

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY TENSIONS IN DIVERSE CONTEXTS

PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCE IN THE NETHERLANDS

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INTRODUCTION

In considering the development of pre-service teachers, there has been an increasing focus on normative professionalism; normativity concerns the values, norms, and beliefs of pre-service teachers. Sometimes, the values and norms of pre-service teachers may not align with instrumental or pedagogical actions. In such situations, professional identity tensions can – and probably will – arise. However, to date, ideological identity tensions have not received much attention.² Consequently, little is yet known about how pre-service teachers deal with professional identity tensions when beliefs of their pupils, school parents or co-workers differ from their own.

Normative beliefs of a teacher become explicit in contexts in which those beliefs are questioned. Normative identity tensions arising from differences in viewpoints with parents or students occur more frequently in contexts with greater diversity of beliefs. Consequently, students who completed internships in a highly urbanized environment were selected for the present research to gain insight into how normativity influences teachers' actions. In the Netherlands, highly urbanized environments are multicultural and multi-ethnic. In this study, undergraduates from a teacher training program were interviewed about situations in which they experienced such a tension or encountered critical situations where their own views differed from others. Through this descriptive, exploratory research approach, the aim is to understand the normative considerations students take into account in situations of conflicting beliefs. Additionally, based on their internship experience, we explore how teacher training programs can enhance pre-service teachers' normative professionalism.

The sample consists of students at Ede Christian University of Applied Sciences (CHE³) who completed internships at schools with a diverse population of children in an urban context. These students were not raised in an urban environment, but hail from suburban, small-town or rural households. It is expected that they are more

¹ The authors express their gratitude to all participants, the anonymous reviewers, and Hilda Paalman for her valuable contributions in the early phases of research design and data collection.

² Marieke Pillen – Douwe Beijaard – Perry Den Brok: Teachers and Teaching: Professional identity tensions of beginning teachers. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 2013, 1–19. [Professional identity](#)

³ Abbreviated from Dutch: Christelijke Hogeschool Ede.

likely to be confronted with different normative views and frameworks during their internships in an urban environment. This will be particularly pronounced when compared to individuals who were brought up in similar urban contexts. While interning at primary schools, students will encounter diversity in their pupils' beliefs, socioeconomic status, and religious backgrounds. The question is where students will particularly experience identity tensions, and how they act in these situations.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND – PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY TENSIONS

Pillen, Beijaard, and Den Brok⁴ address identity tensions of beginning teachers regarding their professional identity. They discuss 13 categories of professional identity tension; however, they do not deal with tension in terms of ideological and/or normative identity formation. In their own research among beginning and pre-service teachers, Pillen, Beijaard, and Den Brok⁵ identify three domains in which tensions usually occur: (1) the transition from student to teacher role; (2) conflicts between desired and actual student support; and (3) conflicting conceptions of learning to teach. While the last one relates to beliefs, tensions around conflicting ideological beliefs are generally absent in scholarly contributions. Two reasons could account for the lack of research on the third domain among students during their studies: it is possible that these students do not perceive these aspects as contentious, or these tensions may inherently pose challenges for investigation.

Normative identity tensions in professional practices

Based on the literature concerning professional identity of (beginning) teachers, their underlying values, normative frameworks, and beliefs are indeed significant for their professional practice. Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop⁶ define the professional identity development of teachers as the process of integrating personal knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, norms, and values, alongside professional demands from teacher education institutes and schools.

Ruijters⁷ argues that in the professional identity development of professionals, the individual plays a crucial role. In her model, she focuses on the professional identity of employees, which is fed by the material, social, and spiritual self. The spiritual self, in which the values and beliefs of the professional are encapsulated, is especially pertinent. When professionals experience tension in their work, it often stems from their material, social, but primarily spiritual self. Although normativity certainly plays a role in conflict situations or tension at work, the deeper cause of the tension often receives little attention, and the focus remains largely instrumental or practical.

⁴ Pillen–Beijaard–Den Brok: *Teachers and Teaching*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Douwe Beijaard – Paulien C. Meijer – Nico Verloop: Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20, 2004, 107–128.

⁷ Manon Ruijters: *Mijn binnenste buiten – Werken aan je professionele identiteit*, Amsterdam, Boom, 2019.

Bakker and Wassink⁸ also argue that the professional actions of teachers are evident in their instrumental skills. In addition, they suggest that this action is based on each individual's normative framework, beliefs, and core values. They claim that it is important that professionals learn to establish a connection between their professional identity, the identity of the team in which they work, and the identity of the students. They introduce the concept of normative professionalism, which they define as “the dialogical development of the professional dimension, where the teachers are aware of the existential aspects of the work. That is, recognizing the uniqueness of the appeal made to them by the other (the student). They seek to act well, acknowledging both their own uniqueness and that of the other for whom they are responsible”.⁹

Defining critical situations

Critical situations are defined as those tensions that teachers experience when their beliefs are questioned or when they encounter others with differing beliefs. Pillen, Beijaard and Den Brok¹⁰ describe tension as conflicts between what pre-service teachers find relevant to the profession and what they personally desire or perceive as good. They state that conflicts can be seen as professional identity issues that may result in serious tension for teachers, potentially leading to consequences for their learning and even causing them to leave teacher education or the teaching profession entirely.

In this research, we focus on all tensions teachers experience between their profession and their beliefs. These tensions can also be minor conflicts that do not lead to major decisions like leaving the teaching profession. Akkerman and Meijer¹¹ also advocate for a closer examination of the doubts, dilemmas, and uncertainties that teachers experience, especially when faced with educational innovations, but also implicitly within their normal work routines.

THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Research questions

In the present study, two research questions are addressed:

- 1) What personal and professional identity considerations do pre-service teachers at diversity schools make when they experience tension or encounter critical situations where their views differ from others?
- 2) According to these pre-service teachers, what are the implications for teacher training program?

⁸ Cok Bakker – Hartger Wassink: *Leraren en het goede leren – Normatieve professionalisering in het onderwijs*, Utrecht, Hogeschool Utrecht, 2015.

⁹ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰ Pillen–Beijaard–Den Brok: *Teachers and Teaching*.

¹¹ Sanne Akkerman – Paulien Meijer: A dialogical approach to conceptualizing teacher identity, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27, 2011, 308–319., [Dialogical_approach](#)

Participants

10 participants were selected from the Teacher Education Institute at CHE. All participants completed internships at urban primary schools, mainly defined as diversity schools. At these institutions in the Dutch context, the different religious backgrounds of pupils and teachers are positively appreciated, with a special position of esteem for the Christian tradition, given the confessional nature of many of these primary schools or their governing bodies themselves.¹²

Research instrument

Given that the aim of the present research is to clarify how teachers experience tension in beliefs in their teaching at primary school, an explorative and qualitative research design was adopted.¹³ A semi-structured interview guideline with open-ended questions was developed.

The interviews began with questions about critical situations in which the interviewees experienced tension or where their beliefs were at stake. Once the students described all the situations they could remember, each situation was thoroughly discussed. Then students were asked about their deepest motivations for teaching. Prior to the interviews, all participants gave voluntary written ethical consent to record, collect, interpret and analyze their data as necessitated by the research objectives.

Methods of data collection

The interviews lasted approximately one hour each and were conducted by the authors between January 2021 and July 2022. They took place at the teacher education institute (CHE campus). In some cases, interviews were carried out online due to restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interview transcripts served as the basis for data analysis.

Data analysis

First, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. Then, all interview transcripts were entered into ATLAS.ti. The data analysis was conducted in two steps. First, one interview was analyzed through open coding and then consensus on the codes was reached in meetings. Based on this initial analysis, themes that emerged from the data, were identified.

¹² Gerdien Bertram-Troost – Cees Kom – Ina ter Avest – Siebren Miedema: *Typen van protestants-christelijk basisonderwijs in een seculiere tijd – Schoolleiders aan het woord over de eigenheid van hun school*, Woerden, Besturenraad, 2012.

¹³ John Creswell: *Qualitative inquiry and research design – Choosing among five approaches* (3rd edition), Thousand Oaks-London-New Delhi, Sage, 2013; Michael Quinn Patton: *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd edition), Thousand Oaks-London-New Delhi, Sage, 2002.

In the second phase, the interviews were analyzed using these themes. The researchers worked with ATLAS.ti and developed coding for each theme. All codes were clarified for consistency, enabling co-coders to use the same codes. From this analysis, a unified list of codes was designed. This unified list served as a guide for coding all interviews. Throughout the analysis, the authors engaged in reflection, and ensured the credibility of their interpretation through peer debriefing. Also, an audit trail was maintained to ensure transparency.

The reliability of the present research was enhanced through various means. Firstly, a logbook was used to document the research process, including choices made and reflections on interview content. Secondly, all interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the ATLAS.ti computer program was utilized for analysis, recording all analysis steps for transparency. Thirdly, to ensure inter-coder consensus, codes, analyses, reflections, and interpretations were thoroughly discussed among the co-authors in multiple meetings. These measures aimed to uphold transparency and rigor in the research process.

RESULTS

Initially, it was observed that participants found it challenging to recall critical situations. Only after they were asked some questions, were they able to recall some instances. Participants struggled to reflect on these critical situations, but after the researchers asked some questions, they were able to describe the situations in detail. While participants initially mentioned seemingly less important examples, these instances revealed significant tensions and also how participants dealt with them.

We will now proceed to describe these tensions and their underlying causes. Subsequently, we will explore the students' responses to these tensions, considering the link between motivations and specific situations. Finally, we will present five strategies for dealing with critical situations. Quotations are used from the interviews to support our findings.

Where it gets tense

Students were asked to recall critical situations where their identity was questioned or at stake, or where there was a tension caused by difference in views. Initially, students could mention only few examples. Four categories were identified in the situations that may create tension, as described by interviewees:

- Difference in religious beliefs (Bible story, prayer, activities related to holidays like Christmas, and God).
- Difference in beliefs regarding pedagogical actions (especially about correctional measures during education and whether physical violence should be allowed as such a measure).

- Tensions with parents (especially due to a language barrier or an excessive amount or lack of parental involvement).
- Tensions due to cultural and ethnic differences (e.g. respect for equality, equality of women and men, authority issues).

Most tensions seem to arise from contact with parents (sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly) or with pupils (directly and indirectly). *Indirect* – in this context – refers to interviewees having perceptions or presuppositions about pupils or parents, which they articulate as part of experiencing tension.

Cause of tension

Students were asked to explain the causes (in their experience or perspective) of the tensions that they described. The following causes were mentioned in the interviews:

- A situation is different from what the student is used to. This means that the student may not be familiar with it or may not agree with it. Also, this can refer to cases when it is difficult for the student to understand the other person involved in a situation.
- Tension arises mainly because one is aware of other interests. Pre-service teachers do not want to upset parents and want the best for their educational organization. Hence, they downplay their own interests in tensional situations to appease others. Paradoxically, because they tread so carefully, they experience even more tension whenever such a situation continues to demand professional action.
- Tension is experienced because the situations described relate to their personal identity and beliefs, which concerns their deepest self and is therefore experienced as a vulnerable area.
- Tension also arises because one does not want to hurt the other person. Pre-service teachers indicate they want to be understanding first and foremost, and if there are differences in views, tension arises because addressing these differences head-on feels (to them) less pedagogically prudent. The following situation as described in one of the interviews illustrates this: *“A boy was not joining in [prayer in class] and I asked, ‘Why not?’ Then he said, ‘Yes, I’m not doing that.’ So I said, ‘Why are you not doing that? We’re all at school here, so we’ll all join in.’ Especially in first grade, I think everyone should just participate. And then he said, ‘Yes, but I have another God’, and then I thought, well, yes, that is logical, because he is a Moroccan boy, his parents go to the mosque as well.”*

It is noteworthy that all these causes of tension seem to be accompanied by feelings of fear: fear of the unknown, fear of losing face, fear of parents walking away, fear of confrontation, fear of being hurt, fear of hurting others and/or their feelings. Let us now see whether and how these fears are reflected or addressed in the different responses to these critical situations.

Responses to tension

Students indicate that tension evokes emotions. In many cases, these emotions are negative. Respondents report that they are startled, experience fear, feel unsafe, get stuck, find the tensions nerve-racking and difficult, and become insecure. In some situations, students also mention positive feelings, such as finding the tensions interesting, or learning from them themselves. So, despite the primacy of negative feelings in critical situations of clashing normative beliefs, some students also believe that they benefit from them.

Motivations

Respondents were asked what motivations they have for the teaching profession. The motivations mentioned are either pedagogical or religious and philosophical in nature. The pedagogical motivations focus on the relationship with the student (wanting to be trustworthy and empathetic, building a good relationship, providing a safe foundation, and paying attention to the child), on children with special needs (wanting to be there for those students, standing up for them and helping them), and on atmosphere (supportive open atmosphere, not hurting others, loving and respecting others, seeking connection, everyone should feel comfortable). One of the students expresses this pedagogical motivation focusing on relationships, as follows: *“Of course it is important to project enthusiasm to the children, but I think trust is also very important. With trust, however, relationship [between the student and the teacher] and a sense of security also come along. I think that this in any case is really a focal point in my development now.”*

The religious/philosophical motivations mainly focus on wanting to share their faith (respondents mentioned: being faithful to the Bible, standing up for their faith, witnessing, sharing faith, passing on Jesus’ love, passing on norms and values, praying, not losing oneself when being open to others). While sharing her faith, one of the students emphasizes that this differs from convincing children of her faith: *“Well, I find a sentence which I once heard a very important point of departure. I have mentioned it before, but bearing witness instead of convincing. I think that might be my starting point.”*

The connection between action in any situation experienced as tensional and the role normativity or identity plays in that experience and subsequent action/inertia is not automatically made by the respondents. The authors, in their capacity as interviewers, had a role in establishing this connection through follow-up questions.

Connection between motivations and situations perceived as tense/critical situations

The critical situations often occur in interreligious and/or intercultural on the one hand and pedagogical contexts on the other. Precisely on these two points, the

respondents also mention strong beliefs and how they relate to their motivation. Critical situations put these motivations under pressure and imply that, to resolve the tension, one has to prioritize one motivation over the other or at least adhere to some kind of hierarchy between them.

Five ways of dealing with critical situations

How, then, do students ultimately deal with the tension described above? In other words, which kind of motivation, among the ones categorized above, ultimately plays the most important role?

In the interviews, the respondents mentioned five ways that can help them to deal with the tension:

- 1. Adapting yourself to the others' perspectives,
- 2. Avoiding confrontation,
- 3. Not forcing the other to do something,
- 4. Being clear and not adapting to other people's beliefs,
- 5. Seeking connection with other people.

With the first three approaches, the students adapt their actions to what happens in practice and puts their own belief, at least partially and temporally, to the side. Choosing this strategy, pre-service teachers might still tell the other about their beliefs, but do not expect a pupil, parent, or co-worker to accept it. However, when applying strategy 4, the teachers stick to their own point of view and a student, parent or co-worker has to adapt to what they consider important. Finally, when opting for way 5, pre-service teachers seek to establish intercultural or interfaith connection between others and themselves. In addition, there are students who also discuss the tension with their peers and bring it up in conversation at school or in the teacher training program they are enrolled in at CHE.

Way 1: Adapting yourself to the other's perspectives

Respondents who adapt themselves in a critical situation and leave their own belief aside mentioned the following: adapting the retelling of a Bible story so that the message pleases the audience, accepting it when students refuse to participate in religious education, accepting it when people do not want to greet you with a handshake or avoid eye contact.

Way 2: Avoiding confrontation

These respondents mainly mention examples in which they avoid confrontation when critical situations arise. They avoid the discussion and do not express that they experience tension or disagree with something. For instance, one of the students tells how she avoids a topic during prayers together with the class: *"There are a few things because, for instance, I'm not going to say that the Son has risen or anything like that because children don't believe that, or at least some children don't, and children might not like to hear that."*

Way 3: Not forcing the other to do something

There are also respondents who, when confronted with a critical situation, express their viewpoint but respect the other person's autonomy without imposing their beliefs. They do not want to force their pupils in class to participate in activities like praying, so they allow them to make a choice according to their own preference: *"But I would never force children to do anything, I believe as a Christian you should never force things on others or impose a faith. It's supposed to be very good news. No, I think history has certainly taught us time and again that imposing a faith on people does not help."*

In terms of religious education and their normative professionalism, they speak more of witnessing than convincing. They communicate their beliefs in a way which emphasizes the individuality of their own opinion and experience, as a means to ensuring that the other person also feels at liberty to express their own opinion and act accordingly. The following quotation illustrates this point: *"We also pray at the beginning, but you never tell the children to fold their hands and close your eyes. So children are allowed to just sit respectfully. So many children sit, for example, with their hands open and do not close their eyes. But I think that's okay because they don't have to pray in the Christian way for me, but they must have respect for those who do pray and they must participate, that is part of it. But I am not going to force them to fold their hands and close their eyes."*

Way 4: Being clear and not adapting to other people's beliefs

In some situations, respondents show their colors and choose not to adapt to other people's beliefs. They are not ashamed to express their perspective and to attach a normative dimension to it. These respondents also mention that they find it crucial that their school make its viewpoints abundantly clear and set rules for everyone, so that everyone knows what values and beliefs they consider important. These respondents tend to support it when the school is clear on moral issues, so that they can act upon it and use the school rules to protect themselves from criticism. Respondents opting for way number 4 do not want to make exceptions for certain students or parents. This is demonstrated by the following quotation: *"First of all, I make sure to tell it as a story, I simply tell what is in the Bible. I stay close to the Bible and tell it to the children as a story, so they can just listen to the story. Of course, I tell it as a truth, it is a truth for me, but that it has to be a truth for the children too, they can just listen to it, because they are in a Christian school so it is part of it. But also with the questions, I keep them to myself when I answer... I believe that it is written in the Bible like this."*

Way 5: Seeking connection with other people

Finally, there are respondents who, in a situation where identity tension arises, specifically seek to connect with the other person. This usually happens through

understanding or finding common ground. In this approach, respondents not only bring their own voice into the critical situation, but also want to hear the other person's voice. In such situations, respondents truly want to understand the other person, delve into the other person, take the other person's questions seriously, show respect, and emphasize similarities in particular. Respondents here tend to consider respect the utmost value one can have and are willing to ascribe more importance to respect than to their own story. This attitude is exemplified by the following situation: *"A boy actually said, 'But at our place, Adam was made from dust or clay,' and another boy said, 'No, at our place, from dust,' and the other says, 'From clay.' And then you say, 'Hey, there's a difference there,' but actually, you think about it the same way again. So again finding the similarity there. And what also stands out is that many Muslim parents, to put it briefly, send their children to Christian primary education because they do agree on those norms and values. And I always find that interesting – so if parents send their children to a Christian school, then those parents also know that their child will receive Christian education. I think that's why there isn't such a big clash."*

While these five different approaches are significant and separately discernible, as illustrated by the interview responses and quotations highlighted above, it is of course possible to combine multiple approaches in any given critical situation to act in accordance with one's professional identity. For example, ways 3 and 5 are not mutually exclusive, but can be used in tandem with each other in order to reinforce an outcome in which the feelings of others are validated and one's own position is expressed.

DISCUSSION

The interviews demonstrated that multiple students unilaterally emphasized the recognition of other people's identity. Recognizing one's own identity and therefore an important part of normative professionalism is thereby required.¹⁴ A risk of not being able to advance one's own identity by students, is that they do not fully commit themselves to the teaching profession and leave their studies prematurely.¹⁵ Ruijters' model of professional identity development also acknowledges the importance of advancing one's self-identity in order to create space for the uniqueness of a professional.

In the BA programs - and especially in the teacher training program – it is necessary to give greater importance to the professional identity of students, who are the normative professionals of tomorrow, relying on Manon Ruijters' model introduced above. This offers opportunities for lecturers and students to connect

¹⁴ Bakker–Wassink: *Leraren en het goede leren*.

¹⁵ Gert-Jan Veerman – Anje Ros.: *Praktijkvoorbeeld: Samen werken aan meer inclusieve en diverse lerarenopleidingen*, *Tijdschrift voor Lerarenopleiders*, 44(4), 2023, 168–177.

practice to underlying beliefs and to make students aware of them. This mainly happens based on reflections *following action*. The next step, on which further research is necessary, is to make students aware of choices *while acting* in their professional environments.

During critical situations of diversity, students ask for an expansion of their options for action, in addition to awareness. Expanding and exploring the options for action combined with attention to professional identity offers the opportunity to open up new professional actions in critical situations of diversity. This enhances the repertoire for action beyond affirmation of frequently chosen strategies of adaptation (ways 1, 2, and 3 in our classification) to the much less preferred option of establishing a connection with other people (way 5) while adhering to one's own set of normative beliefs (way 4).

The present research study has not entirely clarified why students choose a certain way to deal with the tension. These often seem pedagogically motivated rather than ethically and/or religiously. In the respondents' motivations, both theological and pedagogical motivations can be recognized. But it is not clear yet why students choose one approach over another. Further research on this topic is therefore required. It seems that in practice, respondents' religious convictions often have little influence on their actions when dealing with identity tensions, but their pedagogical convictions take precedence. This may be explained by the prominence of the educational context that they are professionally engaged in and supposedly also because of the relatively young age of the interviewees or the fact that they were selected at a university with an outspoken religious identity.

We see great reluctance among pre-service teachers to let their religious beliefs have a dominant role in the classroom in normative challenges they encounter. They strongly tend to keep their deepest value-laden and most existential convictions to themselves, not wanting to impose them on others due to fear of indoctrination (telling beliefs to the students until they accept them – without criticism) or fear of conflict. They justify these choices based mainly on pedagogical principles.

Suggestions from pre-service teachers for their own teacher training

Upon recognizing that many respondents had trouble finding words to talk about these issues of normativity, identity and beliefs in practice, the interviewed pre-service teachers were asked to reflect on these difficulties. According to the pre-service teachers, training programs at higher education institutions should address the following topics:

- Knowledge on various forms of diversity (neurodiversity, differentiation in class, cultural differences, behavioral problems, language deficits and/or barriers),

- Parents (how to involve parents, how to deal with them, how to communicate with parents who do not speak Dutch very well, practice conversations with parents with different religious, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds),
- Knowledge on violence (how to deal with signs of domestic violence),
- Identity tensions (becoming more aware of critical situations, how to deal with questions, what possibilities are there to deal with critical situations).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it appears that pre-service teachers find it difficult to describe critical situations and reflect on their actions in those situations. Pre-service teachers seem to recognize tension within themselves and immediately act upon it, but this immediate action is governed more by intuition than by careful normative reasoning from the outset. When asked to reflect deeply on the situations in interviews, normative reasoning does ensue and various patterns of dealing with identity tensions can be established. Five patterns were revealed: (1) Adapting yourself to the others' perspectives, (2) Avoiding confrontation, (3) Not forcing the other to do something, (4) Being clear and not adapting to other people's beliefs and (5) Seeking connection with other people.

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