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On Becoming a teacher: Narrative Meaning-Making in the reconfiguration of the professional self

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Abstract: Through a continuous interpretive process, teachers rework their life experiences and self-conceptions, progressively redefining how they experience and interpret their professional role over time (Beijaard et al., 2004). Indeed, becoming a teacher entails more than simply acquiring methodological and pedagogical skills; it involves the gradual process of recognizing oneself within the profession, constructing meaning, and negotiating one's positioning across various educational contexts. Drawing on narrative approaches to teacher identity, this study examines how newly qualified primary school teachers retrospectively interpret their initial teacher education experiences as significant transitions in the construction of their professional identity. Specifically, it investigates how certain experiences take on transformative value as teachers narratively reconstruct the continuities between who they were as students, who they imagined becoming, and who they recognize themselves to be in professional practice. The research utilizes semi-structured interviews conducted with ten primary school teachers who were actively teaching at the time of data collection. Participants reflected on significant aspects of their university training, including experiences that fostered or challenged their professional development and their preparation for inclusive educational practices. Data were analysed using Riessman's (2008) thematic narrative analysis, first at the individual case level and subsequently through a cross-case perspective, focusing on how experiences are selected, organized, and connected within the teachers' professional narratives. The study conceptualises turning points as narrative events through which experiences are retrospectively reinterpreted and integrated into evolving professional identities, thereby generating identity-related learning and offering useful insights for initial teacher education.

Keywords: Teacher professional identity; narrative identity; initial teacher education.

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1. Introduction

Initial teacher education represents a key space for the progressive construction of professional identity. Becoming a teacher involves learning to recognize oneself within the profession, attributing meaning to one's educational experiences, and continuously negotiating one's positioning in relation to contexts, practices, and professional expectations (Beijaard et al., 2004).

Particularly significant in this process is the transition from being a student to becoming a teacher (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Individuals enter initial teacher education with representations of teaching that have already taken shape through their own educational and personal histories. Therefore, the construction of teacher

identity can be understood as a transitional trajectory between different configurations of the self (Hanna et al., 2019; Wong & Liu, 2024), in which individuals continually relate who they were before entering teacher education, who they imagine becoming, and who they are beginning to become through professional practice (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

However, the transition into the profession does not mark the end point of this process. On the other hand, identity continues to evolve through the interaction between individual dimensions and the situated conditions of professional action (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Izadinia, 2013). These transitions become particularly relevant when teachers are called to reconsider their own images, beliefs, expectations, or ways of interpreting their role. Naturally, the same experience may take on different meanings depending on how it is interpreted, connected with other events, and integrated into the individual's professional history. As a result, central to this process is examining not only what happens during initial teacher education, but also the processes through which teachers retrospectively attribute meaning to what they experienced.

Through narrative, heterogeneous experiences are selected, organized, and connected within a temporal configuration that interconnects past, present, and future. Drawing on Ricœur's (1993) concept of narrative identity, continuity of the self does not consist in the persistence of a fixed identity but is continuously constituted through the process by which individuals configure events, tensions, and transformations within a meaningful plot. Thus, narrating an experience means not merely recalling it but placing it in relation to a 'before' and an 'after', interpreting it, for example, as confirmation of a choice, a moment of crisis, an opportunity for learning, or an opening toward a different professional possibility.

From a biographical-narrative perspective, the retrospective reconstruction of experience stimulates the selection and reinterpretation of specific episodes as key experiences, moments of transition, or turning points in the construction and reconstruction of teachers' professional identity (Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Meijer, 2011; Monereo, 2019), giving rise to meaning-making processes.

In fact, in Dewey's (1997) account of reflective thought, an experience may acquire transformative significance through the reflective reworking of what has been lived. It is through its reinterpretation that continuity may be recognized in the way individuals understand themselves, their role, and their possibilities for action. Thus, narrative reflection constitutes a space in which experience, identity, and professional agency can be brought into relation: teachers reinterpret what they have experienced, recognize the resources and constraints that have shaped their trajectories, and reconsider how they intend to act within the profession (Priestley et al., 2015).

Although literature has widely highlighted the dynamic, relational, and contextual nature of teachers' professional identity (Beauchamp & Thomas,2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Hong et al., 2024). little is known about how newly qualified teachers reinterpret the experiences they lived during initial teacher education once they have entered the profession. This study stems from the premise that a guided retrospective journey may lead research participants to attribute new meanings to course content, experiences, interactions and encounters that were not considered valuable at the time. The use of a narrative approach to collect feedback on initial teacher education programmes becomes an educational experience through which

newly employed teachers reconstruct their professional trajectories, serving a dual purpose for the researcher and the participant. Feedback becomes a reflective and narrative practice.

The focus of this study is on how recent graduates in education identify experiences within initial teacher education as important to the construction of their professional identity. Attention is directed not only toward identifying relevant experiences, but also toward how retrospective narratives endow these experiences with educational and, at times, transformative value. The research question guiding the study was:

"How do recent graduates in education, when narrating their university experiences, attribute transformative value to specific experiences within their initial teacher education and reinterpret them as meaningful transitions in the construction of their professional identity?"

2. Methods

2.1 Study design

The study adopts a qualitative narrative approach, consistent with the aim of exploring the meanings that newly qualified teachers attribute to their experiences and the potentially transformative value (Mezirow, 1994) that these experiences assume in their narratives. This approach was chosen because the analysis allows to capture not only what is narrated, but also how experiences are interpreted and situated within one's professional trajectory.

To address the research question, data were collected through semi-structured interviews organized around four thematic areas: (1) the development of professional identity; (2) initial teacher education and professional identity; (3) teaching in inclusive classrooms; and (4) feedback and suggestions for improving initial teacher education. Recurring themes were identified from the overall content of the narratives. The paper focuses on thematic areas 1, 2, and 4, with particular emphasis on area 4, whereas the third area is not examined in depth here.

Riessman (2008) notes that the term 'narrative' can refer to three distinct levels: the stories told by participants, which are inherently interpretive; the interpretive accounts developed by the researcher; and the narrative constructed by the reader through engagement with the first two. This distinction is particularly relevant here, as the themes presented in the findings derive from the researchers' interpretation of the participants' narratives.

2.2 Participants and sampling

A total of 10 interviews were conducted. The inclusion criteria were having completed the single-cycle Master's degree in Primary Education and having no more than seven years of teaching experience. This time frame was considered appropriate to reduce the risk that the passage of time might affect participants' recall of their university experiences. Participants were recruited through a combination of personal networks, referrals, and social media outreach. Although the outreach was aimed at both genders, the resulting sample consisted entirely of women.

The interviews were conducted during the 2025/2026 academic year, from November 2025 to February 2026 in person, whenever possible, or via the Zoom

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platform. Interview duration varied, with an average of 35 minutes. All participants read and signed the consent form for recording and processing of data for research purposes. Each participant was informed of the possibility of withdrawing at any time. Numerical codes were assigned to each participant to guarantee anonymity.

Two interviews were excluded from the analysis. One was excluded because the participant disclosed only at a late stage of the interview that she did not hold a Master's degree, which was one of the eligibility criteria. The second interview was excluded because it was interrupted prematurely due to an unexpected commitment and could not be completed in a way that yielded a sufficiently developed account of the participant's experience. The final corpus therefore consisted of eight complete interviews. The original participant identifiers (codes 1–10) were retained following these exclusions.

2.3 Transcription and translation

With the participants' prior consent, the interviews were recorded in audio or video format in Italian, depending on each participant's preference. These were subsequently fully transcribed using Zoom's automatic transcription. All transcripts were reviewed by the researchers against the recordings, and transcription errors were corrected; unintelligible sections were flagged. The content of the narratives was not altered. All data were analyzed in Italian and translated into English only for publication purposes.

2.4 Data analysis

The analysis began with repeated, complete readings of the transcripts, enabling the researchers to become familiar with the data and gain an overall view of each narrative before breaking it into segments. Relevant segments of the interviews were coded using MAXQDA software, with attention both to recurring patterns across participants and to the distinctive features of each individual narrative. In line with Riessman (2008), attention was maintained to the overall context of each narrative throughout the interpretation, hence avoiding the isolation of themes from the meanings attributed to them by the participants themselves. This approach supported the identification of recurring patterns while preserving the complexity and variability of the experiences. The analysis had a twofold objective: to identify which experiences participants considered significant and to understand the narratives through which those experiences acquired transformative value (Mezirow, 1994).

3. Results

An initial overall reading of the interviews showed that five of the eight participants reported having undertaken the trajectory toward the teaching profession consciously and intentionally, whereas for the remaining three the choice appeared more gradual and progressively developed over time (Olsen, 2008; Table 1).

Table 1. Type of choice in the decision to become a teacher

INTERVIEW	TYPE OF CHOICE	INSPIRING FIGURES OR EVENTS
01	Intentional	Her grandmother; the birth of her daughter during her degree
03	Gradual	No figure mentioned
04	Intentional	Family of teachers; her grandmother as a maternal role model
05	Gradual	No person or experience
06	Intentional	The birth of her brother
08	Gradual	No figure mentioned; an inclination towards support that emerges later
09	Intentional	Her primary school teacher
10	Intentional	No figure mentioned

In several cases, this choice appears to have been supported by the presence of significant figures within the participants' family or relational network, such as relatives already working in the teaching profession or people who had pursued a similar course of study.

For example, one participant stated:

"I would really talk about my grandmother. As people, you know, familiar, close affections" (authors' translation - cod. 04). In other cases, personal experiences connected to relationships with emotionally close children take on particular importance, such as the birth of a child or of a younger sibling.

Another participant reported:

"I could find a direct correspondence with my daughter's development. It was really wonderful, because everything she explained about child development at the various stages, from six months to the first year, I could observe concretely" (authors' translation - cod. 01).

Instead, another primary school teacher linked her choice to the birth of her brother:

"It came after the birth of my brother, whom I consider more a son than a brother" (authors' translation - cod. 06).

These elements seem to indicate an inclination toward the educational profession that is supported not only by role models and experiences gained in one's own life context, but also by a personal interest and a deeper motivation toward teaching.

These aspects acquire further meaning when situated within the overall narrative constructed by the participants, contributing to how each interviewee retrospectively represents her pathway toward the profession (Demetrio, 1996; Mortari, 2003). Thus, it becomes relevant to examine not only the content of the episodes narrated, but also the function they assume within the professional story that each teacher constructs in the present.

The same function emerges in references to other significant figures encountered during training and the first professional experiences, such as university lecturers, tutors, mentor teachers, and colleagues. Therefore, reinterpreting lived experiences and relationships offers insight into the representation participants develop of themselves as teachers and to the meanings they attribute to the experiences that contributed to defining their professional role (Bruner, 1992).

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The thematic narrative analysis identified three recurring macro-areas among the experiences to which participants retrospectively attribute transformative value: (1) practicum and laboratory activities; (2) relationships; (3) additional significant experiences. Each macro-area was analyzed by considering two aspects: the ways in which the experience is narrated, that is, the value attributed to it, and the identity transition that emerges. The following table summarizes the results, indicating for each area the interviews in which the theme recurs and the corresponding MAXQDA codes.

Table 2. Summary of Macro-Areas

Themes	How it is narrated (attributed value)	Identity transition that emerges	Interviews	MAXQDA codes
Practicum and laboratory activities	Practicum takes on different value depending on the quality of the experience: when accompanied by a reference figure, it is narrated as a decisive encounter and an opportunity for professional identification; when reduced to observation alone or carried out in unwelcoming contexts, its transformative value is diminished. Laboratories and practical lessons, by contrast, are recognized as concrete opportunities to acquire usable tools, experiment with methodologies, and work in groups.	Transition from knowing to knowing how to act and from student to teacher. The presence of professional role models fosters identification and subsequent critical comparison with one's own style; in less significant experiences, the transition is postponed and professional identity tends to be constructed mainly through workplace practice.	09, 06, 03, 08, 10, 01, 04	Training > Importance of practicum; Training > Importance of practicum/laboratories; Training > Suggestions for improvement; Personal experience; Decision
Relationships	Relationships with tutors, lecturers, and peers constitute a central dimension of the pathway. The value of training is often attributed to the people encountered: reference figures, relationships of mutual esteem, and colleagues with the same professional intention. The relational dimension makes the pathway a space for dialogue, recognition, and belonging.	Teacher identity is also constructed through mutual recognition and belonging to a community of practice. Engagement with significant figures and peers supports the transition toward feeling and recognizing oneself as a future teacher.	09, 06, 03, 08	Training > University experience; Training > Importance of practicum; Personal experience; Decision
Additional significant experiences	Extracurricular, work-related, and biographical experiences emerge as important turning points: working with students with disabilities, substitute teaching, post-graduate specializations, motherhood, specific courses, and family or childhood experiences. The first encounter with the classroom is also narrated as a strongly transformative experience, often marked by fear and a sense of inadequacy, yet capable of fostering resilience and a more realistic view of the profession.	Professional meaning is constructed at the intersection of university, personal biography, and work. Concrete experiences may confirm an identity that has already begun to take shape or produce a reconfiguration: from idealization toward a more realistic, aware, and confident teacher identity in classroom management.	05, 01, 08, 03, 04, 06, 10	Personal experience > Moment of change; Perceptions > negative/positive; Confidence in the classroom; Classroom management; Decision to become a teacher; Personal experience

This highlights how laboratory and practicum experiences perceived as meaningful, together with the presence of concrete professional reference figures, may support progressive entry into the teaching role. Practicum and situated educational experiences play a decisive role in connecting theoretical knowledge with professional knowledge, fostering a more concrete and reflective understanding of teachers' work (Korthagen, 2010). Engagement with practice allows participants to test what they learned during training, reconsider their initial expectations, and, in

some cases, confirm and consolidate the professional choice they had previously made.

From this perspective, some experiences particularly emphasized by the interviewees retrospectively acquire transformative value because they are recognized as moments of openness, dialogue, and movement toward the profession. This process of reinterpreting experience also recalls the reflective dimension of professionalism, through which the individual reworks action and progressively constructs forms of professional knowledge from practice (Schön, 1983).

The first thematic core, concerning practicum experiences and laboratory activities, is particularly relevant. References to the laboratories attended during the Master's degree program represent a solid foundation that brings participants closer to the practical dimension of the profession. They feel supported and closer to the context in which they will subsequently work. In this sense, laboratory and practicum activities can be interpreted as opportunities for situated learning and progressive familiarization with the real conditions of teaching (Korthagen, 2010). Thus, direct experience enables not only to apply previously acquired knowledge, but also to subject it to critical review, fostering the development of a reflective stance and a more conscious professional identity (Schön, 1983; Beijaard et al., 2004).

This process provides targeted feedback on initial teacher education (in line with Theme 4 of the interviews), reconstructing its meanings and elements of continuity and discontinuity. Six out of eight of the participants' statements show that the interview represented both a valid narrative tool and a semi-structured guide for revisiting experiences that were genuinely formative. The teachers expressed a desire for such reflective opportunities to occur more frequently, considering them fundamental for ensuring a personal and safe space for expression. In support of this, one interviewee observed:

> 'The interview was interesting. It gave me a positive feeling and allowed me to reflect. It is interesting to understand where one's responses coincide with or differ from those of other people' (authors' translation - Code 05).

Along the same lines, another interviewee emphasized the importance of ongoing and peer-based dialogue:

> 'It would be nice if opportunities for this kind of discussion were more frequent and if we could also organize ourselves among peers, to understand how to use our skills in other areas' (authors' translation - Code 06).

4. Discussion

The analysis reveals two ways in which experiences are narrated, depending on how the choice to teach is presented. In accounts where the decision is intentional, the experience confirms and consolidates a choice that had already matured (codes 01; 04; 06; 09; 10). In accounts where the choice is gradual, the experience makes a still-uncertain orientation concrete, transforming a vague inclination into a viable image of oneself as a teacher (codes 03; 05; 08).

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In both cases, the experience is narrated as significant, but not necessarily as transformative: this suggests that practical experience should not automatically be equated with transformative experience. Practicum or laboratory work acquires transformative value when, in the participants' reconstruction, it introduces a meaningful discontinuity between previous and subsequent ways of understanding themselves, pupils, or their professional role. Change does not derive from mere exposure to the experience, but from the interpretive work through which it is subsequently re-elaborated. With respect to the transformative perspective referenced in the study (Mezirow, 1994), this helps clarify that not every experience perceived as significant is transformative: transformation can be recognized only where the narrative reveals a reconfiguration of previous expectations, beliefs, or images of the profession, and therefore of the way the individual interprets the self and one's own action.

The contribution is threefold. At the theoretical level, it distinguishes among experiences that confirm, concretize, or reconfigure the professional image of the self, avoiding an undifferentiated use of the adjective 'transformative'. At the methodological level, it shows that the narrative interview can also function as a reflective device for participants. At the practical level, it indicates that consciously supported practicum experiences and well-structured laboratories may enable narrative re-elaboration that can make initial teacher education more impactful.

5. Conclusions

The present study explored how recently qualified primary school teachers retrospectively revisit selected experiences from initial teacher education and reconstruct their meaning within the process of professional identity formation. The results suggest that the formative value of an experience depends not only on its intrinsic characteristics, but also on the meaning it assumes when it is re-elaborated through narrative and, therefore, through reflection.

The results also highlight the importance of experiences that connect university education with professional practice. Practicum, laboratory activities, and relationships with lecturers and colleagues can provide relevant opportunities to test previous expectations, develop more realistic representations of teaching, and progressively position oneself within the profession. The reflective act that occurs during narration accompanies teachers in understanding their professional identity (Schön, 1983; Korthagen, 2010; Kelchtermans, 2009). Narrative thus makes visible processes that may remain implicit while experiences are being lived, contributing to an understanding of professional identity not as a stable outcome achieved at the end of initial teacher education, but as a construction that continues to be re-elaborated over time (Riessman, 2008; Watson, 2006).

From this perspective, the results may offer some indications for initial teacher education. Alongside practical experiences, it may be useful to provide more systematic spaces for reflection and discussion in which students can revisit what they experience during their training, discuss it with peers and professional figures, and relate it to their own representations of the profession. Such opportunities could support not only the development of professional competencies, but also greater awareness of the processes through which each individual constructs their own way of being a teacher.

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. The final corpus consists of eight interviews with recently qualified primary school teachers recruited on a voluntary basis; the findings are therefore not intended for generalization, but rather for an in-depth understanding of the meanings that participants attribute to their experiences. In addition, the retrospective nature of the interviews means that events are reconstructed from the participants' current professional position rather than observed at the time they occurred. This feature constitutes both a limitation and an element consistent with the aim of the study, which concerns precisely the way past experiences are reinterpreted in the present.

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