

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Teaching Health Sciences at the Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia

Ser docente de ciencias de la salud en la Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia

Amantina Osorio-Ramírez¹  Margarita María Gómez-Gómez²  Teresita Alzate-Yepes³  Gloria Eugenia Giraldo-Mejía⁴  Olga Francisca Salazar-Blanco⁵ 

¹ Universidad de Antioquia - Faculty of Medicine - Department of Preventive Medicine and Public Health - Medellín - Colombia.

² Universidad de Antioquia - Faculty of Medicine - Department of Medical Education - Medellín - Colombia.

³ Universidad de Antioquia - School of Nutrition and Dietetics - Medellín - Colombia.

⁴ Universidad de Antioquia - Faculty of Agricultural Sciences - Veterinary Medicine - Medellín - Colombia.

⁵ Universidad de Antioquia - Faculty of Medicine - Department of Pediatrics and Child Care - Medellín - Colombia.



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Corresponding author: Margarita María Gómez-Gómez. Departamento de Educación Médica, Facultad de Medicina, Universidad de Antioquia. Medellín, Colombia.
E-mail: margaritam.gomez@udea.edu.co.

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Abstract

Introduction: Studying the identity of university teachers contributes to the understanding of their professional career, since their personal and professional development is projected in their work, as well as in their commitment to educational change or improvement on the basis of the concept they have of themselves and their profession.

Objective: To recognize the meanings of being a health science professor at the Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia.

Materials and methods: Qualitative study, based on symbolic interactionism, carried out between 2016 and 2019. Semi-structured interviews were administered to 73 teachers who had been working for more than five years in the health sciences programs offered by the Universidad de Antioquia. Data were analyzed inductively and compared with each other until achieving the creation of an explanatory table that would allow addressing the objective of the work.

Results: The meaning of being a health sciences professor at the Universidad de Antioquia was expressed as follows: 1) being a trainer: since professors conceived themselves as academics and educators; 2) having ethical behaviors: being a critical and caring counselor-companion for students who generates bonds with social responsibility; and 3) being someone welcoming: being a role model in terms of social relationships and demonstrating fulfillment with their performance in their teaching practice.

Conclusion: Participants conceive teaching as a way to contribute to the development of critical thinking in students and define their role as facilitators of the students' learning process. Furthermore, they have a common interest, namely, to guide, support and facilitate such process, so that students acquire tools that allow them to achieve an appropriate personal and professional development in the affective, social, and life project dimensions.

Resumen

Introducción. Estudiar la identidad de los docentes universitarios contribuye a la comprensión de su vida profesional, ya que estos proyectan su desarrollo personal y profesional en su labor, así como su compromiso con el cambio o mejoramiento educativo sobre la base del concepto que construyen de sí mismos y de su profesión.

Objetivo. Reconocer los significados de ser docente de ciencias de la salud de la Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia.

Materiales y métodos. Estudio cualitativo, basado en el interaccionismo simbólico, llevado a cabo entre 2016 y 2019. Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a 73 docentes vinculados por más de 5 años a los programas de ciencias de la salud de la Universidad de Antioquia. Los datos se analizaron de forma inductiva y fueron comparados entre sí hasta lograr un cuadro explicativo que permitiera abordar el objetivo del trabajo.

Resultados. El significado de ser docente de ciencias de la salud en la Universidad de Antioquia quedó expresado así: 1) ser un formador, al concebirse como académicos y pedagogos; 2) ser ético: ser un orientador-acompañante crítico y amoroso que genera vínculos con responsabilidad social, y 3) ser acogedor: ser un modelo a seguir en lo que respecta a relaciones sociales, y demostrar satisfacción con su ejercicio docente.

Conclusión. Los participantes conciben la enseñanza como una forma de contribuir al desarrollo del pensamiento crítico de los estudiantes y se definen como facilitadores de su proceso de aprendizaje; además, tienen un interés común: ser orientadores, acompañadores y facilitadores en dicho proceso para que los estudiantes adquieran herramientas que les permitan lograr un apropiado desarrollo personal y profesional en las dimensiones afectiva, social y de proyecto de vida.

Introduction

Teachers' professional identity is an area of study that was incorporated into the field of educational research in the 1990s within a framework of reference for higher education.^{1,2} This field makes it possible to investigate teachers' commitment to the profession, job satisfaction and motivation,³ and is of great relevance since this identity involves a series of roles and associated tasks that may overlap and sometimes clash with each other, in addition to being affected by national and global circumstances. Although the teaching profession has been widely studied in Anglo-Saxon countries, studies on the subject are limited in Latin America;⁴⁻⁶ in Colombia, Fonseca *et al.*⁷ and Valbuena *et al.*⁸ have conducted research on the identity of biology teachers.

Interest in the study of teachers' professional identity has increased considering that it has been established that this identity involves much more than the simple accumulation of knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies for teaching.^{2,9} Rather than professional norms, rules, and values, it focuses on aspects such as the ways of approaching teaching and structuring the teacher/student relationship, or the positioning and way of relating to students.¹⁰ In other words, the identity of teachers is influenced by their professional practice, which goes beyond training in specific fields of knowledge and involves the development of skills and abilities in students.¹¹

Professional identity, as established by Zamora-Pabón³ in his study of nurses, can be influenced by the identity of each professional, since according to Maya-Maya (cited by Zamora-Pabon³), the image a person has of their profession and the feelings it generates affects their way of thinking, acting, and developing their relationships with the environment. Regarding teacher professional identity specifically, Day *et al.*¹² established that it is neither intrinsically stable nor fragmented, as the literature suggests, but that it may be more or less stable and more or less fragmented at different times and in different manners, depending on certain factors in the life, career, and situation of each teacher.

Considering the above, the objective of this article was to recognize the meanings of being a health sciences professor at the Universidad de Antioquia in Medellín, Colombia.

Materials and methods

Qualitative study conducted between 2016 and 2019 with professors of the Universidad de Antioquia from the Faculties of Agricultural Sciences, Nursing, Medicine, Public Health, Dentistry, and Pharmaceutical and Food Sciences; the School of Nutrition and Dietetics; and the University Institute of Physical Education and Sports. The meaning that professors of these faculties gave to their interaction with colleagues and students in natural environments and in daily interactions was explored. The study was carried out in accordance with symbolic interactionism, which ratifies the importance of meanings given by individuals to interactions in specific contexts. Thus, the analysis of the interactions between the actor and the world was carried out considering both elements as dynamic processes and not static structures and taking into account the actor's capacity to interpret the social world.

This article is part of the project *Identidad profesional de los docentes del área de la salud de la Universidad de Antioquia* (Professional identity of health professors at the Universidad de Antioquia), which was conducted between 2016 and 2019 in the aforementioned units of this institution and was funded by the Committee for the Development of Research with resources from the Programmatic Call for Proposals in the Area of Social Sciences,

Economic Sciences, Humanities and Arts 2015. The research team comprised professors from the university's health sciences programs with experience in qualitative research, and was in charge of the entire research process, which included the design, definition and validation of the instrument used to collect the information, data analysis, and dissemination of the results.

The initial list of potential participants was obtained from the faculty databases of each of the university's health sciences programs. Professors were contacted by e-mail, telephone or in person to invite them to participate voluntarily and anonymously in the research, asking them to sign the informed consent form and guaranteeing the confidentiality of their data. Inclusion criteria were being a tenured or temporary professor (professors hired by the university for a period of less than one year) with full-time or part-time dedication; having more than five years of experience in the faculties concerned; and being professionals in the discipline of the faculty, a condition that did not apply to the Faculty of Public Health because this field of knowledge is made up of different disciplines.

A total of 73 professors (33 women and 40 men) from all the faculties considered who met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate in the study were included in the study. Participants were administered semi-structured interviews between October 2016 and April 2018 at locations suggested by the professors. The interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed in their entirety. The number of interviews depended on the saturation of the data that were considered necessary to achieve the objective of the study, saturation being understood as the point at which a diversity of ideas has been obtained to such an extent that further interviews would not provide additional elements or observations. Participants were asked about the characteristics, meanings, strengths, challenges, values, and rewards of being a professor in their field and at the Universidad de Antioquia.

To protect the anonymity of the participants, the following codes were used for coding the interviews: abbreviated academic unit (FCA: Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, FE: Faculty of Nursing, FM: Faculty of Medicine, FNSP: National Faculty of Public Health, FOD: Faculty of Dentistry, FCFA: Faculty of Pharmaceutical and Food Sciences, ENyD: School of Nutrition and Dietetics, IUEF: University Institute of Physical Education); sex (H: male or M: female) and interview number, for example: (FOD/M/19).

Data (interview transcripts, literature review, and documents related to the emerging issues) were analyzed as a whole to facilitate the approach to the meaning of being a health sciences professor, and inductively, i.e., from the specific to the general. Similarly, the constant comparative method was used to look for similarities and differences among the data, which enabled them to be sorted and classified until achieving the emergence of the category 'being a professor', with three subcategories: 1) *being a trainer*, by perceiving themselves as academics and educators; 2) *having ethical behaviors*, by being a critical and caring counselor-companion for students who generates bonds with social responsibility; and 3) *being someone welcoming*, by conceiving themselves as role models in terms of social and interpersonal relationships.

Data triangulation was done based on the data collected, the literature reviewed to validate the results, and the information disclosed at the Health Teachers' Identity Meeting, held in Medellín on May 24, 2019.

The study, which was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the Medical Research Institute of the Universidad de Antioquia according to Minutes No. 007 of April 30, 2015, took into account the ethical principles for research involving human subjects established by the Declaration of Helsinki¹³ and the provisions on health research of Resolution 8430 of 1993 of the Colombian Ministry of Health.¹⁴

Results

The meanings that professors give to their work are built during the stages of their professional development as a result of changes that affect their way of perceiving and relating to reality. They are also an expression of the institutional culture and of local and/or international governmental policies, but it should be noted that the practices and values of professors are matters that depend on the institution in which they work and on the way in which that institution understands their meaning within a given society:

“Public universities enable us to constantly recreate academic content depending on the context [...] we are part of the faculty movement; we are also part of the health movement [...] this permanent dialogue between the other sectors is also enriching for me as a professor because it gives me a different perspective on problems [...] I really value the possibility of being a professor at the Universidad de Antioquia.” (FOd/M/18)

In the analysis by subcategories, it was found that in the first one (being a trainer) professors were recognized as role models for students, not only regarding disciplinary knowledge, but also in the way of acting, thinking and perceiving the world, and in aspects related to the self, values and ethics:

“[...] You realize that students look upon you, they see what you are like, your personality. In other words, you are no longer an imaginary person, you are a real entity. The treatment, the approach to the patient, the greeting, the farewell, the verbal indications, that is, you are now like an image, a living one, of the approach to a patient, and I believe that they grasp that, they take it with them.” (FM/H/42)

“I believe that a university professor must have a high sensitivity to be able to understand the student, the reality, and the context, and also to be able to creatively articulate these different levels of reality according to the objects of study and work that are being developed in the classroom [...] A professor must have a high capacity to understand the conditions of the other, but also his or her own conditions.” (FOd/M/18/)

Concerning the second subcategory (having an ethical behavior), it was possible to establish that the pedagogical practice of the interviewees contributes to the development of a social project; to cultivate human capabilities in order to improve the living conditions of the community; to create reflective and inquisitive collectives that develop critical thinking; and to train professionals committed to socio-historical transformations and with the capacity to solve problems in their personal, cultural, academic, and work environment. In this sense, it is considered that the educational process provides students with tools to ensure their autonomy.

“[...] I believe that this is the most valuable opportunity we have in the country to help others become social actors, to educate human beings who are reflective, who can be with others, who are collaborators, who ask questions, who are not confined to what is established, but who think and are creative.” (FNSP/M/20)

“You have to act as a tutor with the student. Since I do internships with five students, I become very close to them, always bearing in mind that I am the instructor [...] I acknowledge them and I become full of their energy, and I already know what problems they have. So, one becomes like a tutor, because this is not only about teaching and

academics, but also about their growth as human beings, of those young people, that is, the development of a human being in all areas.” (FE/M/35)

Finally, for the third subcategory (being someone welcoming), it was found that professors recognize in their students young people who convey and teach through their behaviors, attitudes and questions, and also identify the changes they are undergoing as professors as the generations grow older and have new and different demands. Thus, the professor-student relationship is essentially transformative.

“[...] Absolutely loving and understanding. With every kid I have... I am able to understand and almost put myself in their shoes.” (ENyD/M/40)

“[...] Professors have to adapt to this; so, they teach us to be a little more flexible. Maybe I am someone who can be very tough; I have had to change a lot, and I think they are the ones who have driven that change” (FCFA/M/36)

“There are two things I like: one is the possibility of interacting with young people who see the world differently, and the other thing I like is that knowledge can be built, and knowledge can be improved through teaching.” (FNsp/H/13)

In general, with respect to being a professor, some participants manifested uncertainty regarding the changes that have been taking place and have entailed new interactions, practices and learning, both in the exercise of their educational duties as well as in their stance towards the students and the university.

“[...] As an actor participating in a scene that has many realities, (sic) being open, being permanently open to the things that are found there, because that allows us to enrich the context, the realities, the situations, and to feedback, that is, to deal with the shortcomings or potentialities; the shortcomings in order to try to approach them and, perhaps, even to overcome them.” (IUEF/H/70)

“[...] I have the obligation to reflect on my teaching practice all the time with my colleagues, not by myself. I believe that we do not come up with thoughts by ourselves, but rather put them in practice with people who give us feedback on things we have not noticed on our own [...] I think the relationship with the student also allows us to give back to them; I think student evaluations, especially the qualitative ones.” (FE/M/26)

Thus, it was established that in order to respond to structural changes in educational systems, for which not everyone is ready, professors must diversify their roles depending on 1) learning needs and the environments in which teaching will take place; 2) the use of information technologies; 3) cultural contexts; and 4) school communities.

“[...] Some of the greatest challenges we experience is that we are terrified of change [...] We cling to the same course all our lives, and we say: ‘I’ve always done it that way!’ [...] So the more open the professor is to change, the easier it is, I think, to evolve as a professor.” (FOd/M/67)

However, even though participants, as was evident, stated that they were satisfied with their work and pleased with their role, it was also found that some professors are unhappy about the poor esteem that society gives to this profession and are dissatisfied with the decrease in the number of new, well-qualified professors.

“From the economic point of view, being a professor is hard, and even more so with the types of contracts available, it’s hard, it’s hard!” (FM/M/72)

“I am very proud to be a lecturer, even if it is a profession that is socially undervalued, that has no political or ethical value, or anything else [...] I am very proud to be a lecturer!” (IUEF/H/61)

Discussion

Professional identity is understood as a projection of self-image that is constructed on the basis of a practice situated in a context.¹² Specifically, Flores & Day¹⁰ point out that, more than professional norms, rules and values, teacher identity is centered on aspects such as the ways of approaching teaching, structuring the teacher/student relationship, and relating to students.

The meanings of being teachers, which in turn shape the meaning attributed to the profession, are of contextual origin and are mediated and influenced by cultural and historical structures, educational policies, power relations, and institutional culture. In this regard, Buitrago & Cárdenas¹⁵ state that structural changes in education systems are related to the requirements of new generations, technological developments, and contexts that suggest other ways of living and being. It should also be pointed out that these transformations are the result of changes in development models, such as globalization, which has influenced collective identities, including teacher identity.

In the present study it was found that, when it comes to interacting with students, the participants consider that attitudinal and communicative aspects are determinant. This is in line with what has been proposed by Sarrado-Soldevila *et al.*,¹⁶ who, in their book, established that integrating the communication processes inherent to the health profession (dialogue and listening) fosters a humanizing process in teaching scenarios that facilitates mutual learning.

This study found that the participants were recognized for disseminating knowledge not only in their area, but also in relation to the human, ethical and axiological sense (sensitivity, wisdom, motivation, and moral character) that is expected from a health professional, which means that knowledge acquires meaning in the context of a society that will benefit from the individual’s learning in the training process, in other words, an individual who responds to the needs of the environment in an effective and appropriate manner. With respect to the latter point, it can be inferred that participants are not only recognized for wanting to do their work well, but also for feeling that education is their responsibility before others and that they must be able to generate in their students a projective view of themselves and the world around them, which, as stated by Maturana,¹⁷ is possible if the legitimacy of the “other” is acknowledged.

The findings of the present study are in agreement with those of Buitrago & Cárdenas,¹⁵ who point out that professional teacher identity is intimately and continuously linked to emotions from the moment the identity profile is structured and in every transformation that takes place in teacher-student interactions. They also concur with the findings of Valbuena *et al.*,⁸ for whom being a good teacher implies, besides disciplinary knowledge, taking into account the values, feelings and attitudes of the student, aspects that were evident in the definitions of professional identity given by the interviewees.

In turn, Fonseca & Martínez,⁷ citing Shulman, state that teachers’ knowledge and actions influence the persistence and identity formation processes of their students, which is consistent with what was found in the present study, since the participants here

recognized themselves as role models for the students. However, according to Day *et al.*,¹² citing James-Wilson, the ways in which teachers build their professional identity are influenced by how they feel about themselves and their students; in addition, this professional identity helps them to position themselves and make appropriate and effective decisions regarding their students.

In their study, Caballero & Bolívar¹⁸ point out that there are factors that intervene and, in some cases, determine the career path within the teaching profession, such as salary; evaluation systems for access, promotion and incentives; the work environment; power structures; and policies that regulate working conditions, factors that were also recognized by the participants in the present study as influential in their work.

Conclusions

The analysis of the data suggests and confirms that the professional identity of teachers alludes to a definition related to a specific field or area of performance, and that the personal (subjective), social (collective references and belongings) and cultural (attitudes, behaviors) aspects of each individual influence the development of this identity. Furthermore, this analysis established that professional identity is created through a continuous and dynamic process that involves the construction of new meanings and reinterpretations of one's own values and experiences. These aspects also reveal clear patterns in the way teaching is conceived and approached in the university classroom.

Thus, it was established that the participants conceive teaching as a way of contributing to the development of students' critical thinking and define themselves as facilitators of the learning process; in addition, they have a common interest: to be mentors, companions and facilitators in this process so that students acquire tools that allow them to achieve an appropriate personal and professional development in the affective, social and life project dimensions.

The findings of the present study are relevant to health sciences since it was demonstrated that professors are role models for students and that this favors the learning of professional culture and behavior. However, it is not possible to generalize the findings since it is clear that institutional relationships and social contexts are involved in the construction of teacher identity.

Conflicts of interest

None stated by the authors.

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