Psychosocial Factors that Shape the Professional Identity Crisis in Prospective Language Teachers

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Abstract

This case study, framed in the Socio-critical paradigm and following a narrative approach, describes the role psychosocial factors play in shaping the professional identity crisis in a group of prospective teachers in the Language Teaching Program of a private university in Medellín, Colombia. We developed three data collection techniques to conduct this study. First, participants in the stage of professional practicum were to write a narrative about their first experiences as prospective language teachers. Our objective was to describe the psychosocial factors shaping the identity crisis. Then, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the intention of defining the role these factors play in shaping the crisis; and finally, a focus group with the objective of relating these psychosocial factors with the identity crisis. Findings revealed that prospective teachers perceive themselves very vulnerable to fail, they tend to avoid frustration and their lack of self-confidence inhibits their class performance. We also found that the lack of career guidance during high school years, the social status of the teaching profession, and the idealization of the teaching profession as well as the social conditions of school contexts, played an important role in shaping the identity crisis in our prospective teachers. We find it advisable for Language Teaching Programs to develop psychosocial support strategies that bring prospective teachers' voices to be heard in favor of constructing strong and resilient identities able to respond to current school demands.

Keywords

language teacher's professional identity crisis, teacher's identity, prospective teachers, psychosocial factors, socio-critical paradigm, narrative approach

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This case study, framed in the Socio-critical paradigm and following a narrative approach, describes the role psychosocial factors play in shaping the professional identity crisis in a group of prospective teachers in the Language Teaching Program of a private university in Medellín, Colombia. We developed three data collection techniques to conduct this study. First, participants in the stage of professional practicum were to write a narrative about their first experiences as prospective language teachers. Our objective was to describe the psychosocial factors shaping the identity crisis. Then, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the intention of defining the role these factors play in shaping the crisis; and finally, a focus group with the objective of relating these psychosocial factors with the identity crisis. Findings revealed that prospective teachers perceive themselves very vulnerable to fail, they tend to avoid frustration and their lack of self-confidence inhibits their class performance. We also found that the lack of career guidance during high school years, the social status of the teaching profession, and the idealization of the teaching profession as well as the social conditions of school contexts, played an important role in shaping the identity crisis in our prospective teachers. We find it advisable for Language Teaching Programs to develop psychosocial support strategies that bring prospective teachers' voices to be heard in favor of constructing strong and resilient identities able to respond to current school demands.

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"It is in initial teacher education where the first professional crisis takes place."
(Vaillant, 2007, p. 14)

Undergraduate language teaching programs constitute the starting point for most prospective language teachers in their process of developing competences, reflecting and understanding their profession. Nevertheless, becoming a teacher requires, not only understanding and developing the skills and knowledge of how to teach, but also comprises becoming aware of what it means to be a teacher, this is, configuring a professional identity. The construction of a teaching identity – within and out teacher training programs – is highly pervaded by the fluctuating social demands and transformations; likewise, the permanent reform of the education system, changes in the educational paradigm, and the constant fight to position the status given to the teaching profession, challenge teachers' professional competence and alter the teacher's role, image, and assessment (Sadovnikova et al., 2018; Vaillant, 2007). The initial training during which the professional identity commences taking shape is fluctuating and tangled as well; tensions, struggles and feelings of frustration seem to

be common as this is often considered a stage of transformation, configuring the conditions that may subsequently lead to the arousal of a professional identity crisis.

Teacher identity, as a subjective construct that is permanently evolving, comprises a wide arrange of sources that shape such construction. Along this process, teachers aim at making sense of themselves, their roles and how they are presented to others. Teaching in a new context or facing new school constraints tests teachers' identity resources, and also challenges and struggles with their prior identity constructions (Pennington & Richards, 2016) hence, language teacher identity crisis might be triggered. Consequently, prospective teachers' professional practicum appears as the main stage in which crises are prompted, as it is the space in which, for the first time, the majority of prospective teachers face a classroom within an authentic school context assuming their professional role. The crisis experienced by student teachers during their professional training constitutes a turning point and unstable state in which hesitation about the career selection and own capabilities are constant. In consequence, the feeling of uncertainty is mainly found as prospective teachers reach the point in their formative process where they are expected to make use of the methodological and theoretical frameworks acquired during their training as well as the individual resources of their professional identities.

Even though teacher initial education programs have attempted to tackle the issues posed above by means of promoting reflection practices within their curriculum, when they are adopted "only in a cursory or superficial way in the teacher education context, the opportunity to acknowledge, nurture and challenge the developing identity of the teacher is limited" (Graham & Phelps, 2003) and with that, the possibility of student teachers developing the tools to successfully cope teacher identity crisis and the challenges it brings about. In this scenario, opportunely and efficiently allowing student teachers to develop awareness of who they are and become as professionals, turns into a major cornerstone in coping with the struggles, ups and downs and stressful feelings that arise as part of the profession. Hence, the conceptualization of how teachers develop their identity and the dynamics implied around it have connotations for the kind of support needed for professional formation and development (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Therefore, a deep understanding of the factors that shape student English teachers' identity crises becomes fundamental.

This research study emerges under the intention and need of further exploring and expanding the understandings of the professional identity crisis experienced by a group of prospective language teachers within a Language Teaching Program; namely, the call for describing the role psychosocial factors play in shaping such crisis comes coherent. The concern is that once prospective teachers start teaching their first lessons or begin getting familiar with schools' contexts, some of them also begin to experience a kind of discomfort and conflict in relation to the decision of becoming teachers. The contact with actual teaching conditions and reality make them hesitate, and a set of conflicting emotions and ideas arise, affecting their class performance.

As language teachers ourselves we have experienced the clashing feelings that in most cases lead to the emergence of professional identity crisis; indeed, we have experienced the crisis ourselves. In the course of our professional endeavor, we three have served as practicum advisors/mentors for novice teachers. As researchers and language educators, we have turned our interest in understanding the crisis, its characteristics, and on the whole of the factors that shape it; we acknowledge the importance of developing projects that allow us to understand our reality, but also contribute to transform it from a critical perspective. We hope to come up with the insights needed to renovate the curricular programs and the follow-up strategies that help us better support our prospective teachers in their way to become professionals.

Literature Review

"The entanglements I experienced in the classroom are often, no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life."

(Palmer, 1998, p. 2)

In the last decade, many researchers have considered teacher identity and its process of construction as a prominent framing concept and a useful analytical tool in the field of teacher education research (Yeh, 2017); these studies conduct to outline the process of construction of identity in teachers. Developed at a local or international level, the studies focus on prospective teachers, teachers during their first years of teaching, or teachers with certain amount of professional experience. The majority of them consider the stage of professional exercise, and subsequently the entanglements experienced during such phase. Obliquely, as part of their results they reach a number of conditions or features of professional identity crisis. Even though these studies indirectly grasp the phenomena of teacher professional identity crisis, it is noticeable that there is a need for a clear and profound scheme about the factors that configure such crisis in prospective language teachers. Results reported dichotomies, paradoxes and incongruences concerning student teachers' expectations and reality. That is, prospective teachers experienced a sort of tension between reality as it is and reality as it is expected to be. The crisis, then, is triggered by the changes and the mismatch in the sense of working context and personal expectations (Fajardo, 2014; Pinzón & Guerrero, 2018; Sadovnikova et al., 2016; Schatz-Oppenheimer & Dvir, 2014; Sierra Piedrahita, 2018).

Likewise, emotional traits of teachers are found to be an important source of crisis since the juncture between actual teaching conditions and the new expectations and necessities of the context drives teachers to feel "vulnerable" in their jobs; such vulnerability "involves the feeling that their professional identity and moral integrity are being questioned" (Bolívar et al., 2014, p. 111) and loss of self-confidence is one of the main symptoms experienced during the professional identity crisis (Sadovnikova et al., 2016). There is also a significant association between the age and the level of teacher identity, meaning that older students- as having a well-formed sense of personal identity- are better prepared for the process of teacher identity construction and in the overall, demonstrate a higher sense of it (Friesen & Besley, 2013), which provides important considerations in regards of social and psychological factors that are determining in teachers' configuration of identity and the crisis that arises within it. Lastly, as part of the coping behaviors to manage and overcome the crisis "teachers mainly use non-constructive mechanisms of psychological defense (denial and repression), which leads to an increase in internal tension and reduced resistance to stresses of educational activities" (Sadovnikova et al., 2018, p. 39).

In the current scenario, giving relevance to the teacher identity crisis phenomena within the curriculum and the formative scheme, appears mandatory for teacher education programs to foster formative processes that accurately respond to the prospective teachers' needs. It means, providing formative actions and companionship along the teacher identity crisis experienced should be seen as a step into the configuration of a higher sense of their professional identity, as it becomes an effective source of personal and professional growth.

The tension, struggle or conflict – namely, the crisis- experienced by student teachers building their professional identity has been characterized in terms of personality traits of teachers, emotions and behaviors that accompany the stage and even some coping strategies used to manage the crisis. A thorough framework that construes the inner and individual characteristics; the social and external factors that comprise language teachers' self-understanding; and in consequence their identity crisis has not clearly been discussed. That is, there has been an absence of studying prospective language teachers' identity crisis from a

psychosocial viewpoint. Accordingly, the need for further research into this matter has become evident. Consequently, this study arises under the intention of answering the following question: what are the psychosocial factors that shape the professional identity crisis of a group of students of the English language teaching program at a private university in Colombia?

As an essential step to reach a profound awareness of the psychological and social factors that shape professional identity crisis in prospective language teachers, and therefore achieve a deeper understanding of the overall phenomenon, it is fundamental to comprehend acutely the subsequent elements comprised within this study. Exploring them may help us gain perspective to better understand teachers' identity crisis from an integrated view of teachers' performance, teachers' social practice and teachers' self-actualization.

Language Teacher Identity Crisis

Erikson (1968) defined the concept of crisis as a "necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation" (p. 16), this definition is appropriate to multiple situations, including the one of personal development and identity crisis. In this sense, identity crisis is explained by Pennington and Richards (2016) as a time in which individuals feel doubtful about who they are, and it can be triggered by numerous sources such as others' opinions about own self-hood and extreme changes in contexts that require rethinking one's identity. Likewise, when prospective language teachers question their aptitudes and aptness to face the teaching task, their perception of deficiency conduct them to undergo a professional identity crisis.

In the case of language teacher identity, Richards (2012) defines different areas that comprise the foundational and advanced competences that constitute language teacher identity. Thus, language proficiency, disciplinary knowledge, teaching skills, contextual knowledge, learner-focused teaching, pedagogical reasoning skills, theorizing from practice and belonging to a community of practice forge the complex composition of language teachers' identity as these represent the core of expert teacher knowledge and performance (Richards, 2012). Student teachers' own judgement and sense of non-fulfillment on any of these dimensions might lead them to be subjected to a professional identity crisis.

Psychosocial Factors

The notion of psychosocial factors refers to the individual characteristics and social factors that constitute a structural condition of teachers' self-understanding, that is, to their sense of identity. They are defined as the "interpersonal interactions and relations which influence the individual's development and behavior" (Carson et al., 1988). The interaction of these individual and social characteristics influences teachers' perception of the profession and teacher's perception of themselves.

The psychological dimension refers to the individual characteristics of the teacher as a person such as the self-concept, job motivation, beliefs, emotions and values. According to Kelchtermans (as cited by Tateo, 2012, p. 345) the term self-understanding encompasses self-image, job motivation, future perspective, self-esteem, and task perception. Concerning teachers' emotional aspect, literature shows that emotions are at the epicenter of teachers' work. According to Tateo (2012), frustration, changes and failures are also part of teachers' understanding of themselves. Teachers' negative emotions are usually related to their vulnerability – feeling threatened or being unable to face growing demands; and resilience – the way teachers manage to sustain their motivation in times of change (Kelchtermans as cited

by Tateo, 2012). Teachers may experience tension when they cannot overcome emotional stress and demotivation towards their profession.

Likewise, the psychological dimension also comprises the period of human development that prospective teachers come across. According to Arnett (2007), emerging adulthood is a term used to conceptualize the lives of people from their late teens to their mid- to late 20s in industrialized societies. Five characteristics make this time distinct: it is the age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in-between and the age of possibilities (Arnett, 2007). During this stage, young adults are in a transition stage where they are sorting different kinds of difficulties trying to find a place in the adult world including the professional sphere. According to Taber-Thomas and Pérez-Edgar (2014), in the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood the brain is experimenting developmental changes in structure and wiring; and as a result, this process determines the changes from an emotional to a more rational brain. That is, new executive and reasoning functions are awakened and emotional-based decisions are left behind. This also means that emerging adults and their brains are consolidating new adult functions and roles.

The social dimension refers to an interpersonal level, including social relationships, practices and artefacts; and a cultural level, including representations, norms, values and the organizational context (Tateo, 2012). That is, the role of the organizational culture and practical conditions of work. It also includes the social perception of the teaching profession, the changing conditions triggered by the government policy reforms and the changes in society that are leading to new demands on teachers' role, that is, teachers' quality and competences.

Methodology

"Experience is the only real reference point teachers share: experiences as students that influence their views of teaching, experiences in professional preparation, experience as members of society."

(Freeman, 1998, p. 10)

Design

This qualitative research is framed within a Socio-critical paradigm considering that such paradigm is guided by the idea that history, and life in the overall, is "a virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender values crystalized over time" (Guba & Lincoln, 2008, p. 168). In this regard and at a broader level, this study looks into providing a wider scope and bringing a greater deal of attention to the role of professional crisis in the process of identity configuration in prospective teachers, which in turn, promotes a sense of reconfiguration within the formative proposals of language teaching programs; then as well, Critical theory research takes researchers to go beyond describing, "*what is*" towards describing, "*what could be*" (Thomas as cited by Glense, 2011).

Framed in the noted paradigm and considering the characteristics of this study, case study emerges as a suitable and coherent research design, given that our purpose is to make sense of the phenomenon of teacher identity crisis of a group of prospective language teachers. In this sense, Kogan (2004) explains that case study "seeks to recognize a small number of cases in profundity with the purpose of recognizing a wider social phenomenon" (p. 45). Moreover, considering the characteristics attributed to case study aiming at (1) building reality more clearly; (2) minimizing the distance between the researcher and those they study, and (3) understanding the interaction between the different parts of the system studied (Páramo, 2011), a narrative approach provides an advantageous scheme to depict the realities and bring about the portrayal of psychosocial factors that shape the crisis through the stories of the group of

prospective teachers participants. According to Lieblich et al. (1998), narrative approach (1) provides the set where stories themselves become raw data, (2) has been used to learn more about the culture, historical experiences and identity of the narrator; and in a broader level, (3) "refers to any study that uses or analyzes narrative material" (p. 2)

Setting

This study was carried on in a private university located in the city of Medellín, Colombia. It took as a particular context, its English Language Teaching Program and more in specific 10 prospective teachers from the program in their professional practicum stage, which stretches for the last 4 semesters of the program. We selected the participants based on a *homogenous sampling strategy* (Glense, 2011), which consists of selecting all similar cases in order to describe them in depth. The researchers had served, and two of them were currently serving, as mentors/advisors for different student teachers at different stages of their formative process; hence a teacher educator – student teacher relationship had been established prior the commencement of the study. Such condition allowed the researchers to recognize tensions, dissatisfaction and struggles experienced by student teachers within the program; and some of those who were more explicitly and readily manifesting such tendency to trigger a professional crisis were asked to participate in the study. All Participants speak Spanish as their mother tongue and English as their language of instruction. Their ages ranged from nineteen to twenty-five years old and they were attending the practicum class/seminar that accompanies their professional practicum stage. It is important to mention that our participants are considered to be emerging adults who are in search of defining a professional and personal identity.

Data Collection Process

In the pursuit of greater credibility and with the intention of achieving higher levels of accuracy, we implemented multiple data collection techniques to conduct our case study analysis: (1) the construction of a narrative by each participant, (2) semi-structured interviews and (3) a focus group. First, we invited each of the participants to write a narrative about their first experiences as novice language teachers that compiled their formative process from the moment of insertion to the program to the current stage of practicum they were taken; hence, their writing depicted a biographical route focused on describing the paths they take to become teachers. Some of the prompts that guided their writing included describing what actions they carried on during their first experiences inside the classroom as practicum student teachers, how they felt and what they came to think about their experience at schools. The narratives served as the initial and main data source for the study and their construction stretched for about 4 weeks for most participants, though some of them were submitted between two and three weeks after commencement.

After narratives had been written, 5 of the participants were voluntarily settle to participate in a semi-structured interview which was conducted in a one-on-one setting within the university facilities and some in a two-researchers setting; the interviews were intended to discuss and deepen into some of the concepts and ideas that had arouse and were constant along the narratives. We were able to deepen into their teacher development processes, breaking points experienced in their professionalization, and emotions and strategies to overcome the feelings of crises. The interviews lasted no more than 40 minutes each, they were all audio-recorded and were subsequently transcribed for its analysis.

Finally, we administered a focus group with the five participants who had not taken part in the interviews. This last phase was moderated by the three co-researchers. A moderator's guide with prompts and probes was used to keep the discussion on track (Savin-

Baden & Major, 2013) and ideas and concepts initially addressed on the narrative and subsequent interviews were complemented and enhanced. The focus group, as well as the interviews, were conducted in Spanish and the subsequent analysis of the data was also carried on the original language, but finally translated to English for publication purposes.

As researchers, during the process of data collection we followed a set of actions to ensure ethical research practices for the study. Initially, the permission to conduct this research project was granted by the University Research Board Committee and the Vice Director of the Research Department. Prior to participation in the study, the participants were asked to sign a consent form for their participation. Also, we protected their identities by designing an alphabetical code system to label the data each participant provided during the research process. Moreover, the information gathered was systematized and kept in privacy for confidentiality and a bio data chart was organized to keep relevant information on participants such as age, socio-economic strata; as researchers, we were the only ones who had access to all this information. Finally, we used the same assigned code system to reveal data along the research paper and public presentations.

Data Analysis

Stake (1995) suggests that in the process of data analysis researchers are called to "review raw data under various possible interpretations" [and] "search for patterns of data (whether indicated or not indicated by the issues)" (p. 54). Such assertion endorses the practical process we followed in analyzing the data. We began this stage by analyzing the narratives that had been written by the participants. All of the researchers took part in reading through each one of them; they were examined for patterns on the manifestations portrayed within the personal stories of the participants. The information presented there was systematically analyzed by using open Initial Coding (Saldaña, 2016), which implied that we remained open to all possible theoretical and categorical direction indicated by our reading of the data; and as framed in open coding, it also entailed labeling concepts, and defining and developing categories. We read through the narratives until no new concepts were found, but only repetition of the existing labels was evident.

For the subsequent stage of data analysis, we transcribed and analyzed the audio-recorded semi-structured interviews and focus group. We reviewed the information obtained from the transcript using a thematic analytical process on searching through the data for themes and patterns (Glesne, 2011). We read through all transcripts repeatedly in order to identify key concepts and phrases that arose as meaningful units that depicted a more profound and deepened essence of participants formative process and first teaching experience, and namely to observe how data changed or varied in search of new relationships.

We carefully systematized the information gathered at the different phases and from the different sources and followed a three-step process proposed by Parson and Brown (as cited by Mertler, 2006) to conduct the analysis of the overall data for the goal of the study: organization, description and interpretation. The organization stage involved, similarly to the specific coding of the narratives, a reduction of information through the development of a categorization system, which was used to group data that provided similar types of information. We accomplished this by evaluating the codes that were repeated throughout the narratives and transcripts. We used different color markers to organize the emerging categories. We then moved on with describing the main features or characteristics of the categories resulting. In this stage, we connected and related the information gathered from the different sources. Finally, and in seek of interpretation, we examined events, behaviors and other observations for relationships, contradictions and similarities. Anytime instances of the psychosocial factors

that relate to the trigger of the crisis surfaced, we pointed them out as likely to help us answer our research question.

The voice and view of researchers are inevitably present along the research process, especially in our study as the topic is one of personal significance as part of our own story as teachers. Such situation could bring about biases that limit the research design and analysis of the data; for that reason, we conducted an uptight process of triangulation. Denzin (1978 as cited by Fusch et al., 2018) built on the idea of triangulating multiple sources of data and developed four types of triangulation that researchers can use to enhance objectivity, validity and dependability in qualitative research (p. 22). In our case, we conducted a process of analysis and interpretation of data framed in investigator triangulation intended to correlate the findings from the viewpoint of the three researchers in the study; and methodological triangulation for correlating the data from the multiple data collection methods used (Denzin, 1970).

Investigator triangulation permitted bias to decrease in the process of analyzing our data as we were able to confirm findings across the three researchers; and methodological triangulation was manifested in using three different methods in our process of data collection. The process of data analysis led us to three final categories in order to help us describe the role psychosocial factors play in shaping the professional identity crisis experienced by the group of prospective teachers once they started their teaching practicum at different schools around the city; namely, they are presented as prospective teachers' self-understanding, characteristics of the crisis and emotions derived from it, and social tensions and expectations and are fully expanded in the following section.

Findings

"Teaching is an occupation that strongly involves the teacher as a person."
(Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1994, p. 46)

Prospective Teachers' Self-Understanding

This category encompasses all the psychological factors that shape prospective teachers' identity crisis, that is, vulnerability, and frustration avoidance, lack of confidence and fear of failing. The fact of being novices or amateurs in the teaching profession make prospective teachers feel vulnerable to fail, that is, they feel weak and more likely to make mistakes. This incompetent feeling led them to experience a sort of fear to fail, debilitating their efforts to struggle and overcome daily difficulties. On the other hand, their cognitive repertoire to cope with teaching challenging situations was limited. Frustration became an obstacle instead of perceiving its adaptive function to adjust to new experiences at school; and finally, yet importantly, emotions that emerged during the crisis contributed to shape it.

Prospective teachers tended to represent themselves as vulnerable to failure. They were more likely to feel threatened or unable to face the growing demands of the teaching profession as participant (C) manifested:

> I didn't know if I was going to be able to deal with everything the profession requires. It was then when the crises appeared, every time more constant and stronger than the previous ones, [...] I knew that I did not have what this job was demanding, I just wanted to cancel everything and leave[1] (Narrative excerpt).

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[1] "[...]No sabía si iba a ser capaz con todo lo que la carrera exigía; fue entonces cuando las crisis aparecieron, cada vez más seguidas y más fuertes que las anteriores, no me sentía feliz y mi afán por terminar la carrera era

When prospective teachers refuse their vulnerability or run away from it, they refuse the help needed to move the essential and controversial foundations of their identity. They missed the opportunity to prove themselves right or wrong and to put into practice what they once had learned, the chance to construct a strong teacher identity.

On the other hand, prospective teachers' lack of confidence led them to see some teaching tasks as obstacles to their class performance, as participant (E) expressed: "…classroom management was the worst of my enemies, since my students did not see authority in me; evidently it was because I did not see it in myself either." [2] (Narrative excerpt). This lack of confidence tended to bring prospective teachers to accept failure easily and to perform poorly concerning their students' expectations. This narrow and negative perception of classroom reality is the result of an unfavorable self-image that made prospective teachers feel defeated before going to the battle scene.

Besides that, we also found that this fear of failing took prospective teachers to develop a negative appreciation of their own job performance. They were more inclined to undervalue their own qualities and abilities. This attitude seemed to affect their classroom performance as participant (A) expressed:

> I think it's a fear of failing, of not fulfilling the expectations people have of me [...] many people beat me up about me giving not value at all to what I do…because I'm not able to see in me what other people see [3](Interview excerpt).

This absence of self-value interfered with their class performance as far as this resulted in a disempowerment of human and teaching actions. This predisposition to ignore own capabilities is the result of a low self-esteem at a personal level. Therefore, we can see that the relation between the personal and professional dimensions are closely related; they depend on each other.

In the same regards, students' fear of failing triggered a driven predisposition to avoid frustration. This represented an influential element that shaped their professional identity crisis as well, as expressed in the following excerpt by participant (C)

> I felt a great love and passion for teaching, the pedagogy courses made me reflect and imagine myself in a classroom being the best teacher, but the fear of not being the best in English created a barrier in me, taking away my self-confidence [...] my thoughts about myself were positive and negative. (Narrative excerpt)

The confrontation between the ideal teacher and the real one made prospective teachers experience a kind of hesitation mixed with an emotional imbalance. Frustration was also the result of the high-quality expectations constructed around the English teaching profession and the idealization of the use of the language at a native speaker level, which leads to a misconception of the voice of the language teacher in the EFL context.

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cada vez mayor […]yo sabía que no cumplía con lo que esta labor me estaba demandando, solo quería cancelar todo e irme"

[2] "Siempre he sido una mujer extremadamente perfeccionista, entonces sería un choque muy duro si fracasara en mis prácticas docentes. […] El manejo de clase fue el peor de mis enemigos, ya que mis estudiantes no veían autoridad en mí, evidentemente era porque ni yo misma la veía en mí"

[3] "Yo creo que es un temor a fracasar, a no llenar como las expectativas de lo que la gente espera de mí […] muchas personas me regañado qué porque yo no valoro lo que hago…que porque yo no soy capaz de ver en mi lo que otras personas ven"

Characteristics of the Crisis and Emotions Derived from It

Concerning this category, we understand that a professional identity crisis cannot be outlined in a straight, single, formal manner. It becomes necessary to outset the backgrounds to it and the different ways in which it may be manifested. One of the characteristics of the professional identity crisis experienced by the participants of this study is the emotional imbalance that results as part of confronting unfamiliar, challenging experiences at a professional level. Participant (B) expressed,

> I was going through a pre-practicum crisis, in which I doubted thousands of times if I would be able to fulfill the teaching task, since now I was about to put into practice all of my learnings. [...] I realized that there was a lot I still needed to learn, since I was confronted many times about my role as a teacher [...]. I began doubting about my decision. I felt that there were many things that I did not have internalized in my teacher-self and that could eventually affect my professional performance. [4] (narrative excerpt)

Thus, the challenge that arises from facing the teaching practicum process for the first time, presents a conflictive stage for prospective teachers since during this phase they are to assess themselves – sometimes at a subconscious level – as to how they have been able to internalize the fundamentals, and construct themselves as teachers. Furthermore, this assessment is to be determined and examined by external agents who are part of their first teaching experience in a real scenario.

Likewise, the tensions that derive from this juncture, which is the commencement of the practicum, are stressors of emotions that contributed to shape the teacher identity crisis; either positive or negative emotions played determining roles in the configuration of the crisis as expounded by participant (E):

> The first day, I arrived happy and excited about my lesson, but as time passed, I became scared of Mondays. I knew I would feel disappointed of my own job. My excitement turned into frustration, I had moments of doubting whether or not my career was placed on teaching, every time I had to grade exams I felt lost, because my students were failing that much and so many of them, that I thought I was the one to blame, and I was right. (Narrative excerpt)

This means that not achieving the goals that had been personally and initially established led prospective teachers to experience emotions of disappointment towards their own capacities when being unable to face the teaching task; moreover, this frustration triggers a feeling of dissatisfaction with the profession and brings hesitation to the choice of becoming teachers. In addition, going through the uncertainty that represents that stage of teaching for the first time in an actual setting pushes student teachers into emotions of fear. As described by participant (H):

> I am afraid of failing, I am afraid of not achieving something I set. That sense of frustration for not being able to make it. [...] I need more experience but I am

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[4] "Estaba atravesando una crisis previa a la práctica, en la que dudaba miles de veces si podría cumplir con la tarea de enseñanza, ya que ahora estaba a punto de poner en práctica todos mis aprendizajes. [...] Me di cuenta de que todavía tenía mucho que aprender, ya que muchas veces me confrontaron con respecto a mi papel como profesor [...]. Empecé a dudar de mi decisión. Sentí que había muchas cosas que no había internalizado en mi ser docente y que eventualmente podrían afectar mi desempeño profesional. "

afraid to go out to gain that experience, so it scares me to undertake that process
of putting into practice everything that I want to accomplish, but I don't know
how to put it there. [5](Interview excerpt)

In this regard, fear can be understood as a restricting and suppressing factor that makes students
avoid taking challenges and risk into acquiring new learnings and experiences towards
teaching. In short, emotions such as frustration, dissatisfaction, and fear, which come across
when entering unfamiliar situations that require putting teaching knowledge into action,
comprise meaningful psychological factors involved in the configuration of teacher identity
crisis.

We also found that when student teachers started experiencing the crisis that surrounds
their teaching identity, they made use of implicit strategies that allowed them to manage and
go through this conflictive stage. The strategies were used as an attempt to gain emotional
balance. Participant (J) depicts a tendency to put aside academic responsibilities as a behavior
that permit her cope with this critical juncture: "unfortunately, this crisis lasted a long time and
made me neglect and lay back in my academic obligations" [6](Narrative excerpt). Hence,
prospective teachers left aside the responsibilities that derive from their formative process as
teachers as a way to make up for the anguish and uneasiness experienced during this stage and
diminish the overwhelming effects of the crisis. This emotional recovery attitude also disguises
a kind of avoiding copying strategy that takes people to postpone pain or pleasure before
confronting situations in life.

Moreover, participants also manifested that while living such identity crisis, they have
trouble in putting together actions to move forward. Participant (H) expressed:

I feel like stopping doing anything because I try but I'm blocked. There is
something that doesn't let me go forward and I don't know what it is, I feel like
I'm starting to collapse, […] so I start to feel that I'm drowning, that I can't, that
I don't want to continue anymore. [7](Interview excerpt)

This means, as student teachers go through the teacher identity crisis, mental blocking appears
as a constraint that limits their ability to construct a positive perception of the profession during
this phase. Consequently, the behaviors that outline teacher identity crisis are more evidently a
disconnection from the teaching task and reluctance to cope with academic responsibilities.

Social Tensions and Expectations

Concerning this category, we found that the lack of career guidance during high school
years as well as the social status of the teaching profession were issues interfering with the
decisions prospective teachers made as they experienced some kinds of tensions and
contradictions during their identity crisis. On the other hand, the idealization of the teaching
exercise triggered a kind of discomfort and distress the group of prospective teachers
experienced as they started teaching their first lessons. In the same thread of reasoning, the

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[5] "El miedo al fracaso, […] me da miedo fracasar, a mí me da miedo no lograr algo que yo me propuse, sentir esa
frustración de que no pude […] me falta más experiencia pero me da miedo salir a conseguir esa experiencia,
entonces me da susto enfrentarme a eso, poner en práctica todo lo que yo quiero lograr, pero no sé cómo ponerlo
ahí"

[6] "Lastimosamente esta crisis me duró muchísimo tiempo e hizo que me descuidara y me relajara en mis
obligaciones académicas".

[7] "siento que ya no quiero hacer nada porque yo intento pero estoy bloqueada, hay algo que no me deja avanzar
y no sé qué es, siento como si estuviera empezando a colapsar, […]entonces empiezo a sentir que me estoy
ahogando, que no puedo, que ya no quiero seguir"

unfavorable teaching conditions of schools and the constant policy reform tended to frustrate and dishearten prospective teachers towards the profession. The high expectations of significant others and society changes made students feel overwhelmed by the social responsibilities entrenched in the teaching profession.

The lack of vocational orientation during school years made some prospective teachers entere the profession uncertain of the decision to become teachers. They left school without knowing what they were good at, they left school without a clear idea of what it was they really wanted to do with their lives, as it was evidenced in one of the interviews by participant (I): [8] "Actually, I did not know what I wanted to study, I had not made any decision, nor what choice to make". (Interview excerpt). The result of this hesitation made these prospective teachers more vulnerable to experience a prompt identity crisis in comparison with other participant teachers. They happened to become teachers by accident and not by incident.

Nonetheless, the social status of the profession as well as the social recognition in terms of income, played an important role in prospective teachers as they come to assess the social and economic benefits teachers are provided with.[9] "[…] the perception they have about being teachers is tough, teachers are poorly paid and that is true" (Focus group excerpt). The poor social perception of the teaching profession made prospective teachers feel confused and weak-minded to exercise the profession and picture themselves as language teachers.

The poor teaching conditions of schools, especially in public institutions were likely to discourage prospective teachers to the point that they were willing to quit, as expressed by participant (D).

> I took a look at the circumstances and I said to myself, that teacher doesn't have anything to work with, no materials, and no resources at all. It was something I wanted to witness since I came from a private school, but when I saw her with forty kids, I said to myself, I do not want that kind of job. [10] (Interview excerpt)

This unpromising picture of reality made prospective teachers develop negative feelings and attitudes towards the teaching profession.

In this sense, as prospective teachers immersed themselves into school cultures and began delivering their first lessons, they were inclined to idealize the teacher they might become and find it incapable of taking it up as also expressed by participant (D)[11] "[…] That also makes me get scared, the fact that I do not find myself being a good example to follow, that fact that I go to cope with teaching and I feel incapable of doing so." (Interview excerpt). The idealization of the teaching profession made prospective teachers feel incompetent and see frustration as a negative experience. Negative predictions about self-performance reflected a lack of confidence to exercise the teaching profession.

Moreover, we also found that prospective teachers perceived fear of failing as a negative consequence that goes side by side with the emotional pressure they feel for not letting

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[8] " … la verdad no sabía que quería estudiar pues no tenía como como una decisión tomada de lo que quería, ni siquiera tenía como tal opción de que quería estudiar"

[9] "[…] la percepción que se tiene de que ser docente es un trabajo duro y es muy mal remunerado si pues, en cierta forma es verdad."

[10] "Pero yo miro esas circunstancias y digo, pero es que no tienen con qué trabajar la profesora (…) "igual no hay materiales no hay recursos no hay, y es una cosa que yo quería conocer porque yo vengo de toda una educación privada… ( )   "pero cuando yo la veo a ella con 40 y pico de pelaos… (…) yo si digo, yo en eso no quiero trabajar"

[11] "… eso también da como mucho susto que yo no sea un buen ejemplo que pues que yo salga ahí como a enfrentarme a eso a enseñar y a eso y que no, no sea capaz."

their beloved ones down.[12] "I think it is more like a fear of failing, for not fulfilling people's expectations, I am afraid of disappointing my beloved ones, I know they expect a lot from me." (Focus group excerpt). Prospective teachers perceived social demands and people's expectations as social stressors that interfere with their teaching performance.

Discussion

"Societies have histories in the course of which specific identities emerge; these histories are, however, made by men with specific identities."
(Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 194)

The role psychosocial factors play in shaping the professional identity crisis in the group of prospective teachers reveals that during the identity crisis, students are more concerned about personal and instrumental issues of the profession, which might be a reflection of the prescriptive English Language Teaching Programs that are framed upon discourses that only value teachers because of their technical and linguistic competences, but the very essence of becoming a teacher seems to be undervalued.

Psychologically speaking, findings expose that prospective teachers are more likely to be self-centered. It means that as they start teaching their first lessons, their personalities turn out to be more narcissistic since their attention is more focused on their performance and the expression of the emotions derived from it. Giving too much importance to their teaching performance and struggling to empathize with students and school reality came to trigger an unstable sense of identity. The choice to grow as teachers depends on how they deal with their vulnerability.

However, politically speaking, more than a transitory breakdown, this identity crisis should represent an opportunity to find chances to risk, to go fully through the door of the unexpected and not to remain paralyzed by fear. Social, cultural, and political issues are not relevant yet, unless prospective teachers realize the social function of school and the social responsibility of the language teaching profession.

Socially speaking, we have noticed that the internationalization of the English teaching profession, because of the globalization process around the world, has also interfered with the identity construction process of English teachers in peripheral contexts. The idea of international teachers seems to take away teachers' identity as they have not a country, but only a language. However, putting this crisis into a specific EFL context, we consider these findings can help teacher educators, curricular designers, and administrators in Teacher Education Programs to better understand the personal and social factors that comprises the first professional identity crisis in contexts where English has been spread with universal values. Likewise, it can be asserted that the professional identity crisis experienced in an ESL context by a prospective teacher will be absolutely determined by their own socio-cultural and psychological factors.

As researchers, we came to value narratives, not just as mere instruments to collect data, but to generate meaningful information as participants were given opportunities to write, think and reflect during their first lesson deliveries and keep track of that information in journals. As teacher educators, we also came to value these narratives as interactive and pedagogical techniques to promote reflection and change. While prospective teachers were given the chance

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[12] "Yo creo que es un temor a fracasar a no llenar como las expectativas de la gente, lo que esperan de mí como no poder saciar eso entonces me da como susto decepcionarlos las personas pues que yo quiero y que me quieren y que esperan mucho de mí, me da es como ese susto."

to reflect, we could evidence how some of them were transformed as they were confronted by their own inner voices, questions, and wonders.

One of the implications our findings have for Language Teacher Education Programs is to include a stronger space for the voice of students' personal accounts into the courses offered in the curriculum. The crisis seems to be unavoidable for prospective teachers; therefore, allowing them to be heard in atmospheres that are designed for that may help them find the place they are looking for during this period. Along with this, we also believe that it is important to build higher awareness within the academic community of the issues implied in the construction of the professional identity of prospective English language teachers. Thus, professional development programs should include spaces for approaching and discussing literature and ways to overcome the identity crisis in the company of peers and professors.

Concerning the results found by Sadovnikova et al. (2016), we also found a profound need for psychological support for the development of teachers. Most of our prospective teachers found avoidance as a debilitating copying strategy that affects their class performance. Negative feelings and emotions as fear and frustration became mechanisms of psychological defense that increased their internal tensions. The loss of confidence became the motor that inhibits positive behaviors. Prospective teachers need emotional, cognitive and behavioral support that provide them with suitable tools that help them find creative and alternative ways to deal with the professional and social demands.

We came to understand that during this identity crisis, there are some other concurrent factors that are exclusively present during this period of life and also need to be solved. These factors involved a set of issues that constitute a cornerstone stage in the configuration of their personal and professional identities. The way they overcome their professional crisis is pretty much related to the ways they solve their personal issues. The professional crisis contributes to reshape their personal self, setting a reciprocal relationship between the ideal self and the ideal teacher. Hence, when the manifestations of the crisis are grasped by Teacher Education Programs as sources of learning and therefore included in the curriculum, it might be an opportunity to favor the formative process of prospective teachers.

Our results also disclose what Bolívar et al. (2014) found in their study about teachers' vulnerability. The unfavorable school conditions as well as the expectations of the contexts seem to trigger a tension and a kind of discomfort among the group of prospective teachers who find becoming language teachers a really challenging undertaking. The reality of public-school teaching conditions seems to discourage and dishearten students. Prospective teachers whose resilient identities become able to sort adverse and unexpected teaching situations can find their own ways to overcome that impact, while those with less resilient traits struggle to overcome their difficulties. That is why it is important for Teacher Education Programs to include in their curriculum alternative ways to help prospective teachers deal with challenging situations they find uncontrollable.

In accordance to the study developed by Schatz-Oppenheimer and Dvir (2014), who also examined the psychological processes comprised in the construction of professional identities in novice teachers, two important issues were related to our results; that is, prospective teachers' perceptions of their teaching role and the gap between fantasy and professional reality. Concerning teachers' perceptions of their role, it was evident that teachers tended to undervalue their class performance as a result of their fears. The tensions emerging from the mismatch found between reality and their expectations causes a psychosocial shock that ended up affecting their performance.

In the same thread of reasoning, local studies evidenced the prominent mismatch between the school reality and the information prospective teachers receive during their training process. The curricular content through which prospective teachers are trained is incongruent and does not help to gain a real picture of reality; there is a manifested

incongruence concerning prospective teachers' expectations and reality. That is, prospective teachers experienced a kind of tension between reality as it is and reality as it is expected to be (Fajardo, 2014; Pinzón & Guerrero, 2018, Sierra-Piedrahita, 2018). This reflects a profound need to provide prospective teachers with tools that allow them to have an actual and more critical reading of school contexts.

However, regarding the results presented by Friesen and Besley (2013) about the development of teacher identity during the first year of teaching experience, they found a closed relationship between age and identity level. In contrast to their study, we found that younger students demonstrated a lower level of identity; that is, prospective teachers hardly ever picture themselves as successful teachers. They tend to see themselves vulnerable to fail. They find it difficult to believe in themselves. They do not find competences or abilities in them to construct strong teaching identities.

According to Arnett (2007), it might happen that many emerging adults are ambivalent about taking on adult roles and responsibilities. This author affirms that this ambivalence does not represent a rejection to adult life. It is more a time to assess their potentials and wait to take adult obligations. The life stage of emerging adults is a developmental period traced by the transition to adulthood that has arisen thanks to social and cultural pressures and tensions. Consequently, brain development contributes to increase independence and responsibility in a context where emerging adults still find parental and social support. It is the time to learn how to become adults.

The configuration of an identity as professionals is implicitly and explicitly, the essence of Teacher Education Programs. This vital construction is traced by a conflictive and tensioning stage in which an identity crisis appears as prospective teachers are faced with the actual conditions of schools. Reality does not match with imaginary made up during their preparation courses. As a result, the beginning of their professional practicum seems to be the most tensioning and significant one. Along with this, prospective teachers are in a transition stage into adulthood when they are trying to figure out their place in the adult world, this by itself represents a source of constant struggle, adding to the configuration of the crisis. So, considering the findings reached in this study and the discussion presented, we can assert that prospective teachers' acceptance of who they are as persons and professionals and the awareness of their own possibilities and limitations as professionals arise in part as a result of the way they overcome the crisis. Moreover, the crisis experienced raised students' self-awareness, adaptation and acknowledgement of their personal and professional potentialities.

One main limitation of our study was time and stress, as researchers and teacher educators, we are not given enough time to accomplish the corresponding duties compare to the time assigned in public universities and other countries. Ten months are not sufficient to conduct a study and accomplish administrative and teaching responsibilities at the same time. Unfortunately, the research policies of the institution are very strict when deadlines are not met, researchers are penalized getting their research hours reduced at the expense of their effort for working very intensively to prepare, conduct, analyze, and present the research report.

We suggest for those who get interested in developing studies related to our topic, to consider expanding the number of participants to include prospective teachers from public and private universities in order to compare sociocultural issues involved in the configuration of the professional identity crisis. It would be interesting to open up spaces of dialogue and academic exchange between prospective teachers from both contexts to better understand the issues related with the construction of the current and upcoming generations of English Foreign Language Teachers in our specific context.

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