

# Postmodernity Fears and Transformations of Teachers' Identities

Elissavet (Elizabeth) Lintzerakou<sup>1,\*</sup> and Eleftheria Argyropoulou<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Postmodernity affected educational systems and teaching practices in several ways, such as deconstructing knowledge and changing the power dynamics in class, as well as putting emphasis on diversity, inclusivity, interdisciplinary approaches, critical pedagogy, and reflexivity. These changes led to the alterations and fluidity of teachers' professional identities. The purpose of this small-scale qualitative research is to depict teachers' fears in association with changes in their profession caused by postmodernity. Two distinct tools were used: a priority list and an explanation-justification template for each respondent to indicate the reasons behind their priority choices. Thematic analysis was used to indicate major themes and subthemes in the participants' verbatim answers. Findings indicated that teachers at different stages of their careers are worried about continuous educational and environmental changes. Younger teachers with less experience are especially worried about systemic changes and abruptions that affect not only their profession but their lives as a whole. The findings of this study verify previous research concerning teachers' professional identity determinants with an emphasis on contextual factors and career advancement. Postmodernity as a factor underpinning professional alterations indicates that the dominance of various factors depends on variations between contexts, cultures, and structures of educational systems, as well as on the psychological mechanisms employed by individuals in forming the perception of their self.

**Keywords:** Postmodernity, teachers' fears, teachers' identity, transformations in the teaching profession.

Submitted: July 08, 2024

Published: August 24, 2024

 10.24018/ejedu.2024.5.4.864

<sup>1</sup>PhD, School of Philosophy, Department of Educational Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.

<sup>2</sup>Professor of Educational Management and Leadership, School of Education, Department of Preschool Education, University of Crete, Greece.

\*Corresponding Author:  
e-mail: lintzerakouelissavet@gmail.com

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background

Postmodernism in education challenges traditional notions of knowledge, authority, and identity, including that of teachers. Postmodernity affected educational systems and teaching practices in several ways (Coulby, 1996; Zufiaurre, 2007): deconstruction of knowledge and change of power dynamics in the class, as well as an emphasis on diversity, inclusivity, interdisciplinary approaches, critical pedagogy, and reflexivity, leading to the fluidity of teachers' professional identities. Beijaard *et al.* (2004) and Cordingley *et al.* (2019) supported the idea that professional identity is a dynamic construct, and it is subject to alterations stemming from a wider and not individual-only experience. This experience is fed on contextual changes and career advancement combined with age (Flores & Day, 2006). Previous research in the Greek context (Lintzerakou

*et al.*, 2023) also indicated similar worries about changes in teachers' identities.

The elements discussed in the literature review above indicate the various variables that affect the examination of teachers' identities. It has already been argued that contextual changes cause changes in identity perception. What this research does differently is that it brings forward how and why contextual changes negatively inform identity changes. It examines another perspective, fear, anxiety, or negative expectation, based on how teachers perceive the fluidity of their context. Within the research context of phenomenology, research was done by Korkmaz and Doğanülkü (2022) regarding COVID-19 fear and career distress and Antoniadou *et al.* (2018) regarding fear of the workplace as an experience of people dedicated to service others. The suggestion of examining the context perception in terms of negative tacit feelings, such as fear, and the assessment of the external world is closely related to the

elements and variables used by previous researchers, as shown above, but in an opposite mind.

More specifically, fears are rooted in subjective perceptions formed by the individuals. However, it is questioned how individuals form their fears, beliefs, opinions, judgments, attitudes, and behaviors and how these fears, beliefs, opinions, and judgments are identified with the supposed objective reality (Bem, 1972; Robins & John, 1997). This implies that the researcher should always be aware that the association between objective reality and subjective perceptions is risky and that specific judgments might often be exaggerated or undervalued.

### 1.2. Purpose

The purpose of this small-scale qualitative research is to depict teachers' fears in association with changes in their profession caused by postmodernity. The rationale behind this research is to help practicing teachers and leaders understand the demands of their profession, probe into their moral responsibilities in a constantly changing environment, and encourage them to seek proactive training and support in order to facilitate their own job.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Research Design

As the paper deals with personal feelings and psychological dimensions of the inner self, qualitative methodology was preferred as the most appropriate approach to probe into deeper levels of teachers' perceptions of their continuously changing work context. Consequently, we do not claim any generalizability, but we expect to promote research in this area.

The conceptualized construct of teachers' fears associated with their work within postmodernity led to designing a differentiated qualitative tool consisting of two distinct parts: Firstly, participants were presented with a priority list of 25 items which [supposedly] cause them fear or anxiety to number items in ascending order [from 1-most fearful to 25-least fearful]. The head question on the list was "What elements of your profession cause you fear or anxiety? Please mark them by putting 1 to the most important and 25 to the least important". Secondly, they were asked to explain and comment on the reasons they chose the first 10 items according to the priority they assigned to each one of them [in written form and taking their time].

Thematic Analysis (Male, 2016) was preferred because it facilitates the systematic spotting, organizing, and understanding of repeated nuances or phrases, providing meaning within the whole set of participants' answers.

### 2.2. Sample and Ethics

The sample of this qualitative study included 42 in-service primary and pre-primary teachers. Participants were at different stages in their careers. Table I shows the demographics of the sample.

Participants were selected on a convenience basis and asked to sign an informed consensus form providing details about the research and permitting them to withdraw whenever they wished to. For the sake of anonymity,

answer sheets were codified and given cardinal numbers. To facilitate the analysis of data and references verbatim, participants were given codified names [taken from Greek mythology] to avoid any chance of resemblance or identification.

## 3. RESULTS

The first part of the responses included the priority lists prepared by the respondents according to their age. Tables II and III show their respective choices.

Comparison between the two priority lists indicates interesting findings. The thematic analysis provided five major thematic groups, each with a number of subthemes.

### 3.1. Practical Everyday Problems and Working Conditions Uncertainty

Younger teachers are more concerned with *practical everyday problems* and are *uncertain about their working conditions* [1], as short-term contracts and salaries are not enough to create and support a family [3] and the obligation to move to new positions around the country [4]. "I fear uncertainty; I don't know how to manage it, how to approach the future" (Zeus, 34), "I have been to more than eight different positions around the country, my home town never included in one of them; I cannot have a steady relation not even speak of getting married and have children" (Artemis, 39).

### 3.2. Educational Policy and Legislative Framework

Changes in educational policy and the consequent legislative framework are very high in both lists. "Constant changes in our profession really worry me, as I do not fully understand what these changes aim to or how I am supposed to include them in everyday teaching" (Athena, 31), "after 20 years of service, I still can't realize how educational changes work for the benefit of children; they ask us for so many things, but neither children nor teachers are ready yet to incorporate these trends" (Aris, 48). Others seemed reluctant to continue with the teaching profession and expressed a preference for other service sectors that could pay more. "I may not be a teacher forever"; "I am thinking of using other skills to join a more profitable job market"; "I understand that my four-year university teacher training will be wasted, but managing to live decently is higher in my agenda" (Persephone, 35).

### 3.3. Postmodern Teaching Practices

Employing *postmodern teaching practices* worries both groups but to a different degree. Younger teachers are worried about practices causing disturbance and lack of calm and discipline in class [such as structured class debate, 5], while older ones find it difficult to reorganize their teaching routine in another way [3], for example, adopting more freedom for students' expressing unconventional ideas. Though older teachers are in a more advanced stage of their career and have more years of class experience, they were not trained within the modern trends, and they seem to lack specific skills and knowledge regarding the reversing of the teaching process and moving from providers to facilitators of knowledge acquisition. Younger ones have

TABLE I: DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE SAMPLE

Age band	Male-N	Female-N	Total per age band	Type of employment
29-34	5	6	11	One-year contract
35-40	2	5	7	One-year contract
41-45	3	9	12	Permanent tenure
46-50	5	7	12	Permanent tenure
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>42</b>	

TABLE II: POSTMODERNITY FEARS AFFECTING SENIOR TEACHERS' IDENTITIES

Priority order	Type of fear for ages 41-50	Frequency of reference
1	Constant changes in educational policy and legislative framework	21
2	Obligations associated with accountability	20
	Responding to evaluation and monitoring processes	20
3	Reorganizing teaching [from teacher-centered to student-centered]	18
4	Managing parents	17
5	Managing inclusive teaching practices [alone or in collaboration with the SEN teacher]	15
6	Collaborating effectively with colleagues towards a specific goal	14
7	Using IT in teaching	13
8	Low salaries for a very demanding job	11
9	Tracking bullying incidents-Preventing bullying incidents	10-10
10	Facing dilemmas stemming from equity for all and didactic pedagogy issues	6

TABLE III: POSTMODERNITY FEARS AFFECTING YOUNGER TEACHERS' IDENTITIES

Priority order	Type of fear for ages 29-40	Frequency of reference
1	Fluid working conditions [short-term contracts, lack of permanent employment]	18
2	Constant changes in educational policy and legislative framework	17
3	Low salaries to build and support a traditional family	17
4	Yearly changes of school positions around the country	17
5	Teaching students to dialogue and debate in a civilized manner = keeping calm and order in class	15
6	Observing school leader's instructions towards school quality aims and targets	15
7	Managing parents	15
8	Adopting self-reflection as part of teaching practice [know how to do it]	13
9	Lack of specific skills or knowledge to perceive the rationale of policy changes	12
10	Political uncertainty [fear of disturbance of current political status-quo, possibility of war outbreak, terrorist attacks due to imported violent individuals]	12

met with postmodernity changes during their initial training, but they worry about how they can have orderly and calm class audiences.

### 3.4. Managing Parents

*Managing parents* and their intention to interfere with teaching and learning is rather high in both lists, though it seems more annoying for older teachers [4] than younger ones [7]. This makes sense as older teachers had experienced different parent attitudes in the past when the tight centralized system left very little or no rights at all to parents regarding what happens within the school. "A couple of decades ago, parents did not dare to come and wag their finger to us; now they are often insolent, they do not know where to stop" (Aphrodite, 46), "Parents are often a nuisance, coming to school and demanding unreasonable things; they believe they can make me do what they want

*because I am young and inexperienced in their eyes"* (Poseidon, 33).

### 3.5. Ethical Issues

*Ethical issues* dealing with critical incidents within the school environment, such as racism against specific groups of students and/or bullying or inclusive teaching practices for SEN students, seem to be a concern for senior teachers. Younger teachers are more concerned with contextual factors bringing changes to their identity and position in the school. This is normal as they are in earlier career stages, and they are not yet acquainted with or well aware of the parameters of their profession. "Despite our preventing efforts, I still come across many cases of racist behaviors against the "different other"; as time passes, ethical dilemmas seem to augment, not to diminish" (Polymnia, 46). "Being still a military reservist and planning to set up a

family, I am worried about what happens in our area, for example, Middle East war activities; if something breaks out, my career and my personal life will be disturbed" [Hermes, 36].

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The research has fulfilled its objectives, namely the identification and depiction of teachers' fears in association with changes in their profession caused by postmodernity. The results are revealing and informative. However, they indicate a difference in priorities between teachers in their early career stages and mature teachers. For younger teachers, the first priority is stability in their job as they experience job uncertainty due to the postmodern contracts [i.e., permanent employment is rather rare compared with what happened some decades ago, salaries are not high enough to satisfy major necessities of life, etc.]. Both groups share certain areas of concern but at a different priority level. For example, managing parents is issue number 4 for senior teachers, but it is lower on the priority list for younger teachers, number 7. An issue of almost equal concern affecting the identity of both groups (number 1 for younger teachers, number 2 for senior teachers) is the constant changes in the educational policy and the consequent amendments of the legislative/statutory framework.

The findings above align with previous research concerning teachers' professional identity determinants (Beijaard *et al.*, 2004) with an emphasis on contextual factors and career advancement (Cordingley *et al.*, 2019). The major determinants of postmodern teaching identified in the participants' answers are in agreement with those mentioned by Zufiaurre (2007) and Coulby (1996). Regarding previous research within the Greek context, similar teachers' concerns regarding the perception of their professional identity and their function within the school were identified in Lintzerakou *et al.* (2023).

#### 5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, postmodernity as a factor determining professional alterations is a synthesis of many areas; the dominance of one over the other depends on variations between contexts, cultures, and structures of educational systems, as well as on the psychological mechanisms employed by individuals in forming the perception of their self. Our results provide a strong basis for further qualitative and quantitative research on a larger-scale sample as well as encourage similar cross-national research with the aim to share experiences and spot similarities and differences among various educational systems; this will deepen our knowledge of how postmodernity functions within the teaching profession. Moreover, it can inform policymakers and university curricula designers to reconsider and reshape initial training contents in order to help young teachers cope [strategically] with the fears of the future. Additional attention should be given to mature teachers to acquire awareness and familiarity with postmodernity changes and facilitate them to adapt and function effectively regarding the challenges of the postmodern school.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

#### REFERENCES

- Antoniadou, M., Sandiford, P. J., Wright, G., & Alker, P. L. (2018). Workplace fear: A phenomenological exploration of the experiences of human service workers. In L. Petitta, C. E. J. Härtel, N. M. Ashkanasy, & W. J. Zerbe (Eds.), *Research on emotion in organizations Vol 14: Individual, relational, and contextual dynamics of emotion* (pp. 271–297). Emerald Publishing Ltd.
- Beijaard, D., Meijer, P., & Verloop, N. (2004). Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 20*(2), 107–128.
- Bem, D. J. (1972). Self-perception theory. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (pp. 1–62). Academic Press.
- Cordingley, P., Crisp, B., Johns, P., Perry, T., Campbell, C., Bell, M., *et al.* (2019). *Constructing teachers' professional identities*. Education International Research Series.
- Coulby, D. (1996). Postmodernity, education and European identities. *Comparative Education, 32*(2), 171–184.
- Flores, M., & Day, C. (2006). Contexts which shape and reshape new teachers' identities: A multi-perspective study. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 22*, 219–232.
- Korkmaz, O., & Doğanülkü, H. A. (2022). Fear of COVID-19 and career distress: Mediating role of visions about the future. *The Journal of Human and Work, 9*(1), 31–44.
- Lintzerakou, E., Argyropoulou, E., & Spyridakis, A. (2023). Secondary art teachers' perceptions of their professional identity and their teaching practice in the state art schools. *Hellenic Journal of Research in Education, 12*(1), 78–97.
- Male, T. (2016). Analysing qualitative data. In I. Palaiologou, D. Needham, & T. Male (Eds.), *Doing research in education: Theory and practice* (pp. 177–191). Sage.
- Robins, R., & John, O. (1997). The quest for self-insight: Theory and research on accuracy and bias in self-perception. In R. Hogan, J. A. Johnson, & S. R. Briggs (Eds.), *Handbook of personality psychology* (pp. 649–679). Academic Press.
- Zufiaurre, B. (2007). Education and schooling: From modernity to postmodernity. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society, 15*(2), 139–151.