

# REFLECTING UPON TEACHER IDENTITY, SELF- EFFICACY AND TEACHING PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN PRIMARY TRAINEE TEACHERS

## Introduction

This article discusses the findings of Beth's undergraduate dissertation which investigated teacher identity in trainee primary school teachers, specifically focusing on their identities as primary teachers who teach physical education (PE). The dissertation, although small-scale, has some interesting reflections to consider on trainee teacher identity and how initial teacher training (ITT) providers might support self-efficacy in the teaching of PE. Beth used a mixed methodology approach; this included a questionnaire, interviews and focus groups to gather data from a sample of 65 trainees in their final year of a three-year undergraduate primary education degree with qualified teacher status (QTS).

## Beth's motivations

During my teacher training, I was motivated to address my own teacher identity as someone whose further education had focused on mathematics yet was specialising in PE in my teacher training. I observed my teacher identity evolve as I became more familiar with teaching primary PE and was intrigued to investigate how this presented in my peers and how much specialising in PE would impact on my identity compared to my peers with specialisms in different primary subjects. I was interested in the way in which university and school-based experiences could affect my peers' (trainee teachers) perceptions of themselves, how this affected their self-efficacy and their feelings about their teacher identity.

## Rationale

Current literature on this topic highlights issues relating to identity and the impact on teacher attrition, suggesting feelings of incompetence and lack of confidence can result in low job satisfaction which, in turn, can result in teachers leaving the profession (Department for Education (DfE), 2018; Ofsted, 2019; Foster, 2019). Educational professionals are among those reported to have "the highest rates of work-related stress, depression and anxiety in Britain" (Ofsted, 2019, p.4). For newly qualified teachers (NQTs), initial experiences of teaching have a significant influence on the likelihood of them remaining within the profession (DfE, 2019, p.4).

Whilst many NQTs understand teaching is hard work, they underestimate the pressure they will experience as teachers. Randall et al.'s (2016) *Generation Next* review of the emerging generation of teachers found a large proportion of primary trainees lacked experience of teaching PE in their most recent placement. This report further highlighted that primary trainees, on average, received as little as 6-10 hours of taught input on primary PE during their training, with some trainees on school-based routes experiencing even less (2016, p.4; Whewell, 2019, p.5). As a result, many trainees may not be provided with the experiences to develop their professional knowledge, are unprepared to apply the knowledge practically and, consequently, lack confidence when required to teach PE.

## Teacher identity and self-efficacy

The concept of identity is one for which many researchers have struggled to determine a universal definition (Whewell, 2019, p.1). There are similarities between definitions, many of which suggest 'identity' refers to how an individual perceives themselves or are perceived by others. Teachers possess a professional identity which embodies the professional knowledge and values entangled in the teaching role; this identity underpins the very pedagogical practices and values of teachers. In the context of this research, professional identity is referred to as 'teacher identity'. Beijaard et al. (2000) suggest teacher identity is an amalgamation of professional knowledge, including subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and curriculum knowledge.

Reflecting on their teacher identity is particularly important for trainees and NQTs who are found to undergo significant shifts in their teacher identities as their understanding and experience of teaching increases (Friesen and Besley, 2013, pp.23-24). Trainees must negotiate the transition from student to teacher; in addition, primary trainees must learn to manage several sub-identities associated with each subject they will teach (Fletcher and Kosnik, 2016, p.564). Teacher identity is also thought to affect trainees' resilience, confidence and their adaptability and openness to new approaches (Lamote and Engels, 2010, p.4).



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Literature indicates teachers' personal and professional experiences influence teacher identity and can inform their values and approaches (Randall et al., 2016, p.11; Lamote and Engels, 2010, p.7; Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009, p.5). Trainee teachers are likely to experience conflict between preconceptions of the profession, the 'ideal' teacher they picture themselves as and the realities of teaching. Interactions with mentors and experienced members of staff can cause challenges to trainees' identities (Whewell, 2019, p.3; Sirna et al., 2010, p.72). Trainees may align themselves with certain values and approaches, according to those around them, and these behaviours become embedded in their teacher identity.

PE teacher identity is one which has evolved as the subject itself has evolved; the current curriculum aims to distance PE from a discretely sport-focus subject and provide a holistic physical education (DfE, 2013, p.198). A sport-focused approach to PE can reinforce stereotypes of PE teachers as athletic and sporty and the physicality associated with this (Garrett and Wrench, 2007). This can cause tension for primary teachers who do not identify with the stereotypical image of a PE teacher. The tensions experienced in forming a teacher identity associated with the teaching of PE can raise issues of poor trainee self-efficacy, not only relating to subject knowledge and curriculum content knowledge, but of conforming and aligning to expected identities.

Research suggests self-efficacy plays a significant role in identity formation (van der Want et al., 2019; Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009). The concept of self-efficacy refers to the perceptions of one's ability to undertake a task (Bandura, 1997, p.3). With some similarities to confidence, self-efficacy can affect teachers' performance and how they manage classrooms (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2001). Teachers who demonstrate high self-efficacy are shown to be more effective and resilient. Pendergast et al. assert ITT programmes are essential to trainees' development of self-efficacy and identity; self-efficacy is found to reduce as trainees' progress through their training

programmes and, particularly when they start teaching, it is important to promote awareness of this in order to maintain motivation and resilience (2011, p.46). Consequently, the notion of self-efficacy in the teaching of primary PE becomes an important factor in early career teachers' wellbeing, identity development and likelihood of remaining in the profession (Whewell, 2019).

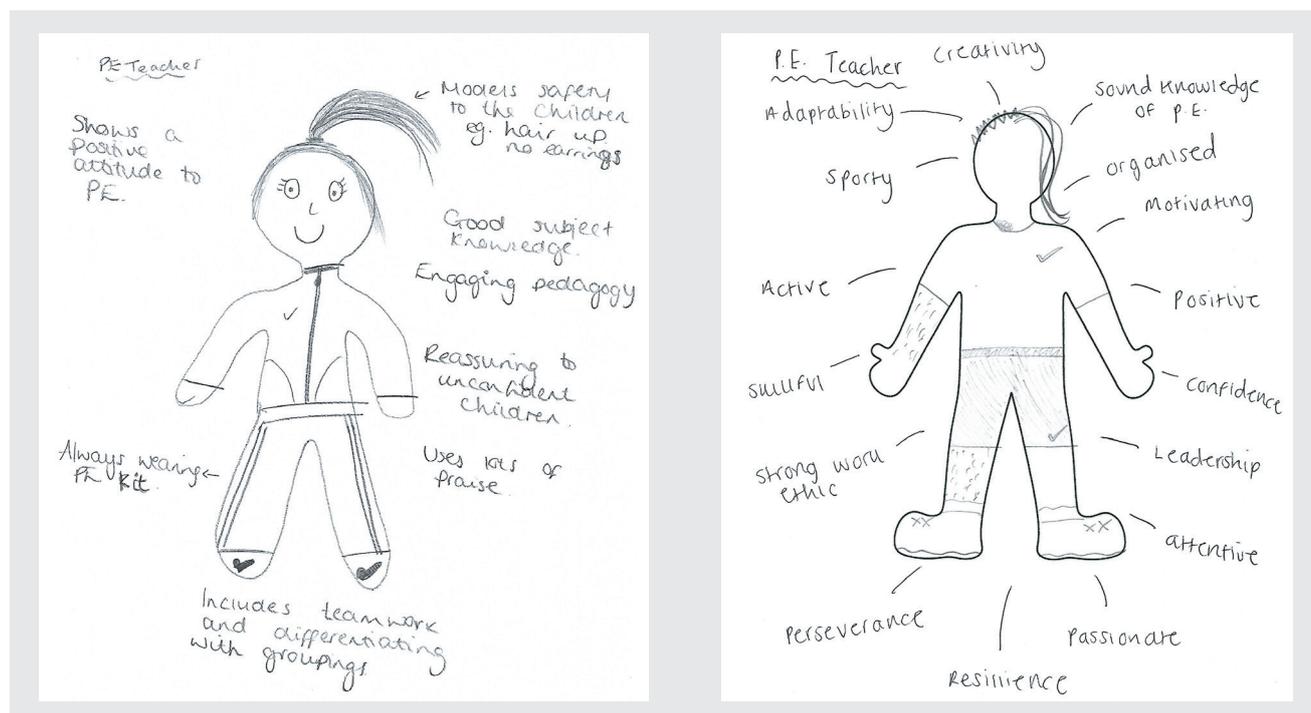
**Research methods**

Beth's study used a mixed methodology, employing a combination of scientific and ethnographic approaches (Punch and Oancea, 2014, p.339). The participants were all third year primary education students and included a mixture of PE specialists and non-PE specialists. It should be acknowledged that the sample was relatively small and participants shared several characteristics, such as training at the same institution and all being final year trainees on a three-year undergraduate degree. Three separate research methods were used. Firstly, an online questionnaire, featuring scaled questions; secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data, one with a PE specialist and one with a non-PE specialist. Interviews focused on investigating the trainees' perceptions of teacher identity. During the interviews, participants were required to draw a typical PE teacher – following an approach similar to the 'draw a scientist' studies – and explain their drawings (Chambers, 1983). Finally, focus groups, consisting of three trainee teachers – one PE specialist and two non-PE specialists – were conducted to collect data regarding the trainees' perception of self-efficacy in relation to PE teaching. This research includes the ethical considerations of acquisition of informed consent, confidentiality and secure storage of data (British Education Research Association (BERA), 2018, p.4).

**Findings and discussion**

Multiple trainees conceived teacher identity to be one's perception of themselves as a teacher. During the interviews, trainees were asked to draw and annotate images of PE teachers (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Images of a primary PE teacher, drawn by trainees and annotated with key traits.



One similarity between the drawings was that both PE teachers were drawn in PE kit, with the trainees even specifying the sportswear brand. This presented a clear visual identity of how primary teachers might look when teaching PE. During the interviews, trainees suggested being dressed in appropriate kit is an important component of the teachers' identity, both modelling safety and demonstrating their commitment to teaching PE. This aligns with Sirna et al.'s suggestion that looking like a stereotypical PE teacher is integral to teachers' identity (2010, p.79; Whewell, 2019, p.4). Gender was highlighted as another important component. Figure 1 shows one image drawn as half male, half female; the trainee elaborated, stating: "PE teachers can come across as quite manly [however] that's not the case, because I'm a PE specialist and I'm not a man". Trainees discussed the elements which they believe contribute to teacher identity: one trainee affirmed teacher identity involves their 'style of teaching'; another highlighted the significance of a teacher's 'values' and 'visions' within teaching, and how these are essential to their identity. This illustrates the influence of an individual's personal experiences on their professional values and beliefs.

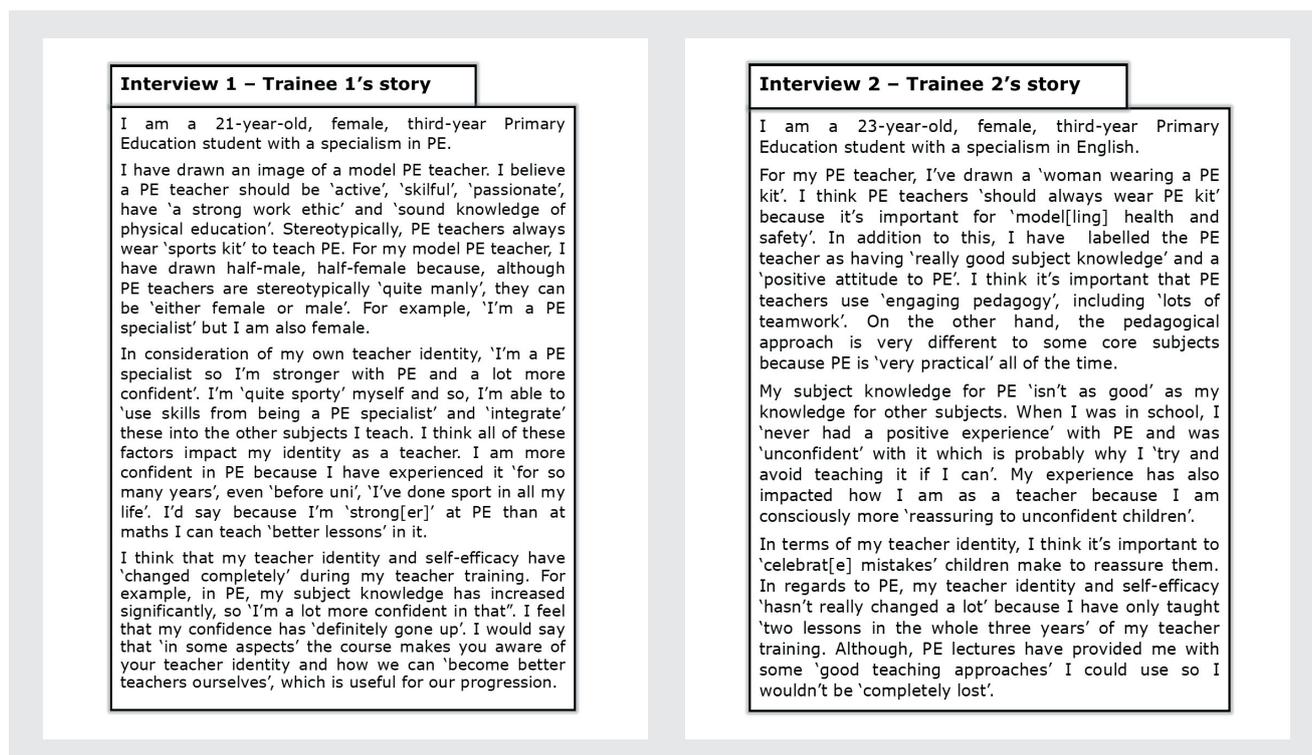
Figure 2 shows the trainees' interview responses retold in the first person as vignettes. These offer a personal and frank account of their feelings towards their teaching, their developing identity and their self-efficacy. Trainee 1 is a primary trainee who specialised in PE; Trainee 2 is a primary trainee who specialised in English. Both trainees refer to their past experiences of the subjects, their teachers and how these have impacted upon their self-efficacy in relation to teaching PE.

Trainee 1 identifies that her self-efficacy in PE and her subsequent identity as a PE teacher is due to having "done sport all her life", being able to "use skills from being a PE specialist" and "being a lot more confident in that [PE]". In contrast, Trainee 2 suggests that her lack of self-efficacy in teaching PE is due

to her subject knowledge being "not as good" and having "never had a positive experience" with PE. This has resulted in her avoiding teaching PE when she can and suggesting a limited change in her levels of self-efficacy, and subsequently her teacher identity relating to PE, as she reports having taught "two lessons in the whole three years of my teacher training". The questionnaire suggested that the number of PE lessons taught by trainees was fewer in comparison to core subjects. Despite more than half of the participants being PE specialists, it was evident that trainees generally had less experience of teaching PE. In the focus group, one trainee attributed their lack of experience in PE to timetable clashes with planning, preparation and assessment time, where PE was taught by members of the wider workforce, rather than the class teacher. The conclusion is that trainee primary school teachers would benefit from teaching PE more regularly, in a sequence and under the guidance of a well-trained and PE-confident mentor.

Subject knowledge (which includes pedagogical knowledge) was most frequently mentioned in the focus group, suggesting it is one of the most important influences. Figure 2 (Trainee 2) suggests her subject knowledge in PE "isn't as good as my knowledge for other subjects" and that she "tries to avoid teaching it if she can". Trainees in the focus group suggested self-efficacy and teacher identity are intrinsically linked. One trainee indicated that every teacher has a perception of their own abilities, which may vary from the perceptions of other teachers and colleagues. Trainees identified factors which influence self-efficacy, many of which were similar to those which affect teacher identity. One trainee described their anxiety towards swimming and how they had not learnt to swim due to this. They reported their personal experiences with swimming had limited their experience and confidence in teaching it, particularly as a skill with a high-risk element – a finding similarly made by Morgan and Bourke (2008, p.2), who found that confidence to teach was "directly predicted" by personal experience.

**Figure 2:** Trainee stories vignettes, presenting the trainees' experiences of primary PE, teacher identity and self-efficacy.



Further to this, the trainees highlighted that the differences are not limited to being inter-subject, but also intra-subject. Trainees expressed varying levels of confidence among different areas of PE, with one expressing they would be less confident teaching gymnastics than they would be teaching games-based PE. This was attributed, in part, to their personal experience of specific sports. This has implications for teacher identity; if trainees relate lower self-efficacy in one area of the PE curriculum with a negative perception of the subject, it could be consequential to their identities. Reflecting upon teacher identity is an important part of learning how to teach and trainees would benefit from reflecting upon their own developing teacher identity, their levels of self-efficacy relating to specific subjects and support in planning how to develop their skills, competence and knowledge in these areas.

### Beth's reflections

My research has demonstrated that the identity of a primary teacher is complex and dynamic. It highlighted traits which primary teachers possess in their teaching of PE, drawing upon the active nature of the subject. I and many of my peers had not explicitly considered our teacher identities during our training. Subject knowledge, personal experience and teaching experience were acknowledged by my peers to be the three most important factors which impacted on their teacher identities.

The significance of personal experience is influential upon teacher identity and self-efficacy, a finding reciprocated by Randall et al., (2016, p.11; Lamote and Engels, 2010, p.7). In the context of teaching PE, the breadth of the subject served as a challenge as trainees reported that their past experiences had deterred them from certain areas of the curriculum. My research highlighted that trainees experience varying self-efficacy, which is largely dependent on personal experiences and teaching experiences of PE. Self-efficacy, it appears, is a key factor in teacher identity and the areas in which trainees described higher self-efficacy correlated to the aspects of their positive teacher identities. It is this which Glazer suggests can be vital in teacher attrition (2018, p.63).

I have, throughout this process, been more thoughtful about my developing teacher identity, I recognise many of the points raised by my peers in my own reflections. It has been cathartic to consider these and identify ways in which I can develop my own self-efficacy in subjects where I feel less confident to teach. I hope to develop this research further in my Masters studies and look for ways in which subject content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge confidence can be developed through working with school-based mentors. ■

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