

# WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY “TEACHER”? PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON TEACHER PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

## *O QUE VOCÊ ENTENDE POR “PROFESSOR”? PESQUISA PSICOLÓGICA SOBRE IDENTIDADE PROFISSIONAL DO DOCENTE*

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### ABSTRACT

Teacher Professional Identity is today an autonomous theoretical construct. The paper explores the dimensions of TPI stressed in psychological and educational research, presenting different answers provided to questions such as: Which dimensions have been taken into account to define what a teacher is? The image of teachers actually emerging from literature analysis points out vectors of tension between “mainstream” Social Representations of teacher and everyday experience; between different perceptions of TPI; between established practices and innovation in teaching; between technical rationalist assumptions and lived experience of teachers’ job, involving ethical and emotional nature of teaching; and, definitely, between “reality-as-it-is” and “reality-to-be” in teaching. These questions are closely connected to the wider social debate on the future of education. Asking what a teacher is also implies questions about what a “good” teacher is, what should be and, consequently, what are the role and the Social Representations of teachers in society.

**Keywords:** teacher professional identity; change; educational practice; social representations.

### RESUMO

O artigo explora as dimensões da Identidade Profissional do Professor na investigação psicológica e educacional e apresentar diferentes respostas para perguntas como: que dimensões foram tidas em conta na definição de professor? A imagem do professor emergente dos estudos evidencia vetores de tensão entre: a) as Representações Sociais de professores e a experiência cotidiana; b) diferentes percepções sobre a Identidade Profissional de Professores; c) as práticas estabelecidas e a inovação no ensino; d) entre os pressupostos técnicos racionalistas e as vivências dos professores, envolvendo a natureza ética e emocional do ensino; e) a “realidade-tal-como-ela-é” e “realidade-a-ser” no ensino. Estas questões estão intimamente ligadas ao debate social alargado sobre o futuro da educação e também implica questões sobre o que é um “bom” professor é, o que um professor deveria ser e, consequentemente, quais são o papel e as representações sociais dos professores na sociedade.

**Palavras-chave:** identidade profissional de professor; mudança; prática educativa; representações sociais.

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### Introduction

Teacher Professional Identity (TPI) is fully established as an autonomous theoretical construct, drawing from educational, psychological and sociological paradigms of teaching (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Samuel & Stephens, 2000). Then, which is the image of teacher actually emerging from the several studies and theoretical analyses carried out until now? Which dimensions have been taken into account to define what a teacher is? Besides, these questions are closely connected to the wider social debate on the future of education. Asking what a teacher is also

implies questions about what a “good” teacher is, what a teacher should be and, consequently, what are the role and the social representations of teachers in society. The paper attempts to explore the different dimensions of TPI stressed in psychological and educational research and to present different answers provided to the question: “what do you mean by “teacher”?”

In psychological and educational research, teaching appears to be traditionally conceived as “*caring*” profession, rather than “*high-status*” job (Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996, p. 9), concerned with moral-ethical aspects (Ponte, 2005). Several studies present teacher’s strong personal commitment towards the profession (Nias, 1986; Zembylas, 2003). Teachers are constantly faced with internal dialogical questions such as: is

what we are doing in the interest of the children and, if not, how can we make sure that we do act in the interest of the children? Teaching is “charged with positive emotion” (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 835) and takes place at the intersection of personal and public life. Teaching professional attitudes and skills are closely related to personal dimensions as well as historical and social ones. The way this profession is carried out is often a mix between individual peculiarity and features of the social and cultural environment in which the education system is embedded. Nieto (2003) claims that what had kept teachers going in the profession was “emotional stuff”. Teaching is an intellectual endeavour which involves love, anger and depression, and hope and possibility. Hargreaves (1994) claims that teaching involves “human nurturance, connectedness, warmth and love” (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 175), and each teacher’s individual beliefs about role in caring for students form a crucial part of TPI. Teachers are often represented as passionate persons, whose individual’s professional philosophy is mediated by strong personal systems of beliefs (Hargreaves, 1998). Although this caring aspect is definitely part of the teacher’s identity, TPI has been stressed to be a complex phenomenon involving several intertwined dimensions. Professional identity is a dynamic process involving interpretation, reinterpretation and self-evaluation of life experiences (Kerby, 1991). Lasky defines TPI “how teachers define themselves to themselves and to others” (2005, p. 901). The idea of identity refers to the means by which individuals reflexively and emotionally negotiate their own subjectivity, differently from the concept of role that refers to the socially and culturally determined nature and commonly held expectations of an individual’s professional self. Lasky (2005) argues that agency, context, and identity impact teachers’ professional selves.

### **Psychological dimensions of teacher professional identity**

In a review of studies on TPI, Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) highlight three main research threads on TPI: studies on TPI formation; studies aiming at identifying characteristics of TPI; and studies in which professional identity is (re)presented through teachers’ narratives. Kelchtermans (2005) argues that “identity” indicates a completed and static state, and recommends the term self-understanding to encompass self-image – how individuals represent themselves as teachers; job motivation - reasons for entering and remaining in the profession; future perspective - teachers’ expectations for the future; self-esteem - appreciation of one’s own

job performance; and task perception - everyday jobs a teacher completes. Particular attention has been given to the dimensions characterizing TPI, to its formation and development along professional life. Less studies are focused on the role of Social Representations and educational practices in the elaboration of TPI (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Resnick, Pontecorvo, & Säljö, 1997). In existing literature, theoretical discussion about TPI takes into account three levels of analysis: an individual level, including teacher’s personal biography and positioning dynamics; an interpersonal level, including social relationship, practices and artefacts; and a cultural level, including representations, norms, values and organisational context (Iannaccone, Tateo, Mollo, & Marsico, 2008; Ligorio & Tateo, 2008).

From a narrative perspective, Connelly and Clandinin (1999) show how knowledge, context and professional identity are connected into teachers’ narrative. It actually gives the sense of what teachers care the most about when telling their life stories. It is also expression of their motivations, role of organisational culture and practical conditions of work. TPI is formed and reformed by stories teachers tell and which they draw upon in communication with others (and themselves). Professional identities are shaped by these stories. Stories shape teachers and teaching in return. Professional identities are “*stories to live by*” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). In their narratives, teachers are able to construct and maintain a sense of professional identity, cohering with their philosophical or humanistic beliefs about the teaching role, emphasizing the choice to care for students. Caring consists of those emotions, actions and reflections that result from teacher’s desire to motivate, help or inspire students. Caring is primarily connected to teachers’ pedagogical and classroom management strategies. However, it also exists within the broader social context of teacher–student interactions, inside and outside the classroom situation. (O’Connor, 2008). Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) claim that political interests and personal values shape teachers’ emotions, functioning as rationale for their professional actions. MacLure (1993) also observes that teachers frequently use identity or political belief system to justify how they choose to engage in their work.

Literature shows that emotions are at the epicentre of teachers’ work (Hargreaves, 1994, 1998; Zembylas, 2003), and describe the intangible emotional and empathic qualities that define a “good teacher”. Emotions inform and define identity in the process of becoming (Zembylas, 2003, p. 223). However, even if playing a prominent role in TPI, they are “considered worthless” (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004, p. 247) by poli-

cymakers because they cannot be measured. Thus, the strong personal and emotional commitment of teachers is not taken into account, diminishing TPI. Current systems to assess Professional Teaching Standards and performance of teachers worldwide, and the role of TPI in teachers’ training, are notable for the failure to acknowledge emotional and empathic skills required for effective teaching (European Commission, 2007; NSW Institute of Teachers, 2005).

Common sense image of teaching - a profession totally devoted to students’ well-being and growth - conflicts with the actual everyday practice of teachers, especially novices. None of the teachers training programs actually supports novice teachers to cope with the intense emotional correlate, especially the negative dimension, accompanying school everyday practice. This generates a first type of tension between the “mainstream” representation of TPI and teachers’ everyday experience. Teachers think about themselves totally devoted to students’ caring, feeling positive emotions towards them. Definitely, they always tend to safeguard the educational relationship with pupils (Hargreaves, 1998; Lasky, 2005; Ligorio & Tateo, 2008; Nias, 1986; Zembylas, 2003). Therefore, when teachers face problems, changes, failures - challenging TPI and generating negative feelings - they project those feelings on other targets - school organisation, families, colleagues, etc. Definitely, it is socially unacceptable that teacher can experience negative feelings towards his/her own pupils. Thus, nobody takes care of it, by training and supporting, for instance, novice teachers to cope with this type of experiences. Even if it is a matter of fact that they take place with unpredictable negative effects on TPI along professional life.

The problem of teachers’ negative emotions is often studied in relation to burnout, vulnerability and resilience (Gu & Day, 2007; Kelchtermans, 2005; van Horn, Schaufeli, & Enzmann, 1999). Research on teachers’ burnout found that the lack of social support do not allow teachers to effectively cope with burnout dimensions (Burke & Greenglass, 1993, 1995; van Horn, Schaufeli, & Enzmann, 1999). Although teachers talk about emotional stress and de-motivation towards their profession, they experience a tension because they cannot fully express negative feelings against their “clients”, the pupils. The concept of teacher’s burnout has been more recently replaced by the idea of teachers’ professional vulnerability (Kelchtermans, 1996, 2005) which is related to experiences of feeling threatened and questioned by principal, parents, politicians and being unable to face the growing demand for change and innovation. Teachers feel like losing the control of processes and tasks they felt responsible for (Gao, 2008; Kelchtermans, 2005). Teachers’ experience of

professional vulnerability is often mediated by social context (Kelchtermans, 1996, 2005; Lasky, 2005). In the knowledge society, vulnerability seems to become a structural condition of teachers and educators in general (Kelchtermans, 2005; Lasky, 2005; van Veen & Lasky 2005). Thus, teaching is more and more demanding job (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Henderson & Milstein, 2003), requiring strong resilience’s abilities to face vulnerability and change. A shift in focus from teacher stress and burnout to resilience allows to understand the ways that teachers manage and sustain their motivation and commitment in times of change. With respect to TPI, resilience is a multidimensional, socially constructed, dynamic and developmental concept, related to the ability in quickly and efficiently recovering strengths and spirit in the face of adversity. Resilience is closely allied to a strong sense of vocation, self-efficacy and motivation to teach, which are fundamental for promoting achievement in all aspects of students’ lives. Teacher’s resilience has a social dimension involving the interactive impact of personal, professional and situated factors on TPI. A teacher can show resilience in a specific context or professional phase, but cannot display similar abilities if the context changes. Thus, personal and work contexts may become unstable in unpredictable ways. For instance, if frequent school reforms take place, the way these changes are perceived –for instance, as adverse conditions - by the individual may vary depending on his/her TPI, experience at the time of change, competence and confidence in managing the emerging conditions, beliefs about the meaning of engagement, and the availability of appropriate support within the context of change (Gu & Day, 2007). In the light of these observations, it is argued the importance of not merely challenging teachers professional Selves in accountability measures, but also to provide them with the support needed to reconstruct professional approaches and Selves (Darby, 2008), and with a support network throughout their professional trajectory in order to cope with change in knowledge society.

### **Teacher professional identity and educational practice**

It is understood that teaching is much more than simple transmission of knowledge (Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996). Teaching cannot be reduced to instrumental actions for achieving learning objectives. Teaching profession is also related to pedagogical and ethical dimensions, such as providing scaffold for the development of students’ relational capabilities and individual empowerment.

In our post-modern societies teachers increasingly face moral, social, and emotional dilemmas, such as: How can we educate students for uncertainty? How can we educate students with multicultural and different social backgrounds? How should we cope with consequences of a society in which social control has been replaced by strong processes of individualization? How do we deal with deviant student behaviour? How should we judge and discuss other sources of information and technologies that are available to students now? How can we diagnose and help students to overcome problems as a result of divorce, sexual abuse, etc.? (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000, pp. 751-752)

Shift toward student-centred and socio-constructionist model of teaching has also changed the professional educational practices. Teachers educational expertise is not only conceived as the capability to plan, execute and assess lessons. It also includes helping students to develop their own learning and collaboration methods, with a greater emphasis on learning and less on teaching. Teachers are required to be mediators, facilitators and to scaffold learners, with consequences on the perception of professional identity. This generates a second type of tension between different perceptions of TPI, especially for those trained and socialized to profession in a more “traditional” way. In other words, construction of TPI is influenced by teacher professional biography, teaching experience and teaching context.

In teacher’s everyday work, the simplest way of reflecting is to compare actual practice with past experience, in order to check if previous practical solutions can still work. Otherwise, teacher can compare actual practice with other teachers. Through this type of reflection, the teacher leans on tradition and routines that become part of TPI. The growing complexity of teaching and learning situations can create a need for control and for easier solutions that teacher can grasp from routines and tradition (Loughran, 2006). The problem is that, given the continuous change of education, each teaching situation becomes complex, unique and situated. It is always more difficult to do like “last time” or like “other teachers did with other students”. This leads to a third type of tension between established practices and solutions, that become part of the TPI, and innovation in teaching – multiculturalism, technology, new pedagogical approaches, reforms, etc. – so that reflection not only affects the Self (personal impressions and feelings) and the personal level of performance, but also norms of the profession, in the level to reach (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). The reflection process need afterwards to focus on actual performance - former experience, routines, personal tradition or personal values - and to internalized professional values and shared professional standards. Only in this way, the tension between actual level of professional competence and “ideal” level of

professional competence can be resolved. This tension can be a powerful drive force for professional development, but it can also lead to vulnerability of TPI. This issue again becomes especially important in teacher education. In the training programs for other professionals, who in their work are responsible for complex tasks, trainees are provided with practical experience and possibility to reflect on their experience, in simulated or simplified situations, before being “left alone” in a real situation (ICET, 2008). Such reflection should become integral part of training, as well as the support of a social and professional network. In the present situation, instead, teachers still work most of all alone without everyday collaboration and sharing with colleagues and researchers.

Teachers’ emotions are intimately connected with their reflective selves. Nevertheless, Dillabough (1999) argues that institutionalised teacher standards often act to marginalise and repress individual beliefs and experiences. Private sphere is considered irrelevant. The aims of the individual and of the system are conflicting. Teacher competencies are first of all rational and technical so that the role of reflective individual is sidelined in professional knowledge (Schon, 1983). Then, only a part of TPI is considered to be a worthy subject for discussion and training. Research demonstrate that many teachers define themselves through the roles they play in professional live (Barber, 2002; Nias, 1989). It is worth to note that teachers’ job also consists of the so-called “non-work”, in the sense that there is no economic benefit for caring, and such activities do not technically constitute work (Forrester, 2005). It is exactly the perceived discrepancy between technical rationalist assumptions presented in current policy discourses and experience of teachers’ work that generates the fourth type of tension in TPI. Teachers works in conditions where caring is not encouraged by public policies (Jeffrey, 2002), and where caring often comes at professional cost. Ethical and emotional nature of teachers’ work is consistently ignored in public policies that seek to assess teacher’s quality (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004).

### **Teachers Professional Identity in changing society**

Changes in society and education challenge the teaching profession. Rather than imparting basic knowledge, teachers are asked to holistically help young people to become autonomous learners, to acquire key competences rather than memorising information. Teachers are also asked to be up-to-date, to develop more collaborative and constructive learning approach-

es and, finally, to be facilitators and classroom managers rather than *ex-cathedra* trainers. These new roles require education in a range of teaching approaches and teaching styles (European Commission, 2007). The advent of so-called knowledge society, enacted in Europe by Bologna process and declaration of Lisbon, started a change in educational conditions, through several educational reforms related, some say, to devolution and commercialization. Research shows how this process is taking places worldwide - from China to Australia, from USA to European Union - impacting on teaching profession and making teachers feel deskilled and threatened (Elliott, 2004; Gordon, 2000, 2005; Kelchtermans, 1996; Kudomi, 1999; More, 2002, 2004; Sachs, 2001; Troman, 2000). For example, in England the two terms of Labour government have already seen eight different Education Acts and hundreds of separate initiatives (Chitty, 2004; Walford, 2005). Britain, Sweden and New Zealand have also witnessed an era of standards movement and similar development of patterns of political and administrative control over teachers (Goodson & Numan, 2002). Contemporary teaching - even if perceived as a global issue - have been the object for two decades of successive and persisting government policy reforms on a national level. These initiatives and changing conditions in which teachers teach and students live and learn have combined to place increased social, performance and workload pressure upon teachers.

Changes in society are leading to new expectations about the role of education, which, in return, is leading to new demands on teachers' quality and competences. Thus, there is an increased need to be more explicit in describing teacher quality. Again, in debates about innovative power of Europe and knowledge economy, discussions on teacher quality tend to focus on knowledge and skills. Quality indicators used to monitor teacher quality are predominantly quantitative, leading to a very limited and one-sided perspective on the quality of teachers and teacher education (Association for Teacher Education in Europe, 2006). Besides, concepts used to define teacher quality are complex and lack clear definitions. This might lead to negative emotions concerning a reduction in professional autonomy of teachers and teacher education institutes, and it might stimulate the belief that teacher's professional development is complete once met merely quantitative standards. In other countries, standards are seen as instruments to stimulate teachers' professional development. These standards are often associated with positive emotions related to increasing teachers' professional autonomy.

In international discussions about teacher's quality, the use of terms like “competence” and “standard” assumes different meanings in different countries, lead-

ing to different definitions of quality. Teacher's quality should be an overall concept that comprises not only knowledge and skills, but also personal qualities - such as respect, care, courage, empathy, and personal values, attitudes, identity, beliefs, etc – making quite evident the tight link between quality and TPI. The way in which these characteristics are implicitly or explicitly included in indicators of teacher quality reflects dominant social, cultural, economic and educational views and concerns about teachers' quality.

Several studies focus on teacher's quality, using categorizations of teacher characteristics. Categories and indicators can be seen from the perspective of adult-teachers, administrators, teachers educators, educational researchers and students. These studies provide descriptive lists attempting to identify the key elements of teacher's quality, sometimes establishing standards for teacher preparation (Myers & Myers, 1995; Wong & Wong, 1998) and guidelines for evaluation (Flores, 1999). There are lists of teacher's competences - such as knowledge, skills and dispositions -, lists of knowledge and skills in effective teachers (Izumi & Evers, 2002; Rice, 2003). In general, effective teachers must have extensive subject knowledge, good knowledge of teaching strategies and methods. Other skills frequently identified in research are management and organizational skills, interpersonal skills - such as communication -, skills to work collaboratively, to guide and support learners, teaching skills - in using state objectives of learning, using innovative teaching methods, using instructional methods that foster critical thinking, involving students actively in learning, etc. Besides, these studies individualize personal attitudes, values and ethical behaviour of quality teachers - such as being respectful, democratic, fair, caring, understanding, positive, approachable, open minded, having a sense of humour, autonomy, responsibility, etc. (Evans, 2002; Rogers & Renard, 1999).

European member states' official documents on teachers' qualification establish two main categories of standards. The first category includes requirements for qualification of teachers with respect to the academic profile, individualizing measurable and policy relevant indicators - such as teacher preparation programs and degrees, teacher coursework, teacher experience, teachers' self reflection and self evaluation. The second category includes many personal emotional characteristics important for a good teacher, which are not always measurable (International Council on Education for Teaching, 2008). While many attempts are made to define objective general standards for teacher's quality, the subjective part, as well as the TPI, cannot be ignored. In this sense, quality is a complex multifaceted personal construct, reflecting the views on learning used by teacher and other stakeholders, that depends

on the specific local context of teacher. From teacher's perspective, this can be characterized by the sentence "*You teach by who you are*" (ICET, 2008). Teacher's professionalism is a complex, dynamic and contextual construct. It is thus subject to different, and sometimes competing, interpretations (Hargreaves, 2000; Helsby, 2000). It reflects the Social Representation of teachers' role shared by a broader social and political level and the kinds of competencies expected from them. However, it also reflects how teachers see themselves and their work as professionals. This implies that teachers' professionalism is the fifth issue of tension between "*reality-as-it-is*" and "*reality-to-be*". It reflects the role teachers play in everyday life, self-awareness and commitment that many teachers feel towards profession, and engagement in learning processes of students (ICET, 2008). Nevertheless, descriptions of teacher quality are not only instruments for control and accountability, but also instruments for professional development and professional change. In these processes of professional development and change, reflection is a crucial. Relationship between TPI and teacher's quality is perfectly synthesized by McCulloch, Helsby and Knight (2000):

educational improvement depends on teachers wanting to make a difference. It depends upon their feeling professional. Neither raising standards by regulation nor professionalizing by prescription will work. Teachers have power in the sense that they have to want improvement for improvement to happen. (p. 118).

### TPI in teachers' training

Analysis of literature shows how teachers training and quality evaluation is more focused on "*how to teach*" rather than "*what is a teacher*" "*how to become a teacher*". An American educational psychology handbooks used in teachers' training typically explains what "good teaching" is: "as an art, teaching calls for vision, intuition, talent, commitment, and creativity – very little of which can actually be taught. As a science, however, teaching requires knowledge and skills that can indeed be learned" (Woolfolk, 1996, p. 7). Nevertheless, research seems to highlight that teachers' vulnerability rarely comes from feeling not up-to-date or bad at teaching. Jeffrey and Woods (1996), instead, explain that when teachers are challenged in educational reform processes they may experience a "loss of self" (p. 331). Other studies shows how the effort to meet needs of so many varied constituencies often evokes teachers' emotions (Godar, 1990; Lortie, 1977; Nias, 1989). Moreover, Canadian and UK perspectives on teachers' emotions during educational reform highlight the importance of caring in classroom. Teachers need to

control their emotions, that become more intense when they perceive an intrusion by parents or government officials into classrooms (Hargreaves, 1998, 2001; Jeffrey & Woods, 1996; Lasky, 2000). Jeffrey and Woods (1996) found that teachers subject to scrutiny experience sense of professional inadequacy, reduction of positive emotions and loss of self, pedagogical values, and harmony. They explain this de-professionalization by the "move from professional to technician status" (Jeffrey & Woods, 1996, p. 328). Darby (2008) shows that teachers experience fear and intimidation when their professional self-understandings is challenged. Only with adequate support by researchers and trainers they are able to reconstruct self-understandings, leading to improvements in student achievement, instructional practices, and positive changes leading to emotions of pride and excitement.

The most part of school reforms focus on improving and evaluating teaching quality, while teachers must be also helped to deal with the re-elaboration of TPI with respect to school change. Teachers often feel like they are left alone and unheeded. Jeffrey and Woods (1996) highlight, for instance, the emotional dissonances caused by external inspection system in English schools. Troman (2000) studies teachers under stress, in what they called a "low trust" society in England. Similar studies has been carried out in Australia by Dinham and Scott (2000), in Canada by Burke and Greenglass (1995), and in America by Nias (1999).

Besides subject matter knowledge that teachers often feel to manage very well, pedagogical content knowledge is also important to teachers' development and maintenance of agency and ownership in relation to educational practices (Schweisfurth, 2006). TPI and agency are, therefore, densely interwoven sociological constructs that shape teachers' beliefs and experiences of teaching. The relationship between TPI and agency is influenced by key elements of TPI - such as professional preparation, prior experience with diversity, and generational status (Skerrett, 2008). As curriculum standardization policies change, teacher's agency in relation to students' diversity takes on an increasing importance (Skerrett, 2008). Teacher's agency in relation to TPI is a generative theoretical lens through which examining how teachers experience the world of school (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Spiegelman, 2004; Barwell, 2005; Lasky, 2005; Schweisfurth, 2006; Sloan, 2006). Lasky (2005) studies the interactions between secondary teachers' identity, agency, and professional vulnerability in a reform climate, finding that external mediation systems may have greater impact on identity formation for teachers of younger professional status than for those whose identities were securely formed before the onset of reforms. TPI, in return, affects

agency, beliefs about, and actions in relation to their students and teaching. Teacher’s work is becoming increasingly complex. Teachers are expected to respond to greater pressures and comply with multiplying innovations under conditions that are at best stable and at worst deteriorating (Hargreaves, 2000, 2003). Teaching in the 21st century is rated as one of the most stressful professions (Kyriacou, 2001). Thus, TPI becomes a robust explanatory tool to make sense of teachers responses to accountability reforms (Sloan, 2006). Teachers responses to change are neither mechanistic nor mono-dimensional but depend upon various aspects of TPI, such as narratives of the Self as teacher and subject matter knowledge. The studies discussed present a complex description of what is TPI and at the same time converge towards a new approach to the study of TPI. First of all, it emerges the multidimensional nature of TPI – intrapersonal, interpersonal and cultural. Besides, the relevant role of TPI in teachers’ professionalism is not enough taken into account by training and evaluation, demanding for training activities to support teachers in managing emotional and personal dimensions that play a strong role in teaching profession.

### Conclusions: what is a teacher?

The aim of this paper is to explore literature on TPI, attempting to answer the question: what is intended by “teacher”? This question is not trivial at all, because teachers are key persons in the construction of knowledge society. For instance, according to the European Commission (2007), there are around 6.25 million teachers in Europe. Everybody would like to have the best teachers for his/her children. Nevertheless, these workers have to deal every day with professional and societal changes and growing social pressure that define teachers as technicians with testable content knowledge and shortening higher education curricula. Teachers are facing continuous changes in school context and, in the end, in whole society – migration, new educational practices, new technologies, laws, etc. – with relevant effects on their personal and professional identity. TPI, as fundamental dimension of Self, is the psychological mediator teachers use to make sense of change. In general, identity is something assumed to be coherent and stable, while is also the place where conflict and variety are experienced and, hopefully, resolved.

In the state-of-the-art review of literature, five main point of tensions have been pointed out and discussed:

1. The tension between “mainstream” Social Representation of “ideal” teacher, totally devoted to students’ care, and real life, where teachers experience hard-to-handle frustration and negative feelings;
2. The tension between different perceptions of TPI, especially for those trained and socialized to the profession in a more “traditional” way;
3. The tension between established practices and solutions, that become part of the TPI, and innovation in teaching;
4. The tension between technical rationalist assumptions, presented in current policy discourses to assess teachers’ quality, and lived experience of teachers’ job, involving ethical and emotional nature of teaching;
5. The tension between “*reality-as-it-is*” and “*reality-to-be*” in teaching.

These vectors of tension - emotional, cognitive and identity - question TPI with respect to the projection towards the future. TPI is both a product and a process, but also a tool for sense-making (Sloan, 2006) and definitely a project (Valsiner, 2007). Nevertheless, teachers are often bereft of this projectual dimension of TPI by school’s organisational context, practices and policies, teachers’ training programs and, after all, by the way society represents teacher’s role in education.

TPI is at same time a strong and weak identity. It is strong because involves a large part of Self, and needs a strong personal, emotional and ethical involvement lifespan. At the same time, it is a weak identity because of scarce social recognition, growing social pressure and low remuneration. In period of dramatic change of education systems, teachers experience a wider sense of vulnerability, affecting practice and effectiveness. TPI is also the space for the negotiation between internal and external cognitive, cultural and emotional dimensions forming the complex everyday life of teachers.

Teachers are definitely asked to act as mediators and facilitators in classroom, and to teach students how to learn independently, to collaborate and to reflect. They are also asked to scaffold the holistic growth of student’s Self, helping to face challenges of knowledge society. At the same time, teachers are unsupported or not enough trained to develop and manage TPI. It is worth to reflect upon the role of research in cooperating with teachers in the challenging task of managing professional identity in changing world. This task first requires psychology to develop a new psico-social model, in which personal biography, social representations, situated educational practices and relationships with significant Others are taken into account to understand TPI. This knowledge will be then used to draw innovative modules for training curricula, in order to provide teachers with the ability to observe, make sense and cope with change.

A new model of TPI has first to take into account the interweave of different levels of analysis –intrap-

ersonal, interpersonal, cultural –, while the most part of studies have been focused on a single dimension. Secondly, TPI must be understood as interpretative and project psychological tool that teachers – novice and experts – use to make sense of everyday professional life. It must be also taken into account the distinction between *teaching-as-it-is*, *teaching-as-it-would-be* and *teaching-as-it-should-be*, that generates uncomfortable tension within TPI and between teachers and other social actors – students, parents, principals, etc. Finally, a theoretical model of TPI should lead to practical support for teachers in order to manage and preserve TPI. This practice is not common in teacher education, and its use would help to avoid loss of teachers self-efficacy that is proven to directly affect effectiveness of teaching with negative effects in students' learning.

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