

**TAKING THE (NEXT) LEAP: META TO PROMOTER POSITIONS
IN PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION
(COMMENT ON LEIJEN & KULLASEPP)**

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ABSTRACT. Leijen and Kullasepp show that the support seminars they developed were partly useful (as not all students were able to identify and solve tensions between personal and professional positions and thus come to an integration), but need to be developed further. This development needs to include an integration of perspectives whereby the tensions between different I-positions and any linked meta-positions are categorized and then debriefed. This would lead to teacher/mentor interventions aimed at having students formulate a promoter-position as a form of higher-order integration with regards to their personal and professional selves.

KEYWORDS: integration of I-positions, dialogue, positioning

In their article, Leijen and Kullasepp take a dialogical perspective in researching student teachers' professional identity formation. They state, and I agree, that while student teachers need to explore their identity, there is ample evidence that in existing university programs student teachers are not sufficiently prepared to deal with their emerging professional selves. Building on Dialogical Self Theory and Alsup's concept of borderland discourses, Leijen and Kullasepp see the integration of personal and professional selves as an important aspect of professional identity formation. They propose that meta-positioning – where the "I" leaves a specific position and observes the variety of positions from the outside – through self-reflection and the creation of coalitions between different positions should support this integration. Leijen and Kullasepp report having developed support seminars for student teachers, aimed to facilitate (1) the voicing of their positions, (2) identifying tensions between personal and professional positions and (3) solving these tensions. I would like to start with complimenting the authors for the attention they pay to this very important step in identity development and for their attempt to thus make an otherwise covert process the subject of empirical study.

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In a first step, Leijen and Kullasepp focus on the categorization of tensions between positions and make the following distinctions: tensions between personal and professional I-positions ($n=13$, by 7 students), tensions between expectations and school practice ($n=6$, by 3 students) and tensions between university and school practices ($n=25$, by 7 students). These categories are clearly inspired by, though not entirely similar to, the examples formulated in the student assignments. An interesting result is that some types of tensions are more likely to be communicated than others, with fewest tensions reported between expectations and school practice, double as much between personal and professional I-positions and again double as much between university and school practices. The authors readily admit that the latter category probably relates to a surface layer of professional identity development. This apparent difference in students' ability for core reflection may provide an interesting starting point for identifying how students who do core reflecting, differ from their fellow students and what might help stimulate this type of deeper reflection. The authors tentatively put forward the role of debriefing, which we will come back to.

A second step in the study of Leijen and Kullasepp was to analyze the characteristics of solutions student teachers created for the tensions they experienced between positions. Although the assignment stated criteria for these solutions that would make them 'coalitions' ($n=5$), the analyses show three more types of solutions. The authors distinguish between: dominance of a person ($n=7$), dominance of role expectations ($n=3$) and changing conditions ($n=16$). The latter category represents solutions based on a reorganization external to the self (by 7 students), while the former – including making coalitions – represents a reorganization in and of the self (by 6 students). Again, herein lies an important qualitative difference in terms of professional identity formation, which led Leijen and Kullasepp to conclude that the support seminars they developed were partly useful (*indeed, a number of students were able to identify and solve tensions between personal and professional positions and thus come to an integration*), but need to be developed further.

From our own empirical research (Winters et al., 2012; Winters et al., 2013), we may be able to suggest and illustrate a next step in this development, in line with the above mentioned role of debriefing. The crucial concept here is dialogue, understood as the actual *guidance* learners – in this case student teachers – receive from their mentors. Our research in Dutch schools for secondary vocational education focuses on the role of the learning environment, and more specifically student guidance conversations in the context of student placements, in enabling the development of a career identity. Based on the analyses of 30 guidance conversations between student, teacher and/or workplace mentor, four different strategies of teachers and mentors were distinguished and it was

shown that Dialogical Self Theory can support both teachers and mentors in broadening their positioning repertoire to improve the quality of their guidance conversations with students.

From Dialogical Self Theory, we understand identity development in terms of positioning: as a dynamic process from I-positions to a meta-position and subsequently to a *promoter*-position. Leijen and Kullasepp already situate I-positions and meta-positions. The integrative understanding gained through a meta-position is intended to lead to action or at least the intention to act, while remaining aware of the complexity and changeability of ourselves and our work environments. The position that is capable of taking action, with the intention to give a developmental impetus to future I-positions, is called a promoter position. A promoter position is introduced as a new position by a significant other or oneself and allows the integration of other I-positions in such a way that the individual is enabled and/or stimulated to make a choice or take an action.

We focused in our analysis on positioning (i.e. is an I-, a meta- or a promoter position formulated and by whom?) and the reactions to this positioning (who reacts and what does that reaction look like?). Much like Leijen and Kullasepp, we found that promoter positions – which require a qualitative integration of different positions – were formulated only rarely (on average, one promoter position was formulated in every two conversations). Analyzing the quality of the responses, we found this was related to the four different types of interventions by teacher/mentor: ignoring the student's I-position, re-positioning by talking on behalf of the student, broadening the I-position without conclusion, and a dialogue in the direction of the formulation of a promoter-position (illustrated in Winters et al., 2013). What was needed for students to be able to engage in core reflection and an integration of different positions was the mentor strategy of “promoting”, but an average conversation shows this dynamic only twice. We have suggested incorporating this application of Dialogical Self Theory into teacher training to raise awareness about more dialogical interventions to achieve a broadening of student positions and stimulate them to develop the capacity to reflect on themselves (meta-position) and to find ways for their future development (promoter positions).

Progress in both Leijen and Kullasepp's research and ours, could come from an integration of perspectives whereby the tensions between different I-positions and any linked meta-positions are categorized and then indeed debriefed, leading to teacher/mentor interventions aimed at formulating a promoter-position in students as a higher-order integration of their personal and professional selves. For both (teacher) education and educational research, I look forward to starting this dialogue!

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References

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