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Collaborative identity development during a global pandemic: exploring teacher identity through the experiences of pre-service high school teachers in England

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ABSTRACT

Since early 2020, COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on teacher education. We consider novel aspects of how pre-service teachers have collaboratively developed their professional identities during the pandemic. Drawing on findings from forty-five interviews with pre-service high school teachers working in England during September 2020 – June 2021, we share how collaborative identity development was central and occurred in a variety of spaces, communities and modes. Collaborative identity development featured in how pre-service teachers saw themselves making a positive contribution to society through education and, in strong subject connections. Reflection that is collaborative, personalised, iterative, and separate from notions of formal progression enables positive identity work. Notions of identity are absent from international policy initiatives in ITE (Initial Teacher Education). This case study provides insights for policy makers in and beyond England who aim to support teachers at the beginning of their career so that they are retained.

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Teacher identity; collaborative identity development; pre-service teachers; global pandemic; teacher retention

Introduction

Since early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on every aspect of education across the globe. In England, previous research has explored the impact of the pandemic on schools (Kim and Asbury 2020) and teacher education (Ellis, Steadman, and Mao 2020), including the virtualisation of school placements for pre-service teachers (Kidd and Murray 2020; Murtagh 2021). To date, the experiences of new entrants to the profession during this turbulent period have not been substantially considered, and this research contributes new insights through the voices and perspectives of pre-service teachers. We seek to better understand teacher identity development in the context of an initial teacher education programme completed during the pandemic (September 2020 –

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June 2021) and highlight the support those teachers may need during the next few years. Given the persistent teacher retention challenges that exist in England (Worth and Van der Brande 2019; Worth and McLean 2020), there is a need to ensure that those who trained during an unusual period are supported so they remain in the profession and continue to work with pupils whose learning and education has been significantly disrupted since March 2020.

Drawing on literature that consider teacher identity (Pearce and Morrison 2011; Olsen 2016; Sellars 2017) and the social identity approach (Mavor, Platow, and Bizumic 2017), we consider pre-service teachers' identity development in the context of a global pandemic, and how they draw on personal, professional and social identity domains. Although the focus of this study is on pre-service high school teachers, based in one location, we argue that the implications have relevance for those working with pre-service teachers and Early Career Teachers across the international sector. Drawing on forty-five interviews with pre-service high school teachers, we use Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to explore the development of their professional identities, guided by this central research question: How do pre-service teachers develop their professional identities when undertaking Initial Teacher Education (ITE)[1] during a global pandemic?

Background and context

Teacher identity

Teacher identity is a multifaceted concept that is defined in different ways and influenced by different factors (Beauchamp and Thomas 2012; Douwe, Verloop, and Vermunt 2000; Granjo et al. 2021). Researchers have denoted teacher identity as a combination of a teacher's personal and professional self (Pearce and Morrison 2011) that is shaped by the context, or situation, in which they work, also described as a 'situated identity' (Day et al. 2006). Aspects of the situated identity for a pre-service teacher include an individual's role as a subject specialist, their relationships with teaching colleagues and students during their school-based placements, and the interplay between their practice and critical engagement with research. School placements are key sites for teacher identity development where pre-service teachers are supported by their mentors to establish their own teacher identities (Day 1999; Zeichner and Liston 2013) through critical reflection on both their own teaching, and observations of others (Sellars 2017). As well as being contextually situated (e.g. in a school, a classroom, or a mentoring relationship) the process of identity development is extended over time, for example, identity formation does not end with the conclusion of formal training. Olsen (2016) conceptualises teachers' examination of their identity or 'interpretive frame' as an iterative process in which teachers consider the ways that their values and beliefs shape their practice and how this shifts and changes with time. Teacher identity therefore is shaped and refigured throughout teacher's career trajectories, shaped by a range of influences including changing school contexts and cultures (Barnatt et al. 2017).

More recently, researchers have considered how the social identity approach might inform understandings of identity in relation to education contexts (Mavor, Platow, and Bizumic 2017) including high school teacher identity (Rushton and Reiss 2019, 2020; Rushton 2021a). The social identity approach (Haslam et al. 2011) brings together theories

of social identity (Tajfel et al. 1979) and self-categorisation (Turner et al. 1987). Social identity theory suggests *how* groups form whereas self-categorisation theory suggests *when* groups form. The social identity approach highlights the collaborative nature of identity development, suggesting an individual's sense of self is determined by the groups to which they belong and identify with. Whilst the notion of 'situated identity' (Day et al. 2006) models how context forms identity, the social identity approach emphasis the significant context provided by other people, and how interactions between people and groups shape a person's sense of self. For example, the way that people seek to develop and maintain a positive view of their identities by comparing themselves and their group memberships in a more positive light than their alternative 'outgroups' (Tajfel et al. 1979; Naomi and Haslam 2012). These comparative processes are collaborative in the sense that both the individual and the group are working towards a shared goal of the construction of defined identities, that are mutually beneficial.

Rushton and Reiss (2020) have highlighted how the social identity approach (re)affirms the importance of groups and social context in the identity development of teachers and, that shared identity and group membership play an important role in an individual's ability to develop and sustain positive professional identities. They argue that the social identity approach provides education researchers and teacher educators with a greater understanding of how and why some teachers form identities that allow professional flourishing, whilst others do not. The social identity approach understands professional identity as an inherently social and collaborative construct, where an individual does not simply attain 'Qualified Teacher Status', but instead develops a professional identity concurrently with *becoming* a teacher by developing a position within a social group. The collaborative construct acknowledges the shared goals of trainees and their social groups (their peers, tutors, mentors, school colleagues etc.) in working towards the development of effective practitioners. We contend that this framing of teacher identity is especially relevant when seeking to understand pre-service teachers' experiences during a period of crisis such as a global pandemic because the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the value of collaboration to reach mutually beneficial goals, for example the education of young people. The crisis has emphasised the interconnected nature of human experience and hence the necessity of collaboration. We argue that the socially embedded nature of ITE, where trainee teachers learn within multiple social system, suggests that a collaborative identity lens is both a novel and appropriate tool for examining teacher development during the Covid pandemic.

Teacher retention

Understanding how teachers collaborate with their social groups during teacher education programmes to shape the development of their identity is both significant and timely given the challenging global context of teacher retention, including in wealthy countries such as the UK (Davies et al. 2016), Ireland (O'doherty and Harford 2018), the USA (Marco-bujosa et al. 2020) and Australia (Weldon 2018). In England, persistent shortages of teachers occur in subjects including chemistry, computing, mathematics, languages and physics (Worth and Van der Brande 2019). Despite the recent increase in applications to initial teacher training (ITT) in England, research suggests that teacher supply gaps are unlikely to close (Worth and McLean 2020).

Teachers leaving the profession at relatively high rates in the first five years of their careers and retention rates are lowest in schools with higher proportions of recently qualified teachers and disadvantaged students (Worth, Rennie, and Lynch 2018; Worth and McLean 2020). These attrition rates have been explained by a number of factors including excessive workload, weak leadership and management in schools, and poor work-life balance leading to low levels of well-being (Worth, Rennie, and Lynch 2018). Added to this already worrying teacher retention landscape has been the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic which has caused ongoing disruption to the education sector since March 2020 (Ellis, Steadman, and Mao 2020; Education Policy Institute EPI 2021; Kim and Asbury 2020). This has impacted teacher education where outbreaks of COVID-19 have meant repeated periods of self-isolation for pre-service teachers, their mentors, teaching colleagues and students which has disrupted the rhythm of their teacher education programme (Rushton 2021b). Challenges have also been experienced in relation to the implementation of school placements (Kidd and Murray 2020) with shortages of school-based placements greatest in schools with the most disadvantaged pupils (Worth and McLean 2020), reducing opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop their practice in these contexts.

Prior to the impact of Covid-19, in England, the Department for Education (DfE) had recognised the need for teachers to receive sustained and integrated professional development opportunities across the first two years of teaching to improve the support provided and therefore increase teacher retention and well-being. This increased support has been implemented in the newly established Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework (Department for Education 2019) and the Early Career Framework (ECF) (Department for Education 2020). As part of the ECF, teachers receive support through a reduction in contact teaching time and mentoring and continual professional development over a two-year period, rather than only the first year of their career (Department for Education 2020). Whilst intended to support the retention of teachers, Manning, Brock, and Towers (2020) have highlighted that, support implemented by schools to support the wellbeing of teachers, though well intentioned can be interpreted as burdensome rather than supportive. We argue that understanding the ways in which individuals develop their professional identity over the course of their careers, but especially during their training (or pre-service year(s)), where they can experience periods of 'transition shock' (Miles and Knipe 2018) is a crucial and persistently overlooked part of teacher retention and well-being policies. Furthermore, understanding the ways in which identities are socially and collaboratively (meaning within groups with mutually agreed aims) constructed is of value when seeking to support teachers to remain in the profession during periods of crisis and unfortunately, the pandemic context affords a rare opportunity to consider crises experienced by a whole professional rather than individual cases. In these ways, a renewed focus on identity development, led by policy makers, may mean that ITE providers and school leaders are better able to ensure that professional development, implemented as part of the ECF, ameliorates the challenges of retention and teacher well-being in a more personalised way that enables individuals to persist through periods of challenge.

Methodology

Our aim through this research is to understand the identity development of those undertaking ITE programmes during a global pandemic with the overarching research question: how do pre-service teachers develop their professional identities when undertaking Initial Teacher Education (ITE) during a global pandemic? Our research draws on the analysis of forty-five interviews with pre-service high school teachers as we outline below. Data collection

This study was conducted in the context of a university-based ITE provider in which trainees have lectures, seminars, and tutorials with university-based tutors and, in parallel, complete practical placements in two schools, which usually provide varied experiences of schooling (e.g. schools which have different educational philosophies, approaches to pupil admission, demographic profiles and/or geographical contexts) where they are supported by teacher-mentors. The research was approved by the researchers' university Ethics Committee on 6 August 2020 (LRS-19/20–20527). Data have been derived from one-to-one semi-structured interviews with 16 participants, pre-service teachers on a university-based teacher training course. We assume that teacher identity formation is an ongoing process, that does not end with the completion of the training year. To represent the dynamics of the process, rather than presenting 'snapshots' of identity at particular moments in a changeable year, we adopted a repeated interview strategy (Roos 2022). The approach is reported to support the development of a holistic understanding of a group of respondents and allows the presentation of data on change processes, not simply static reports of momentary states.

An overview of each of the interview phases and participants is provided in Table 1. A series of three interviews, each lasting approximately 40–50 minutes, were completed with 12 participants at three points during the 2020–2021 academic year: October 2020, January, and April 2021 (Phase 1). Of these 12 participants, five participated in a further interview in late-June 2021 after they had completed their training (Phase 2). A third phase of interviews was carried out in May 2021 to ensure that a diversity of subject specialisms was included, and this provided a further four interviews, bringing the total number of interviews to 45.

Table 1. Interview phases with participants and subject specialisms.

	Phase One October 2020 January 2021 April 2021	Phase Two May 2021	Phase Three June 2021
Participants (subject specialism)	Alyson (Geography) Chloe (Geography) Damara (Chemistry) Danny (Geography) Elodie (French w Spanish) Isla (Geography) Jenny (Latin w Classics) Lucy (Geography) Paul (Geography) Pietro (Physics w Maths) Saba (Biology) Sherry (English)	Albert (Computing) David (Physics) Owen (Computing) Ted (Maths)	Chloe (Geography) Damara (Chemistry) Danny (Geography) Jenny (Latin w Classics) Sherry (English)
Total Number of interviews	36	4	5

Table 2. Overview of interview topics and indicative questions.

Interview topics	Indicative questions
Background and context	Why did you decide to become a teacher now? Why did you choose the PGCE route? Did the COVID-19 pandemic have any part in your decision to become a teacher?
Experiences of the PGCE	Can you describe your experiences of the PGCE course? What have you enjoyed and what have you found challenging? Has becoming a teacher during a period of pandemic provided any challenges or opportunities?
Role or place of subject	What contribution can your subject make to young people? Have your ideas about your subject changed during the PGCE?
Teacher identity	Do you think your experience of becoming a teacher has changed how you see yourself? Can you describe what sort of teacher you want to be? Can you share what you think is the purpose of education? Can you describe how the work you do reflects your values?
Future careers	What are your plans for your future career? How prepared do you feel for your first year of teaching? Has the pandemic provided you with any particular challenges or opportunities? What key ideas and/or experiences from your PGCE will you take forward?

During the interviews, participants were asked questions in five main areas related to their training and identity development in the context of the global pandemic. Indicative questions for each of these five areas are shared in Table 2. At the outset of the interviews, we discussed issues around anonymity and confidentiality with participants, and their contributions are shared in this research using pseudonyms.

Analytical process

As academics working within the higher education system which we are researching, and therefore have 'insider knowledge', we describe our methodological approach as one of 'tacit ethnography' (Clegg and Stevenson 2013). By this we mean that our findings are drawn from analysis of data which includes both the responses provided by our participants and the perspectives and insights we bring to and through our analyses. The understandings we construct are shaped and enriched by our knowledge and beliefs (Fox 2008) where our positionality as researchers, with detailed knowledge of our research context as educators as well as researchers, is understood as a rich analytical resource rather than as a barrier to knowledge production (Braun and Clarke 2019). Through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), researchers identify patterned meaning across a qualitative dataset, where researchers' subjectivity is understood as a resource through which to develop new understanding, rather than as an impediment to be overcome (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2020). When using RTA, researchers actively interpret data and create new meaning through sequential phases of research that are iterative and discursive rather than through the rigid application of a codebook or framework. Phases of analysis include (1) data familiarisation; (2) coding the dataset; (3) generation of initial themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) writing up the analytic narrative in the context of the literature (Braun and Clarke 2020).

Author 1 conducted all the interviews apart from one completed by Author 3. Data familiarisation occurred throughout the data collection period, through repeated listening to and reading of the interview data and online group discussions where researchers shared their ideas, perspectives and questions having read the transcripts. Through

written reflections and group discussions, researchers considered the different roles and perspectives they brought to the research including teaching roles as part of the PGCE programme (tutor, seminar leader and lecturer), researchers with areas of interest and expertise (teacher identity, well-being, education policy, subject specialism) and former teachers. Expertise drawn from each of these roles informed our understanding of the experiences that participants shared through their interviews and our familiarity with the participants' context through our involvement in the PGCE programme enabled for rich conversations that provided the opportunity for more nuanced understandings.

Phases 2–5 of the RTA process involved the researchers reflecting individually and in groups, on average, monthly during the period October 2020–June 2021 to consider the ways in which participants articulated their professional identities as teachers during the interview(s). Our analysis was situated in our familiarity with both the role of identity within teacher professional development and our understanding of the specific ethos and practice of the PGCE programme. Therefore, our analysis was directed by these existing ideas and theoretical framings from the literature that considers teacher identity as well as our experiences as teachers and teacher educators. Therefore, members of the research team were drawn to different aspects of the data which related to their areas of expertise and interest. For example, Authors 5 and 6 focused on areas relating to inclusion of young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in conjunction with Author 9's focus on pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and together, they considered pre-service teachers experiences with these groups of pupils. At the same time, Authors 3, 7, 12 brought their knowledge of issues relating to teacher wellbeing to their consideration of pre-service teachers' experience of ITE during the pandemic whilst Authors 1, 2 and 10 considered these experiences in light of recent policy making relating to initial teacher education. In our ongoing work we are considering the ways in which reflexive analysis processes are implemented by teams of researchers and how tensions and inconsistencies are acknowledged through a process of consensus making.

Results

In the following section, we document and reflect upon the ways in which pre-service teachers developed their professional identity in the context of a PGCE programme completed during the COVID-19 global pandemic. An overview of the research findings and analytical process of theme identification is provided in Table 3.

Below, using excerpts drawn from the interviews and participants' reflections, we discuss each theme in turn.

Teacher identity grounded in the desire to make a positive contribution to society through education

Nearly all of the participating pre-service teachers described how their work in schools during their teaching practicum provided them with greater insights into the contributions that schools make to society, including aspects beyond their core purpose of education. This was especially pronounced during the successive lockdowns throughout the pandemic as schools were instrumental in supporting the mental and physical health

Table 3. Superordinate themes, sub-themes and indicative interview quotes.

Superordinate Themes	Sub-themes	Indicative interview quotes
Teacher identity grounded in the desire to make a positive contribution to society through education.	Becoming a teacher during COVID-19 provided insights as to the societal contribution schools make. Pastoral work of a teacher key motivating factor to persist through periods of difficulty.	'My motto for the next six months is going to be, "I'm so excited and so terrified". I am very excited, I do want to make a difference, I do want to have an impact. I want to be professional. I want to make students feel safe in my class'. Damara, Phase 3.
Strong identification with a subject specialism and connection with a community of practice supports the development of teacher identities.	Value of subjects to make a difference in the lives of all young people. The importance for pre-service teachers to engage with big ideas that are grounded in their subject specialism.	'I love my subject it is obviously really important because it is … an invaluable skill to be able to communicate with people in a different language … having the ability to understand people … who speak broken English is a skill that you really get from learning a different language … I think it teaches you to be more aware'. Elodie, Phase 1. 'I want to work with young people in a way that they can become critical thinkers, you know, heartfelt citizens, where they are moving in the world and they can relate to people with other ideas and they can relate to themselves, the more and more I am in school it is a huge responsibility … ' Alyson, Phase 1.
Collaborative identity work occurs in a variety of spaces, communities, and modes.	Sites in which identity work takes place include university tutorials and seminars; schools, subject departments and faculties; subject communities beyond schools and universities (e.g. subject associations, learned societies). Communities involved in identity work include peer networks, university-based tutors and staff; school mentors; other school staff; family and friends. Online and in person spaces provide different and complimentary opportunities to access varied communities.	'I have really learnt about the value of my mentor … and with university sessions you can engage in discussion, you can explore ideas and with other staff in the department you can explain your thinking'. Saba, Phase 2. 'My step-brother [is a teacher] it's been useful to have him as a kind of support network … he's made it a lot easier … talking through my experiences … getting that sense check from someone I know well'. Paul Phase 2. 'The university side has been really good, the support … the Zoom sessions … English started a group on WhatsApp and that has been the most amazing support group'. Sherry, Phase 2.

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (Continued).

Superordinate Themes	Sub-themes	Indicative interview quotes
Reflection that is collaborative, personalised, iterative and separate from notions of progression enables positive identity work.	The value of iterative reflection (including written reflections and informal conversations with mentors and peers) over the course of the year. Value of interviews as, collaborative, personalised and almost therapeutic spaces to reflect upon their values and experiences of becoming a teacher.	'I find reflecting on feedback that I've been given really, really hard … I always act upon it … so I think that kind of process of sitting down and thinking about … what I … carry forward into the next lesson … that's certainly one of the main things, even though at times I don't enjoy it. It's definitely been really valuable'. Lucy, Phase 3. 'It is really nice to be asked the sort of questions that really make you reflect and think … Although we try and be reflective throughout the course, it has been really good for me to have these reflections … brought back around in the interviews … .the interviews have helped me keep track of my own development'. Danny, Phase 3.

of their students, including providing much needed food and resources for those families in need.

Damara's comment reflects the feelings of many of the participants towards their role in schools during the pandemic crisis:

> My motto for the next six months is going to be, 'I'm so excited and so terrified'. I am very excited, I do want to make a difference, I do want to have an impact. I want to be professional. I want to make students feel safe in my class. *(Damara, Phase 3).*

This included schools providing opportunities for all young people, regardless of their backgrounds, starting points or resources to develop the skills, knowledge, and experiences necessary to navigate their future lives. This opportunity to be part of a profession which is involved in enacting greater social equity, sometimes described by one participant as 'levelling the playing field' (Paul) and providing classrooms where issues could be discussed without fear of judgement, was a core part of the pre-service teachers' identity. For many, the pandemic had exposed the 'invisible layers of advantage' (Paul) available to some but denied to others and highlighted the real challenges that many young people face, including holding substantial caring responsibilities within the home and significant barriers to accessing online learning. For example, Jenny highlighted the sadness she felt at witnessing the disadvantage some pupils experienced during periods of remote teaching:

> I am teaching remotely this week which has been hard … it was really sad … lots of them [the pupils] did not have appropriate technology, they were on their phones, you could see them leave the lesson after only a few minutes and they are already the students with cause for concern. You quickly start to see the people fall through the gaps … there are pupils in every class who cannot access their education during school closures and that is a very worrying thing to witness. *(Jenny, Phase 2).*

Relatedly, Paul reported his motivation to persist during periods of challenge was in part because staff and pupils were relying on his contribution and that this had become a stronger source of motivation since his first interview during his first school placement:

> SE2 [second school placement] has been harder … I know people at school have been depending on me and that has got me through, I have dragged myself through with that mantra of 'do right' these past few months. *(Paul, Phase 3).*

The participants described how they wished to be good role models and to exhibit and develop qualities and capabilities in their students such as being 'heartfelt citizens' (Alyson), 'critical thinkers' (Isla) and 'respectful under all circumstances' (Damara).

The pastoral role of teachers, and their wider social contribution, have been emphasised by the experience of COVID-19 for many participants. Participants emphasised the opportunity to make a difference to the lives of young people and their communities was a key motivating factor in their decision to become teachers. For example, Piero reflected on the continuing importance of the initial 'inspiration' to change professions at the age of 48 years, 'the main reason was to … doing [sic] something good. If I don't get that [in the future] that would be critical'. The COVID-19 pandemic was the spur to change for some participants to, 'make the leap' (Ted) into the profession. Moreover, the opportunity to make a positive societal contribution was central in motivating them to persist through periods of challenge in their practice. The broad role of the teacher, highlighted in the pandemic, encouraged pre-service teachers to reflect on their careers in novel ways. For example, Elodie expressed a desire to specialise in working with those with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND). Others spoke about the motivation to support literacy across a whole school setting, with a focus on enabling those with English as an Additional Language (EAL).

The emphasis that participants in this study placed on the value of the pastoral role to the school settings and communities in which they work was evident in that all the participants who participated in more than one interview made explicit references to such contribution. For example, whilst Damara did not emphasise the pastoral aspects of her role in earlier interviews, and focused on substantive features of her position, in her final interview she said:

> … the role of the teacher in September 2021 I think is more important than ever, because you know there's so many pastoral aspects due the pandemic that are coming out … like safeguarding … *(Damara, Phase 3).*

The interview data suggest that rooted in their personal identities, is the desire to be the type of professional that makes a positive difference in the lives of others. For example, in Lucy's third interview, it became clear that her understanding of what it is to be a teacher had expanded as she reflected on how her idea of the pastoral role of the teacher to provide 'care' beyond classroom teaching had developed in response to experiences in her second placement school:

> I think teaching is … about making the children more well-rounded and I think that has been cemented in my second placement because they are very much of the belief that teachers are only there to teach … that teachers should not have to spend an hour after school phoning parents … I think that teachers are responsible for making sure that the children are

> developing in a well-rounded way . . . I don't think that this should be left to three or four . . . behaviour leads within the school, I think it is the teacher's job to make sure that the child . . . is a cared for and well-rounded individual. *(Lucy, Phase 3).*

Here, Lucy underlines the role of a teacher, as part of a community of practice, to care for every child. These findings suggest that post-pandemic ITE policy might well acknowledge that that trainee teachers' professional identities often value holistic care for students, rather than academic 'catch-up' alone, and emphasise and celebrate wider professional contributions as part of a collaborative effort.

Strong identification with a subject specialism and connection with a community of practice supports the development of teacher identities

An important social group within which collaborative identity formation takes place is the in-group of subject specialists who share an identity as specialists in a particular field. The participants were specialists in a variety of subjects (see Table 1), and all participants highlighted how their own love of a subject was a key factor in deciding to become a teacher and was a core part of their professional identity. As Elodie said of Modern Foreign Languages:

> I love my subject it is obviously really important because it is . . . an invaluable skill to be able to communicate with people in a different language . . . having the ability to understand people . . . who speak broken English is a skill that you really get from learning a different language . . . I think it teaches you to be more aware. *(Elodie, Phase 1).*

Similarly, Ted described how he believed his passion for mathematics and his desire to instil that passion and enjoyment in pupils would continue to shape his career choices so that any future career progression was grounded in his subject, for example leading a school mathematics department:

> I just love maths . . . I'm that person that pupils ask a random maths question to now . . . they know I just geek out on maths . . . I have already set up my own maths club with Year 10 and 11 pupils coming . . . I want to share that love of maths . . . I don't want my career to take me away from that so I see myself as a HoD [Head of Department] in the future. *(Ted, Phase 2).*

All participants articulated the value of their specialism to the lives of young people, regardless of pupils' attainment level, whether pupils elected to continue with their subject post-14 or post-16 years, or if their subject informed pupils' future career choices. For example, Sherry (English) and Elodie (Modern foreign languages) highlighted the value of their lessons as safe, open spaces where pupils could learn to share and develop their ideas through discussion which was rooted in mutual respect. Lucy and Paul (geography) underlined how geography has the capacity to enable young people to understand their place in the world and the capacity they have to bring about positive change in their own lives and those of others. As Alyson said:

> I want to work with young people in a way that they can become critical thinkers, you know, heartfelt citizens, where they are moving in the world and they can relate to people with other ideas and they can relate to themselves, the more and more I am in school it is a huge responsibility . . . *(Alyson, Phase 1).*

This sense of empowering young people through their understanding of geography also featured in Saba's reflections on the value of teaching science that had evolved over the course of teaching practice:

> . . . what has developed for me is the importance of inquiry . . . not just asking questions about the natural world, but . . . how you see the world . . . the way you understand rules and authority figures . . . that is how science started, when you see something you want to question . . . you ask the question. *(Saba, Phase 2).*

All participants acknowledged the tensions they experienced between ensuring that pupils were able to progress through necessary examinations but also wanting to engender in pupils a lasting understanding and affinity with their chosen subject. For example, Ted expressed a concern about the tension between 'getting kids engaged and interested in maths as opposed to just setting their sights on getting a grade 9 . . . ' but, he felt this would come with time.

Participants valued the opportunity that their ITE programmes gave them to engage with 'big ideas' or concepts that are grounded in their subject specialisms. Alyson and Isla (geography) shared how they had come to understand the interconnectedness of the world through geography and how central the environmental context is when trying to understand economic and social issues such as globalisation and development:

> I think geography is important and has been massively overlooked by me for most of my life . . . it ties . . . the natural to the social and that is something that I always found was missing with politics, it didn't take into account the natural world . . . there are reasons why certain countries do and don't develop in terms of the naturally occurring resources they may or may not have . . . *(Isla, Phase 1)*

This understanding helped Alyson and Isla develop both their professional identities as geographers and supported their thinking concerning the ways in which their subjects could support and shape their pupils' lives and capacities:

> You can really elicit strong responses from these young people when you are teaching them physical geography, we can teach them empathy, we can teach them awareness, tolerance, we can teach them about the world through these ideas. *(Alyson, Phase 1)*

During the interviews, pre-service teachers highlighted powerfully the importance of nurturing engagement with and enjoyment of the subject they teach for their own self-efficacy as teachers. In this way, developing a professional identity as a subject matter expert was intertwined with a pre-service teacher's ability to inspire their pupils by showing them the value or relevance of their subject:

> When a kid leaves school and talks about maths in the future . . . I want them to remember maths positively . . . I'm a big believer in if I show a kid some maths I also like to show them why am I teaching you this formula, where is it used, to kind of ground it in reality where possible . . . I'd like them to look back and have fond memories of maths, but also to [say] 'oh yeah, I remember Sir said we use that type of maths in geography' . . . *(Ted, Phase 2)*

The data shows that a passion for their chosen subject was identified frequently as a key motivating factor in deciding to become a teacher, and the opportunity to nurture this passion and develop subject specific knowledge through continued professional development (CPD) opportunities can plausibly be linked to an ongoing desire to remain in the profession. Pre-service teachers including Pietro, Jenny and Chloe shared how the COVID-

19 pandemic increased the opportunities they had to engage with subject specific CPD due to the huge variety of lectures, seminars and courses freely available and accessible online. Some participants were able to take advantage of a reduction in travel time (as the university elements of the programme were predominantly taught online) and used this to enhance their practice in a way that was rooted in their professional identities as subject specialists.

In addition to the collaborative identity work that occurs between pre-service teachers, wider society and their schools, discussed in the previous section, this section indicates that a sub-group of society and school, the community of practice of specialist colleagues, also has a significant role in collaborative identity development. The collaborative nature of identity making occurred within different spaces and modes and this is the focus of the third theme.

Collaborative identity work occurs in a variety of spaces, communities and modes

The collaborative nature of identity work took place across different spaces, withing various communities and through contrasting modes. The importance of social and collaborative identity development was thrown into sharp relief due to the circumstances surrounding the pandemic, periods of enforced isolation highlighted, through their absence, the value of shared identity construction. The period of national lockdown which took place between January and March 2021, highlighted the importance of physical presence in schools, and the associated formal and informal interactions, for pre-service teachers' collaborative identity development. Whilst, in earlier interviews, social connection was not a prominent feature of her course engagement, Elodie commented, towards the end of her experience of ITE:

> I am shy … I have found it hard to build relationships with staff in the school and with Covid … I have found it hard making connections, but now finally I am making some and it is a lot nicer. *(Elodie, Phase 3).*

Other sites in which identity work took place included university tutorials and seminars (both in person and online) and subject communities beyond schools and universities (e.g. subject associations). For example, many participants described how their collective engagement with research in the field of education enabled them to develop their professional identities as teachers, which enhanced their self-efficacy. Many highlighted how these collaborative learning experiences provided vital opportunities to engage with, debate and consider a range of ideas including pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, classroom management, inclusion and social justice. These ideas relating to inclusion and social justice were particularly pertinent during the pandemic, when existing inequalities were exacerbated and became more apparent to participants. For example, Paul (Phase 2 interview) described how during a two-week period in March 2021, when he and another pre-service teacher had a delayed start to the second school placement due to COVID-19 they voluntarily participated in 'as many CPD courses we could, like ones about Black Lives Matter' because they did not want to 'squander' this opportunity to be better able to support pupils. These collaborative spaces of engagement with research enabled pre-service teachers to develop their own ideas about teaching and learning and, although the university provision (and frequently the school CPD offer) was almost completely

online, this did not diminish the experience or its importance. Many participants articulated that they had made a conscious and considered choice to study to become teachers in the academic setting of a university, in partnership with schools, and they felt their choice to be the right one:

> I have really learnt about the value of my mentor … and with university sessions you can engage in discussion, you can explore ideas and with other staff in the department you can explain your thinking. *(Saba, Phase 2)*.

As with other participants, Saba came, partly through the contrast enforced by lost opportunities in the pandemic conditions, to appreciate the important role of social interaction in the development of her identity as a teacher.

Many of those interviewed said they were likely to pursue further academic study in the next two to three years.

A variety of different yet overlapping and complimentary communities were noted as being part of the work of a pre-service teacher, including their school placement communities, networks of peers and university-based tutors and staff. Participants who described struggling with one community (for example, Paul and Saba described periods of difficulty with a school mentor during one placement) were able to draw on other communities for support, for example their peers, other school placement staff and their family and friends who had experience of teaching and education. For example, Paul reflected:

> My step-brother [is a teacher] it's been useful to have him as a kind of support network … he's made it a lot easier … talking through my experiences … getting that sense check from someone I know well. *(Paul Phase 2)*.

Some pre-service teachers noted how their drive to share experiences and develop their practitioner identities in relation with their peers, rather than alone, led them to form effective communities with their peers, even though the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 regulations substantially limited the opportunities to meet in person, and develop a sense of togetherness through informal conversations and social time. To overcome this, many pre-service teachers used online methods to connect, for example WhatsApp groups and online social meetings to share experiences, ask questions and exchange resources and ideas about becoming and being a teacher. These modes of connection were particularly vital during periods of lockdown (for example January 2021) when the vast majority of school teaching moved online. As one participant said:

> The university side has been really good, the support … the Zoom sessions … English started a group on WhatsApp and that has been the most amazing support group.*(Sherry, Phase 2)*.

Participants (including Chloe and Danny) who had the opportunity to meet their peers in person towards the end of the programme noted how they found that the people they were meeting were very familiar and they had a sense that they knew them well. However, at the same time, they also described experiencing a sense that they had 'missed out' on developing strong friendships with their peers that would support them throughout their careers, and that this was part of 'what doing a PGCE was all about' (Danny, Phase 4). These sites, communities and modes of identity work underline the social aspect of becoming a teacher, where individuals collectively and collaboratively

move through an experience of professional change and transformation and draw on various sources of group membership from their current (pre-service teacher, colleague in school department, university tutorial group) and parallel or former professional lives (e.g. sports coach, outdoor instructor, science graduate) for support. Both the importance of different contexts as well as the previous theme of the value of subject-based communities of practice are consistent with the social identity approach (Haslam et al. 2011), where different contexts and communities provide opportunities for people to develop a range of group memberships and, where membership of a range of groups is a facet of a robust (professional) identity.

Reflection that is collaborative, personalised, iterative and separate from notions of progression enables positive identity work

All participants recognised the value of iterative reflection (including written reflections and informal conversations with mentors and peers) over the course of the year as a way of developing their professional practice. Written reflections were completed in a variety of ways (weekly diaries or journals, lesson evaluations, essays) and for a range of purposes (to share placement experience with their university tutor, as preparation for weekly meetings with their school mentor, as part of their own personal practice). The reflections, unsurprisingly, were also influenced by the effects of the pandemic on their academic learning and their practice. During periods of challenge related to pre-service teachers' illness, self-isolation or phases of remote teaching, the opportunity to reflect in dialogue with school mentors and university tutors provided vital support as pre-service teachers worked through periods of professional turbulence and uncertainty. Some participants (including Chloe, Lucy and Owen) noted how they recognised the importance of regular reflection in supporting their development as teachers, but they found it difficult to do, both in terms of receiving feedback and the specific act of reflecting on their own strengths and areas for development:

> I find reflecting on feedback that I've been given really, really hard … I always act upon it … so I think that kind of process of sitting down and thinking about … what I … carry forward into the next lesson … that's certainly one of the main things, even though at times I don't enjoy it. It's definitely been really valuable. *(Lucy, Phase 3).*

Some shared that they felt it was very difficult for someone else to 'tell you how to reflect' and they had needed the support of their school mentors and university tutors to model how to achieve this in their own practice.

Twelve of the pre-service teacher participants completed at least three separate interviews with the same interviewer (Author 1) during September 2020 – April 2021. This group underlined the value of the interviews as personalised, collaborative and quasi-therapeutic spaces to reflect upon their values and experiences of becoming a teacher and to begin to develop their identities as teachers. As Danny said:

> It is really nice to be asked the sort of questions that really make you reflect and think … Although we try and be reflective throughout the course, it has been really good for me to have these reflections … brought back around in the interviews … the interviews have helped me keep track of my own development. *(Danny, Phase 3).*

Important features of these interviews included (1) the timing of interviews at key points of the year, for example at the end of school placement, (2) the ability of the interviewer to refer to previous interview answers as prompts for future reflection, (3) the interviewer's familiarity with the content and scope of the ITE programme, and, (4) the clear separation of the purpose and scope of the interviews from participants' assessment and progression on their ITE programmes was crucial in providing an open, collaborative and reflective professional space. Pre-service teachers in this group reported that they did not view participating in this sequence of interviews as 'additional work'; rather that they had value in that they contributed to their identity development in a way that was not otherwise replicated in their ITE programme and felt that they would like the interviews to continue and, that their peers would benefit from a similar opportunity. Damara noted:

> I'm actually gonna miss these interviews, I hope they could be like a permanent thing. In all honesty . . . I find this as a little bit of a therapy session, I think it would be great if they were compulsory . . . everybody would benefit from this opportunity . . . every time post interview you have always really stimulated my thoughts. *(Damara, Phase 3)*.

Damara's reflections on the process of being interviewed highlight, at least for her, the value of reflective dialogue in identity formation and suggest ITE programmes should make space for similar reflections in which pre-service teachers can share and make sense of their personal narratives of border crossing into the community of subject specialist practitioners. Such reflection can support the development of strong communal identities that foster a sense of belonging and wellbeing and support retention.

Some participants' contributions during the interviews had strong affective valences, including feelings of anxiety, fear or being wholly overwhelmed at points during their PGCE which were often linked to their experiences of the pandemic. For example, Piero shared his experiences of his first teaching placement:

> It has been quite tough, for sure, I think that all of us, when we started, we knew there would be complications. I think that maybe it's more than we were expecting . . . at times I was frustrated and upset and I know in a pandemic you have to be flexible, but on the other hand, I was kind of feeling left on my own, so that was a difficult time. *(Piero, Phase 2)*.

During the final interviews, these participants were able to reflect on their own personal growth and how they had exhibited resilience and fortitude during periods of challenge which again, were often inextricably linked to their pandemic experiences. When Alyson reflected about her experiences of period of remote teaching it was a reduction in social interaction and collaboration that she found very difficult:

> Oh my God, it has been challenging, and now that I am back in the classroom, I don't think I gave myself enough leeway or credit for actually how challenging it was. But I remember I was really stressed and scared and tired . . . it was not being in the classroom . . . now I am so grateful to be there just the little interactions . . . when you see a kid lighten up and you know you have helped them do that . . . it is genuinely priceless. *(Alyson, Phase 3)*.

Previous research has established the importance of emotions and the ability to express emotions in identity construction (O'connor 2008; Timoštšuk and Ugaste 2021). Our research suggests that interviews have the potential to provide an important space to enhance teachers' well-being in a personalised way which could lead to greater feelings of job satisfaction and self-efficacy, which could in time increase retention. Whilst we

recognise the substantial resources required to implement one-to-one identity discussion sessions (particularly in terms of the time of mentors with the expertise to facilitate reflective professional conversations focused on values, experiences, and identity, rather than assessment or progress) these findings point to the potential benefits of such support for all pre-service teachers and ECTs. Drawing on the social identity approach (Haslam et al. 2011), we suggest these reflections, undertaken between mentors and pre-service teachers, are part of identity work that is a shared process, where mentor and mentee jointly establish the pre-service teacher's position within a new social group, that of a professional teacher.

Discussion and implications

The findings from this research underline that teachers' identity work occurs across the three central domains of the personal, professional and social and, that identity development is a fundamentally collaborative process which is informed and reformed over time. We contend that the collaborative nature of identity development was clearly visible throughout the four key themes described and, that the pandemic context highlighted the importance of social contexts for identity development, particularly when they were constrained by Covid-secure measures such as periods of remote teaching and online university learning. Furthermore, some participants (e.g. Damara) shared how the interviews for this study provided them with a valued space to reflect on their development as teachers with an individual who was a member of the teacher education community but not working in a supervisory capacity. It also highlighted the ways in which the repeated interviews provided the participants an opportunity to explore changing perspectives and ideas about their work – articulating their identity development. We suggest that this underlines the importance of social interaction when developing a professional identity which is consistent with the social identity approach as, through the sequence of interviews the pre-service teacher and the interviewer together develop the pre-service teacher's position within the social group of teachers.

The values and attitudes regarding the importance of education for all young people of teachers in this study played a central role in (re)forming their professional identities. The participants described the ways they saw schools providing opportunities for pupils to develop as individuals and to ensure greater equity in terms of access to material resources (for example, technology, books) and support (for example guidance and advice relating to future careers) and how this was a 'motivation' or 'inspiration' to join the profession. Furthermore, the circumstances surrounding the pandemic gave a greater weight to the participants' concern and commitment to ensuring greater equity as the disadvantage that some children experienced (for example, access to technology) was made more visible. This emphasis on the role a teacher can play in enacting greater equity shared by the teachers in this case study might helpfully inform future teacher retention policy making in England and beyond, where significant numbers of teachers are predicted to leave the profession in the next few years (Fullard 2021).

Olsen (2008) has highlighted how understanding the reasons an individual chooses to become a teacher is central to their ongoing professional identity development. In this study, participants' personal identities were frequently grounded in a motivation to 'do right' and be a positive role model for young people and this was heightened by the

experience of becoming a teacher during a global pandemic. For example, for some participants the inequities that exist in society were made more apparent by the way some children were able to continue to engage with school and learning in spite of the disruption caused by COVID-19 whilst other children, in the same classes and the same school, were not. These experiences had a profound impact on some teachers' identity development in that it shaped their future career choices and aspirations as they chose to focus their future careers on working with children with SEND or EAL. Again, this more nuanced understanding of the ways in which teachers develop their professional identities in the earliest stages of their careers, where they are most likely to leave the profession could helpfully inform future teacher retention strategies (Worth 2020).

The participants' professional identities were strongly associated with their subject specialism – the desire to become a teacher was often inextricably linked with a passion for their subject and a wish to inspire and enthuse young people. This is consistent with the work of Douwe, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000) who underlined the importance of subject identity for teacher self-efficacy. During their pre-service year, the importance of their specialism continued to develop, with teachers building subject-based communities of practice within their school placements, university seminar groups and more widely though subject associations and online networks. As pre-service teachers developed their teaching practice, their subject identity moved from encouraging every child to 'love their subject', and often became more nuanced. For example, they saw their role as a teacher as providing every young person with an appreciation for how their subject could enhance their future lives, regardless of whether they elected to continue to study it when it became optional. Nearly all those who were science or geography specialists described how they used examples drawn from the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to underline the value of their subject, including the ability to interpret graphs and maps. As Velle et al. (2020) have noted, the global pandemic has seen a proliferation of online subject-specific events and materials relating to teacher professional development. The visibility and flexibility of this offer meant that many of the pre-service teachers interviewed developed their subject knowledge during periods of self-isolation or when the conditions provided them additional time. In a rapid review of remote and blended teacher education, Perry, Findon, and Cordingley (2021) highlight that although online modes are likely to proliferate, more research is needed to understand which modes and approaches are effective.

Consistent with the findings of Flores and Day (2006), the social domain of identity development was evident across the experiences of all pre-service teachers in the study in the ways they formed and reformed their identities as teachers through a collaborative process that involved their peers, school mentors and other school staff, university tutors as well as their families and friends. Measures put in place in response to the global pandemic greatly reduced the opportunity for identity work to take place in-person and constrained informal conversations, which can be vital low-pressure spaces to consider new perspectives that shape an individual's thinking and subsequently, their identity. Although online spaces went some way to ameliorate this, many pre-service teachers shared that they felt they had 'missed out' on social connections, particularly with their peers.

Across the domains of personal, professional and social identity it is evident that the global pandemic has provided challenges and opportunities for identity development. If these pre-service teachers, who during 2020–2021 were part of significantly larger than

normal intake (Worth and McLean 2020), are to be supported to develop productive professional identities, and be retained in the profession, they will require personalised support during the early years of their careers. Furthermore, much previous research has described the situated nature of identity development (Pearce and Morrison 2011; Sellars 2017) and the important contexts of school placements (Day 1999; Zeichner and Liston 2013). This research underlines how pre-service teachers' identity development has also been situated in the context of the global pandemic in a way that has, for now at least, heightened teachers' intention and motivation to bring about positive social change through their work. Consistent with previous research which has noted the value of identity work as part of the professional development of teachers (Olsen 2016; Qing and Day 2013), we would suggest that this cohort of teachers will require ongoing support to develop professional identities and support the enactment of societal goods as the pre-service teachers continue their careers during a period of significant challenge associated with the consequences of an ongoing public health emergency.

Conclusions

At the outset of this research, the intention was to consider the identity development of pre-service teachers through repeated interviews during their pre-service year. The impact of COVID-19 on schools since March 2020 is clearly visible in the ways that these teachers have discussed and described their identity development. We argue that this study, a case-study from England, has findings which have international relevance as this work reaffirms the importance of providing all teachers, but especially pre-service and ECTs, with opportunities to undertake identity work that is iterative, collaborative, and reflective. As in England, internationally, ITE has been the focus of review and reform for over thirty years for example in Australia (Alexander and Bourke 2021) and the USA (Fuller and Stevenson 2019) with an emphasis on 'professional standards' which critics have argued has both narrowed education curricula and de-professionalised teachers (Dwyer, Willis, and Call 2020). A key aspect to the methodology of this research was in a longitudinal interview approach, with multiple, spaced interviews. Participation in multiple interviews (Roos 2022) allowed the researchers to not only present a snapshot of experience, at one time, but to present a changing picture of the inherently dynamic and responsive process of identify formation during a global pandemic. Furthermore, in this case study from England, the twelve participants who took part in three or four interviews during their pre-service year highlight the importance of the interviews as spaces where they could reflect on their values, experiences and how they had changed, or not, over time. We suggest that such sessions, when they are carried out by a mentor with experience of ITE and not linked to notions of progression or assessment, may provide a practical model of how pre-service teachers can be supported to undertake identity work that is meaningful and productive. This is especially important given the dual context of the ongoing impacts of the global pandemic and the implementation of the new ECF in England. The intention of the ECF is to provide ECTs with mentoring and support over the first two years of their careers post pre-service period to, 'ensure they have dedicated time set aside to focus on their development' (Department for Education 2020, 4). Indeed, the ECF is a central part of the government's teacher retention strategy (Department for Education 2020). However, as it is currently envisioned, the implementation appears to be through centralised resources

that provide generic, scripted guidance to develop pedagogical strategies that are rooted in regulatory control to ensure 'accountability' and 'professional standards' (Alexander and Bourke 2021; Churchward and Willis 2019) rather than tailored, personalised support grounded in collaboration. The ECF limits ECTs autonomy over their professional development and yet, recent analysis suggests that job satisfaction and teacher retention are enhanced when an individual teacher has flexibility and autonomy over their own developmental needs (Worth, Rennie, and Lynch 2018). Furthermore, even with the advent of the ECF, notions of identity are still largely absent in policy making in England about teacher professional development indeed, the term 'identity' does not appear in the current ECF documentation in relation to teachers (the term appears once, in relation to pupil identity (Department for Education 2020, 22). We argue that this is a substantial missed opportunity and, that developing teachers' professional practice through collaborative, responsive and bespoke identity work remains an under-used lever to support the retention of teachers, particularly those in the first five years of their careers. Undoubtedly, the 'rollercoaster' nature of teachers' identity development has been exacerbated by the global pandemic, with the experience more fragmented and disrupted than in more 'normal' years. Nevertheless, and consistent with Olsen (2008, 2016), we suggest understanding how the ITE sector can enact identity work to support pre-service teachers and ECTs in 'finding their purpose' as teachers is of vital importance in the pandemic period and beyond. The value of these collaborative conversations was noted by Alyson, who said:

> I have found it quite a transformative experience and I have left each discussion feeling really positive and uplifted because I feel it has really highlighted the joyful moments of the PGCE . . . and really that I am driving forward with purpose into a career that I see has deep value.
>
> *(Alyson, Phase 3).*

Note

1. In this article we use Initial Teacher Education (ITE) to describe the professional preparation of new teachers and we use Initial Teacher Training (ITT), the preferred term of policy documents and government reform, when discussing government initiatives and policies.

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