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ABSTRACT

This literature review summarises the growing body of literature discussing teacher identities of university teachers. The aim was to understand what strengthens or constrains the development of a teacher identity. A qualitative synthesis of 59 studies was carried out. The review showed that several factors contribute to the development of teacher identity. While contact with students and staff development programmes were experienced as strengthening teacher identity, the wider context of higher education was experienced as having a constraining effect. Furthermore, the impact of the direct work environment was experienced as either strengthening or constraining, depending on whether or not teaching is valued in the department. Five psychological processes were found to be involved in the development of a teacher identity: a sense of appreciation, a sense of connectedness, a sense of competence, a sense of commitment, and imagining a future career trajectory. The findings suggest that developing a teacher identity in the higher education context is not a smooth process. In order to empower university teachers, it is important to reward teaching excellence and build community. Staff development activities can play a role in helping teachers to develop strategies for gaining confidence and taking active control of their work situation, both individually and collectively. The authors argue that more attention should be paid to the implicit messages that departments convey to their teaching faculty.

Introduction

Scholars increasingly acknowledge that teacher identity is central to the teaching profession (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). Teachers who identify with their teaching role are emotionally attached to this role, and it informs their worldview (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). Over the last decade, the number of studies concerning the development of

teacher identity in the university context has increased substantially. Although studies on the identities of teachers in primary and secondary education have been reviewed (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004), a systematic synthesis concerning university teachers is still lacking. We believe that some aspects of teacher identity development might be different for university teachers since they have to combine the teaching role with other roles such as that of researcher or practitioner. This literature review therefore aims to analyse and synthesise the current literature on teacher identity in the university context.

The development of a teacher identity is an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of who one considers oneself to be and who one would like to become (Beijaard et al., 2004). There are varied theoretical approaches to teacher identity; some stress the social and cultural nature of identity, whereas others focus on its discursive and narrative nature. Most contemporary approaches, however, agree that identity is constructed in a social context and that rather than being stable and fixed it is shifting and dynamic (Rodgers & Scott, 2008, p. 736). Furthermore, scholars agree that when one becomes emotionally attached to the teacher role, that role becomes part of who that person is; it becomes an organising element in teachers' lives (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Though the development of teacher identity is sometimes presented as unproblematic, most authors identify it as a struggle, as teachers must often give meaning to different, sometimes conflicting, perspectives (Beijaard et al., 2004).

In our study, we have approached identity from a socio-cultural point of view, which holds that teachers do not develop their identity in a vacuum, but rather in a context that brings social and cultural forces to bear upon that development (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). Particularly relevant in this respect are the meanings and associations that other people assign to the role of teacher. We hold that university teachers develop and dynamically maintain their identity in relation to the 'collective regard' that others have for their role (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007).

As context plays an important role in the formation of teacher identities, we focus our review on the ways in which the context either supports or constrains the development of teacher identity. The research questions that guided our review were:

(1) How does the development of a teacher identity evolve during the transition to teaching?
(2) Which contextual factors support or constrain the development of a teacher identity?
(3) Which psychological processes are involved in developing and maintaining a teacher identity?

Method

Literature search and selection

Systematic reviews use explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as transparent search strategies and data extraction processes, to produce a synthesis of all the available evidence in answer to a focused research question (Bearman et al., 2012). Our search was carried out in Web of Science, using the following search terms: professional identity, teacher identity, academic identity, higher education, university, academic, faculty, staff.

On the basis of title and abstract screening, we selected the following studies: empirical and review studies published in the English language in peer-reviewed journals that were concerned with adult university teachers and that focused principally on teacher identity (studies that appeared to focus exclusively on research or management roles were excluded). We noted early in the process that the vast majority of the studies employed qualitative research methods and were published from 2005 onwards. Because the analysis of qualitative research papers requires multiple close readings, we chose to limit our search to 2005–2015. However, we checked the reference lists of the selected papers for influential earlier work. One study was cited often (Nixon, 1996) and was therefore included. We then read the full texts using the same inclusion criteria stated above. We additionally excluded papers that did not provide an answer to any of the research questions (i.e., sensitivity analysis, Thomas & Harden, 2008). The final number of studies reviewed was 59, of which 57 were qualitative studies and two quantitative (see Figure 1).

Analysis and synthesis

As most of the included studies were qualitative, we adopted a qualitative synthesis approach to organise, integrate, and interpret the qualitative findings (Hannes & Lockwood, 2012). The purpose of our synthesis was to summarise the data in order to come to a conceptual understanding of the psychological processes involved in teacher identity and the contextual strengthening or constraining factors (Bearman & Dawson, 2013). Inspired by thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008), the analysis and synthesis of the studies consisted of three steps (see Figure 1). First, two members of the research
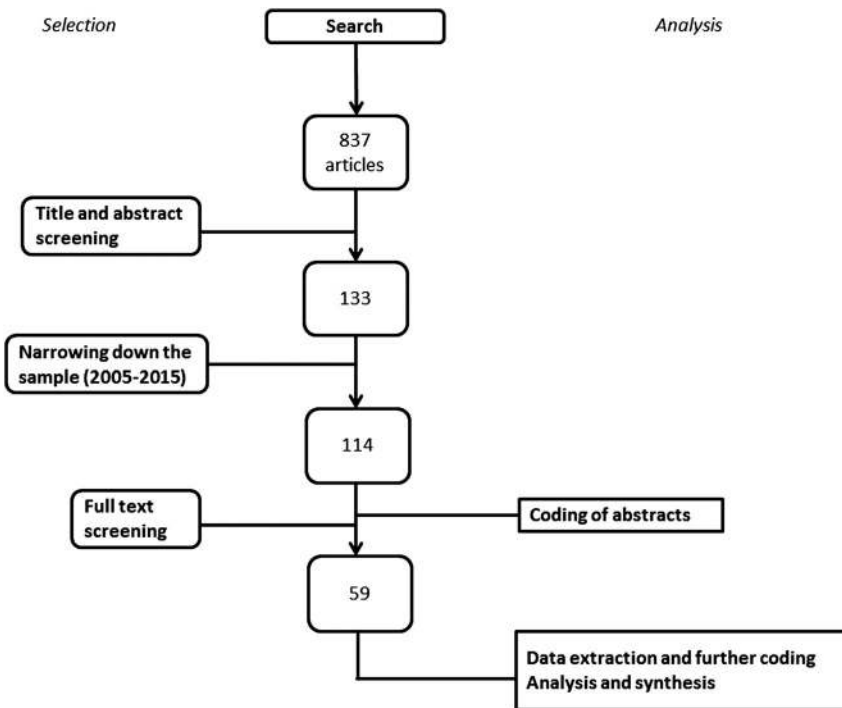

Figure 1. Flowchart of the selection and analysis procedure.

team independently coded the abstracts line by line in order to obtain an initial overview of the major themes of the studies. They then discussed the differences between their codes. Second, full text readings were conducted, resulting in the extraction of the following data: the findings of each study related to teacher identity, the type of study, the country where the study was carried out, its theoretical framework, the data collection method, and the sample size. Also, the codes assigned in the first step were checked and, if necessary, complemented or changed. Third, the summarised results of the studies were iteratively compared and analysed for regularities and patterns. We used thematic synthesis, which entails the translation of themes and concepts from one study into another and checking whether the findings are transferable to other contexts (Thomas & Harden, 2008). We found that since all 57 qualitative studies were situated in a critical or constructivist paradigm, they could be translated into one another. In the two quantitative studies, performed from a post-positivist paradigm, questionnaires were used to consider the impact of staff development activities on the teacher identity. These results were also included in our analysis. In the synthesis, we further interpreted the data and combined the themes into ten analytical or 'higher order' themes: one related to the transition to teaching, four related to the factors that strengthen or constrain identity development, and five related to the underlying processes of identity development. Additionally, we constructed detailed matrices for each of the themes in order to analyse how the studies were different, similar or contrasting. A qualitative description of each theme was constructed iteratively, as well as a final visual summary of the analysis. During the third step of analysis and synthesis, the research team served as a critical review board and critically read the final analysis and synthesis.

Results

Of the 59 studies, 57 used qualitative methods, mostly based on interviews or focus group discussions. Many of the studies investigated university teachers' experiences of academic life, some, for example, focusing on their experiences of recent developments in academia, which were interpreted by the primary researchers through the lens of identity. None of the qualitative studies were performed from a post-positivist paradigm position (Lincoln & Guba, 2000); all were situated in critical or constructivist paradigms, though sometimes implicitly. Most of them used theoretical frameworks either from social or cultural perspectives or discursive or narrative perspectives. Table 1 details the main characteristics of the studies.

In the following paragraphs, we address each of the three research questions in turn. In Appendix 1, a table is included which lists all studies and the issues they address.

Making the transition to teaching and developing a teacher identity

The studies show that the development of a teacher identity during the transition to teaching proceeds differently for teachers who entered university from a professional background (e.g., music, nursing, primary education) than for those making the transition from PhD student to lecturer.

Teachers who made the transition from professional practice strongly identified with their (former) professions, especially during their early years of university teaching. In

Table 1. Characteristics of the studies.

	Number of studies
Theoretical frameworks	
Critical or constructivist paradigm	
Social/cultural	32
Discursive/narrative	11
Critical	6
Unclear	16
Post-positivist paradigm	2
Data collection methods	
Interviews	47
Focus groups	7
Observations, conversations	7
Documents	6
Questionnaires	5
Autobiographies	3
Diaries, reports	3
Continent where the study was located	
Europe	
UK	24
Other than UK	12
Australia, New Zealand	10
North America	8
South America	1
Africa, Middle East	3
Asia	2
Participants' tasks	
Teaching only	3
Teaching and research	31
Teaching and working as a practitioner	19
Unclear	14
Total number of studies	59

these early years, they primarily saw themselves as professionals rather than as university teachers and considered their professional expertise important to their credibility as teachers. Their first years were experienced as a stressful period characterised by feelings of uncertainty, self-doubt, and inadequacy – even for teacher educators with significant experience in primary or secondary education. The teachers realised that their professional expertise was not sufficient for their new role. Some authors refer to this as *expert becomes novice* or as a *loss of expertise*. This phase of insecurity lasted from one and a half to three years, and sometimes even longer. After two to three years, being a teacher did become an important part of their identity, either as a second identity or by replacing their previous identity as a professional in their field. In design and music, however, teachers reported to solely see themselves as professionals.

For university teachers making the transition from PhD student to lecturer, the picture is more diffuse. Although several authors have argued that academics most strongly identify with their discipline (cf. Henkel, 2005), the studies in our review show that it is more complex. In one study, most teachers did not identify with their discipline, while the only one who did actually distanced himself from the paradigms that dominated his discipline. Some of the academics identified with being intellectuals rather than with their particular disciplines. Roles like teaching and research were mixed; some academics saw themselves as researchers who teach while others perceived themselves as *blended professionals* who bring teaching and research together in the quest for learning. Moreover, teachers who identified with teaching differed in the type of teacher they saw themselves to be. Two

studies specifically address the transition phase from PhD student to lecturer. In these studies, respondents reported feelings similar to those of teachers coming from professional backgrounds, that is, many recalled feeling insecure about their level of teaching expertise during their early years.

Contextual factors strengthening or constraining identity

The studies address four factors that strengthen or constrain the development of a teacher identity in the university context: the direct work environment, the wider context of higher education, interaction with students, and staff development activities. Each of these factors had a varying impact on teacher identity. We found that contact with students and staff development programmes were usually described as strengthening teacher identity, whereas the wider context of higher education was generally described as having a constraining impact. The direct work environment was described as being either strengthening or constraining.

Direct work environment

Eleven studies describe work environments that enhanced teacher identity, whereas 12 studies describe constraining work environments (see Appendix 1).

The work environment enhanced teacher identity when it was perceived as collegial and supportive. In these departments, teachers felt part of a team that emphasised the value of teaching and offered opportunities to discuss educational matters with colleagues. They experienced a sense of community and provided each other with emotional and practical support. Experienced colleagues played an important role in this respect, since they acted as role models for their colleagues and modelled desired practices.

The work environment was experienced as having a constraining impact on identity when teachers perceived their departments to be competitive, hierarchical, lacking in trust, or to value research more than teaching. In such environments, teachers felt isolated and inhibited to ask for help and experienced a lack of career opportunities based on teaching performance.

The wider context of higher education

Many studies address the role of the wider context of higher education at both the national and international level, although the studies did not make a clear distinction between the two. Overall, the wider context of higher education was described as having a negative impact on university teachers' identities. This involved two themes: (1) the influence of neoliberal management culture and (2) the tension between teaching and research.

Sixteen studies, most conducted in the UK or Australia, discuss *how neoliberal management culture in universities affects teacher identity*, for example, through increased competition between institutions, the introduction of (quasi-)market mechanisms, and quality assessments and audits (see Appendix 1). Teachers in all 16 of these studies criticised these neoliberal developments. They perceived the developments as suppressing creativity in teaching, leading to the reduced autonomy of teachers, expressing a lack of trust in teachers, trivialising the complexity of teaching, and undermining core academic values like community service and academic freedom. Though teachers appreciated rewards of teaching achievement, they were also cynical about the tick-box character and increased

workload they involve. This led to tensions in their teacher identities, often experienced as an increased sense of insecurity and uncertainty.

Six studies demonstrate some resilience among academics. In these studies, teachers managed to maintain a positive identity as an intellectual coupled with a great passion for one or more aspects of their work. They tried to cope with neoliberal developments by, for example, playing the game or creating supportive practices for themselves, as well as stressing that other aspects of their life are more important than work.

Twenty studies mention the *relationship between teaching and research*, and all of them describe it as one filled with conflict that leads to tensions in one's identity as a teacher (see Appendix 1). The common thread in these studies is that teachers came to believe that teaching is less valued than research. These teachers said that universities send mixed messages; although they claim that research and teaching are equally important, academics experienced that when it comes to promotions and tenure, research performance and publications were emphasised. One respondent teacher put it as follows: 'Get a published paper read by six people, you're a hero. Get 1400 people with an 80%–90% pass rate, you know, so what?' (Clarke, Knights, & Jarvis, 2012, p. 10). Some studies report that academics felt that teaching is seen as a second-class activity, even in *teaching universities*, where research is optional rather than required. The undervaluation of teaching compared to research led to tensions in the academics' identity as teachers and to feelings of insecurity and reduced self-esteem.

Quality initiatives like teaching awards, development grants, and the establishment of centres for teaching excellence were said to open up new opportunities and support the emergence of *the teacher* as a separate and legitimate identity within universities. Yet, this emergent identity was nevertheless still insecure, since it was experienced as having a low status and given only limited support in terms of recognition.

Students

Contact with students is described as strengthening university teachers' identities. Through student reactions and feedback, academics both felt appreciated and experienced job satisfaction. They reported enjoying working with students and feeling strongly committed to them. In interactions with students, teachers sensed that their work mattered, which in turn strengthened their teacher identity.

In three studies, however, tensions are reported in relation to working with students. These concern issues university teachers found difficult to deal with, for example, dealing with cultural differences in dialogic forms of teaching or disappointment when teachers were confronted with students who did not feel as passionate about their subject as they did.

Staff development activities

Eleven studies report that staff development activities were experienced as strengthening teacher identity (see Appendix 1). Different aspects contributed to this positive effect. First, teachers experienced that staff development led to increased confidence in one's teaching ability. Second, the activities provided the potential to experience a sense of connectedness with like-minded peers, with whom they could test ideas and exchange opinions. Third, staff development helped teachers to develop an educational language,

which provided them with a sense of credibility and legitimacy as educators within their departments.

Two studies, however, report a negative impact of staff development on teacher identity. In the first, some teachers felt that the actual teaching support from staff development activities was suspect, with the teachers fearing the staff developers played a surveillance role. In the second, academics at a research-focused university felt that participation in a teaching course was risky, since they were being marked out as second class because their interest in teaching was not conducive to the research focus of the department.

Psychological processes underlying the development of a teacher identity

We identified five psychological processes involved in the development and maintenance of a teacher identity. These processes and their relationship to contextual factors are summarised in Figure 2.

First, in terms of developing a teacher identity, it seemed important that university teachers feel a *sense of appreciation* for teaching. University teachers who felt their academic worth was questioned also felt their self-esteem to be undermined, whereas teachers who felt understood and valued did not. On the other hand, appreciation from students, as well as initiatives such as such as teaching awards, grants or monetary rewards, seemed to underscore a general appreciation for teaching and were found to confirm one's identity as a teacher.

Second, a *sense of connectedness* to other teachers was described as having a strengthening effect on one's identity as a teacher. Colleagues served as resources to identify with.
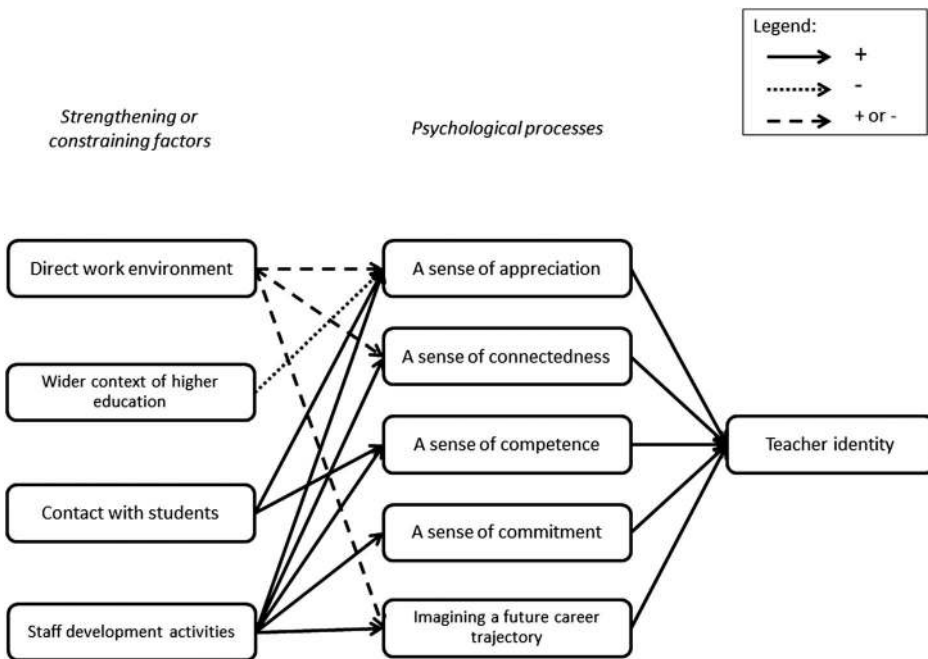
Figure 2. Identity development of university teachers: strengthening and constraining factors and underlying psychological processes.

Sharing experiences with colleagues with similar experiences created a sense of mutual trust and enhanced confidence; this also validated one's identity as a teacher. Contact with peers outside the department through social and professional networks or during staff development activities fulfilled a similar role.

Third, a *sense of competence* was found to be a key indicator of the development of a teacher identity. In the early years of teaching, academics felt reluctant to see themselves as teachers, but once they felt more confident in their role, they developed a teacher identity. Moreover, we found that the *recognition* of competence by others is important. The few teachers in the studies whose teaching competence was not recognised felt insulted and tense and reported strong identity struggles.

Fourth, teacher identity went hand in hand with a *sense of commitment* and feeling a deep personal interest in teaching the next generation. Several studies describe teachers with strong values in terms of caring for students. When signals from the department or from a neoliberal management culture conflicted with such strong values, these teachers tended to experience strong identity struggles. On the other hand, staff development activities were found to offer opportunities for teachers to develop or reinforce their strong values of care and to reaffirm their satisfaction with teaching.

Finally, teacher identity was strengthened when teachers were able to *imagine their future career trajectory* as teachers. Senior colleagues with track records based on teaching performance appeared to serve as role models for younger teachers in this respect. Conversely, when teachers saw limited or no career development possibilities, the potential to envision themselves as senior teachers in the future was curtailed.

Conclusions and discussion

The studies included in our review show that university teachers develop a teacher identity after a few years of being a teacher. This teacher identity is built on other identities, including those of a professional, academic, researcher, or intellectual. We identified several factors that strengthen or constrain the development of teacher identity. Contact with students and staff development programmes were experienced as strengthening teacher identity, whereas the wider context of higher education was generally experienced as having a constraining effect. Additionally, the role of the direct work environment was experienced as either strengthening or constraining, depending on whether or not teaching was valued in the department. We found five psychological processes that were involved in the development and maintenance of a teacher identity: a sense of appreciation, a sense of connectedness, a sense of competence, a sense of commitment, and imagining a future career trajectory.

As is the case for teachers in primary and secondary education, developing a teacher identity in the university context is not a smooth process, and the outcome is uncertain. The limited 'collective regard' that the wider higher education context has for teaching sometimes particularly appears to be conflicting. The negative impact of neoliberal management culture on identity has also been reported by primary and secondary education teachers (Wilkins, 2012).

The direct work environment has a strong impact on teacher identity. It can either compensate for the negative effects of the wider context of higher education or maintain them. Finding a professional community of like-minded colleagues is not easy for

university teachers. At universities, departments are usually discipline based, which means that often research prevails. Teachers may therefore be more likely to find like-minded colleagues in other departments.

Limitations

First, our choice to restrict our search to English articles may have led to an over-representation of studies from English-speaking countries, which may have influenced our findings. Second, interpretation of the studies was hindered by the fact that many of the studies provided limited information on their context. The status of participants' appointments, for example, and the proportion of time they spent on teaching was often not clear, which prevented us from understanding whether teachers with different appointments experience different identity tensions.

Implications

The studies we reviewed suggest that much work still needs to be done on the explicit appreciation of university teaching, even though universities are increasingly likely to emphasise the value of teaching (Hénard & Roseveare, 2012). In the UK, for example, academics can now gain formal recognition as associate fellows, fellows, senior fellows or principal fellows (HEA, 2011). If institutions incorporate these fellowships in their systems for promotion and tenure, this could lead to an increased sense of recognition, reward, and professional status. An interesting question for future research would be to determine whether this would also have a positive impact on teacher identity.

The review shows that the direct work environment is the place where university teachers experience appreciation for their job (or not). An interesting question for future research would be to find how if and through what means the implicit messages about the value of teaching can be changed. The role of department leaders for example, seems important. Recently, there has been growing attention to leadership development programmes in universities. Currently, these tend to focus on leadership styles, interpersonal (communication) skills, and leadership theories (Ladyshewsky & Flavell, 2011). Our review, however, shows that it would be good to also pay attention to the way leaders can change the implicit departmental messages about the value of teaching.

All five of the psychological processes we found to underlie the development and maintenance of teacher identity (as depicted in Figure 2) are associated with membership of a professional community of university teachers. A community provides a sense of appreciation, a sense of connectedness, recognition of one's competence, a shared sense of commitment, and role models that help teachers to imagine their own future career. This suggests that it is important to build community for university teachers, a community where teachers can support each other and identify possibilities for change (Holland & Gómez Correal, 2013). When teachers feel connected to a community of teachers, the community serves as a group to which they feel they belong (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Wenger, 1998). However, as studies have shown, finding like-minded colleagues in one's department is not always easy. In order to empower university teachers, it thus seems valuable to encourage contact across departments, for example, via teaching teams or communities of teachers with similar teaching roles (Van Lankveld et al.,

2016). An interesting question for future research would be to investigate whether such teaching teams or teacher communities provide teachers the possibility for better identification with the teaching part of their jobs.

Staff development activities have been shown to play an important role in this respect, especially if they manage to increase a sense of appreciation, a sense of connectedness, a sense of competence, a sense of commitment, or make it possible to imagine a future career trajectory as a teacher. As the review shows, in programmes for new teachers, attention needs to be paid to building teacher identity. It is useful to look for connections between teacher identity and other identities, for example as an intellectual, professional, researcher, or academic. Further research could point out whether interventions are helpful in making those connections. Furthermore, the review shows it is important to help teachers to develop strategies to take active control over their situation, either collectively or individually. This will help them deal with neoliberal management cultures and the higher status of research. By focusing on possibility rather than on probability, attention is taken away from the notion that teachers are subject to outside forces, and attention is drawn to the way they could act in order to change the world (Holland & Gómez Correal, 2013). An interesting question for future research would be to explore whether staff development activities explicitly aimed at strengthening these aspects have an effect on teacher agency and identity.

Disclosure statement

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Appendix 1. List of studies and the issues they address.

	Transition to HE teaching	Contextual factors strengthening/constraining teacher identity					Psychological processes involved in teacher identity				
		Work environment	Wider context NLM	Wider context R-T	Students	Staff development	Sense of appreciation	Sense of connectedness	Senses of competence	Sense of commitment	Imagining a future career trajectory
Adler and colleagues (2015)							+				
Andrew, Ferguson, Wilkie, Corcoran, and Simpson (2009)	−								+		
Archer (2008a)			±							+	
Archer (2008b)				−			−				
Beach (2013)			−								
Billot (2010)				−							
Bolden, Gosling, and O'Brien (2014)			−	−							
Burton, Boschmans, and Hoelson (2013)	−										
Cahan and colleagues (2011)		+			+					+	
Carrillo and Baguley (2011)	−				−			+			
Churchman and King (2009)			±		+		+	+			
Clarke and colleagues (2012)			±	−	+						
Clegg (2008)			±	−							
Duffy (2013)	−										
Fanghanel and Trowler (2008)			−	−			−			+	
Fitzmaurice (2013)				−						+	
Griffiths, Thompson, and Hryniewicz (2014)	−	±			+						
Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett (2013)			−	−							
Harman and McDowell (2011)											

(*Continued*)

Continued.

	Contextual factors strengthening/constraining teacher identity						Psychological processes involved in teacher identity				
	Transition to HE teaching	Work environment	Wider context NLM	Wider context R-T	Students	Staff development	Sense of appreciation	Sense of connectedness	Senses of competence	Sense of commitment	Imagining a future career trajectory
Harrison and McKeon (2008)	−	±				+		+	±		+
Hockings, Cooke, Yamashita, McGinty, and Bowl (2009)		−	−		+		+			+	
Hökkä and Eteläpelto (2014)		−		−							
Hurst (2010)		±				+			+		
Izadinia (2014)	−					+		+			
Jawitz (2009)		+									
Jones (2007)			−			−					
Jones (2010)					±					+	
Khan (2011)	−			−							
Kreber (2010)		−	−	−	+	+			+	+	
Kumar, Roberts, and Thistlethwaite (2011)		±		−	+	+		+		+	±
Levin and Montero Hernandez (2014)		−								+	
Lieff and colleagues (2012)						+		+	+	+	+
Liu and Xu (2011)		±							−		
Lopes, Boyd, Andrew, and Pereira (2014)		+									+
Martensson, Roxa, and Olsson (2011)						+					
Mathison (2015)			±					+			
McCormack, Vanags, and Prior (2014)											
Menter (2011)				−							
Murray (2012)					+					+	
Murray and Male (2005)	−			−					+		
Nevgi and Löfström (2015)						+		+			
Nixon (1996)		±	−	−	+			+		+	

(*Continued*)

Continued.

	Contextual factors strengthening/constraining teacher identity						Psychological processes involved in teacher identity				
	Transition to HE teaching	Work environment	Wider context NLM	Wider context R-T	Students	Staff development	Sense of appreciation	Sense of connectedness	Senses of competence	Sense of commitment	Imagining a future career trajectory
O'Sullivan and Irby (2014)							+				
Peach and Bieber (2015)					+					+	
Reybold and Alamia (2008)	−			−						+	
Sikes (2006)		+		−			−	+		+	+
Skelton (2012a)			−	−			±			+	
Skelton (2012b)					−					+	
Skelton (2012c)			−				−				
Skelton (2013)						±					
Smith (2010)	±	±	−				−			+	
Starr and colleagues (2006)						+	+	+		+	
Trevitt and Perera (2009)						+					
Triantafyllaki (2010)											
Tryggvason (2012)				−							
Van Roermund, Tromp, Scherpbier, Bottema, and Bueving (2011)		−									
Williams (2014)		−									
Winberg (2008)						+					
Ylijoki and Ursin (2013)			±								

Note: + positive, − negative, ± both positive and negative.