and variables that influence its construction, with specific reference to inclusive practices and contexts. The primary objective was to delineate a conceptual framework capable of supporting the interpretation of professional identity development processes from an inclusive perspective, laying the foundations for subsequent phases of empirical investigation and in-depth study.

The second phase focused on the analysis of the curricula and pedagogical models adopted in initial teacher education course programs for future primary school teachers to examine how the development of an inclusive professional identity is intentionally promoted and embedded within training pathways.

The third phase envisages the administration of a questionnaire to students in their final year of their master's degree program, with the aim of exploring their level of awareness and development of professional identity in relation to inclusive learning contexts. This phase is fundamental for capturing how future teachers perceive their own professional identity development at the point of completion of their initial training, with specific attention to key dimensions identified in the literature, mentioned earlier in this article. Data will be collected on the perceived preparation of future primary school teachers to deal with inclusive situations at the end of their university studies. Their levels of professional development will be analyzed through significant variables identified in literature. These are professional orientation (adapted from Wong & Liu, (2022), The Teacher Professional Identity (TPIS) Scale), commitment to teaching in inclusive schools (adapted from Wong & Liu, (2022), The

Teacher Professional Identity (TPIS) Scale), intrinsic professional value (adapted from Hanna et al. (2020), Teacher Identity Measurement (TIM) Scale), task perception (adapted from Sharma & Jacobs, (2016), The Attitudes towards Inclusion (AIS) Scale), and teacher self-efficacy for inclusive practices (adapted from Sahli Lozano et al., (2023), The Teacher-efficacy in Implementing Inclusive Practices (TEIP- SF) Scale).

Finally, the fourth phase will consist of conducting semi-structured interviews with primary school teachers, aimed at collecting qualitative data on their perception of their professional readiness to work in heterogeneous classrooms and identifying useful suggestions for improving initial teacher education programs. The interviews with in-service primary school teachers will be valuable to gather information regarding their perceived impact of initial training on the development of their professional identity and their teaching practices in inclusive learning contexts.

Overall, this research design seeks to generate a comprehensive understanding of how inclusive teacher professional identity is shaped through the interaction between theoretical frameworks, institutional curricula, student perceptions, and professional experience. The expected results are intended to provide valuable insights into the identification of effective practices in initial teacher education, to develop a solid professional identity to work in inclusive contexts.

7. Conclusion

Considering the growing importance attributed, at both national and international levels, to the development of teacher professional identity in contemporary educational contexts, the proposed study aims to offer a significant contribution in terms of theoretical reflection, methodological proposal, and the enhancement of training programmes oriented towards inclusion. The goal is to promote a cultural and professional change that places the teacher at the centre as a catalyst in building equitable, inclusive school environments capable of effectively responding to the increasing complexity that characterizes 21st-century schools.

From this perspective, the study seeks to contribute meaningfully to the scientific and pedagogical debate on the development of professional identity, based on the conviction that this construct represents a strategic element for ensuring quality education for all, in line with the principles promoted by the most recent European documents, and as highlighted in the Eurydice 2024/2025 report (Eurydice, 2024).

Therefore, it is essential to design and implement training programs that prepare teachers, from the earliest years of their professional experience, to adopt truly inclusive approaches capable of perceiving as opportunities the challenges posed by the cultural, linguistic, social, and cognitive diversity of students. Contemporary schools increasingly configure themselves as heterogeneous and multicultural spaces, where multiple identities, experiences, and educational needs coexist. In this context, the role of the teacher becomes ever more complex, requiring advanced pedagogical, relational, and intercultural competences, built on complex paths and values that guide professional action itself (Giacconi & Aiello, 2024).

As highlighted in this article, for such training to be truly effective it cannot be limited to the transmission of theoretical knowledge. On the other hand, it must be based on reflective practices that actively involve teachers in a continuous process of critical re-elaboration of their professional experience. As emphasised by numerous theoretical contributions (e.g. Burke and Stets, 2009; Freeman et al., 2014; Beau-

champ, 2015), it is precisely through systematic reflection on their educational practice that teachers can develop greater awareness of the relational and didactic dynamics that take place in the classroom, recognise their own implicit biases, and re-think the methodological strategies adopted.

In this sense, reflexivity becomes not only a tool for professional improvement but also a fundamental lever for the construction of a solid, flexible teaching identity capable of adapting to changes in the school and social context. Only through personal and professional growth paths rooted in this awareness is it possible to prepare teachers who are able to work in truly inclusive and transformative schools that recognize and value differences as a resource, promoting the educational success of all students and each individual learner.

Accordingly, this study contributes to the design of teacher education programmes that create the necessary conditions for the development of values, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions of efficacy, knowledge, and skills required to consciously and critically construct a professional identity for teaching in heterogeneous learning environments. This professional identity is understood as an evolving construct that continues to develop within school contexts, thereby shaping and being shaped by teachers' practices and actions (Farrell, 2011; Goodnough, 2011).

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