

# Crisis and Reconstruction of Teachers' Professional Identity: The Case of Secondary School Teachers in Spain

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**Abstract:** While the teachers' identity crisis is a recurring dilemma, it has acquired its own set of characteristics at the end of modernity. In addition, there are characteristics specific to secondary school teachers in Spain. Therefore, this topic must be placed within the broader framework of the modernity crisis and the academic community. From a narrative-biographical perspective, identities are constructed within a socialization process, like a story. This article describes the design of a study on the professional identity crisis of secondary school teachers in Spain. The study sequentially combines different individual interviews and focus groups. The research can be considered a *collective case study*, a *multiple case study* (individual interviews), and a greater collective study (focus groups). Finally, this article presents some of the study's main conclusions. Identity is crucial to how teachers construct the nature of their work on a daily basis (motivation, satisfaction and competence). Therefore, and given the current crisis, it is necessary to evaluate alternative discourses that can lead to better school systems and a reconstruction of teachers' identity in the academic community.

**Keywords:** Late modernity, lower secondary education, narrative research, Spain, teacher's professional identity.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A set of factors have changed the framework for teaching and restructured the professional practice in the postmodern age. In the early twentieth century, a great French sociologist and educational reformer [1] spoke of the crisis in secondary education and, particularly, of their teachers. He pointed out that when facing a new scenario, it is necessary for the actor –in order to stay in the game– to change his/her habits, stating [2]: “this book portrays what happens when society changes but the basic structures of teaching and schooling do not. Teachers become overloaded, they experience intolerable guilt, their work intensifies, and they are remorselessly pressed for time” (p. x).

In a specific study on the topic, a researcher [3] correctly highlights that the teachers' identity crisis is inseparable from the crisis of modernity. With regard to the crisis of modernity and identities, the German sociology school [4] has spoken of “institutionalized individualism”, while the French [5] speak of “deinstitutionalization”, and others [6] speak of “shell institutions”: “the outer shell remains, but inside they have changed. They are institutions that have become inadequate to the tasks they are called upon to perform” (p. 19).

From the French sociology perspective [5], the reconstruction of the identity of professionals dedicated to caring for others is rooted in the *decline of the institutional*

*model*, when it is no longer possible to perform under the structure provided by the institution (school or hospital). In the “institutional program”, the professional is armed with a vocation, a set of universal values, a teaching discipline, and a sense of socialization and liberation for the students. But the contradictions of modernity have exhausted the model and professionals are feeling immersed in the crisis. Now, in the absence of this institutional “cover”, professionals feel somewhat disarmed, as each person must build his/her own role in each situation and personally gain recognition within the work context. Naturally, this situation is felt or experienced as a lack of social recognition, calling one's identity into question. However, if this professional uncertainty is united with the crisis of modernity, the exit routes become more complex, re-establishing the professional practice in a more shared, collective or communitarian way.

The professional teaching identity, especially in Secondary education, is based on the possession of a specific knowledge that can only be taught and whose acquisition is controlled. This identity has been seriously restructured in the information or knowledge society. At the same time, other factors stemming from social change and new demands placed on schools force its reconstruction. Furthermore, when approaching teachers' professionalism today, one must consider the impact of individualization on new ways of living [4], such that any possible integrated sense of collective action must be constructed on other bases. Inadvertently, as the rules of the game and lifestyles change, essential aspects of teachers' professional identity, commitment, and daily practice are being rebuilt [7].

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Finally, parallel with professional identity, the concept of “teaching professionalism” is understood as the set of knowledge, competences, actions, attitudes and values that specifically constitute what it means to be a teacher. Teacher identity has a subjective dimension (individual experience and social perception), while teaching professionalism is more objective (a set of traits or standards determined objectively, apart from their fulfillment by individuals). However, in these current times of individualization [4], or deinstitutionalization [5], teaching professionalism is identified, in practice, with teachers’ professional identity. The professional identities, in a late modern age context, have become a crucial element by which teachers build their lives and approach their work.

The information or knowledge society has many dimensions and faces which are restructuring the ways of practicing education and, at the same time, forcing the reconstruction of teacher identity. On all fronts (academic discourses or educational experts, educational policy, etc.), it has been pointed out that teaching profession must change, given that it must adapt to the social changes that have occurred in the knowledge society [1, 8]. These transformations make teaching more complex and more difficult, requiring a new way of conceiving and practicing the profession, with new “competences” that must be acquired to accompany an expanded role (educator, rather than specialist in a discipline; specialist in learning, rather than teaching). In addition, there are new ways of working in class (group work, leaving behind the traditional individualism; commitment to the institutional life of the school, and not only to the group-classroom to which one is in charge; a more systematic and collective action, etc.).

## 2. THE CONSTRUCTION OF TEACHERS’ PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The concept of identity is complex because it is not an objective reality, but rather a discursive and mental construction that individuals use to express a certain way of seeing themselves and feeling in relation to their environment (spaces for representation and practices). Some author [8] states, “Professional identity should not be confused with role. Identity is the way we make sense of ourselves to ourselves and the image of ourselves that we present to others” (p. 48). The personal identity is *constructed* in a process and in the relational space that is, at the same time, a subjective construction and a social inscription. The individual constructs his/her identity through the eyes of others. It is common, therefore, to distinguish two dimensions of identity: “identity for the self” and “identity for others” [9, 10]. Nancy Frazer [11] rightly analyzed recognition of identity, stating that it “starts from the Hegelian idea that identity is constructed dialogically, through a process of mutual recognition. Recognition designates an ideal reciprocal relation between subjects, in which each sees the other both as its equal and also as separate from it. This relation is constitutive for subjectivity: one becomes an individual subject only by virtue of recognizing, and being recognized by, another subject.

Recognition from others is thus essential to the development of a sense of self” (p. 109).

The professional teaching identity is *the result of a long process* to construct one’s own way of feeling like a teacher. However, it also includes competences for the daily practice of the profession. In this process, based on our research [12], several factors play a key role in configuring the identity one way or another: their school experience as students, the possible attraction of teaching, their first modeling in the initial university training, and the beginning of their professional practice. Mockler’s research [13] states that “The findings of this study point to the possibility that teachers’ professional identity might be explicitly shaped and formed out of professional learning and development experiences that focus not only on ‘what to do’, but also on the kind of teacher it is possible to be” (p.136). Meanwhile, in another study [7, 14], authors claim that professional identity is composed of three influential groups:

(a) *Socio-cultural/policy*. This cluster of influences reflects cultural, social and political expectations of teachers and teaching, as well as the teacher’s educational ideals, and ethical and moral purposes.

(b) *Workplace or socially located influences*. These influential factors are located in the micro-politics and social relationships of specific school, department or classroom contexts. They are affected by local conditions (pupil behavior, and the quality of leadership, support and feedback in the teacher’s immediate work context).

(c) *Personal influences*. These are located in life outside school and are associated with personal history, present life, family, social relationships and a personal sense of efficacy and vulnerability.

These components are involved in a dynamic interaction in which one component can take precedence over another, depending on the contexts or life cycle phases, giving rise to more or less stable or fragmented identities. In a similar manner, it distinguishes three areas [15]: personal experience, professional context, and the external political environment within and through which significant aspects of their work are constituted. These aspects are superimposed and interrelate between building the life of the teacher and the job. The impact of each one in configuring the professional identity depends on the circumstances and the context.

The professional teaching identity is, temporarily, the fruit of a *socialization process* that culminates in practicing the profession and accepting the professional culture that makes them feel like and be recognized as teachers. Therefore, in addition to a having theoretical and experiential knowledge set [16], “it also requires a socialization in the profession and a professional experience through which the professional identity is constructed and experienced little by little, and where emotional elements come into play, relational and symbolic, that allow an individual to view him/herself and live as a teacher, thus assuming, subjectively and objectively, the act of pursuing a teaching career” (p.79).

### 3. A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO IDENTITY

Studies on personal, professional or cultural identity have increased in the past few decades, as this has become a new lens through which one may analyze and comprehend other old-aged questions. In fact, in our “liquid” or late modern age, with stability called into question, studies on the dynamics of identity acquire special relevance, as pointed out by various sociologists [6, 17]. Regarding globalization, one author [18] stated that people try to hold onto identities (cultural or organizational) that provide them with the desired stability and security. Without a firm axis to sustain them, people and organizations live in a permanent state of construction and reconstruction. For this reason, an identity is not a fixed entity, but rather something fluid, malleable, precarious and unstable, undergoing continuous revision and redefinition by its members.

Furthermore, in recent decades the biographical-narrative dimension has acquired relevance in the constitution of identity [17]. As one researcher [10] suggests, identity can be understood as a story with all the characteristic elements of a narrative (story line, time sequence, character/s and setting). A narrative conception of identity is defended given the modern crisis of the belief in a fixed, singular and permanent self. In a conceptualization that we share, an author [17] points out that:

“Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. *It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography.* Self-identity is continuity (across time and space) as interpreted reflexively by the agent” (p. 53).

Therefore, self-identity is explained by the story of oneself in the social and temporal geographic aspects of life. It takes the form of the subject’s reflections about the successive scenarios experienced in creating his/her possible self-definition in the entity of a story. People construct their individual identities by making a self-story, which is not just recalling the past, but also re-creating it in an attempt to discover meaning and to invent oneself, so that it can be socially recognizable [19].

Identity is essential to the way in which teachers construct the nature of their daily work (motivation, satisfaction and competence). The narrative identity is the subject’s reflections on the successive scenarios he/she has lived leading to his/her own self-definition in the form of a story. By setting the scene for his/her own life, the subject can reveal and build his/her own narrative identity. Thus, people construct their own identities by making a self-story, which is not just a collection of memories from the past, but a way of re-telling them, in an attempt to make sense of their lives. In this way, we create ourselves by the way we live our story.

Auto-biographical narrations not only represent the self and express it, but also create it. They put a set of past events in order, finding a thread that establishes the necessary relationship between what the narrator *was* and what he *is* today. In this way, the narration mediates the past, present and future. It narrates past experiences and the meaning they

have acquired now for the narrator in relation to future projects. For this reason, a life story is not just a recollection of past memories (exact reproduction of the past) or fiction; it is a reconstruction from the present (identity of the self), according to a future trajectory. Therefore, in relating their own stories, people acquire an identity by recognizing themselves in the stories they tell others [20].

### 4. INVESTIGATING THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY CRISIS

We have specifically studied the process of the *professional identity crisis* experienced by secondary teachers in Spain as a result of the educational Reform [21, 22]. The last twenty years in Spain have seen the introduction of large-scale educational reforms, centered particularly on compulsory secondary education (12-16 years). This has produced serious consequences for the previously accepted professional identity of teachers. The 1990 Education Act established a comprehensive model for lower secondary education, with goals closer to those of Primary Education. These factors destabilized teachers’ professional practice, which brought about a difficult reconstruction of their identity: the new secondary school students challenge traditional models of professionalism (the disciplinary specialist), but demand for extended professionalism (“educator”). Based on the training received and teaching practice that has forged their professional knowledge, teachers cannot respond to the new demands and functions or to the changes in society and in the students. Therefore, a professional reconversion has occurred. This identity crisis [23] is manifested with diverse symptoms. It has created an obvious demoralization and discomfort among the teaching staff, seriously affecting the objectives of public education. We have tried to diagnose the situation, understand the causes, describe the experiences, and propose routes for future improvement.

The initial hypothesis is that the teachers’ resistance to educational and cultural changes does not stem from an unjustified conservatism, but rather is a way of safeguarding their own professional identity, which teachers perceive as seriously threatened. Therefore, we link the professional identity crisis (personal dimension) to the effects produced by an educational reform on the professional practice (contextual dimension), as other authors [24] also state in their research. As we explain, the teachers’ identity crisis is provoked by a set of factors (school and social), and its evolution is linked to a difficult reconstruction of identity.

Our study was designed based on its methodological suitability in the context of current educational research. The professional identity is a socially constructed and personally re-created experience with its own meaning, sense and intentionality. Therefore, it seems logical to complementarily employ, using data collection techniques, individual interviews contextualized and broadened by focus groups. Both techniques, duly triangulated, can allow us to see how individuals construct their professional and personal realities by interacting in their social worlds. As this is a qualitative study, we give importance to “understanding the meaning

people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" [25] (p. 13).

If people construct their individual identities through personal stories, methodologically we give them a voice in order to discursively represent their experiences and concerns. We were interested in how teachers subjectively experience their work and in the conditions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, in terms of the diversity of their professional identities. These identities are understood as their space of personal identification, their perceptions of the job, their attitudes toward educational change, their professional trajectory and its projection in the future, their perception of their status and social recognition, and their relationship with the social environment. The biographical-narrative approach to identity [26] states that people build their individual identities by creating an autobiography. We therefore collected the subjects' personal comments in order to allow their professional identity to emerge. In this way, we tried to *take the discourses of the agents and actors as a means to allow the professional identity to emerge*. The commonalities among the different individual biographical narratives were used as the way to get to know the professional group. Narratives are the stories of our lives and the stories of the lives of others. We asked a set of teachers to tell us their "life stories" in a narrative-biographical interview three separate times [27]. The biographical dimension is composed of the teachers' experiences in their professional lives over time. The narrative dimension refers to "the central role of stories and story-telling in the way teachers deal with their career experiences" [28] (p.30).

Later, based on the Protocol-Report elaborated by the voices of these teachers with our own interpretation, Focus Groups of teachers contributed to interpreting and contextualizing these individual discourses in a more general structural framework. The focus group allows for social constructs to appear, from which the actors articulate their views about teaching. We tried to make a triangulation of perspectives, comparing and complementing ideographic personal contributions of individual interviews with the group in the focus groups.

Our study was set up as a *collective case study* (Secondary teachers). The interviews of the ten teachers were used as a *multiple case study* (single intrinsic studies), while in the second part, using a *cross-case analysis*, we performed the *collective case study* [29]. The latter study consisted of an intensive crossover study of the collective, which was amplified by linking it with the Focus Groups. In the first part, with the life story and history, our purpose was to examine and understand the individual cases of five male and five female teachers, without trying to generalize; in the second part, the collective (Secondary teachers) was the object of interest, through the crossover interviews and the participants in the Focus Groups.

Based on the biographical interviews (each of which was treated as an individual journey) a transversal analysis was performed and collected in a Protocol Guide-Report. The *Focus Groups* corroborated and complemented these perspectives, in order to, above all, contextualize them within a more *synchronic* perspective. There are numerous

reasons to integrate different methodological strategies in the designs [30, 31]. For example, the complementarity increases the comprehension, validity, and sequential triangular qualitative perspectives.

Thus, it is necessary to combine two aspects of the identity processes: (a) the "subjective" trajectory, expressed in diverse biographical stories that return to the social worlds experienced by the subjects; and (b) the "objective" trajectory, understood as the set of social positions occupied in life, placing the individual biography in a broader structural framework. The first was investigated through *narrative-biographical interviews*, and the second by means of *focus groups*. The subsequent conjunction of these two strategies in analysis is especially useful for understanding the professional identities as institutional and biographical processes through which individuals have subjectively constructed their professional and cultural worlds.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

Our case study, due to its sequential design, had three parts. The first consists of the individual biographical interviews as *descriptions of ten cases* with their own peculiarities, but analyzed within a common framework (presentation and bio-gram, descriptive analysis of the process of constructing the professional identity, and outstanding dimensions of the professional identity). Second, as previously mentioned, the *transversal analysis* crossed the ten life stories through a set of common categories (Table 1) extracted from a joint analysis of the interviews. Third, as indicated above, a reduced version of the Protocol Guide-Report served as a guide for developing the Focus Group sessions. Thus, the report that was made from the analysis of the Groups was validated and added a new dimension. It collects the key dimensions of the professional identity of Secondary teachers.

Based on literature on the topic, we chose the dimensions that appear in Table 1 for the analysis of identity. Literature reviews also served to elaborate the guide for the interviews and the subsequent analysis. After a period of reflection, we chose to join the sources in a dialectic process with previous constructs (theoretical framework) and data analysis.

In our case study, we read the stories by integrating a dynamic dimension, which resulted from a specific socialization construct (construction of a professional

Table 1. Dimensions for the Analysis of Teachers' Professional Identity.

Components of Professional Identity	Construction of the Professional Identity
A. Self-image	H. Life trajectory
B. Social recognition	I. Professional history
C. Degree of satisfaction	J. Training received
D. Social relations in the School/Dept.	K. Identity crisis
E. Attitude toward change	
F. Professional competences	
G. Future expectations in the profession	

identity). Subjective or personal data, with the more static or common facet of components are represented in Square 1. The first is more subjective and singular, while the second, although individual, has more common aspects that make up the central core of the identity. The history of their training and the structure of their actions make up the two axes of the constitution and definition of identity. The different categories are interrelated in specific ways and have combinations at a personal and conceptual level.

In this way, we intend to use the discourses of the agents and actors as a means of discovering the professional identity. The intersection among the different individual biographical narratives was used to understand the narrative of the professional group. On one hand, our case study explores individual trajectories using ten biographical interviews, making it possible to obtain longitudinal and personal visions of the processes concerned in identity development. On the other hand, the group as collective is examined by joining the voices in a crossover biographical story through a transversal analysis of the common elements and, more specifically, with the eight Focus Groups. Through a sequential triangulation [31, 32], the ideographic or personal dimensions of the interviews give rise to a joint report that is later complemented by the group dimension. As one objective of the research design is to articulate the singular biographical narrative within a more general contextual model, it is necessary to inscribe the longitudinal lives of the teachers and their individual itineraries on a common structural framework as to increase their intelligibility. As once explained by one of the most renowned philosophers [10], the two faces of identity (personal/social, oneself/another) can be captured from the uniqueness of a professional and personal life, along with the experience of the group. While the professional identity crisis is a socially constructed reality, it is also lived personally. Therefore, in addition to singularity, the social dimension should be expressed in a relatively homogeneous group that describes the common experience of the situation [33].

In a case study like ours, where the biographical dimension of events is fundamental, the dynamic development of the personal trajectory is as important as the collective experience. The proposed methodological design consists of articulating and joining both dimensions of the identity (individual identities based on the individual biographies and interactions, and collective identities constructed historically through social processes). While the individual recognizes his or her identity in socially defined terms, the identity remains a personal experience and the perception of a role in a given society [17]. The Focus Group is especially suitable for understanding the diverse logics that underlie the discourses expressed about the living situation of the same activity, even when the biographical journeys and the contexts are different. In this regard, the Focus Group allows a collective identity to be constructed. Each participant speaks in a double landscape: the general view he/she has of the situation, but also what personally affects him/her or what he/she has known. These verbal representations tell us not only what the participants think, but also who they are and what they feel.

The conjunction of literary theoretical framework and our case stories allows us to define a set of valid dimensions for analyzing and describing the object of our study. The teachers feel “vulnerable” in their work, due to conflicting experiences in their relations with other actors in school and in society. They also feel that their professional identity and moral integrity are being questioned. The sources of the vulnerability teachers feel in their work include: political and administrative measures, professional relations in the schools, and limitations to teaching efficacy. The triangulation of life narratives, both personal and collective, has been shown to be a relevant strategy in understanding the emotional “geographies” in teachers’ daily interactions. This knowledge makes it possible to construct new identities in crisis by redesigning work contexts in such a way that allows for broken identities to be repaired.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The design, which included the empirical study of field data collection and their later analysis and interpretation, allows us to hold a discussion and draw conclusions. The voices of experience (tales of action, *story*) can be reconstructed in other ways of telling the stories (context genealogies, *history*) [34]. Joining the literary theoretical framework and the field stories has led to the following conclusions:

1. The triangulation of life stories, both personal and collective, has proven to be a relevant strategy in understanding the "emotional geographies" of teaching. Their knowledge allows for the redesigning of work contexts in ways that facilitate suturing broken identities.
2. The Secondary teachers’ identity crisis reflects the decomposition of a transmission teaching model, with no alternative model emerging until now. For better or worse, the disciplinary and wise teacher who transmits a masterful lecture, an intellectual passion, a national patrimony and a more universal culture, has certainly died out. This has not only occurred in theory, as this type of teaching is also impossible to maintain in practice.
3. Therefore, in this first general overview, the current restructuring (reconversion) of schools also requires a *restructuring of the professional identity itself*. When this does not occur, teaching enters into a deep crisis. Thus, there are continuous calls to “reinvent” a new professionalism for teachers [1]. Many ideas exist for future directions, but there are few proposals about how to get there.
4. Given that during this time the training, work and organizational culture conditions in Secondary Schools have not changed much, contexts have not been created *to reconstruct a new type of professional identity for Secondary teachers*. Meanwhile, the existing one has entered into a serious crisis.
5. Based on our findings, the discourse of teachers’ discomfort becomes a symptom of a more profound factor: the identity crisis.

Our data show that secondary teachers live a process of professional reconversion that is felt as a serious professional identity crisis. The teachers' strategic redefinitions of the professional practice (resistance, survival, a "second" occupation, and other inertias and schizoid behaviors only tend to increase teachers vulnerability or even their "victimism").

In sum and from a narrative-biographical perspective, our data show that some teachers feel "vulnerable" in their jobs, due to the new ways of experiencing relations with other actors in school and in society. This vulnerability involves the feeling that their professional identity and moral integrity are being questioned.

## 7. REIMAGINING ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSES

Faced with the broad *cahiers* that the teachers' voices have documented with a sense of frustration and demoralization, we are obligated to *reimagine alternative discourses*. We now attempt to explain what schools and the teachers' role within it should be, in times that are no longer modern, but rather in a "second modernity" that is more "liquid" [5]. As one researcher [35] stated, "the conditions of teaching appear to have deteriorated over the past two decades. Reversing this trend must be at the heart of any serious reform effort" (p. 77). The professional identity crisis is manifested in many ways and provoked by social and educational changes. Once it has been detected, the lines of action must be directed toward the reconstruction of these identities. In times of social re-structuring, the identity has to be re-structured as well.

Secondary teachers in Spain are living in a process of professional conversion. It is experienced as a serious professional identity crisis, particularly affecting those who come from the previous Bachelors' system. We gathered from the teachers' voices that the professional identity crisis is the product of contextual factors, and the modern experience of the identity, worsened by the current crisis of the institutional model [5]. Any proposals, therefore, cannot nostalgically call for a return to old times.

Given this situation, an *identity policy* should propose actions that can lead to a reconstruction of identity. It is important to explore new avenues in order to favor both the construction and the reconstruction of the professional identity. As shown in the literature, this identity is not something that stays the same. Rather it is the fruit of contingent identifications, characterized by crisis and destabilization that gives rise to new reaffirmations. Making specific proposals about how to develop an identity policy is difficult because the baseline situation is, at the least, ambiguous. At a time of serious crisis in the public school system, articulating new conditions for exercising the profession, and its resulting social and public recognition, is a risky undertaking. However, it is possible to mention some dimensions that can at least contribute to redefining the path it can take. The configuration of a new teaching professionalism, in line with an *identity policy*, requires a decided effort on at least *four fronts*. Each front is in a different dimension, as we described in our study [22, 36]: a) the persona of the teacher: training to reaffirm identity; b)

the profession as a collective; c) the organizational context; and d) the alliances with other external sectors.

Apart from structural and social factors (legitimization of the school and social recognition of the teacher's role), one could ask for greater support from the educational administration, as demanded by the majority, in defense of the teaching collective. At the same time, the collective cannot reaffirm its identity by waiting for administrative measures. As previously mentioned, bottom-up strategies are needed, where the professional identity is a project to be achieved by the collective of teachers. Now more than ever, it is necessary for families and the "educational community" (neighborhoods, towns) to collaborate with the school instead of delegating the responsibility to the school. From the current perspective, the objective is to revitalize the associative tissue of civil society in order to share the education of its citizens with families and the city.

An *identity policy* requires a concerted effort with certain dynamics for the recognition of the professional self, in turn reaffirming its social value in the eyes of others. But this will not be possible and there will be no motivation to initiate the process if *new conditions for practicing the profession* are not established. In the end, in this relationship of mutual recognition where the experience of identity is at risk [37]:

Teachers and students are both prisoners of the problems and limitations that are the basis for the senselessness of the situation in the schools. The construction of another relationship with knowledge, on the part of the students, and another way of living the profession, on the part of the teachers, must occur at the same time. The construction of another professionalism for teachers is not prior to, but rather accompanies, the construction of another relationship with the students (p. 80).

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors confirm that this article content has no conflict of interest.

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