

Case Study

Understanding Vocational Teacher Educators' Role Identities Through Metaphors: A Case Study in Malta

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Abstract: The objective of this qualitative study, that is framed using identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009), based on semi-structured interviews, is to gain a deeper understanding of the professional role identities of vocational teacher educators (VTEs) through the use of metaphors. VTEs are undervalued in studies and policy in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) context, and misunderstood as an occupational group, despite being essential to maintaining a high-quality vocational teaching workforce and significantly influencing the quality of vocational education. It presents empirical evidence taking Malta as a case study and examines how VTEs synthesise the meanings they assign during an initial teaching education (ITE) programme. In addition, it also investigates how, through metaphors, the role identities of VTEs in Malta change during the ITE programme. Findings indicate that VTEs face various complexities, and it is difficult to express the multiple facets of this professional role identity in a single metaphor. Moreover, within this case study, VTEs' role identity formation does not follow a linear trajectory but unfolds according to the needs at that time.

Keywords: metaphors, vocational teacher educators, role identities, vocational education and training

1. Introduction

VTEs play a crucial role in ITE and the professional development of vocational teachers. They provide theoretical and practical education to student teachers, preparing them for the teaching profession. However, little is known about their different roles and professional development needs. While there is an increased focus on teacher educators' roles and identities, more research is needed to understand them (Noel, 2006; Crawley, 2013; Izadinia, 2014; Springbett, 2018; Powell, 2020). Policymakers within the Vocational Education and Training (VET) context need to recognise the importance of VTEs and their profession, establish policies to support them and guarantee consistency and quality in their work.

This study examines the meaning of being a VTE in a Maltese context using metaphors and analyses their identity changes during an ITE program in Malta to examine whether time affects their role identity formation. VTEs are vital for maintaining a high-quality vocational teaching workforce and neglecting them in policymaking may lead to poor teaching practices.

2. Research objective and questions

The study forms part of a larger study on the role identities of VTEs. While the principal research, framed using identity theory explores the distinctions in role identity descriptions of VTEs within the Maltese context, the primary goal of this qualitative research is to comprehend how VTEs assign meaning associated with their role identities. Moreover, another goal of this study is to understand how, through metaphors, the role identities of VTEs in Malta change during an ITE programme. In pursuit of this aim, this paper examines the following two research questions:

How do VTEs assign meaning associated with their role identities in the Maltese context?

During the ITE programme, how do, through metaphors, the role identities of VTEs change in the Maltese context?

3. Defining identity

This section discusses the theoretical lens used in this paper and the term professional identity is also outlined.

3.1 Theoretical lens

Burke and Stets's (2009) identity theory serves as the theoretical foundation for examining the role identities of VTEs. This theory, rooted in structural symbolic interactionism (SI), focuses on the meaning of identity, particularly through the concepts of 'identity prominence' and 'identity salience' to analyse how participants perceive and rank their identity meanings. The theory emphasizes that individuals develop shared identities through symbolic interactions. Utilising SI as the primary theoretical framework for this study provides a profound insight into the identities of VTEs at a detailed level. This approach allows the researcher to investigate the dynamic aspects of VTEs as they narrate their own identities and position themselves within their contexts.

The term SI was coined by Herbert Blumer (1962) who developed Mead's (1934) ideas into a cohesive theory. Blumer (1962) emphasised the need for sociologists to examine society from the "bottom up" (i.e., starting at the micro-level and moving up toward the macro-level). SI, which takes a micro and social level orientation, looks at how people interact with, and make sense of their world to create meaning. SI promotes a system of symbols to negotiate meaning, where intentions and expected responses to others are communicated to maintain social harmony. In shifting the focus from the macro- to the micro-level of analysis, Blumer's SI provided sociologists with a theoretical perspective that departed from over-socialised descriptions of human actors, towards "an understanding of individuals as agentic, autonomous, and integral in creating their social world" (Carter & Montes Alvarado, 2019, p.3).

Opting to use Burke and Stets's (2009) identity theory helps in extending current understanding and past research on the identities of VTEs and takes on a different perspective by delving deeper into the individual level rather than seeking merely to consider the institutional or national level. Identity theory builds on existing knowledge on the professionalisation of VTEs, but will also contribute something unique to a better understanding of what it means to be a VTE in a Maltese context.

McCall and Simmons (1978) maintain that individuals typically claim more than one role identity and organise them into a *prominence hierarchy* which shows their primary concerns, such as being a good teacher or a good parent. This organisation reflects a person's "ideal self" (McCall & Simmons, 1978, p.74). The prominence of an identity depends upon three factors: (1) receiving support from others for an identity, (2) commitment to the identity, and (3) receiving extrinsic and intrinsic rewards from the role identity. The more prominent the role identity is, the more likely it will be activated and performed in a situation. Moreover, enacting a role identity is always done in relation to a corresponding counter-identity within the interaction, for example, teacher to student, or parent to child. However, this is not the only determinant of behaviour, since less prominent identities will appear in situations due to norms or pressures from others. This leads to the second hierarchy of identities-the salience hierarchy (Stryker, 1980).

Stryker (1980) suggests a view of identities that is somewhat similar to that of McCall and Simmons (1978), although developed independently. According to him, the many role identities that a person may have are organised in a *salience hierarchy*-where the individual responds to the expectations or requirements of the situation rather than its ideals or what is valued. This means that while the prominence hierarchy of McCall and Simmons (1978) addresses what an individual values, the salience hierarchy (Stryker, 1980) focuses on how an individual is likely to behave in a

situation. Several factors, such as prominence, support, rewards and the perceived opportunity structure influence the salience of an identity in a specific situation. Thus, what one values may or may not be related to how one behaves in a situation even though there is a significant relationship between the two (Stryker & Serpe, 1994). These two forms of hierarchy (prominence and salience) will also be used in this study to explore further the understanding of the role identities VTEs through metaphors. The present research is part of a larger study on the role identities of VTEs. Whereas the main study framed using identity theory (Said, 2022) investigated how VTEs differ from mainstream TEs in how they describe their role identities in the Maltese context, and Said (2023) examined the perceptions of employers in Malta on how they perceive the role identities of VTEs, the overall aim of this qualitative study is to understand further the role identities of VTEs through metaphors.

To understand the identity formation process, Stets and Burke (2003) combined “sociological identity theory” with “social identity theory” and came up with three different categories. These are: (1) the roles one takes; (2) the membership within a group; and (3) the personal perspective. With regards to the first and second categories, role and group identities are structural, and individuals are aware of certain factors that exist and respond according to social settings. The latter refers to personal identity when individuals voluntarily and willingly make their own decisions (Heise & MacKinnon, 2010).

Role identity connects with personal identity through equivalent sets of meanings (Stets & Burke, 2000; Stets & Serpe, 2013). For example, a reliable TE (role identity) can also be a reliable person (personal identity). Nonetheless, one’s role identity can also contradict one’s personal identity. For instance, a person can be diligent whilst on the job, but very careless when at home. Moreover, since an individual brings together all three dimensions of identity (role, group and personal), the way they interact determines the person’s identity. For example, individuals can play different roles in different groups, and can perform their roles differently depending on the personal identity standard put into those specific roles. For example, an individual who has the personal role identity of a student attends a particular school and is a member of that group (Stets & Serpe, 2013). Burke and Stets (2009) claimed that a personal identity is like a master identity as it is constantly being activated and is generally very high in salience in the hierarchy of identities; the meanings within one’s personal identity influence the meanings within one’s role and group identities. However, this happens based on the assumption that individuals can choose what roles to take and groups they form part of, but if an individual has little opportunity for choice, such a situation will affect their personal identity. Certain situations cannot be changed, and personal identity can still be influenced by roles and groups. The extent of choice can also be influenced by the relative openness of the particular society or context. For example, VTEs in general cannot change the student teachers that register on an ITE programme. Moreover, Burke and Stets (2009) argue that through the control of active and potential resources and the manipulation of meaning, using signs and symbols in a particular situation, the process of verifying any type of identity is accomplished. The same perceptual control and verification processes could be used for all roles, groups and personal identities and how they operate.

Identity theorists have dedicated much of their attention to individual role identities and have not examined integrating all three (role, group and personal). Although this study focuses on the role identities of VTEs due to their relevance to professional identities, the influence of personal identities will also be examined. The following paragraphs explain the theoretical model that underpins this research. Ultimately, to understand a role identity well, it needs to be seen as a process.

Identity theory integrates SI with perceptual control theory (Powers, 1973). The latter was primarily developed by William T. Powers (1973) and is based on control systems in the field of cybernetics. Cybernetics was developed as a field of study by Weiner (1948) and comprises the study of self-regulating systems in closed feedback loops in which the output of a system can be controlled by negative feedback. However, Powers (1973) noted that the control of perception or input to the system is what matters for individuals, and not simply the control of output or behaviour (Burke & Stets, 2009). When humans are faced with disturbances, they still tend to maintain a steady and stable environment, although others’ interactions may disturb an individual’s attempt to maintain consistency between situational meanings and identity meanings each time an identity is activated. The individual’s identity is “verified” when meanings are maintained through this process without any disturbance (Burke & Stets, 2009).

The identity model comprises four key components: input, identity standard, comparator, and output. These components form a cyclic process where discrepancies between inputs and identity standards generate error signals, leading to potential behavioural modifications to align with identity standards, as shown in Figure 1. This process

continues until identity is verified, producing positive emotions.

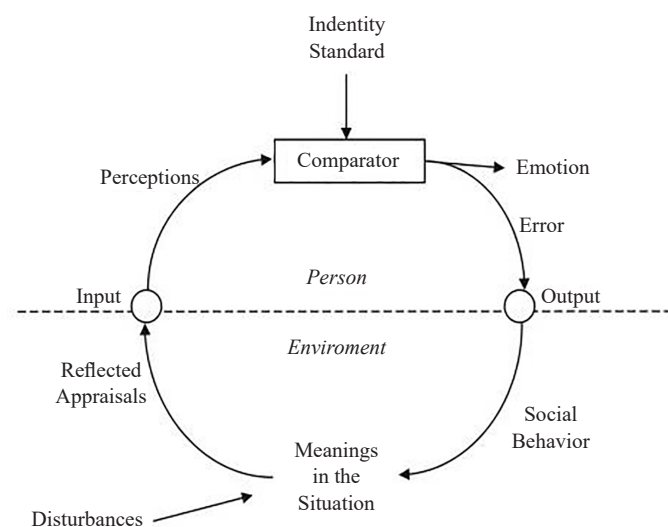


Figure 1. Basic Identity Model (Reprinted from Burke & Stets, 2009, p.62)

Role identity influences individuals' perceptions, expectations, and behaviours, providing structure and meaning to their lives. The theory highlights the dynamic nature of identity and its impact on how people understand their roles and achieve their goals.

3.1.1 Teacher educators' professional roles and identities in a general education context

Professional identity in teaching has become the prime focus of education research (Avidov-Ungar & Forkosh-Baruch, 2018). It is also directly related to perceiving professional belonging (Davey, 2013). Lasky (2005) argues that it is based on the individual's experiences, personal background and others' expectations, all of which guide their behaviour (Lasky, 2005). Previous studies recognise that identities and roles are not fixed, but are malleable and influenced by interaction, and identity can be viewed as an answer to the recurring question: "Who am I at this moment?" (Beijaard et al., 2004; Gee, 2000).

Literature on TEs that is also relevant to VTEs (Meeus et al., 2018; Springbett, 2018; Lunenberg et al., 2014; Kopsen, 2014; Willemse & Boei, 2013; Crawley, 2013; Simmons & Thompson, 2007; Noel, 2006) does not investigate the development of professional role identity; the emotion TEs invest in this; the professional intentions that shape this; and the outcomes for TEs' working practice.

Moreover, not all researchers have specifically mentioned their alignment with a particular theoretical framework when investigating TEs' identities, although this review of the literature indicates that the most common theoretical approaches were framed by sociocultural theories, SI, communities of practice and social learning theory.

The professional identity of TEs is complex, considering their different educational contexts and backgrounds. For example, TEs working in the general education context engage in teaching, research and teaching practice for student teachers (Willemse & Boei, 2013). Although they are distant from schools, their professional identity is constantly shifting from their role as researchers to their role as TEs (Willemse & Boei, 2013). Identifying professional roles can form a basis for developing the TE professional identity. Lunenberg et al. (2014) who reviewed the profession of TEs working in the general education context identified six professional roles: 'teacher of teachers', 'researcher', 'coach', 'curriculum developer', 'gatekeeper' and 'intermediary'. They conceptualise a professional role as a personal interpretation of a position.

Moreover, several researchers (Loughran, 2014; Zeichner, 2005; Dinkelman, 2003) argue that focusing on

researching one's own practice as a teacher of teachers (practitioner research) should be done throughout a TE's career to promote scholarship as a basis for TEs, which functions with different roles (Lunenberg et al., 2014). It is acknowledged that these roles are not all fulfilled at one moment in the TE's career, nor do they belong to a particular point in time throughout their career (Kelchtermans et al., 2018). These roles depend on the education context they work in and on the different relationships they form throughout their career (Beijaard et al., 2013). The professional roles of TEs identified by Lunenberg et al. (2014) could be the same or similar to those of the participants of this study, even though it is a case study focussing mainly on VTEs based in a Maltese context.

3.2 Professional identity in studies of the VET teaching workforce

There has been little examination of the professional identity of the VET teaching workforce. Literature from this section informs the importance of exploring the differences in the professional role identities of TEs from both mainstream and vocational education contexts.

Avis et al. (2003) conducted a study where the narrative experiences of new lecturers in HE and FE were compared. Although their sample does not include TEs, findings from this study can illuminate ways in which professional role identity in general is understood. One of the main characteristics that was found, was the fact that the amount of administration staff had, distracted them from their main job of teaching and research. Specifically, "they worked within institutions that pursued efficiency gains lodged within hierarchical and managerial organisations that placed a limit on the development of professional collegiality" (p.186). This lack of collegiality might hamper professionals' sense of identity.

Similarly, another study conducted by Avis et al. (2011) on VTEs in Scotland and England, found that college-based educators placed importance upon the particular needs of their learners, whilst university-based TEs put more focus on research. This was also the case in Avis et al.'s study (2003) of university and FE lecturers. In another study conducted by Bathmaker and Avis (2005), the way teaching is seen in an FE context is centred around assisting students, where the role of lecturer is depicted as a facilitator. All these findings could also relate to the way VTEs in a Maltese context describe their professional role identities.

4. Use of metaphors to understand identity

Since SI was chosen as the theoretical perspective for this study and metaphors depict these symbols, research on their use to understand identity was reviewed to target the research questions of this study. Through the metaphors that VTEs in a Maltese context choose to represent their roles, a deeper understanding of the range and entirety of their professional role identities is likely to be achieved.

Symbols, such as the three types of inter-subjective activities-language, play and the game-allow effective interaction (Mead, 1934). They are the fundamental social processes that enable the reflexive objectification of the self.

Language or conversation is achieved through words, gestures and signs, all of which carry meaning; they form the first set of symbols we use as babies to understand our world and create our social self (Mead, 1934). Some argue that the absence of language would mean that the 'self' and differentiating others as individuals would also cease to exist (Mead, 1934). People use language in the form of metaphors to illustrate, among other things, the "complexity of identity" (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011, p.764), and in this study, metaphors can help teachers talk about their teaching experiences in a rich and stimulating way.

It should be evident that the self-as-object, as described by Mead (1934), is not an object in a mechanistic, external world of relationships, but rather a fundamental structure of human experience emerging in response to others within an organic social-symbolic real of internal (and inter-subjective) relations. This concept is further clarified in Mead's (1934) analysis of plans and games. In these activities, like linguistic interactions, the generation of self-consciousness is driven by role-playing. During play, a child assumes the role of another person and acts as if they were that person. This type of role-playing involves only one role at a time, meaning that the 'other' the child encounters in play is a "specific other" (Mead, 1934, p.169). In the context of teaching, play can be seen in the way educators experiment with different teaching styles and strategies, adopting various roles to find what works best in various situations. Through this role-playing, the identity of teacher educators can be further understood.

The game involves more complex role-playing than play, requiring individuals to internalise the roles of all participants and understand the governing rules (Mead, 1934). This stage of socialisation is where individuals attain selfhood. Educators must internalise the roles of various stakeholders—students, administrators, and colleagues—and understand the broader educational framework. Through these activities, educators develop a nuanced understanding of their role identities, a continually shape their self-concept based on social interactions and environmental expectations.

4.1 Defining metaphors

If a picture is worth 1,000 words, a metaphor is worth 1,000 pictures! A picture provides only a static image while a metaphor provides a conceptual framework for thinking about something (Shuell, 1990, p.102).

Holman (1980, p.264) defines metaphor as “an implied analogy which imaginatively identifies one object with another”. Other researchers such as Massengill, Shaw and Mahlios (2008) explain metaphors as “analogic devices that lie beneath the service [sic] of a person’s awareness and serve as a cognitive device ... as a means for framing and defining experience in order to achieve meaning about one’s life” (p.35). Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) seminal study explores the use of metaphor by individuals to understand their experiences better. They argue that when individuals use metaphors their lives can be more meaningful. In fact, they state that “a large part of self-understanding is the search for appropriate metaphors that make sense of our lives” (p.233). Therefore, we also conceive of ourselves through metaphor.

The above quote depicts Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) “cognitive theory of metaphor”. Metaphors are ways that structure our perceptions, thoughts, and actions. In this study, a metaphor is employed when TEs understand their world by linking complex phenomena such as their professional role identity (the abstract), to something they have already experienced (the concrete). Thus, in this study, a metaphor can take the form of just one word, phrase, or figure of speech, which acts as a lens for the participants through which their professional role identity is reviewed and interpreted.

4.2 Metaphors about teachers or student teachers

Many studies have examined the use of metaphors to understand teacher or student-teacher identity and identity formation (see for example: Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011; Saban et al., 2007; Alsup, 2006; Farrell, 2006; Hunt, 2006; Goldstein, 2005; Gillis & Johnson, 2002; Knowles, 1994; Bullough & Stokes, 1994; Briscoe, 1991; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). However, the educational contexts of these studies have focussed on teachers within primary and secondary education. These researchers found that teachers use metaphors to conceptualise and reconceptualise their teaching roles, beliefs, and identities (Tobin, 1990; Munby, 1986). Metaphors strongly influence their teaching practice and who they are as teachers (Briscoe, 1991). Guerrero and Villamil (2000) argue that metaphors make teachers aware of implicit assumptions they may have, and thus, give impetus to change educational beliefs and practices. Moreover, Clandinin (1986), suggests metaphors can also guide how teachers interact with their students in the classroom. The preceding studies have informed this research and encouraged the study of ascribed multiple meanings participants use, to describe the role identities of TEs in a Maltese context.

5. Research approach

A qualitative methodology located within an interpretive paradigm was used where data was collected over the two-year Master in Teaching and Learning (MTL) programme at the beginning and towards the end, undertaken with one year time. The semi-structured interview technique was chosen where convenience and purposive sampling were adopted. The primary subjects of this research were VTEs in the MTL program at the Faculty of Education (FoE), University of Malta (UM). All participants were interviewed in their natural working habitat while adhering to educational research guidelines and ethical regulations approved by the University’s research committee. All interviews were structured in a way to flow from uncomplicated questions about the participants’ backgrounds to more specific questions regarding their practice. Such an approach aims to establish trust and helps to connect with participants.

The objective for the first stage of data collection was to gather general information from VTEs about the MTL program, their experience as a TE at the beginning of the course, their relationships with different work groups, their questions about their role as TEs and any final remarks regarding the impact of the programme in their identity formation. The interview guide was based on Burke and Stets's (2009) identity model and it targeted mostly the 'Input' stage of the model. Moreover, questions regarding their role as VTEs at the beginning of the programme, together with the metaphors they chose to represent their role identity as VTEs, were used in comparison with the data in the second stage of data collection to target the second research question. The reason is, to see whether VTEs experienced changes in their role identities throughout the MTL in VET programme.

The same stage of data collection consisted of more questions about their roles as VTEs. Specifically, this interview, which was also guided by Burke and Stets's (2009) identity theory, asked questions about the importance of identity, the identity standard (i.e. the ideal TE) and verification, their relationships with students, and institutional contexts and influence. Table 1 gives a brief overview of the participants.

Table 1. VTEs

VTE No.	Subject Discipline	Full-Timer (FT)/Part-Timer (PT)	Experience in industry
Tanya*	VET General Pedagogy	FT	N/A
Liam*	Media studies	PT	Yes, as a media producer
Amy*	Psychology	PT	N/A
Anne*	HSC	PT	Yes, in HSC
Miguel*	HSC	PT	Yes, as a social worker
Claire*	HSC	PT	Yes, as a physiotherapist
John*	Applied Science	PT	Yes, as a scientist

*All names representing these participants are pseudonyms to minimise the risk of identification

5.1 Metaphor analysis

This section discusses the analysis that was conducted on the metaphors that were collected during the semi-structured interviews. Participants were specifically asked to come up with a metaphor that portrays the role identity of a VTE. This question, which was not provided in advance, aimed to determine the self-identities that are important to the participants which are in line with the concept of identity prominence within identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009). Participants were allowed to reflect on the question before answering. However, as the findings section reveals, participants used many other rich metaphors to describe their role identities throughout the interviews. Therefore, the metaphorical analysis did not only apply to the specific answer to the interview question (*Can you come up with a metaphor that portrays your role identity as a VTE?*) but to all metaphors that participants used in their interviews. The same question was also asked in the second stage of data collection. Participants strive to verify their identity in the identity control feedback loop (Burke & Stets, 2009). The more important it is to them, the more prominent it is. Thus, analysing the metaphors participants use is a way to determine the identities that are more prominent to them. Moreover, Pajak (1986) and Clandinin (1986) argue that metaphors are significant in the practical knowledge of teachers as they shape their understanding of their role. Pajak (1986) continues to argue that metaphors act as a way for teachers to verbalise their "professional identity".

The procedure used to analyse the metaphors during both stages that were chosen by the participants was based on the data analysis processes of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) and Schmitt's (2005) guides.

Five stages were used during metaphor analysis. The first stage consisted of identifying the topic; i.e. the professional role identity of VTEs. The second step was to identify the metaphors that participants used from the transcripts. In this study, a word, phrase or figures of speech, all count as a metaphor, together with the specific answer participants gave to the interview question (*Can you come up with a metaphor that portrays your role identity?*). For example, if a participant is comparing the process of mentoring to a “chain control within a manufacturing company”, that phrase is considered a metaphor. Thus, the language participants used throughout all the interviews was closely examined to see what metaphors emerged and how the connection between the metaphorical concept and the VTEs’ professional role identity was made through their discourse. The identified metaphors were typed into a list for the group of participants.

The third step was to synthesise the collected metaphors into metaphorical concepts. For example: the metaphors ‘motivator’ and ‘facilitator’ were grouped together under the metaphorical concept of *supporter*. The reason is that all the metaphors that belong to the same image source and description are grouped under the same heading. This is how the main metaphorical concepts were formed for the lists of metaphors. Moreover, the formulation of the metaphorical concepts was also influenced and informed by the studies of Thomas and Beauchamp, (2011); Saban, Kocbeker, and Saban (2007); and Alsup, (2006). In addition, an iterative approach was used to group the metaphors according to metaphorical concepts about the professional role identity that emerged. “In vivo codes”, which are the same words that participants use, were used for labeling the categories (Creswell, 2013, p.268) during the first stage of open coding. The same process was repeated for all groups of participants to build reliability in the analysis. When all the data were coded, the transcripts were re-read, and the metaphorical concepts were re-examined.

The fourth step was to compare the metaphorical concepts with each other for both stages and check for similarities and differences. Since VTEs were asked to come up with a metaphor during two stages of data collection (at the beginning and towards the end of the MTL programme), the metaphorical concepts from their metaphors were compared with each other to check for evidence of change within their professional role identity.

The final step was to interpret the metaphors to generate knowledge on the subject matter. In fact, Schmitt (2005, p.374) states: “Knowledge in respect of metaphoric concepts only becomes of use if it makes interpretation possible (i.e., if a connection can be made between the concepts found and the events, thoughts, and actions that take place in the real world)”. Participants gave their reasons why they chose a particular metaphor. For example, the metaphor which fits in the metaphorical concept of *nurturer*, was *mother*. The participants that mentioned this were all female, and therefore, this implicitly suggested their counter role-the students, who are portrayed as their children. The metaphor ‘mother’ in this context, does not make a lot of sense in its literal meaning. However, the image that is portrayed is that of someone who cares for her children, implying that the VTEs who chose ‘mother’ as their chosen metaphor is that of someone who cares for her student teachers and wants the best for them. For obvious reasons, metaphors can be subjective, as they depend on various characteristics, such as gender, biographical and cultural contexts. For example, male participants of this study did not choose ‘mother’ as a metaphor, showing the gender influences in choice of metaphors. Moreover, the personal (individual) self and identity, together with the social (group) identity, leaves an impact on individuals on the metaphors they choose for their role identities. This shows that personal identity may act like a master identity as it is constantly being activated and is generally very high in salience in the hierarchy of identities, as claimed by Burke and Stets (2009).

6. Findings

This section presents the various metaphors that participants identified that encapsulated what it means for them to be a VTE. These metaphors reveal that their professional role identities are complex and multifaceted. Moreover, the variety of metaphors reflects multiple perspectives that VTEs have of their professional role identities, showing that identity is dynamic and not fixed. This sub-section presents the metaphorical concepts that emerged from the metaphors that VTEs used during their interviews about their professional role identity.

VTEs came up with various metaphors that portrayed what it means for them to be a VTE. The common metaphorical concepts that emerged during the first stage of data collection with VTEs across the sample are discussed first.

6.1 The first stage of data collection

This section describes the common metaphorical concepts across VTEs at the beginning of the ITE programme. Four main metaphorical concepts emerged from an analysis of the metaphors collected during the first interviews. These include *nurturer*; *supporter*; *provider of guidance and advice*; and *collaborator*. Only two metaphors did not fit into these specific concepts-‘change agent’ and ‘tool’. Table 2 presents a summary of how VTEs metaphorically conceptualised their professional role identity at the beginning of the ITE programme.

Table 2. VTEs’ Metaphors (stage 1)

Metaphors	VTEs	Description VTEs gave	Metaphorical Concept
Mother	Amy	“I feel like a mother that has to protect them.”	Nurturer
Motivator	Liam	“I feel like a motivator at this stage as student teachers are still finding their ground at the beginning.”	
Critical Friend/Peer	Miguel, Tanya	“I’m more of a critical friend to help them find their way.” (Miguel) “I hope to be more of a critical peer who is there to push, pull, to praise.” (Tanya)	Supporter
Facilitator	Tanya	“I feel like a facilitator to help them and guide the way.”	
Bridge/Stepping-stone	John	“I feel like a bridge or a stepping-stone between student teachers and the experience they require, same thing as VET after all.”	Provider of guidance and advice
Waterfall	Claire	“I feel like a waterfall where my knowledge and experience are being passed from one person to the other.”	
Cobweb	Claire	“My relationship with these different workgroups [other TEs, student teachers, and respective schools where teaching practice takes place] is like a cobweb. Everything is linked and together you get the full picture”	
Chain	John, Anne	“I feel like a chain where everyone is connected to each other and working together.” (John) “Sometimes, I feel like a chain and we are strong as our weakest link. I don’t work in isolation. I would want to know what comes before me and what comes after.” (Anne)	Collaborator
Equilateral triangle	Miguel	“We are all working together like an equilateral triangle. There’s the TE, the university and place of work as the sides of the triangle, and the student teacher is in the middle.”	
Change agent	Anne	“I think I’m a change agent. I try to keep abreast with what is happening. I believe a lot in change. Change is inevitable part of life.”	Other metaphors
Tool	John	“I also feel like a tool for improvement.”	

6.1.1 Nurturer

This metaphorical concept captures the metaphors that VTEs used to describe their role identity within a nurturing role. It was only Amy, who said that she feels like a “mother”. The reasons she gave for her chosen metaphor were that since student teachers have just started the ITE programme, she feels that it is within her responsibility to take care of them as much as possible so they do not feel discouraged. She admitted that being a mother herself, she sees her student teachers as her own children who need protection. Amy’s dual identity as both mother and TE helps to influence how she perceives her professional role identity. Moreover, her metaphor echoes one of the trainee further education (FE) lecturers in Bathmaker and Avis’s (2005, p.56) study, who refers to the lecturing role as “playing the role of a parent”. This concurs with Blumer’s (1969) argument where he claims that individuals enter into various types of interaction with established identities and different ways of dealing with other participants. This also implies that the identity standard is informed by the respondents’ past experiences.

6.1.2 *Supporter*

This metaphorical concept captures the metaphors that VTEs used to describe their role as being supportive. For example, Liam said that he feels like a “motivator”. Like Amy, he acknowledges the fact that student teachers are at the beginning of the ITE programme, so he wants to make sure that he tries to motivate them as much as possible to remain on it. Similarly, Miguel said that he feels like a “critical friend”. He suggests that he wants to be trusted by his student teachers, to be able to support them as much as possible throughout the course. In addition, this portrays how Miguel wants to build a good relationship with his student teachers. Tanya also wants to be close to her student teachers as she feels like a “facilitator” and a “critical peer”. She wants to be present in the educational journey of her student teachers to help them and make any action easier. Tanya’s metaphor of “facilitator” echoes that of the ten trainee FE lecturers in Bathmaker and Avis (2005, p.56).

6.1.3 *Provider of guidance and advice*

This metaphorical concept captures the metaphors that VTEs used for their role identities, to portray their way of providing guidance and advice to their student teachers. John sees himself as a “bridge/stepping-stone” between his student teachers and the experience they require. He suggests that it is within his responsibility, to offer his student teachers the knowledge, skills and competences (KSCs), so that they will become effective vocational teachers. Similarly, Claire sees herself as a “waterfall”, where she passes KSCs to her student teachers.

6.1.4 *Collaborator*

This metaphorical concept captures the metaphors that VTEs used for their role identities in their working relationships. Three metaphors were used: “cobweb”, “chain” and “equilateral triangle”. VTEs chose these metaphors to depict that they do not work in isolation but collaborate with one another. For example, Claire feels that her working relationship is like a “cobweb” where everything is linked. So, her role as a VTE is linked with the student teacher and the school where teaching practice takes place. Similarly, both John and Anne feel that they are part of a “chain” and describe how everything is connected and that they do not work in isolation. Miguel’s metaphor, “equilateral triangle” portrays the TE, the university, and the place of work, with the student teacher at the centre, depicting that the main focus is always on the student teacher.

6.1.5 *Other metaphors*

The metaphors that Anne and John chose to use, “change agent” and “tool” respectively, did not fit with any of the above metaphorical concepts. Anne described herself in that way, as she sees herself as promoting different pedagogies and current changes related to VET to her student teachers. On the other hand, John described himself as a tool that is being used for improvement, though he did not specify whether this was for improvement in general or with regards to the ITE programme. The next section describes the metaphors that VTEs used in their second interview.

6.2 *The second stage of data collection*

This section describes the common metaphorical concepts VTEs used towards the end of the ITE programme. The second stage of interviews found the VTEs to be more focussed on their role identities and most of the metaphors used portrayed a change when compared with the first stage. However, two of the emerging metaphorical concepts that were present in the first interview, *nurturer* and *supporter*, remained the same for the second interview. In addition, only two metaphors could not fit within the emerging metaphorical concepts. The metaphors used by VTEs, focus on one common metaphorical concept, supporting student teachers. Table 3 presents a summary of how VTEs, metaphorically conceptualised their professional role identity towards the end of the ITE programme.

Table 3. VTEs' Metaphors (stage 2)

Metaphors	VTEs	Description VTEs gave	Metaphorical Concept	Individual change (Stage 1 vs Stage 2)
Mother	Amy, Anne	"I still feel like a mother, even though they [student teachers] progressed throughout the year and did very well." (Amy) "I feel like a mother who wants the best for her children." (Anne)	Nurturer	Amy-No change Anne-from 'change agent' and 'chain' to 'mother'
Farmer	John	"I now feel like a farmer who has sowed seeds during the programme and am now reaping the harvest."		John-from 'bridge/stepping stone', 'chain' and 'tool' to 'farmer' and 'mentor' (see below)
Facilitator	Liam	"I feel like a facilitator now and not only a motivator."	Supporter	Liam-from 'motivator' to 'facilitator' however still in the supporting metaphorical concept.
Critical Friend	Tanya	"A critical friend and not just a supporter."		Tanya-no change for 'critical friend' however she now used 'advocate' rather than 'facilitator'.
Advocate	Tanya	"I want to be like an advocate for them [student teachers]."		John-completely changed his metaphors. See above.
Mentor	John	"I also feel like a mentor, as a lot of mentoring is still going on similar to a chain control within a manufacturing company."	Other metaphors	Liam-added another metaphor. See above.
Curator	Liam	"Sometimes, I took the role of a curator due to certain projects which I had assigned to them [student teachers]."		Miguel-from 'critical friend/peer' and 'equilateral triangle' to 'leader'
Leader	Miguel	"Definitely a leader. Because if it's not the TE that takes the lead and influence student teachers. He cannot be a follower."		

6.2.1 Nurturer

This metaphorical concept captures the metaphors that VTEs used to describe their ongoing nurturing role identity, in the case of Amy who admitted she still felt like a "mother" to her student teachers, using the same reasoning she provided in her first interview; and Anne, who now also feels like a "mother" to her student teachers. She admits that like she does with her children, she wants the best for her student teachers and wants them to succeed. Likewise, John changed his metaphor for the second interview, and he now feels like a "farmer" reaping the harvest of the seeds he had sown at the beginning of the ITE programme. He indicates that he feels satisfied with the performance of his student teachers, and thus, his professional role identity has been verified (Burke & Stets, 2009).

6.2.2 Supporter

This metaphorical concept captures the metaphors that VTEs used during the second stage of data collection to describe their role as being supportive. Even though they are towards the end of the ITE programme, the VTEs still see themselves as supporting their students albeit in a slightly different way to at the beginning of the course. For example, Liam now sees himself as a "facilitator"; he still wants to help student teachers when the need arises. Similarly, Tanya said that she now feels like a "critical friend" or an "advocate" and not just a "facilitator". On the other hand, John feels like a "mentor". He uses a workplace metaphor to describe his mentoring role as "similar to a chain control within a manufacturing company". All these metaphors depict how VTEs are still putting student teachers at the centre even though they are nearing the end of the ITE programme.

6.2.3 Other metaphors

There were other metaphors that emerged during the data analysis stage which did not fit in the above metaphorical concepts. For example, the metaphor that Miguel (VTE) used was "leader", which contradicts how he described the student-centred approach he uses in his lectures because being a leader mimics traditional lecturing, rather than responding to the students' needs.

Liam's metaphor, "curator", who must supervise his student teachers in projects that are assigned to them, also did not fit in the above metaphorical concepts. Curators are usually responsible for gathering objects or collections and planning and organising exhibitions. This metaphor could be interpreted as Liam feeling that he needs to observe and

manage his student teachers. However, it could also depict how VTEs together with their student teachers need to be very responsible on their teaching placement where certain equipment is being used.

7. Discussion

The first research question was approached by analysing ways in which VTEs described their professional role identities through the metaphors they used. The findings for this research question provide a better understanding of the role identities of VTEs. However, they are not enough to understand fully their roles, as metaphors only provide a glimpse into the complex notion of identity (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). Thus, the findings of Said (2022) together with these findings broaden our understanding of what it means to be a VTE.

The participants used varied metaphors which depict the complexity of being a VTE. The metaphors they came up with reflected their aims in their roles as VTEs. The most common aim amongst all VTEs is to put student teachers as a priority and help them in their career trajectories as future teachers. This was shown through the emerging metaphorical concepts of *supporter* and *nurturer* when VTEs chose metaphors such as “mentor”, “critical friend” and “mother”.

There was no single metaphor used that depicted the subject discipline for a VTE. In fact, the metaphors that VTEs came up with, were similar to each other despite the differences in the subject areas. However, the main distinction that was noted is that four metaphorical concepts (*nurturer*, *supporter*, *provider of guidance and advice*, and *collaborator*) emerged for VTEs. The reason for this, is because VTEs had a small cohort. Thus, VTEs could build a strong relationship with their student teachers. Moreover, there is the tendency that showing care and building strong relationships is quite apparent in a VET context. In fact, Kopsen (2014) investigated how vocational teachers describe their vocational teacher identity, and it was found that they support their students, which is in accordance with the findings of this study.

An interesting outcome of this study is the evidence that similar conceptions of what being a VTE means were portrayed. Moreover, the results of this study show that there is a trend towards a student-centred approach, which represents both the current teaching practice and the desired practice. This is also in line with what VTEs discussed in the previous research question regarding their identity standard and continuing efforts to aspire towards that ideal (Burke & Stets, 2009).

As previously mentioned, the role identities of VTEs were examined at the beginning and towards the end of the MTL programme. The following paragraphs illustrate how they changed. According to identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009), identity meanings are always changing, showing that identity standards are not fixed and static.

The role identities that VTEs mentioned at the beginning of the programme, were teaching, curriculum development and supporting student teachers (Said, 2022). Towards the end of the programme, participants mentioned that their roles were the same as those at the beginning of the programme, and an additional role was that of examining. The reason for this additional role, is the fact that teaching practice and final exams were also held during this semester. This change in the situation is one of the four sources of change in identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009). Therefore, this situational change disrupted the meanings of their identity standard at the beginning of the programme, which was mainly based on the teaching role, and participants had to change the meaning for the identity standard to match the situational meanings.

Another source of identity change is identity conflict which relates to the above-mentioned source (Burke & Stets, 2009). From the findings of Said (2022) and the second research question of this paper, VTEs have multiple meanings attributed to their role identities. Participants explained that it was very difficult for them during the teaching practice phase.

To summarise, the VTEs experienced two sources of systematic identity change, as suggested by identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009). The first factor that influenced this change, was the problems they were faced with verifying their teacher identity towards the end of the MTL programme. The second factor was that their multiple identities (teacher identity and examiner identity) were activated together whose verifications required opposing meanings during the formative assessment in the first visit of the teaching practice. During the teaching practice, VTEs have to grade student teachers whilst still giving them constructive feedback. These are two opposing roles which causes tension when verifying both role identities at that point in time. Thus, VTEs had difficulty to associate their role identity when faced with contrasting roles.

Another objective that the second research question had was to understand how VTEs describe their role identities through the use of metaphor at the beginning and end of the MTL programme. These were compared and the changes noted provide insights into VTEs' identity formation and how they adapt to their professional role identities.

In terms of the patterns that were identified, the metaphorical concepts that emerged towards the end of the MTL programme were still very similar to those at the beginning. The nurturing and student-support role was still present. However, a significant change that can be noticed in the metaphors used towards the end of the programme is that of 'critical friend'. This metaphor reflects the challenges that the participants were encountering during the teaching practice phase, especially during the formative assessment stage, and confirms their previous responses. The variety of metaphors that have been used, reflects the broad range of perspectives that VTEs attribute to their professional role identities, and shows us that identities are dynamic and situation dependent, as suggested by identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009). Thus, the identity development of TEs was revealed through their use of metaphors at two different stages, at the beginning and towards the end of the MTL. The use of rich metaphors clearly indicates that they are a good way to stimulate TEs in talking about their experiences, and the results show that identity development does not rely solely on length of experience, but on the varied situations that TEs are faced with. This finding is consistent with the findings of Thomas and Beauchamp (2011), who examined newly qualified teachers using metaphors.

8. Conclusion

This study enhances the understanding of VTE identity standards by using interview data and metaphor analysis to illustrate the various meanings that VTEs attribute to their roles. It explores how they manage multiple roles, deal with conflicting roles, and handle identity prominence and salience, while also examining how their identity evolved throughout the ITE program.

Metaphors were used by VTEs to ascribe the multiple meanings of their role identities. The metaphorical concepts that emerged from VTEs' metaphors focussed mainly on the relationships with the student teachers. This shows that VTEs' aim is the help them as much as possible, which aligns with what they described elsewhere (Said, 2022). No single metaphor can be used to communicate all the complexities of the role identities of VTEs. TEs face various complexities, as was described in the discussion of Said (2022), but it is difficult to express the multiple facets of this professional role identity in a single metaphor. Thus, this shows that no single metaphor can be used to communicate all the complexities of the role identities of VTEs. VTEs face various complexities, but it is difficult to express the multiple facets of this professional role identity in a single metaphor. Moreover, teacher education and in particular vocational teacher education remains a complex and demanding profession. Within this case study, VTEs' role identity formation does not follow a linear trajectory but unfolds according to the needs at that time.

Findings from this study suggest that policies should be put in place to support the professional role identity and development of VTEs. Career development for VTEs should be guaranteed with consistency and quality, providing continuous professional development opportunities, clear advancement pathways, and regular performance evaluations to support their growth and success. Future research could explore how role identities interact with social and personal identities, and how this interaction affects the behaviour of VTEs. Investigating how multiple identities interact with each other will broaden the understanding of VTEs' professional identities and will help in policy making as VTEs are better understood.

Declarations

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no competing financial interest.

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