

INITIAL JOINT QUALIFICATION TRAINING: ONE PATH, TWO IDENTITIES?

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Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative investigation into how a joint professional qualification—the Master's Degree in Preschool Education and Primary Education, implemented within the Portuguese framework for initial teacher training—shapes the professional identity of beginning teachers. Situated within broader European policy reforms, the programme qualifies graduates to teach both in Preschool Education and Primary Education, raising important questions about how a single training pathway contributes to the development of two distinct yet interconnected professional identities. Drawing on interviews with graduates who have experienced teaching in both levels, complemented by documentary analysis, the study explores the influence of initial teacher education on processes of professional socialisation, curriculum interpretation, and the articulation of personal and pedagogical values. The findings reveal that the dual qualification fosters a flexible, holistic and relational professional identity, even as graduates navigate tensions arising from contrasting curricular and developmental expectations. The study concludes that joint qualification can contribute to integrated identity development when supported by coherent practicum experiences and sustained reflective practice, offering important implications for programme design and educational policy.

Keywords: *Initial teacher education, joint qualification, professional identity, early childhood education, primary education.*

1. Introduction

Initial teacher training is widely recognised as a complex and socially significant field of knowledge production. It carries a heavy responsibility in supporting the development of human capital, contributing to societal, cultural, scientific and technological progress. Higher Education Institutions therefore play a decisive role, not only by organising and implementing training that prepares future teachers, but also by certifying their professional qualification and ensuring that their graduates possess the competencies required for teaching.

Reforms following the Bologna Process (DL 42/2005) reshaped teacher education in Portugal, establishing a two-cycle pathway in which the bachelor's degree provides foundational knowledge and the master's degree ensures pedagogical, didactic, cultural, and ethical preparation, culminating in supervised practice (DL 43/2007). This legislation also introduced the possibility of joint qualification for Preschool Education and the Primary Education, enabling graduates to work in both educational levels.

This paper focuses on the Master's Degree in Preschool Education and Primary Education offered by the University of Madeira and examines how this joint qualification contributes to the construction of professional identity among teachers who navigate two distinct teaching contexts. The study aims to understand how training is experienced, how professional socialisation occurs, and how teachers interpret the development of their identities across their professional trajectories.

In short, the present study seeks to understand how graduates from this programme construct their professional identities as they transition between Preschool Education and Primary Education, exploring the extent to which initial training influences their ways of being, acting and positioning themselves as teachers.

2. Context and policy framework

The Master's Degree in Preschool Education and Primary Education is situated within a robust regulatory framework that guides both teacher education and curricular design. Preschool Education is

governed by the Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education (Silva et al., 2016), which emphasise holistic development, play, exploration, and child-centred learning. In contrast, curriculum organisation in the Primary Education is defined by DL 55/2018, Essential Learning documents, the Profile of students upon leaving compulsory education (Martins et al., 2017), the National Strategy for Citizenship Education, and the legal framework for Inclusive Education.

Despite these differences, teachers across all levels share a unified professional profile defined by DL 240/2001, structured around four dimensions: professional, social and ethical responsibility; teaching and learning development; school and community participation; and lifelong professional development. This common framework highlights the centrality of pedagogical knowledge, ethical commitment, and reflective capacity in teacher professionalism.

Because Preschool and Primary Education are linked by the principle of educational continuity, the joint qualification encourages teachers to understand the specificities of each level while recognising shared goals in fostering children's learning. As Serra (2004) notes, familiarity with the characteristics of both levels enriches the pedagogical repertoire of teachers and creates greater opportunities for children's success.

3. Theoretical framework

Professional identity is understood here as a multidimensional construct emerging from the interplay of knowledge, practice, personal values, emotions, and socialisation processes. The literature emphasises that becoming a teacher is both a personal and professional journey (Borges, 2014; Morgado, 2011). In this sense, professional identity develops through the appropriation of professional culture and the internalisation of values, norms, and practices associated with teaching.

Nóvoa (1992) argues that the personal and professional selves of teachers are inseparable, as teaching involves emotional and relational engagement. The construction of identity is therefore grounded in the teacher's ability to integrate cognitive, pedagogical, and relational competencies. Perrenoud (2000) highlights that teaching competence is expressed in the capacity to transform pedagogical knowledge into action, adapting to complex, situated contexts.

From this perspective, joint qualification programmes may offer unique opportunities for identity development, as they expose teachers to diverse pedagogical cultures and challenge them to negotiate multiple professional expectations. The Master's Degree in Preschool Education and Primary Education, by combining Preschool and Primary Education, creates conditions for teachers to construct flexible and holistic identities that transcend conventional boundaries between educational levels.

This study draws on a body of literature that recognises professional identity as a dynamic, multidimensional and continuously evolving construct. Authors such as Morgado (2005, 2011, 2018), Flores (2015) and Nóvoa (1992, 2022) emphasise that professional identity is not limited to the accumulation of knowledge or the mastery of pedagogical techniques, but instead emerges from processes of professional socialisation, reflexive engagement with practice, and the integration of personal values, emotions and beliefs. Teaching, particularly in early and primary years, is a relational, emotional and ethical profession in which the personal and professional dimensions cannot be dissociated. The joint qualification model therefore offers a particularly fertile ground for identity construction, as it requires teachers to reconcile two pedagogical traditions, two curricular cultures and two developmental horizons.

Competence frameworks conceptualised by Perrenoud (2000) and Sacristán (1995) underscore that teaching requires the integration of knowledge, skills and dispositions. In this regard, the dual qualification may serve both as a source of enrichment—by broadening teachers' perspectives and enhancing their pedagogical adaptability—and as a potential source of tension, particularly when curricular demands or institutional expectations differ markedly between the two levels.

4. Methodology

A qualitative, descriptive case study design (Stake, 1999; Yin, 2001) was adopted to investigate the Master's Degree in Preschool Education and Primary Education as a unique training environment. Participants were graduates of the programme who had completed supervised practicum in both Preschool and Primary Education and had subsequently worked professionally in both contexts.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to explore experiences during the training programme, perceptions of pedagogical continuity and discontinuity, transitions between educational levels, and reflections on professional identity. Documentary analysis of legislation, curricular guidelines, and the programme syllabus contributed to contextualising the findings.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic content analysis (Sousa & Baptista, 2011). This involved identifying recurring categories related to professional socialisation, curriculum

interpretation, pedagogical practice, and identity construction. Cross-case comparison enabled a deeper understanding of how participants negotiated the dual qualification in their professional trajectories.

The methodological approach allowed an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon situated within a concrete institutional and policy context. The case corresponds to the Master's Degree in Preschool Education and Primary Education at the University of Madeira. The five Participants in the empirical phase were graduates who had completed the joint qualification and had professional experience in both Preschool and Primary Education settings. This case also included two professors from the Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Madeira, also participated in the study, namely the current director of the Master's Degree in Preschool Education and Primary Education course and the coordinator of Department of Educational Sciences during the years 2007-2009 and 2016-2018, whose contribution deserves relevance and pertinence, as they were directly involved in the creation and development process of the course. The data collection methodology was based on document analysis and interview surveys.

5. Findings

The findings indicate that the joint qualification programme contributes to the development of a flexible professional identity grounded in a comprehensive understanding of childhood and learning. Participants consistently described how navigating both educational levels fostered a holistic perspective on children's development and encouraged a more integrated view of curricular progression. They reported that working in Preschool Education strengthened their relational, communicative, and observational skills, while experience in Primary Education enhanced their intentionality, curricular planning, and structuring of learning.

However, the study also revealed tensions arising from differences in pedagogical cultures. Participants frequently highlighted contrasts between the open, exploratory nature of Preschool Education, guided by the Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education, and the more formal, content-driven structure of the Primary Education curriculum. These differences required adaptability and reflective decision-making. Teachers emphasised the importance of avoiding the "schoolification" of Preschool Education and recognised the joint qualification as a facilitator of more thoughtful curricular transitions. Navigating between these two cultures required adaptability and reflexivity, and several teachers reported that understanding both sides of the educational continuum helped them avoid the premature schoolification of Early Childhood and appreciate the foundational role of play and exploration.

The emotional and relational dimensions of teaching emerged as central to professional identity. Teachers described the importance of empathy, emotional awareness, and communication in establishing meaningful pedagogical relationships, in line with Nóvoa's (1992) assertion that teaching is a profession rooted in human interaction. They also noted that identity development was strongly influenced by practicum experiences, mentorship, and collaborative work.

Overall, participants viewed the joint qualification as a source of professional enrichment that enabled them to become more versatile, reflective, and humanistic teachers. They reported greater confidence when transitioning between levels and valued the holistic perspective gained through dual training.

The analysis revealed that the joint qualification fostered a holistic and flexible professional identity grounded in a broad understanding of children's developmental trajectories. Participants consistently highlighted that working across Preschool and Primary Education provided them with a continuity of perspective that allowed them to interpret learning not as a segmented process but as a coherent developmental pathway. This continuity contributed to greater pedagogical confidence and a sense of professional coherence.

Professional socialisation emerged as another critical dimension. Participants described the emotional challenges associated with transitioning between levels, highlighting the importance of mentoring relationships, collaborative work and reflective opportunities provided during the practicum. The relational nature of teaching was emphasised across all narratives, with teachers noting that communication, empathy, and the capacity to build trust with children were fundamental skills that transcended curricular differences.

Finally, graduates viewed the joint qualification as a source of professional added value. The ability to teach in two levels was perceived not only as an advantage in terms of employability but also as a significant enrichment of their pedagogical repertoire. Several participants stated that experiences in one level contributed directly to better teaching practices in the other, reinforcing the idea that dual qualification promoted a more integrated and reflective professional identity.

6. Discussion

The findings suggest that the Master's Degree in Preschool Education and Primary Education plays a pivotal role in shaping the professional identities of beginning teachers. The structure of the programme, which integrates theoretical coursework, didactic training and supervised practicum across two educational levels, supports the development of a comprehensive understanding of teaching and learning in early and primary years. The reflective component embedded in the programme appears particularly important, as it provides teachers with the tools to negotiate the complexities of working in two distinct pedagogical contexts.

However, the study also highlights tensions that arise from the coexistence of two curricular cultures. While participants gained valuable insights from working across both contexts, they also experienced challenges in meeting the expectations of each level. These tensions mirror broader debates on curriculum articulation, educational transitions and the place of early childhood pedagogy in the continuum of compulsory education. The study reinforces the argument that professional identity must be understood as an evolving construct shaped not only by individual dispositions but also by institutional structures, policy environments and the relational dynamics of teaching.

The findings suggest that the Master's Degree in Preschool Education and Primary Education fosters a multifaceted professional identity that integrates knowledge, practice, and personal disposition. The dual qualification provides teachers with an expanded pedagogical repertoire, supporting their ability to adapt to the specificities of each level while maintaining coherence in their educational approaches. The reflective component embedded in the programme plays a crucial role in helping teachers negotiate the complexities of teaching across levels and understand the implications of curricular frameworks.

Despite its benefits, the joint qualification also reveals structural challenges, particularly related to curricular discontinuities and shifting policy expectations. These tensions underscore the need for coherent programme design and for practicum placements that support continuity in learning and teaching across levels. The study aligns with international research emphasising that high-quality teacher education must integrate theoretical, practical, and reflective dimensions to support the development of robust professional identities.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that joint qualification programmes constitute a powerful context for professional identity development. The Master's Degree in Preschool Education and Primary Education enables teachers to integrate diverse pedagogical approaches, cultivate a holistic understanding of childhood and strengthen their reflective capacity. Graduates describe their identities as more flexible, humanistic and relational as a result of their dual training and subsequent professional experiences.

It demonstrates that joint professional qualification programmes, such as the Master's Degree in Preschool Education and Primary Education, play a decisive role in shaping teachers' professional identities. By offering training across Early Childhood and Primary Education, the programme fosters a holistic and flexible understanding of teaching and contributes to the development of reflective, relational, and ethically grounded professionals.

Participants emphasised that their professional identities became more conscious, coherent, and humanistic after experiencing both levels. They perceived themselves as better teachers as a result of navigating two pedagogical cultures, recognising that each context enriched their practice in the other.

Nevertheless, identity formation is an ongoing process that extends beyond initial teacher education. Sustained professional development, reflective practice and institutional support are essential for consolidating the competencies required to teach effectively across diverse contexts.

The findings underscore the importance of designing initial teacher training programmes that acknowledge the emotional, ethical and relational dimensions of teaching and that cultivate teachers' capacity to navigate the complexities of educational practice with critical awareness and professional confidence.

The initial teacher training needs to ensure that teachers develop the competencies necessary to respond to the demands of contemporary education while maintaining the humanistic core of the profession.

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