

Professional identity of early childhood educators: Biographical traces of their childhood and adolescence

Identidad profesional de educadoras de párvulos: Huellas biográficas de su infancia y adolescencia

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Received: May 25, 2023

Accepted: October 31, 2023

Published: November 15, 2023

Recommended citation: Figueroa-Céspedes, I. (2023). Identidad profesional de educadoras de párvulos: Huellas biográficas de su infancia y adolescencia. *Psicoperspectivas*, 22(3). <https://dx.doi.org/10.5027/psicoperspectivas-vol22-issue3-fulltext-2991>

Background

Teacher professional identity is a dynamic and multifaceted concept closely related to personal identity and human agency. It transcends a specific role derived from university education, intertwining with personal life experiences contributing to holistic development. Pre-university experiences significantly shape this identity, as school experiences and influential figures, like teachers and family, influence perceptions of the teaching role. In early childhood education, the impact of early caregiving and attachment relationships on children's worldview and education quality is pivotal. Yet, early childhood educators often encounter challenges due to societal undervaluation of care and gender stereotypes. The concept of "biographical traces," as defined by Piani (2019), involves expressions and narratives illustrating how life and educational experiences etch indelible marks on one's life journey, influencing the development of subjectivities and knowledge. These imprints bear high emotional impact, potentially altering life courses. Such biographical traces play a crucial role in understanding the formation of teacher professional identity and the integration of life experiences into their roles as educators.

Aims

This research aims to explore how the childhood and adolescent experiences, understood as biographical traces, of a group of early childhood educators are narratively related to the construction of their professional teacher identity.

Method & procedures

This research, as part of a larger study, employs a qualitative, descriptive-interpretive approach and focuses on the biographical narrative study of early childhood educators. The study group, comprising 8 female practicing educators, was selected through purposeful sampling based on specific criteria, such as having more than five years of work experience in educational institutions (daycares, preschools, non-conventional settings, or schools) and demonstrating an interest in participating in the research. To collect information, narrative-oriented instruments were used, including semi-structured interviews, biograms, and Journey Plots. The interviews covered different stages of the participants' lives, including childhood/adolescence, vocational decision-making, university experience, and years of teaching. After the interviews, the concept of "Biographical traces" was introduced, and each educator selected key moments that contributed to their teacher identity, organizing them chronologically in a biogram. Then, a Journey Plot was created to visualize and discuss the timing and emotional valence associated with the biographical traces. The analysis was conducted using a thematic narrative approach, identifying common patterns in the educators' narratives. Open coding was performed, and inductive categories were identified for each case. The frequency of episodes and associated emotionality were analyzed. Cross-case themes were developed, and the conceptual strength of the findings was reviewed using the qualitative analysis software Atlas Ti. 8.

Results & discussion

The study identifies five categories of biographical imprints in the childhood and adolescence of early childhood educators, totaling 28 experiences. These categories are: (i) *experiences with significant individuals*, where educators mention positive traces related to role models in their childhood, such as their parents or significant figures who influenced their values and dedication to public service and community work; in (ii) *experiences of neglect/abandonment*, some educators recall negative experiences of abandonment or neglect in their family

environment, which caused them sadness and distress, these experiences allowed them to understand the importance of care and the child's perspective in their teaching role; as (iii) *care experiences*, educators highlight experiences of caring for and supporting the birth of family members, such as siblings or nephews, experiences which generated positive emotions, such as joy and love, and helped them understand the importance of well-being and play in childhood; (iv) *school experiences*, related to formal education, range from positive to tense, some educators value extracurricular experiences that provide them with freedom and observation, while others remember situations of abuse of power in school and demotivation; (v) *vocational experiences* refer to the experiences that led educators to identify early childhood education as a legitimate vocation; these traces include observations in kindergarten, visits to communities in need, and vocational events that sparked their interest in teaching. The emotions associated with these experiences vary, being predominantly positive; experiences with significant individuals are emotionally positive, while neglect/abandonment experiences tend to be negative; care experiences generate positive emotions, and school experiences present a balance between positive and negative emotions. Vocational experiences are usually predominantly positive. The narratives of educators reveal how these experiences have influenced their teaching identity and their approach to care, empathy, and commitment to children. The stories highlight the importance of understanding children's perspectives and the need to listen to and support families. Inspirational figures, such as parents, teachers, and behavioral role models, are also emphasized as influencers in their choice to become early childhood educators. These experiences contributed to the development of their identity and vocational orientation towards early childhood education.

Conclusion

The research uncovers four key findings that illuminate the intricate connection between educators' personal childhood experiences and their professional identities: (i) *childhood influence*: Educators recognize the profound impact of their early life experiences on shaping their teaching identities, with a focus on interactions with important figures, experiences of neglect or abandonment, and early caregiving roles; (ii) *child-centered approach*: These educators stress the importance of creating an educational environment that respects and includes the voices of children. This aligns with the concept of advocating for children's rights and adds a sense of purpose to their teaching roles. Educators are committed to safeguarding children's rights, and they acknowledge the complex relationship between their backgrounds and their roles as educators; (iii) *role models and vocational experiences*: Significant individuals, both in their family and educational history, played a key role in sparking their interest in teaching. Vocational experiences, such as observations and negative role models, have also influenced their dedication to teaching; and (iv) *school experiences*: The educators' relationships with their own school experiences during childhood reflect a mix of positive role models and a critical view of traditional education practices. These experiences underscore the need to explore how they impact their professional identities and how they can be used to break away from conventional education patterns.

Keywords: childhood, early childhood education, teacher education, teacher identity

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Acknowledgments: Special thanks to the educators who participated in this research, acknowledging their dedication and commitment throughout the study.

Conflict of interests: The author declares to have no conflict of interests.



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