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Strengthening Teachers' Professional Identities Through Faculty Development

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Abstract

While medical schools espouse a commitment to the educational mission, faculty members often struggle to develop and maintain their identities as teachers. Teacher identity is important because it can exert a powerful influence on career choice, academic roles and responsibilities, and professional development opportunities. However, most faculty development initiatives focus on knowledge and skill acquisition rather than the awakening or strengthening of professional identity. The goal of this Perspective is to highlight the importance of faculty members' professional identities as teachers, explore how faculty development programs and activities can support teachers' identities, and describe specific strategies that can be used in professional development. These strategies include the embedding of identity and identity formation into existing offerings by asking questions related to identity, incorporating identity in longitudinal programs, building opportunities for community building and networking, promoting reflection, and capitalizing on mentorship. Stand-alone faculty development activities focusing on teachers' identities can also be helpful, as can a variety of approaches that advocate for organizational change and institutional support. To achieve excellence in teaching and learning, faculty members need to embrace their identities as teachers and be supported in doing so by their institutions and by faculty development.

The professional identities of faculty members exert a powerful influence on their choices of professional roles as well as their academic productivity, motivation, and satisfaction.^{1,2} While their identities as physicians and researchers tend to be well prescribed and supported by universities and hospitals, their identities as teachers are not.^{2,3} As a result, clinical and basic science teachers often feel that institutions and colleagues do not value or support their roles as teachers, a phenomenon that can lead to dissatisfaction with being a teacher and/or the abandonment of an academic career.⁴ We maintain that bolstering faculty members' identities as teachers could help them to feel valued, to pursue educational activities, and to participate in faculty development offerings.

Faculty development programs can be used to explore and strengthen faculty members' professional identities.⁵ These programs, offered locally, nationally, and internationally in medical schools and professional organizations, also offer a sense of community that can indirectly support identity formation as a teacher. However, to date, most faculty development initiatives reported in the literature focus primarily on improving teaching and learning⁶; they rarely address professional identity. In fact, in some ways, faculty development programs have mirrored the institutional concentration on content expertise of faculty members (e.g., being up-to-date in one's field), with a focus on expertise in teaching and learning (e.g., pedagogical and leadership skills) without addressing professional identity formation.⁷ We contend that it is time to change this primary focus on pedagogical skills, as faculty development can help to awaken, inspire, and guide the formation of teacher identity.

We define *faculty development* to include all activities faculty members pursue to improve their knowledge, skills, and behaviors as teachers and educators, leaders and managers, and researchers and scholars, in both individual and group settings.⁸ In this article, we focus on the

role of teacher, recognizing that the “lessons learned” can apply to other educator roles (e.g., mentor, curriculum developer, assessor of learning, educational leader, and educational scholar),^{9,10} and at different phases along a faculty member’s career trajectory. In addition, although we illustrate our points using clinical teachers, basic science teachers face similar challenges with identity formation.

We wrote this article to examine the importance of faculty members’ professional identities as teachers; to discuss how faculty development programs and activities can awaken, strengthen, and/or support these identities; and to describe faculty development strategies that can help to address teachers’ professional identity formation.

Professional Identities

The concept of *identity* has many meanings in the social sciences. However, all conceptualizations are based on the premise that identity is a dynamic construct, which is continually formed and reformed.^{11,12} Identity encompasses how individuals understand themselves, how they interpret experiences, how they present themselves and wish to be perceived by others, and how they are recognized by the broader community.¹³ Identity, which describes how people view themselves as different or similar to others, is also derived from perceived membership and roles in an organization and interacts with personal agency and choice.¹⁴⁻¹⁷ Additionally, individuals have multiple identities (e.g., parent, mentor, researcher, teacher),^{12,18} all of which may vary in relative prominence at different times in their lives and careers.¹⁹⁻²¹

Teacher identity in the higher education literature

Research on teachers' professional identities has a long history in the higher education literature.²² For example, Beijard et al²³ postulated that professional identity in teaching refers not only to the influences of external conceptions and expectations of teachers, but also to what teachers find important in their professional work based upon their experiences in practice and in their personal lives. Citing Coldron and Smith,²⁴ Beijard et al highlighted that professional identity is not something teachers have, but something they use in order to make sense of themselves as teachers. The way they explain and justify things in relation to other people and contexts expresses, as it were, their professional identity.

Teacher identity in the medical education literature

Although there is an extensive literature in medical education addressing students' professional identity formation,²⁵⁻²⁹ the literature concerning the development of teachers' identities has been sparser.³⁰ Nonetheless, several studies have indicated that teaching is an integral part of clinical teachers' identities and that teaching often defines who they are. For example, in a phenomenological study with practicing physicians, Steinert and Macdonald³¹ explored the meaning of teaching for busy clinicians and examined what motivates them to teach (and in so doing, achieve a balance between the needs of patients and those of learners). They found that physicians perceived teaching as an integral part of their identity that allowed them to repay former teachers for their own training, gave them an opportunity to contribute to the development of the next generation of physicians, and afforded them ongoing learning. These clinicians also perceived teaching as personally energizing and gratifying. O'Sullivan and Irby^{32,33} reported similar motivations among clinicians and scientists who became occasional faculty developers.

While clinical teachers may develop a strong identity as a teacher, that identity may initially be weak compared to their identity as physicians and researchers; it is also influenced by the group and institution in which these teachers practice.³⁴ Studies have noted that beginning medical teachers often see themselves primarily as physicians or researchers rather than teachers, and that the integration of a teacher identity into their physician or researcher identity can be challenging.^{2,35} For example, Stone et al,⁷ in an examination of factors that influence faculty members' teaching identity, found that medical faculty who identify as teachers are more likely to want to teach, whereas Taylor et al³⁶ noted that faculty members' teaching beliefs, often related to identity, shape their teaching practices. O'Sullivan and Irby^{32,37} noted that health professional teachers tend to report multiple identities (e.g., clinician, teacher, faculty developer, scientist, mentor) that can be characterized on a continuum ranging from compartmentalized (i.e., where differing identities are kept completely separate) to merged (i.e., where identities are inseparable).

As teachers mature, they tend to incorporate new identities (e.g., mentor, program director, dean) and drop old identities as their roles shift and their careers progress. Browne et al² explored what helps and hinders a clinician's transition into becoming a medical teacher, highlighting the role of a strong self-identity, the clinical context, organizational support, and strategies for coping with change. These authors also observed that identity can influence choices about professional development. Building on this work, Cantillon et al³⁸ concluded that clinicians reconciled their teacher and clinical identities by fluidly adjusting to their environments. Moreover, these adjustments were influenced by individual choice, "juggling the two [identities], finding mutuality between them, or forging merged identities that minimized tensions between educational and clinical roles."

Teacher identity in the faculty development literature

Although professional identity is not frequently discussed in the faculty development literature, when it is, it is usually in the context of longitudinal programs that concentrate on teachers' careers and leadership development.^{1,39-42} For example, Lown et al⁴¹ explored the impact of a longitudinal fellowship on 40 faculty members with an explicit focus on the impact of the fellowship on faculty members' identity as teachers, noting that their sense of identity, confidence, and self-efficacy was enhanced because of their involvement in the fellowship. In another report, Onyura et al⁴³ identified the important connection between the local program and the support of the broader institution, especially senior leadership support and institutional empowerment. Educators less frequently discuss professional identity explicitly in faculty development programs focused on pedagogical skills, although Gooding et al⁴⁴ do discuss teachers' professional identities in the context of a hospital academy.

In a different context, O'Sullivan and Irby³² explored the identity formation of clinicians and scientists who were occasional faculty developers and found that the experience of being a faculty developer altered their professional identities. Interestingly, as the faculty developer role increased, it became part of their new identity, especially as it enhanced their status locally and beyond the institution.

Strengthening Identity Through Faculty Development

Since identity influences career choices, development opportunities, and teaching responsibilities sought,² we assert that faculty development can and should be strategically used to foster and strengthen teachers' identities in addition to their skills. Based on the available literature and our own experience in the field, we offer the following recommendations for faculty development programs: address professional identity formation as a teacher by embedding identity—and

identity formation—into existing programs, create stand-alone offerings focused on teachers' identities, and advocate for organizational change and institutional support. In the following paragraphs, we explain these recommendations.

Embed identity and identity formation into existing programs

Ask questions related to identity. Existing faculty development programs can readily incorporate aspects of identity and identity formation. For example, during an orientation program for new faculty members, the following questions could be addressed: What is the career path of a teacher? What networks are available to support you in this role? How might these opportunities influence your identity? Leadership development programs can provide another opportunity for self-reflection and exploration of identity, as facilitators could ask questions about how vision, values, and identity influence leadership.

Although orientation programs and leadership development programs seem to be a natural fit for the discussion of how faculty members see themselves and are seen by others, identity can also be integrated into teaching and learning workshops. For example, during a workshop on giving effective feedback, facilitators could invite participants to discuss how they see their role in supporting learners in the clinical setting; alternatively, during a workshop on competency-based medical education, participants could consider how they view the intersection between competencies and identity, for both themselves and their learners. The key to including these questions is to ensure that the content under discussion explores teacher identity and reinforces the value of the teaching role. In addition, programs aimed at specific career stages (e.g., beginning, middle, late)^{19,20} can be excellent places to explore shifting roles in teaching and the concomitant changes in identity.

Address identity in longitudinal programs. Longitudinal medical education programs provide unique opportunities to explore professional identity. These programs (e.g., educational fellowships and Teaching Scholars Programs) share a number of common features, which can influence the identity, confidence, and self-efficacy of program participants.⁴⁰⁻⁴² These include protected time, a supportive learning environment, positive relationships with peers and mentors, validation of educational expertise by others, community building and networking, and an emphasis on self-reflection.

Lieff et al¹ identified three factors that can influence identity formation in longitudinal programs: personal factors (which include cognitive and emotional aspects unique to the individual), relational factors (which comprise connections and interactions with others), and contextual factors (which refer to the program and the external work environment). Awareness of these factors in longitudinal program design and implementation can help to support or awaken teacher identity, which in turn can increase faculty well-being and productivity. These factors, along with individual agency/choice, can also help to sustain the enthusiasm and identity generated in longitudinal programs once a faculty member returns to the workplace without ongoing program support.⁴⁵ As Stone et al⁷ have observed, continuity in training allows for an exploration of the affective aspects of professional development.

Build opportunities for community building and networking. Building networks and a sense of community is often a key feature of longitudinal programs. However, these elements can also form a critical component of other faculty development programs that can support and strengthen teachers' identity.^{1,41} For example, Cantillon et al³⁴ explored how clinicians become teachers in relation to their clinical communities and the institutions to which they belong. Interestingly, they found that becoming a clinical teacher entails continually negotiating one's identity and

practice between two potentially conflicting planes of accountability (i.e., managerial and professional); they also noted that institutions that valued teaching supported the development of teacher identities in institutionally defined roles. In another context, Lown et al⁴¹ noted that “feeling connected with a larger community of educators” promoted faculty members’ sense of identity (as well as confidence and self-efficacy) as a teacher, whereas Lieff et al¹ found that academic identity was influenced by a sense of belonging, comparing oneself to others, and sharing learning experiences with like-minded colleagues. Belonging to a community (e.g., an Academy of Medical Educators) was also seen as offering a sense of validation and credibility^{46,47} as well as providing mentorship opportunities^{41,48,49} that are often critical to professional and career development.

As with all of these recommendations, this one can also be met through communities of teaching practice at national professional organizations and society meetings devoted to teaching improvement and scholarship. A network of social relationships supports and sustains social identities. Faculty developers should be cognizant of the role and power of communities of practice in shaping and supporting identity.

Promote reflection. Several authors have highlighted the importance of focusing on intrinsic motivations and the meaning of teaching in promoting and supporting identity formation among medical teachers.^{31,50} Other researchers have noted how teachers need opportunities to reflect and that the process of reflection itself may strengthen satisfaction and a commitment to teaching.^{7,43} Lieff et al¹ describe a series of faculty development strategies that could facilitate a focus on identity and include the use of discourse, relationships, applications, and reflection. For example, through language (and discussion) one can affirm and confer status on teacher roles; by focusing on relationships, one can promote interactions and networking among teachers; by

facilitating application to real-life experiences, one can empower participants to be agents of change and to fulfill their educational roles; and through reflection, one can help participants examine their identities and roles. Reflection can also help faculty members cope with a sense of dissonance regarding career choice^{35,51} that may emerge over time. In many ways, reflection can strengthen professional identities, which further helps to shape teaching roles and career choices. Faculty developers can also use a number of additional engagement strategies to enhance reflective practices. These might include the role of narrative in faculty development and honoring faculty members' stories,³⁵ or the use of journals⁷ and portfolios,³ all of which can help to document change and challenges to identity. As faculty developers, we often recognize the importance of participants' sharing their own experiences in faculty development activities and encourage them to tell their "story," using case examples around teaching or assessment. These conversations can generate a discussion about being a teacher in the context of daily work⁵² and can help to strengthen identity or reaffirm career choices.

Capitalize on mentoring programs. Mentoring programs for faculty members, especially junior faculty members, are common in many universities.^{53,54} Some institutions assign mentors to new faculty to facilitate access to resources and advice needed for success.⁵⁵ Others have shown that having a mentor enhances satisfaction for faculty members.⁴⁸ Mentoring could have an important role in sustaining the effects of faculty development once an individual is no longer engaged in a formal program. In the context of career development, conversations about professional priorities and opportunities for development form a natural topic of discussion related to identity. Moreover, since some faculty members may suffer from an "imposter syndrome," opportunities for supportive reflections on roles, abilities, and self-doubt can be helpful in charting a career and receiving the support needed to succeed as a teacher.⁵⁶

In summary, all of these options for embedding discussions around identity into existing faculty development programs are about being more conscious and intentional in addressing teachers' professional identities. They also promote the value of naming the process and reinforcing the value of identity formation.

Conduct stand-alone faculty development offerings focused on teachers' identities

Identity can also be the topic of a stand-alone workshop. To our knowledge, there is no description of such a workshop currently in the literature. So, two of us (D.M.I., P.S.O.) took on the task of designing and delivering such an initiative at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) School of Medicine. The workshop comprised several steps, including the exploration of individual identities, a more general discussion of identity formation, and an examination of how to increase support for teachers' roles and responsibilities at UCSF. The workshop was well received as evidenced by a post-workshop survey and follow-up conversations with multiple participants, and modified versions have been delivered both nationally and internationally. The responses of participants have indicated the strong value in having a focused discussion on professional identity and showed the importance of providing tools to help individuals think about their identities and future career options. These conversations also helped faculty members align what they were doing with what they wanted to do, reinforced the idea that they have agency/choice, and helped them to see that they can initiate certain changes themselves. Although integrating identity into ongoing faculty development offerings might be a more organic implementation strategy, there seem to be distinct benefits to stand-alone activities as well, building on previous work in this area.^{12,25,26,30,57-59}

Advocate for organizational change and institutional support

Over the last 30 years, we have made significant progress in recognizing that excellent teaching requires more than content expertise, that structures such as Academies of Medical Educators⁶⁰ can positively influence perceptions of educators, that institutional policies can contribute to legitimizing education as a valued field of scholarship,³ and that faculty development programs can enhance teaching skills. We also know that institutional support for teachers' identities, roles, and development is critically important. Offering faculty development programs is one sign of support for teaching and teachers. Making visible a clear path toward academic progression for teachers is another. In fact, career and promotion pathways have shifted dramatically in recent years in recognition of the legitimate contributions of teachers and educational scholarship,³ and faculty development can play a critical role in helping to bring about such organizational change. The literature suggests that for individuals to feel that they have a professional identity, change must occur on two levels—internally and externally⁷—and this is where organizational development and change comes in.

For example, Browne et al² highlighted organizational support as key in the development of medical teachers' identities. This includes access to personal networks (as highlighted above), policies that support educational excellence, and the quality and relevance of available resources. Sources of support further include mentoring, advice, peer review and feedback, and access to professional development. Work environments form another critical element in identity development and support,¹ since they can either enable or impede growth.⁶¹ Academies—which are designed to stimulate educational innovation and honor educators, develop the educational skills of faculty members, promote collaboration, provide mentoring, advocate for changes in

promotion criteria and acceptance of educator portfolios, and enhance promotion^{46,60,62,63}—are another example of structural support for the educator roles.

Health professions education scholarship units also reinforce and support teachers' identities, especially as educational scholars.^{64,65} Such scholarship units could prioritize identity formation in faculty development as an important area of research. For example, future studies could explore the relationship between identity formation in faculty development and the recruitment, retention, engagement, and satisfaction of teachers. They could also examine the role of transition points in identity formation and the relationship between the development of expertise as a teacher and professional identity formation.

Institutions can also support the development of students, residents, and fellows in the formation of a teacher's identity. Programs targeted to learners have the potential to increase their identities as teachers and their commitment to pursue a teaching career.⁶⁶ Early preparation also has the potential of making a major contribution to supporting and validating teachers' identities.

In Closing

Faculty development programs or activities can awaken, strengthen, and/or support a teacher's identity. Identity can be implicitly triggered through questions about identity embedded in existing faculty development activities and can be explicitly promoted through longitudinal programs, networking and communities of practice, reflection, mentorship, identity workshops, and organizational support. As Lieff et al¹ have pointed out, educational leaders and faculty developers should be aware of the personal, relational, and contextual factors that can positively influence the growth and development of teachers' identities.

A colleague has recently observed that

faculty development can awaken a teaching identity. People who come to faculty development often have that identity, whereas others have a curiosity that can be developed.

In many ways, a strong sense of identity can help to direct the selection of professional development and educational leadership opportunities as well as career choices. Monrouxe¹² asserts that

a strong professional identity enables individuals to practice with confidence and with a “professional demeanour,” thereby giving others confidence in their abilities.

Faculty development programming can play a critical role in addressing and strengthening faculty members’ identities and can help teachers to excel and thrive.

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