Research Article

Navigating Towards an Understanding of My Complex Professional Identity in a Spanish Context

Joseph Xhuxhi*

Lecturer in Education, Faculty of Education, Universidad Internacional de la Rioja, Spain

*Corresponding Author
Joseph Xhuxhi, Lecturer in Education, Faculty of Education, Universidad Internacional de la Rioja, Spain.

Abstract
This reflective essay examines the evolving notion of teacher professionalism against the backdrop of neoliberal educational reforms, using the author's personal experiences in Spain as a lens. It integrates scholarly theories of professionalism, teacher identity, and agency with introspective analysis of critical incidents in the author's career. The narrative highlights how neoliberal policies, characterised by standardisation, accountability, and market-driven approaches, have challenged traditional conceptions of teaching as a profession, often eroding teacher autonomy and moral authority. Through dialogues with students, observations of colleagues, and the author's own journey navigating multiple roles, school teacher, teacher educator, and researcher, this manuscript illustrates how professional identity is continually negotiated and reshaped. A key argument is that true teacher professionalism emerges when educators achieve agency, the capacity to critically interpret and respond to policy in the best interests of their students. The essay concludes by proposing a reorientation towards virtue-based education and teacher empowerment as means to reclaim the core values of teaching and revitalise professionalism in the field.

Keywords: Teacher Professionalism, Teacher Identity, Teacher Agency, Neoliberal Education Policy, Teacher Autonomy, Virtue-Based Education

1. Introduction

Teacher professionalism is not a static concept; our understanding of what it means to be a teaching professional continues to evolve. In recent decades, the teaching profession has been profoundly influenced by the rise of neoliberal education policies. These reforms have reshaped expectations of teachers, emphasising accountability and performance in ways that challenge traditional notions of professional autonomy. In this manuscript, I explore what professionalism means in the context of teaching today and how global and local policy shifts have impacted the professional identity of teachers.

My exploration is both scholarly and personal. I reflect on how critical changes in the education system have shaped my own identity as a teacher in Spain, using critical incidents from my career as points of inquiry and reflection. Cunningham suggests that significant "critical incidents" in a professional's life can accelerate learning, and indeed I have found that such events have pushed me to continually question and rework my position in education [1]. Drawing on both literature and lived experience, I argue that a teacher can only truly be considered a professional once they achieve a sense of agency in their practice. At that point, they are not just following government policies but are critically responding to them in ways that meet the needs of their students. In the pages that follow, I examine how my professional identity has been influenced by neoliberal policies and critical experiences. I conclude by discussing my growing interest in virtue education and my belief that if we focus on virtues as a starting point in teaching, we can move away from neoliberal policies. Such a shift could reform professionalism in education by empowering teachers

with the agency to act. In short, I argue that true professionalism in teaching requires more than meeting external demands, it requires continuous reflection, moral commitment, and the exercise of independent judgment in practice.

2. Understanding Teacher Professionalism

At its core, the term profession implies a clarity of roles, specialised knowledge, and a defined structure of responsibilities. Classic professions like law, medicine, and the clergy share common traits: a unique body of theoretical knowledge, rigorous qualifications, a high degree of autonomy, and a code of conduct guiding the service provided to clients [2]. An important element underpinning any profession is public trust. As Abbott notes, the trust clients place in practitioners contributes greatly to professional status [3]. Success in fulfilling professional duties also plays a role in how much professionalism is attributed to an individual and, by extension, to their profession [4]. In agreement with Crook, I have generally viewed a profession as something clearly delineated and recognised by such traits and public confidence [5].

In the case of teaching, however, the picture is more complex. I once discussed the idea of "professionalism" with a class of my secondary students (14–15-year-olds in a private school in Madrid). These students strongly equated professionalism with success. They argued that to be a professional, one must be "good at what you do," suggesting that success and professionalism go hand in hand. One student even insisted that being a professional simply means excelling in one's job. This perspective resonates with what Stronach et al. describe as the "economies of performance", the notion that measurable success is the currency of professionalism [6]. I found myself asking: does this conception apply to teachers? Must teachers be "good", in the sense of producing high exam scores or other metrics, to be considered professionals? While my students would emphatically say yes, some scholars dispute the usefulness of terms like *success* in defining teacher roles. Derrick, for instance, argues that framing teaching in terms of success or failure is unhelpful when describing the responsibilities of educators [7]. Instead of viewing professionalism in teaching as an outcome, such as student achievement scores, Webb et al. suggest it should be seen in terms of responsibilities: teachers' commitment to continually develop their knowledge and to take actions that benefit their students [8]. This view introduces the idea of power in the realm of teaching, the power for teachers to control their own professional growth and identity. Sfard and Prusak similarly emphasise that teachers have the power to shape their identities through the stories they tell and live by in their practice [9].

It was telling that when I asked my students to list what they considered true professions, not one of them mentioned teaching. I pressed them on why they excluded teachers. Perhaps, as Hargreaves observes, teachers often lack the autonomy and public trust granted to traditional professionals [10]. Educational policies can undermine teachers' autonomy, leaving them feeling they are not fully trusted to make independent judgments. Whitty has gone so far as to label teaching a "semi-profession" or "quasi-profession" because it does not completely tick all the boxes of the classic professions [11]. The use of such prefixes implies a hierarchy in which not all professions enjoy equal status. This viewpoint, categorising teaching as something less than a full profession, was cautioned against even decades ago by Millerson, who warned that creating tiers of professionalism could be detrimental [12]. Nonetheless, the ambivalence about teaching's professional status persists, influenced by evolving expectations and external pressures on the role of the teacher.

3. The Deprofessionalisation of the Teaching Profession

Since the 1980s, many education policies around the world have been grounded in neoliberal theory [13,14]. Neoliberalism in education is characterised by constant restructuring, privatisation, and market-driven management. These reforms introduced market principles into schooling [15-17]. For example, policies have encouraged competition between schools and treated parents and students as consumers. This market-oriented approach has altered the parent–teacher relationship: parents, emboldened as customers, place heavy emphasis on accountability and results from teachers [18,19].

One hallmark of neoliberal reform is standardisation of curriculum and testing. In Spain, for instance, a push for national standards means that when all schools teach and test the same content, differences in outcomes are attributed to either student factors or teacher competence [20]. Standardised assessments often serve more to monitor teachers than to help students. Collet notes that evaluation has become an end, emphasising control over improvement [21]. Under this regime, teachers are subjected to continual scrutiny. There is ongoing monitoring of lesson plans, student test scores, and compliance with protocols, all of which is further amplified during internal and external inspections. These conditions convey an implicit message that teachers are not fully trusted to do their jobs well [22-24]. This culture of performativity forces teachers to focus on producing evidence of learning, test scores, metrics, reports, to satisfy external demands [22,25]. In some cases, high stakes are attached to these metrics: some systems tie teacher evaluations or pay to student results through "merit pay" or incentive programs [26].

Neoliberal policies have not only changed what teachers do, but also what being a teacher means. When policy defines education purely in terms of efficiency and outputs, it can recast a teacher's role from nurturer and expert to something more akin to a production manager [22]. In Spain today, the pressure for quantifiable results, market-style competition, and tight bureaucratic oversight largely shape teachers' self-perceptions and working conditions [27]. Teachers naturally respond to these pressures in personal ways. Day observed that such reforms provoke both rational and emotional reactions, since they strike at the core of a teacher's identity [28]. Indeed, the clash between external demands (e.g. "raise test scores now") and personal values or pedagogical beliefs can prompt a deep re-examination of one's purpose as a teacher. Hendrikx describes today's environment as one of ethical and technical uncertainty, where even fundamental truths about education are contested [29].

In the face of this, I find inspiration in an unlikely source, Ernest Simoni, now cardinal. He endured 28 years of forced labour for practicing his vocation as a Catholic and teacher under a repressive regime of Enver Hoxha in Albania. Throughout, he maintained that teaching must always be grounded in the pursuit of truth. He continuous to tell that the fundamental role of educators is to kindle in students a passion for truth and knowledge. He insists that teachers should be able to *flourish* in their calling, fully engaging in what he described as the spiritual passion of the profession. If a school reduces educators to merely delivering information and meeting targets, leaving aside the "great questions" that give education meaning, then education becomes sterile. Students miss out, and teachers are left unfulfilled, unable to realise the deeper purpose of their work.

In some of the metrics-driven schools I have taught in, I have heard colleagues talk about teaching simply as "doing the job", Ernest Simoni's perspective revealed to me how impoverished that view is. Recognising this contrast was pivotal for me. It spurred me to critically reflect on my own practice and identity. Over time, I have grown determined to resist the notion that teaching can be reduced to metrics alone. Instead, I want to reclaim a sense of professionalism that is rooted in moral purpose and genuine personal agency, rather than one defined solely by external metrics.

4. The Role of Management in Teacher Identity
For several decades, public education has been reorganised under strict managerial principles emphasising efficiency, measurement, and control. This corporate-style management has significantly shaped teachers' professional identities [30]. A teacher's identity – essentially "Who am I as a teacher?" – plays a key role in how they respond to such reforms [31].

Strict management often seeks to redefine what it means to be a "good teacher" in business terms. It tends to equate teaching with meeting standardised targets and following prescribed methods. As a result, teachers' intrinsic motivations and judgments can be called into question. For example, managerial policies may view teaching as simply achieving test scores, which undermines traditional values like professional autonomy and the spirit of service [32-34]. This creates tension between a teacher's personal ideals and the duties they are told to perform.

Yet teacher identity is not static. It is dynamic and shaped by personal beliefs and experiences [35]. Not every teacher reacts to change in the same way; each brings unique experiences and values that shape their perspective [36]. Teachers interpret changes in their work through their own belief systems, a personal lens configured by their experiences and values [37]. Its these believes that are often deeply rooted and not easily changed [38]. Thus, teachers do not simply absorb reforms passively. They are not, and should never be, mere implementers of policy. Rather, we actively make sense of our work in our own terms [39]. We may adapt reforms to fit our classroom or quietly resist aspects that conflict with our principles.

I have experienced this interpretive process many times. When faced with new objectives from management that contradict my educational philosophy, I felt stress or frustration. Skinner et al. note that such value conflicts can produce negative emotions like anger and anxiety in teachers – emotions I know well [40]. However, each time I navigate one of these conflicts and assert my own judgment, it reinforces my belief in the importance of teacher autonomy in education. In fact, those moments of tension have clarified for me that true professionalism in teaching requires the freedom to exercise one's judgment in the best interest of students.

It is ironic that some management regimes claim to grant teachers "autonomy," but the autonomy often comes with strings attached. Typically, it means we are free to choose how to meet externally mandated goals, but not to question the goals themselves. Being excluded from shaping the very guidelines we must follow breeds' mistrust. As Molina-Pérez and Luengo observe, when teachers have no voice in creating the rules, they understandably doubt whether the "autonomy" they are given is genuine [27]. In such circumstances, the purpose and motivation that drive good teaching are weakened. When policy treats teachers as technicians rather than professionals, it risks stripping away the sense of purpose that sustains us in our work.

5. Discovering My Identity
A study by Amott has helped me put many of the above issues into perspective [41]. Amott's research examined how teachers transition into becoming teacher educators, and her findings mirror several aspects of my own experience. In particular, she emphasises three key insights about professional identity: (a) identity is ever-changing, (b) identity construction is a social process, and (c) identity is also deeply personal. These points resonated with me, because my journey in education has involved continuous change, shaped by interactions with others and by introspection.

Amott's study is directly relevant to my current situation. I am working as a secondary science teacher while simultaneously serving as a teacher educator at a university in Madrid, Spain. In her study, Amott found that when teachers become teacher educators, they retain much of their credibility and identity as teachers even as they take on a new role. Their professional identity evolves rather than completely switching to a different identity. In other words, a teacher who starts training other teachers doesn't stop being a teacher at heart; the identity broadens and shifts, but there is a core continuity.

My case, however, has an extra layer of complexity. Unlike Amott's participants who moved sequentially from being classroom teachers to being teacher educators, I have been straddling both roles simultaneously, in fact, you could say I carry double credentials. I teach science in a secondary school, and I also help prepare future science teachers at the university. This dual professional life sometimes made me wonder: have I truly "become" a teacher educator, or do I still mainly see myself as a teacher who happens to teach teachers? Have I gained a new identity, or just expanded my original teacher identity? I did not

experience a clear-cut transition with a chance to shed one identity and take on another; instead, the two have developed in parallel. Moreover, I have a third role as a researcher, participating in a science education research group in Madrid. I often ask myself how this researcher role fits in, Has engaging in research altered my perspective or credentials as an educator? And how do all these roles interact in defining who I am professionally?

One approach Amott used to understand identity shifts was to collect reflective professional life histories [41]. Inspired by this, I turned to reflect on my own professional past, the critical incidents, the mentors and models I've had, and the personal milestones that led me into teaching and academia. This reflection exercise was enlightening. It helped me "connect the dots" of my career and come to terms with my current multifaceted identity. In doing so, I also became more aware of my own epistemological stance as an educator.

What I found aligns with Amott's observations, even as I took on new roles, I never lost the old one. Amott noted that her subjects largely retained their teacher identity when they became teacher educators, and she did not report that they felt they had grown an entirely separate identity. Initially, balancing these identities required learning new skills and juggling new tasks, but over time I noticed something else. Not only do I still consider myself a school teacher at heart, I also embrace being a teacher educator and a researcher. Rather than each role diluting the others, they seem to be reinforcing one another. I don't experience them as separate, competing personas; I experience them as interconnected facets of a single, more complex professional self.

A vivid image came to mind that helped me articulate this to myself. I remembered watching my grandmother knit socks for my sister and me when we were children. For the pair of socks she made especially for me – "for my oldest grandson who is always on his feet," as she lovingly put it, she used a particular technique. The yarn she selected was not a single strand but was made of three smaller woollen strands twisted together. Each strand was a different colour and individually quite thin, but intertwined they formed one strong, hard-wearing thread. With this triple-strength yarn, she knitted socks meant to withstand a lot of wear and tear.

This memory serves as a perfect metaphor for how I now view my three professional identities. They are like those three differently coloured strands of wool. On their own, each identity (the teacher, the teacher educator, the researcher) is important but partial. Twined together, however, they form a single, stronger thread – the yarn of my professional life. In practice, this intertwined identity has made me more resilient and versatile. It allows me to "walk" further, to extend the range of my professional journey, much as those sturdy socks helped me as a child to run around without getting holes in them.

6. The Importance of Critical Incidents in Teacher Identity Formation

Throughout my career I have encountered pivotal moments, critical incidents, that shaped my professional outlook. Cunningham confirms that significant events in a teacher's life can influence their identity and conception of professionalism [1]. He also cautions that "*no specific event is inherently critical; its criticality exists only in its perception as such by the individual*" [1]. In other words, what makes an incident critical is how we interpret it and learn from it. He advises that when we do recognise an event as critical, we should approach it with wisdom, calm, resilience, and objectivity.

One incident from my professional life stands out. A few years ago, a new teacher in the secondary school I was working as a science teacher resigned mid, citing "excessive pressures" from our school's management. At the time, I didn't fully grasp the significance of his resignation; it seemed an unfortunate but isolated event. As Tripp notes, critical incidents often go unrecognised in the moment, we may only see their importance later when we reflect on why they happened and what they mean [42]. Sure enough, about a year later, I saw another new teacher at the same school showing the very same signs of stress and disillusionment. This time, I felt a strong sense of *recognition*, I had seen this movie before and I knew how it might end if no one intervened. Drawing on what I had tacitly learned from the first incident, I stepped in to support my struggling colleague. This kind of informal learning, gained through reflecting on a crisis, is exactly what Cunningham describes as the valuable byproduct of critical incidents. In offering personal and professional support to the second teacher, I hoped to prevent history from repeating itself [1]. We talked through his challenges, I shared coping strategies, and I acted as a mentor when he felt overwhelmed by management's demands.

Reflecting on these two cases, I asked myself why I had managed to cope in that high-pressure environment while two other capable teachers could not. I realised two factors made a difference. First, our training backgrounds were different. My teaching qualification – a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) from London, had essentially trained me to survive in a system driven by targets and accountability. I entered teaching prepared, in some ways, even conditioned, to accept certain managerial pressures as normal. My colleagues, who had trained in the Spanish system, came with a different expectation of what teaching would be like. The abrupt introduction to a market-driven school culture was a culture shock for them. Second, the school culture itself was unforgiving to newcomers. It assumed that every teacher would adjust automatically to its neoliberal ethos, which was not the case.

In theory, a new teacher can learn and adapt by gradually engaging with their community of practice [43]. But in these incidents, the gap between the teachers' expectations and the school's reality was too wide. Without additional support, conflict was inevitable. In the first case, no support was provided and the teacher left. In the second case, with my informal mentoring, the teacher gradually found his footing. Ultimately, that second teacher did not quit; with guidance and time, he grew more confident and remained in the profession.

These incidents were a turning point for me. They showed how crucial it is to have a supportive, reflective culture in schools, and how damaging a "sink or swim" mentality can be. After experiencing these crises, I became more vocal about the need to move away from purely neoliberal management approaches in education. I also became convinced that teachers must have greater agency in their work environments. This realisation became a defining element of my own professionalism, I started to see a true "professional" teacher as one who not only meets external expectations but also has the courage and capacity to challenge and change those conditions for the better.

I shared my insights with my line manager. He acknowledged the undue pressure on staff and gave me leeway to implement small changes in our science department. I used that freedom to encourage more collaboration, peer support, and innovative teaching methods among my team, essentially carving out a micro-culture that valued teacher input and well-being more than before.

This experience reminds me of the case of "Jock" in Priestley – a teacher who did not simply go along with the prevailing currents in his school [44]. Jock championed a student-centred approach even when his colleagues favoured traditional, didactic teaching. In my own way, I decided not to "go with the flow" of top-down mandates that I felt were detrimental. With the support of my department colleagues, we introduced changes, we made our classes more student-centred, we experimented with creative projects, and we even opened our doors to trainee teachers from a local university. This exchange not only helped the trainees but also invigorated our department with fresh ideas. As a result, our science department became a bright spot in the school, known for innovation and a positive environment.

Eventually, external circumstances changed, the school was taken over by a multinational chain, which ushered in a more corporate, profit-driven agenda. At that point, I chose to leave for a different institution. Leaving the school was a pivotal moment for me, it was an assertion of my professional identity and values. By then, those critical incidents had indelibly shaped me. I left with a clear sense of the teacher I wanted to be, one who values agency, supports colleagues, and puts students' holistic growth first. Those experiences planted the seeds of my identity as not just a teacher and a mentor to other teachers, but also as someone determined to research and advocate for better educational practices.

7. Teacher Agency in Education

In the aftermath of these experiences, I became deeply interested in the concept of agency as it applies to teachers. Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act intentionally and make choices. Biesta and Tedder emphasise that agency is not a fixed trait that one simply *has*; rather, it is something one *does* – achieved through action in particular contexts [45]. In their view, agency arises when teachers engage in reflective and creative practice even under social constraints. In other words, a teacher's agency is realised at moments when they can exercise professional judgment and creativity against the backdrop of structural pressures. Agency is thus relational, it results from an interplay between the teacher's own history and intentions and the environment in which they work.

Emirbayer and Mische further detail agency as involving three interdependent dimensions: the iterative (drawing on past experiences), the projective (imagining future possibilities), and the practical-evaluative (making judgments in the present) [46]. When these dimensions come together, a teacher can act with agency by integrating lessons from the past, aspirations for the future, and an assessment of present needs. This dynamic view of agency suggests it can be nurtured or stifled by one's circumstances. It also implies that agency is crucial for sustaining a teacher's identity, engaging our past, present, and future selves in decision-making keeps our work authentic and purposeful.

I recognise this dynamic in my own career. The times I feel most professional are when I draw on my prior knowledge, envision a better way forward for my students, and then make a deliberate choice in the classroom. For example, I might deviate from a scripted lesson upon realising it isn't meeting my students' needs, improvising a new approach based on both my past experience and my goals for the class. Such moments, when I adapt in real time, remind me why I became a teacher and affirm my sense of agency.

Priestley et al. build on the idea of agency by stressing that it is always situated in concrete contexts [47]. A teacher's ability to act with agency is supported or hindered by the cultural, structural, and material conditions of their environment [47]. For instance, a school culture that values teacher initiative, a timetable that allows collaboration, and access to ample teaching materials will enhance agency. Conversely, a tightly scripted curriculum, lack of collaboration time, and scarce resources can constrain even the most reflective and motivated teacher. From my perspective, the neoliberal trends discussed earlier often systematically erode teacher agency, a policy environment of scripts, metrics, and punitive accountability leaves little room for the creative, reflective interplay that agency requires.

Yet even within restrictive systems, teachers find ways to assert their professional judgment. Osborn et al. describe such teachers as "creative mediators." [48] These are educators who, drawing on their experience and expertise, find cracks in the rigid structures, small spaces where they can bend rules or innovate for the benefit of their students. They meet the letter of the law but still find ways to go beyond one-size-fits-all mandates.

A recent example from Spain shows both the challenge to teacher agency and teachers' resilient response. In 2020, Spain enacted a new education law known as LOMLOE, which introduced a competency-based curriculum and required schools to incorporate more inclusive, gender-neutral content [49]. The reform was well-intentioned, aiming to promote equality and modernise education, but many of us felt it was imposed in a top-down manner, overlooking practical realities such as unequal school resources and students' unequal access to technology [50,51].

In response, my colleagues and I exercised our agency by interpreting the new requirements judiciously. For example, while textbook publishers rushed to add "inclusive" scenarios in lessons, we opted to integrate themes of diversity in ways that we felt were age-appropriate and meaningful rather than simply following a script. Since Spanish schools and universities are permitted to develop their own teaching materials, we took advantage of this autonomy as a loophole to ensure we met the spirit of the law without resorting to superficial tokenism. In my teacher education courses, I also approached LOMLOE's mandates through critical compliance. I introduced the required topics, but rather than presenting the new policy as beyond question, I engaged my student teachers in open discussions about it. Together, we examined whether the reforms introduced by LOMLOE genuinely promote social equality or whether they might inadvertently create new forms of inequality. For example, we noted that not all students have equal access to technology at home, an aspect the reform did not fully account for, and not all schools are equally resourced to implement sweeping changes. By questioning these issues, my student teachers learned to see educational policy as something they can engage with critically, rather than just accept passively.

This experience with LOMLOE reinforced for me that teacher agency is indispensable. Even a sweeping national policy will only succeed if teachers actively mediate it, adapting reforms to the realities of their classrooms. When teachers have the agency to do this, when they can question, adjust, and humanize a policy, education is far more effective and equitable. My recent experiences under LOMLOE have thus only strengthened my commitment to advocate for teacher empowerment as a core aspect of professionalism.

8. My Future Professional Identity

Amid the challenges outlined above, one might ask: *Why do we continue to teach*? Research suggests that it is the ethical dimension of teaching that keeps many teachers committed [52]. I find this to be true for myself. I remain in the profession not for the salary or status, but because I believe in the moral value of educating young people and helping them grow.

Neoliberal policies, however, have made it harder for teachers to focus on these deeper values. We are under constant pressure to improve test scores, graduation rates, and other quantifiable outcomes. Yet an overemphasis on such metrics does not necessarily prepare students for life's real challenges outside of school. A student might graduate with high exam grades and a polished résumé but lack critical thinking, resilience, or empathy, qualities that standardised tests cannot measure, but which are crucial in life beyond academia. Moreover, when teachers are forced to "teach to the test," it narrows the curriculum and can diminish our creativity and love of learning. It also leaves less room to build the kind of trusting relationships with students that we know are essential for meaningful education.

In reality, teaching has always been about more than delivering content; it has also been about character formation and fostering virtues. Arthur et al. remind us that historically, teachers were regarded as moral exemplars and mentors in virtue for young people [53]. Qualities like curiosity, honesty, and perseverance, these virtues have traditionally been cultivated alongside intellectual growth. Under neoliberal pressures, much of this virtue-oriented work has been de-emphasised. The curriculum has narrowed, and teachers' moral authority has been eroded [53]. I am determined to push back against that trend. In my own practice, and in guiding new teachers, I emphasise the importance of reflective practice and the moral aspects of teaching. Sockett describes teaching as moral work and speaks of teachers' epistemic presence – the unique perspective and wisdom we bring [54].

My advocacy for teacher agency and for teaching as a values-driven profession stems from the same source as my decision to become a teacher. I was drawn to education not just to teach biology facts or pedagogical theories, but to make a positive difference in young people's lives. That mission is fundamentally a moral one. It makes sense, then, that I bristle at models of teaching that reduce it to a mechanistic enterprise; such reductionism feels like a threat to the very reason I do this work. In my various roles as teacher, teacher educator, and researcher, I intend to resist any model of education that diminishes the human element. I encourage new teachers to question one-size-fits-all mandates and to remain guided by the core values that drew them to this profession. In mentoring newcomers to the profession, I urge them to stay reflective and true to their educational ideals, even as they navigate the system's demands. I remind them that teaching is as much an art as a science, and that maintaining their passion and principles will help them weather external pressures throughout their careers.

In essence, my vision of my future professional self is someone who integrates both heart and mind in education. I see myself as part of a quiet movement to reclaim teaching as a deeply human, morally purposeful profession. By staying true to the ethical core of our work and by empowering myself and others to exercise professional judgment, I believe we can create educational environments where both teachers and students truly thrive. As teachers, our task is not just to impart knowledge but also to inspire and guide. By holding onto the principles that brought us into teaching and by exercising our professional autonomy, we can educate students to become not only knowledgeable, but also thoughtful, compassionate, and resilient.

9. Conclusion

In the past, I was content to see myself as a capable actor on the educational stage, diligently meeting the targets set by neoliberal policies in education. However, over time, the habit of reflection instilled in me a spirit of criticality, a determination to look beyond the surface of policies in search of what is true and what is right in our profession. This journey of reflection has engaged my whole being, intellect and emotion together, in re-examining what it means to teach.

Today, I view my three professional roles (teacher, teacher educator, and researcher) as interwoven parts of one identity, much like my grandmother's three strands of yarn twisted into one durable thread. In my daily work, I carry all three perspectives with me, and they strengthen one another. With this unified professional identity, I am guided by a clear vision that education is neither aseptic nor neutral, it cannot be reduced to a sterile transaction or a generic formula. Education is inherently value-laden and personal, and effective teaching recognises the uniqueness of each classroom, each community, and each student.

Agency is needed in teaching, and we realise this when we look at teaching with a focus on individual students as whole people and the potential of what each of them could be. In doing so, we also refocus education on the virtues and values that make it a profoundly human endeavour. My journey of learning and reflection is ongoing, but I am more confident than ever that by staying true to these principles I will continue to grow as an educator and help shape a better future for my students in the years to come [55-60].

References

1. Cunningham, B. (2008). Critical incidents in professional life and learning. In B. Cunningham (Ed.), Exploring Professionalism (pp. 161–189). Institute of Education, University of London.
2. Picciotto, S. (2011). *Regulating global corporate capitalism*. Cambridge University Press.
3. Abbott, A. (2014). *The system of professions: An essay on the division of expert labor*. University of Chicago press.
4. Kong, K. (2014). *Professional discourse*. Cambridge University Press.
5. Crook, D. (2008). Some historical perspectives on professionalism. In B. Cunningham (Ed.), Exploring Professionalism (pp. 10–27). Institute of Education, University of London.
6. Stronach, I., Corbin, B., McNamara, O., Stark, S., & Warne, T. (2002). Towards an uncertain politics of professionalism: teacher and nurse identities in flux. *Journal of education policy, 17*(1), 109-138.
7. Derrick, J. (2013). 'Practitioner learning'not 'professional learning': towards a non-technocratic model of autonomous development for post-compulsory sector teachers. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education, 18*(3), 269-279.
8. Webb, R., Vulliamy, G., Hämäläinen, S., Sarja, A., Kimonen, E., & Nevalainen, R. (2004). A comparative analysis of primary teacher professionalism in England and Finland. *Comparative education, 40*(1), 83-107.
9. Sfard, A., & Prusak, A. (2005). Telling identities: In search of an analytic tool for investigating learning as a culturally shaped activity. *Educational researcher, 34*(4), 14-22.
10. Hargreaves, A. (2001). Changing Teachers, Changing Times: Teachers' Work and Culture in the Postmodern Age. Continuum International Publishing.
11. Whitty, G. (2000). Teacher professionalism in new times. *Journal of in-service education, 26*(2), 281-295.
12. Millerson, G. (1964). The Qualifying Associations: A Study in Professionalization. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
13. Ball, S. J. (2016). Neoliberal education? Confronting the slouching beast. *Policy futures in education, 14*(8), 1046-1059.
14. Peet, R. (2009). *Unholy Trinity: The IMF, World Bank and WTO* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.
15. Ball, S. J. and Youdell, D. (2008). Hidden privatisation in public education. Education International.
16. Verger, A., & Curran, M. (2014). New public management as a global education policy: its adoption and re-contextualization in a Southern European setting. *Critical studies in education, 55*(3), 253-271.
17. Brown, W. (2015). Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution. Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books.
18. Coffield, F., & Williamson, B. (2009). From Exam Factories to Communities of Discovery: The democratic route (Vol. 64). Institute of Education Press.
19. Hargreaves, A., and Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional capital: transforming teaching in every school*. Routledge; Teachers College Press.
20. Meshulam, A. & Apple, M. W. (2014). Interrupting the interruption: neoliberalism and the challenges of an antiracist school. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 35*(5), 650-669.
21. Collet-Sabé, J. (2017). 'I do not like what I am becoming but…': transforming the identity of head teachers in Catalonia. *Journal of Education Policy, 32*(2), 141-158.
22. Ball, S. J. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of education policy, 18*(2), 215-228.
23. Wilkins, C. (2011). Professionalism and the post-performative teacher: new teachers reflect on autonomy and accountability in the English school system. *Professional development in education, 37*(3), 389-409.
24. Power, S. (2008). The imaginative professional. In B. Cunningham (Ed.), *Exploring Professionalism*. Institute of Education, University of London.
25. UNESCO & Rizvi, F. (2016). *Privatization in Education: Trends and Consequences*. UNESCO Education Research and Foresight Working Papers, 18.
26. OECD (2018). Effective Teacher Policies: Insights from PISA.
27. Molina-Pérez, J. & Luengo, J. (2020). Reconstrucciones resilientes de la identidad profesional del profesorado: endoprivatización y cultura performativa en Andalucía (España). REICE. *Revista Iberoamericana sobre Calidad, Eficacia y Cambio en Educación, 18*(2), 57-75.
28. Day, C. (2002). School reform and transitions in teacher professionalism and identity. *International journal of educational research, 37*(8), 677-692.
29. Hendrikx, W. (2020). What we should do vs what we do: teachers' professional identity in a context of managerial reform. *Educational Studies, 46*(5), 607-623.
30. Day, C., & Kington, A. (2008). Identity, well-being and effectiveness: The emotional contexts of teaching. *Pedagogy, culture & society, 16*(1), 7-23.
31. Lasky, S. (2005). A sociocultural approach to understanding

teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform. *Teaching and teacher education, 21*(8), 899-916.

32. Skerritt, C. (2019). Discourse and teacher identity in business-like education. Policy Futures in Education, 17(2), 153-171.

33. Schimank, U. (2015). 'New public management'as de-professionalization–conceptual reflections with some applications to school teachers. In *Restructuring Welfare Governance* (pp. 183-199). Edward Elgar Publishing.

34. Buchanan, R. (2015). Teacher identity and agency in an era of accountability. *Teachers and teaching, 21*(6), 700-719.

35. Garner, J. K., & Kaplan, A. (2019). A complex dynamic systems perspective on teacher learning and identity formation: An instrumental case. *Teachers and Teaching, 25*(1), 7-33.

36. O'Connor, K. E. (2008). "You choose to care": Teachers, emotions and professional identity. *Teaching and teacher education, 24*(1), 117-126.

37. Kelchtermans, G. (2009). Who I am in how I teach is the message: self-understanding, vulnerability and reflection. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice, 15*(2), 257-272.

38. Nias, J. (1989). Teaching and the self. In M. L. Holly & C. S. McLoughlin (Eds.), *Perspectives on Teacher Professional Development* (pp. 151-171). Falmer Press.

39. Zembylas, M. (2018). Rethinking the demands for 'preferred'teacher professional identities: Ethical and political implications. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 76*, 78-85.

40. Skinner, B., Leavey, G., & Rothi, D. (2021). Managerialism and teacher professional identity: Impact on well-being among teachers in the UK. *Educational review, 73*(1), 1-16.

41. Amott, P. (2018). Identification–a process of self-knowing realised within narrative practices for teacher educators during times of transition. *Professional Development in Education, 44*(4), 476-491.

42. Tripp, D. (2011). *Critical incidents in teaching (classic edition): Developing professional judgement*. Routledge.

43. Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge university press.

44. Priestley, M. (2011). Schools, teachers, and curriculum change: A balancing act?. *Journal of educational change, 12*(1), 1-23.

45. Biesta, G. J. J. and Tedder, M. (2006). How is agency possible? Towards an ecological understanding of agency-as-achievement. (Working paper 5). Exeter: The Learning Lives Project.

46. Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What is agency?. *American journal of sociology, 103*(4), 962-1023.

47. Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2013). Teachers as agents of change: Teacher agency and emerging models of curriculum. *Reinventing the curriculum: New trends in curriculum policy and practice, 20*, 187-206.

48. Osborn, M. J., Croll, P., Broadfoot, P. M., Pollard, A. J., McNess, E. M., & Triggs, P. A. (1997). Policy into practice and practice into policy: Creative mediation in the primary classroom. In *Teachers and the national curriculum* (pp. 52-65). Cassell, London.

49. LOMLOE (2020). Ley Orgánica 3/2020, de 29 de diciembre, por la que se modifica la Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de mayo, de Educación. *Boletín Oficial del Estado, 340*, 122868-122953.

50. Muñoz-García, A. L. & Lira, A. (2020). Creating political feminists in education. In M. Corvera & G. Muñoz (Eds.), *Horizontes y propuestas para transformar el sistema educativo chileno* (pp. 140-167). Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile.

51. López-Sáez, M. Á., García-Dauder, D., & Montero, I. (2020). Intersections around ambivalent sexism: internalized homonegativity, resistance to heteronormativity and other correlates. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 608793.

52. Belogolovsky, E., & Somech, A. (2010). Teachers' organizational citizenship behavior: Examining the boundary between in-role behavior and extra-role behavior from the perspective of teachers, principals and parents. *Teaching and Teacher education, 26*(4), 914-923.

53. Arthur, J., Kristjánsson, K., Cooke, S., Brown, E., & Carr, D. (2015). The good teacher: Understanding virtues in practice.

54. Sockett, H. (2012). *Knowledge and virtue in teaching and learning: The primacy of dispositions*. Routledge.

55. Barbour, J. B., & Lammers, J. C. (2015). Measuring professional identity: A review of the literature and a multilevel confirmatory factor analysis of professional identity constructs. *Journal of professions and Organization, 2*(1), 38-60.

56. Hargreaves, A. (2000). Mixed emotions: Teachers' perceptions of their interactions with students. *Teaching and teacher education, 16*(8), 811-826.

57. LOE (2006). Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de mayo, de Educación. *Boletín Oficial del Estado, 106*, 1-44.

58. Reay, T., Goodrick, E., Waldorff, S. B., & Casebeer, A. (2017). Getting leopards to change their spots: Co-creating a new professional role identity. *Academy of Management Journal, 60*(3), 1043-1070.

59. Saura, G. (2021). Políticas aceleradas/mundo ensamblado. Ritmos, contextos y actores en educación. *Foro de Educación, 19*(1), 135-158.

60. Troncoso, L., Follegati, L., & Stutzin, V. (2019). Más allá de una educación no sexista: aportes de pedagogías feministas interseccionales. *Pensamiento Educativo: Revista de Investigación Educacional Latinoamericana, 56*(1), 1-15.