

Imagining futures: Possible selves and professional identity in an early childhood pre-practicum incident

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Abstract: This study examines how three Chilean preservice early-childhood teachers configured their Professional Teacher Identity during a shared pre-practicum critical incident. Using a narrative-oriented qualitative design, we analysed two rounds of interviews, reflective writing on possible selves, and a co-construction meeting. A WhatsApp disclosure by a peer—who was both a preservice teacher and a parent—was followed by leadership action and culminated in the removal of two participants from their placement. Reflexive thematic analysis showed three recurring tensions: (1) *emotional labour*, as candidates balanced authenticity with expectations of professional self-regulation; (2) *micropolitical agency*, as vertical authority structures limited opportunities for dialogic participation; and (3) *personal-professional boundary work*, as parent, student, and future-teacher identities collided. Conceptually, the study demonstrates how possible selves and self-discrepancies shaped interpretations of the incident and the perceived attainability of desired professional futures. The findings point to practical implications for initial teacher education, including structured critical-incident learning, preparation for digital family-school communication, and reflective supervision that integrates work with possible selves.

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Introduction

Professional Teacher Identity (PTI) is a central dimension of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), as it underpins teachers' capacity to exercise ethical judgement, respond sensitively to young children's needs, and navigate the relational demands of their work (Flores & González, 2024; Olsen, 2024; Pardo & Opazo, 2019; Su, 2024). PTI becomes the lens through which early childhood educators make sense of who they are—and who they seek to become—in contexts shaped by accountability, care, and structural inequality (Delaney, 2018; Fairchild & Mikuska, 2021; Kamenarac, 2022; Robson & Martin, 2019). From this perspective, identity is not merely an individual attribute but a socially and politically situated project, continuously negotiated at the intersection of pedagogical norms, labour conditions, and broader struggles for the professional recognition of care work.

Practicum and pre-practicum placements are pivotal arenas for identity negotiation, as they confront preservice teachers with authentic dilemmas that require aligning personal narratives, institutional norms, and professional responsibilities (Ma & Hedges, 2024; Weatherby-Fell et al., 2019). Yet reviews of early childhood practicums suggest that pre-practicum phases remain weakly conceptualised, often framed as technical preparation rather than as ecologies where recognition, vulnerability, and the legitimacy of voice are first negotiated (Matengu et al., 2020), echoing broader calls to better connect teacher identity research with situated practices and institutional contexts (Rushton et al., 2023). This gap is especially marked in Latin America—and in Chile in particular—where schoolification, struggles for recognition, and standardisation pressures continue to redefine what counts as professional practice in ECEC, while empirical scholarship on PTI is only beginning to gain traction (Figueroa-Céspedes & Guerra, 2023a; Flores & González, 2024; Guevara, 2020; Lagos-Serrano, 2022; Oliveira & Viviani, 2019; Pardo & Opazo, 2019).

At the same time, practicum settings are increasingly hybrid and digitally mediated. Parents'

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WhatsApp groups exemplify this hybridity: while they can facilitate coordination and community-building, they have also been documented as intensifying visibility, accelerating conflict, and introducing dilemmas around disclosure, confidentiality, and institutional loyalty (Davidson & Turin, 2021; Moyano et al., 2023). In the Chilean context, parent–school WhatsApp messaging has been described as a widespread channel for coordination, surveillance, and conflict (Moyano et al., 2023), alongside accounts of early childhood educators occupying intermediary positions within hierarchical and affective structures (Lagos-Serrano, 2022). Together, these dynamics constitute part of the institutional landscape in which preservice teachers’ practicum experiences unfold.

Against this backdrop, examining identity work at the pre-practicum stage becomes essential. Critical incidents—unexpected events that disrupt routine expectations and demand interpretive and ethical response (Figueroa-Céspedes, 2024; Monereo, 2023)—provide a particularly incisive lens for tracing how preservice teachers configure an emerging PTI prior to full practicum. This article analyses a shared critical incident in a Chilean pre-practicum involving three preservice early childhood teachers, focusing on how possible selves are configured and how they interact with current self-understandings (Higgins et al., 1994; Markus & Nurius, 1986) as participants imagine, evaluate, and recalibrate their professional futures under conditions of institutional decision-making and digital visibility (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Irvine et al., 2024). By bringing possible selves into dialogue with micropolitical literacy and boundary work in a WhatsApp-mediated escalation, the study addresses how early practicum placements mediate identity (re)calibration through shifting risks, contested recognition, and constrained voice—foregrounding the placement-quality conditions under which such recalibration becomes educative rather than silencing. We ask:

(1) How do preservice teachers’ current and possible selves interact in constructing PTI during a shared critical incident in pre-practicum?

(2) What tensions between actual, ideal, ought, and feared selves emerge in relation to pedagogical and micropolitical challenges during teacher preparation?

Conceptually, we mobilise a sociocultural–dialogical view of PTI as a dynamic, relational configuration of meanings about one’s current and aspired teacher self, negotiated over time across practices, relationships, and institutional expectations (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beijaard et al., 2004; Kelchtermans, 2009).

Literature Review

Research consistently shows that a robust PTI supports quality, equity, and children’s well-being by integrating professional judgement, ethical commitment, and contextual responsiveness (Flores & González, 2024; Vanegas & Fuentealba, 2019). In ECEC, PTI develops through reflective and collaborative capacities that enable educators to navigate accountability while sustaining relationships with colleagues, families, and communities (Flores et al., 2022; González & Torres, 2022; Weatherby-Fell et al., 2019). However, across accountability-oriented systems, professionalisation processes often privilege performance, measurability, and standardisation, marginalising relational and care-centred dimensions of practice and reshaping how professional recognition and teacher identity are constructed (Delaney, 2018; Irvine et al., 2024; Kamenarac, 2022; Kelchtermans, 2005; Robson & Martin, 2019).

These dynamics are particularly salient in feminised professions, where care and emotional labour—the regulation and display of emotions in response to institutional and relational expectations (Hochschild, 2012)—are frequently framed as natural or taken-for-granted dispositions rather than recognised as skilled pedagogical expertise (Fairchild & Mikuska, 2021; Kamenarac, 2022). Situated research shows how this devaluation is enacted and negotiated in practice: studies on professionalisation and accountability document the vulnerability of relational work to devaluation (Falabella et al., 2024), while qualitative research—particularly narrative and biographical—traces how identity tensions unfold through critical incidents, professional trajectories, and contested positions around voice, authority, and legitimacy in ECEC settings (Figueroa-Céspedes, 2024; Figueroa-Céspedes & Guerra, 2023a, 2023b; Lagos-Serrano, 2022).

Importantly, research with ECEC teacher students indicates that stronger PTI is associated with perceived programme relevance, a sense of belonging, and the quality of practicum experiences, underscoring identity's personal yet institutionally conditioned character and its non-linear development across training phases (Chen et al., 2023; Olsen, 2024). Practicum design therefore emerges as a pivotal site for identity formation: well-structured placements can provide clear learning goals, scaffolded reflection, and high-quality mentoring, creating proximal conditions for identity growth (Matengu et al., 2020). Conversely, mismatches between university orientations and school cultures often constrain preservice agency and reproduce asymmetries between novices, mentors, and institutional actors (Guevara, 2020; Lagos-Serrano, 2022; Vanegas & Fuentealba, 2019).

International reviews echo this variability and call for explicit outcomes, dialogic supervision, and stronger university–school partnerships to support identity construction and professionalisation agendas (Irvine et al., 2024; Matengu et al., 2020). In Chile, schoolification and standardisation pressures further intensify these tensions in ECEC, as teachers negotiate performance demands and ‘schoolifying’ classroom scripts that may sit uneasily with relational and justice-oriented understandings of early childhood practice (Pardo & Opazo, 2019). Complementing this, critical work in preservice ECEC shows how practicum and practice-related coursework can generate “professional ruptures” that unsettle taken-for-granted images of the teacher and expose the emotional precarity of identity work, particularly when students confront deficit views of children and families or narrow institutional scripts of normalcy (Davies, 2023).

Practicum arrangements are also being reshaped by digitalisation, yet research has only begun to examine how these shifts intersect with teacher identity construction. Existing studies document the ambivalent role of parents’ WhatsApp groups and other platforms in reconfiguring family–school communication and professional boundaries (Davidson & Turin, 2021; Moyano et al., 2023). However, there remains limited empirical evidence on how preservice teachers experience digitally mediated incidents as identity-relevant turning points, particularly at the pre-practicum stage. This gap is especially visible in Latin American ECEC, where few studies explicitly bring together PTI, possible selves, and micropolitical negotiations around digital communication, despite the centrality of these interfaces in everyday school life.

Theoretical Framework

Our study adopts an integrated framework in which the possible-selves and self-discrepancy perspectives (Higgins et al., 1994; Markus & Nurius, 1986) provide the primary lens for analysing how preservice teachers imagine and regulate their emerging “teacher futures.” Following Salgado and Hermans’ (2005) call to move beyond a purely representational view of the self, this lens is embedded within dialogical and sociocultural perspectives that conceptualise PTI as a dynamic, multivoiced and contextually mediated accomplishment, produced within specific institutional and micropolitical arrangements (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beijaard et al., 2004; Kelchtermans & Vanassche, 2017). Taken together, these perspectives situate identity work within the relational, institutional, and digitally mediated contexts of the ECEC practicum, where possible selves are continually negotiated and recalibrated.

Possible Selves and Self-Discrepancy as a Lens on Identity-In-Motion

Possible selves conceptualise identity as a constellation of imagined future states—*ideal selves* (who I would most like to become), *ought selves* (who I feel I should become to meet others’ expectations or obligations), and *feared selves* (who I am afraid of becoming)—that organise action, emotion, and meaning-making in the present (Markus & Nurius, 1986). This framework has been empirically used in Initial Teacher Education to examine how novices position who they hope, should, or fear becoming in response to dilemmas, uncertainty, and institutional power relations (Hamman et al., 2013; Maddamsetti & Yuan, 2023; Ryan & Irie, 2014), and methodologically operates as a bridge between biography and professional norms—simultaneously aspirational, normative, and protective—making it especially suited to early

practicum, where imagined trajectories remain fluid and highly sensitive to institutional feedback (Maddamsetti & Yuan, 2023).

Complementing this focus on imagined futures, self-discrepancy theory specifies the emotional and behavioural consequences that arise when the *Actual Self* conflicts with internalised *Ideal* or *Ought* self-guides (Higgins et al., 1994). These misalignments often manifest in guilt, frustration, anxiety, shame, or moral indignation, and can either catalyse reflective learning or prompt withdrawal—depending on whether desired selves feel attainable, recognised, and institutionally supported (Bay-Alarcón et al., 2024). In our reading, possible selves illuminate the horizons towards which preservice teachers orient their becoming, while self-discrepancy clarifies the affective charge, risks, and consequences of misalignment.

Dialogical and Sociocultural Perspectives as Contextualising Resources

To situate identity work within practicum ecologies, the study draws on dialogical and sociocultural perspectives as contextualising resources. From a dialogical view, identity is multivoiced and relational, emerging through shifting positions that preservice teachers adopt in interaction with peers, mentors, families, and institutional actors (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Hermans, 2001). Zittoun's (2014) semiotic perspective complements this approach by highlighting how meaning-making involves movements across temporal orientations (past, present, future) and varying degrees of abstraction, as preservice teachers mobilise prior experiences and anticipated scenarios to interpret practicum events. In this way, lived episodes, imagined futures, and shared narratives of “the good teacher” intersect, supporting future-oriented reflection while keeping the analytic focus on situated participation rather than internal dialogue alone.

Sociocultural and mediated-development approaches complement this by foregrounding how tools, norms, and communicative practices—such as mentoring arrangements, supervisory expectations, digitally mediated family–school communication—shape which possible selves appear viable or constrained (Han et al., 2020; Vygotsky, 1978). Empirically, research suggests that reflective work on practice-based experiences and future-oriented meaning-making—such as clarifying possible teacher selves—supports identity positioning and agentic sense-making in the practicum (Chávez et al., 2021; Weise & Rojas-Sasso, 2024), while positive emotional experiences can sustain early professional identity formation (Su, 2024).

At the same time, identity work is deeply conditioned by affective imaginaries and micropolitical fields (Zembylas, 2005; 2023). Institutions often privilege emotional restraint as “professional,” marginalising care-driven dissent or morally grounded discomfort through locally operating emotional rules and normative feeling expectations (Hochschild, 2012; Kelchtermans, 2005; Zembylas, 2005). Developing micropolitical literacy—the capacity to read and strategically navigate rules, hierarchies, and relationships—is therefore crucial for enacting possible selves in constrained placements (Kelchtermans & Vanassche, 2017; Wu & Chen, 2013). Collective sense-making can also convert marginality into shared agency (Hökkä et al., 2017). In contexts marked by schoolification and the public scrutiny intensified by digital family–school interfaces, these literacies and collective processes determine whether preservice teachers' aspirational futures are amplified or silenced (Davidson & Turin, 2021; Moyano et al., 2023; Pardo & Opazo, 2019). Taken together, possible selves and possible identities allow us to examine not only what futures preservice teachers imagine, but how institutional cues determine which of those futures become motivationally salient and enactable in practicum ecologies (Oyserman & James, 2011).

Method

Our study adopts a qualitative, narrative-oriented design (Riessman, 2008) to examine how three preservice early childhood teachers make sense of a shared critical incident and, in doing so, (re)shape their professional identities. Within a relational–interpretivist and constructionist–reflexive stance (Riessman, 2008; Tracy, 2021), we assume multiple, situated and historically contingent realities and treat knowledge as co-produced, so the analysis offers one credible, partial reading, among others. We understand “narrative” as participants' storied, temporally ordered and evaluative accounts of experience, which

operate simultaneously as empirical material and interpretive lens, allowing us to trace how meanings, identities and relationships are configured across personal, institutional and sociomaterial contexts.

The inquiry is situated in the first-semester 2023 pre-practicum of a Chilean public-university ITE programme in Early Childhood Education, taken in the fourth year of a five-year degree, where candidates were placed in partner schools and early-years settings, including an experimental, humanist “laboratory” school spanning pre-K to secondary. Analytically, we distinguish this pre-practicum—a university-led, school-based placement prior to full practicum—from practicum, understood as a longer, supervised placement. In this context, pairs of students planned activities, engaged in guided reflection, and received feedback from university supervisors and cooperating teachers, with a specific focus on delivering a brief intervention to a whole class group. Purposeful sampling brought together three contrasting, yet comparable cases linked by a shared incident. Clara (21) was the youngest participant, entering the programme directly from secondary school and encountering school life for the first time from a teacher’s side. Lucía (24) came to early childhood education through sustained family caregiving, translating those experiences of care into an emerging professional project. Kali (31) combined her studies with motherhood and technical training in alternative therapies and occupying a dual position as preservice teacher at one institution and first-grade parent at the laboratory school.

The analytical focus is a critical incident that reverberated across the participants. Guided by the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), the corpus was judged sufficient because a single, highly consequential shared incident, three information-rich cases, a focused aim and dense, practice-proximal data (interviews, reflective writing and co-construction) together enabled robust within-case analysis and warranted analytic generalisation, as evidenced by saturated narrative trajectories, recurring patterned tensions and the stability of central organising concepts during abductive iteration. In March 2023, at the start of pre-practicum, Clara, and Lucía—paired in pre-kindergarten—met regularly to debrief with their friend and classmate Kali, whom they treated as a “safe space” for sharing concerns and seeking feedback. In these conversations, they reported a lack of playful interactions and negative treatment of children, describing rigid bodily postures, constant reprimands and schoolifying routines that included staff shouting, while explicitly noting that there was no physical abuse. In April 2023, Kali shared these concerns in the first-grade parents’ WhatsApp group. Families then escalated the matter to school leadership, after which Clara and Lucía were summoned and instructed to terminate their placement due to an alleged “information leak.” According to participants’ accounts, no reasons were explained to them and they were not given an opportunity to respond. They experienced the removal as unilateral and non-dialogic: both were withdrawn from the school, the university warned that their progression could be jeopardised, and supervisory involvement occurred only after the decision had been taken.

We generated the corpus in three phases and analysed it as retrospective identity work, given that the incident occurred in 2023 and accounts were elicited in 2024—focusing on how participants reflexively reconstruct possible selves as they recall and recount the incident. First, two rounds of semi-structured narrative interviews (≈90 minutes each, March 2024) traced participants’ ITE trajectories and prior practicum practices, during which the critical incident at the centre of this article emerged and the biographical-contextual basis for later stages was established. Second, participants selected a critical incident from their past practicum experiences and completed an Incident Prompt and Reflective Writing Guide (RWG, June 2024), documenting one interpellating pre-practicum episode and articulating their *Actual, Ideal, Ought, and Feared Selves*. Third, a two-hour Co-Construction Group Meeting (CCGM; June 2024) provided a collective narrative space to revisit the incident, deepen interview and RWG accounts, and refine interpretations dialogically; the session prioritised psychological safety through explicit norms (primarily safeguarding confidentiality and fostering a secure space for conversation, aiming to embrace diverse perspectives without prejudice), real-time monitoring of emotional responses, and the absence of hierarchical authority.

We analysed the full corpus using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021), understood as an interpretive, reflexive and theory-informed analytic approach that foregrounds

researcher subjectivity and meaning-making rather than coding reliability. Analysis was conducted in Spanish; English translations were used only for reporting, with quoted extracts checked against the Spanish originals to preserve meaning and nuance. The analytic process comprised five linked moves: (1) immersion across the corpus, constructing within-case vignettes that integrated prior practices, the recorded incident, and possible selves; (2) flexible semantic and latent coding; (3) abductive iteration with sensitising concepts (possible selves/self-discrepancy, dialogical positioning, micropolitical literacy); (4) cross-case mapping using a framework matrix (participant × tension × source); and (5) refinement around the central organising concept of navigating between current and possible selves. For example, the extract “I stayed silent because I feared being mistreated” (Lucía, CCGM) was coded semantically as protective silence and latently as anticipatory sanctioning. During abductive iteration, this code was connected to the sensitising concept of micropolitical literacy, supporting its placement within the cross-case tension between Authority and Dialogue.

Three higher-order themes structured the findings: *Emotional Labour* (Authenticity–Self-Regulation), *Micropolitical Agency* (Authority–Dialogue), and *Boundary Work* (Biography–Role Expectations). Given that our interpretations are theory-laden and researcher-mediated, we did not compute coder-agreement indices. Instead, we strengthened analytic quality through reflexive journaling, ongoing analytic dialogue between authors, and participant resonance checks, including attention to negative or deviant cases (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To support interpretive resonance, we shared a synthesis of the thematic account with participants in December 2024; they reported that it broadly reflected their experiences, while we retained responsibility for the final analytic claims. Both authors are university-based ITE researchers with no supervisory authority over participants; the first author led coding and writing, and the second acted as a critical peer co-analyst.

Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of Universidad Diego Portales (Resolution No. 02-2024). Participation was voluntary with written informed consent, and confidentiality was protected through pseudonyms, secure data handling, and full de-identification. No WhatsApp content was collected or analysed; all messaging references derive solely from participants’ accounts. We adopted a relational ethics stance and maintained reflexive journals to examine positionalities and power dynamics, particularly during the CCGM. Methodological quality was pursued through coherence across questions, literature, analysis, and interpretation, and through resonance with professional practice (Tracy, 2021).

Findings

The findings are organised in two steps: first, an individual analysis of each preservice teacher’s possible selves as elicited by the incident, and then a collective reading of shared tensions and implications for teacher preparation. Although they faced the same critical incident, their narratives trace distinct identity trajectories; using the categories of *Actual*, *Ideal*, *Ought* and *Feared Selves* (Table 1), the analysis shows how expectations, emotions and decisions intersect across their formative and emerging professional pathways.

Table 1
Distribution of Possible Selves of Kali, Clara, and Lucía in the face of a Critical Incident

Student	Actual Self	Ideal Self	Ought Self	Feared Self
Kali	Impulsive, emotionally reactive, openly critical	Dialogic and strategic advocate; affect–cognition alignment in communication	Regulate emotional expression; route concerns through procedurally safe, low-risk channels	Failing to safeguard children or producing counterproductive effects
Clara	Powerless and betrayed following unilateral institutional action; loss of trust	Dialogic, proactive problem-solver with due-process protections	Self-protection through boundary-setting while fulfilling practicum requirements	Loss of learning opportunities and adverse consequences for academic progression
Lucía	Silenced and voiceless in the face of institutional authority	Dialogic and assertive participant able to confront concerns through dialogue	Address concerns directly and responsibly within the educational team	Social retaliation, worsening treatment, or further marginalisation in the placement

Analysis from Each Student Point of View

Kali: Role Conflict and Emotional Self-Regulation

Kali frames her *Actual Self* as impulsive, emotionally reactive, and openly critical—evident in the parents' WhatsApp post that had unintended consequences for peers. She explicitly names these traits:

I am impulsive... very emotional... direct... critical (CCGM).

The post crystallised a role conflict between her student/future-teacher and mother-guardian positions (CCGM).

Her *Ideal Self* is dialogic–strategic: assertive, empathic communication grounded in an alignment of affect and cognition, enacted through careful choice of channel and timing—

It is very important to have mind and emotion aligned in order to achieve things (CCGM).

Her *Ought Self* is duty-bound and prevention-oriented, favouring restraint and procedural caution—

I should restrain myself in what I say (RWG)

—a stance she retrospectively frames as professional learning:

however much I speak... it's just empty talk, I won't achieve anything... I must think strategically (CCGM).

Her *Feared Self* centres on failing to safeguard children and producing counterproductive effects—

I fear not achieving what I expected of myself (RWG).

—a fear intensified by the irreversible consequences for her peers.

Analytically, Kali's profile reveals a sharp misalignment between her *Actual Self* (impulsive, critical) and her *Ideal Self* (assertive, strategic). While both the *Ideal* and *Ought Selves* call for regulation and deliberation, they differ in valence: the *Ideal* is aspirational and approach-oriented, whereas the *Ought Self* is duty-bound and prevention-focused. The WhatsApp disclosure—impulsive in form and consequential for classmates—brought these standards into conflict at once: it fell short of her *Ideal* of strategic assertiveness and breached her *Ought* sense of responsible conduct, intensifying frustration. In the aftermath, her self-regulation shifts toward tighter emotional control and a safer, formal pathway for raising concerns, typically through supervisor-mediated channels. Yet a *Feared Self* organised around failing to protect children adds guilt and emotional load. With mother and student/future-teacher roles overlapping, identity coherence becomes harder to sustain, foregrounding dialogical shifts between personal and professional voices and an ongoing negotiation among Actual and Possible Selves rather than a single, unified self.

Clara: Powerlessness and Institutional Disloyalty

Clara positions her *Actual Self* in the wake of a sudden expulsion as one of powerlessness and breached trust, experienced as unfair and disloyal:

that sadness... how disappointing that professionals like that exist in these situations (CCGM).

Her *Ideal Self* is aspirational and dialogic–proactive: she envisages due-process engagement—

go to the educational centre... a meeting with the four students... perhaps individual meetings with the practicum supervisor present, also to take care of us as students (CCGM, June 2024)

—to resolve conflict collaboratively and protect learning. By contrast, her *Ought Self* is normative and prevention-focused, prioritising boundary-setting and self-protection while still fulfilling role duties through practice:

I think I shouldn't go to the educational centre anymore... but we still tried to implement, to make change through our contribution (CCGM).

Her *Feared Self* centres on not learning and jeopardised development—

I am afraid of harming my education... how am I going to know if I am working well with the children?... that is my biggest fear (RWG, June 2024).

Analytically, the profile shows a pronounced self-discrepancy: an *Actual Self* of helplessness versus an *Ideal* of protected, collaborative problem-solving. *Ideal* and *Ought* converge on prudence but diverge in motivational tone—approach-oriented aspiration (restore dialogue, co-decide, be heard) versus obligation/risk-avoidance (withdraw from harmful contexts, guard wellbeing). The trust breach and procedural opacity intensify frustration and trigger a safety calculus in which boundary-setting becomes rational yet developmentally costly (lost practice opportunities, threatened sense of competence). These tensions generate visible identity movements as Clara oscillates between the desire for dialogic engagement and the need for self-protection, revealing shifting negotiations among her selves. This dynamic widens the gap between *self-as-enacted* and *possible selves*, with the *Feared* amplifying anxiety about progression and recognition.

Lucía: Silencing and Longing for Social Assertiveness

Lucía positions her *Actual Self* as voiceless within a hierarchical, evaluative context. She explicitly describes being unable to intervene in the face of institutional authority:

I felt voiceless... unable to say anything in front of the school... silenced (CCGM).

In her account, silence operates as a protective strategy, yet it simultaneously constrains her agency. Her *Ideal Self* is communicative, proactive and assertive:

I believe in talking within the educational centre... how to face situations, saying what we think (RWG).

Her *Ought Self* is normative and team-oriented, prescribing collaborative addressing of problems with colleagues and superiors—

Hey, don't treat the child like that (CCGM)

—i.e., voice exercised through institutional dialogue rather than withdrawal. Her *Feared Self* centres on social exclusion or mistreatment at the placement—

I was afraid that someone within the centre would hate me and that things would become even worse (CCGM)

—which heightens the interpersonal risk of speaking up.

Analytically, Lucía exhibits a clear *self-discrepancy*: an *Actual self* of protective silence versus *Ideal/Ought selves* oriented to dialogic assertiveness. *Ideal* and *Ought* converge on how to speak (collaboratively, within institutional channels) but differ in motivational tone—approach (competent, relational agency) versus obligation/risk-avoidance (avoid trouble, keep harmony). These dynamics reveal identity movements marked by oscillation between enacted silence and imagined assertiveness, producing a voice paradox in which strong internal endorsement of collaborative speech but limited enactment sustains a gap between self-as-enacted and possible selves, slowing PTI growth and reinforcing dependence on prevailing hierarchies.

Synthesis of Tensions: Navigating Between Current and Possible Selves

Cross-case analysis shows persistent tensions between participants' present and possible selves that shape identity work at moments of conflict and transition. Read from participants' accounts within the pre-practicum context, these tensions appear both as individual dilemmas and as structural features of teacher education, recurring in three domains: (1) *Emotional Labour: Between Authenticity and Professional Self-Regulation*; (2) *Micropolitical Corridors of Agency: Between Vertical Authority and Dialogic Participation*; and (3) *Personal–Professional Boundary Work: Between Biography and Role Expectations*.

Emotional Labour: Between Authenticity and Professional Self-Regulation

In this critical incident, emotional labour sits at the centre of the authenticity-(self)regulation tension. Participants describe norms of “professionalism” in which visible emotion is framed as risky and restraint is rewarded—so emotional control becomes a condition for being taken seriously rather than a pedagogical resource. The parents' WhatsApp group was pivotal. By raising practicum concerns in a parents' WhatsApp chat, Kali shifted reflection into a semi-public space with different audiences, tempos and

power relations. Its affordances (easy forwarding, screenshotability and asynchronous escalation) widened reach while heightening risk, collapsing her parent and preservice-teacher roles and recoding critique as complaint. This role collision activated a protective mother-guardian stance and brought biography into her possible-selves negotiation prompting unscaffolded ethical decisions about disclosure, channel choice and de-escalation.

Participants then enacted distinct forms of emotional labour. Kali recalibrated from advocacy-through-exposure to advocacy-through-strategy—

I need to develop effective and assertive communication (CCGM).

Clara, in turn, absorbed the consequences she associated with emotional exposure and institutional sanction (expulsion), describing

not being able to do anything” alongside “impotence (CCGM).

Crucially, she distinguishes this state from overt rage:

it “wasn’t like ‘Oh, what anger!’” but rather “that sadness... how disappointing it is that professionals like that exist in these situations (CCGM).

signalling a rupture between an *ideal learner-self* grounded in dialogue and an *actual self* rendered powerless by institutional action. Lucía, by contrast, responded through protective silence within routinised practices that constrained both teacher and child agency—

the children sitting still, unable to move... watching a PowerPoint (Interview).

a temporary adjustment that safeguards against a feared self marked by social retaliation and further mistreatment.

These emotional labours can be read as regulatory work aimed at keeping future selves viable under threat. Across accounts, participants managed fear, exposure, and moral urgency. Thus, at this level, WhatsApp operates primarily as an affective mediator, co-producing the boundary conditions of authenticity and self-regulation by shaping how preservice teachers can express themselves in relation to institutional expectations within the practicum.

Micropolitical Corridors of Agency: Between Vertical Authority and Dialogic Participation

Participants’ accounts situate agency as contingent on placement gatekeeping. Authority flowed vertically, decisions were taken unilaterally, and preservice voices were invited only after sanctions had been imposed. The expulsion meeting—convened without prior notice or a right to respond—repositioned Clara and Lucía from learners to liabilities, while supervisors entered post hoc with little leverage. As Clara put it,

When you graduate, you leave with so many ideas, enthusiasm, but then [school teams] hold you back; there is resistance (Interview).

In this context, opportunities to act were structured less by individual willingness than by organizational scripts that prized norm reproduction over pedagogical inquiry. Participants perceived this expulsion as unilateral and non-dialogic and located primary responsibility at the site for not activating inquiry/safeguarding protocols—

getting rid of us rather than addressing the problem (Kali, CCGM).

Gatekeeping thus structured the corridors of agency. Kali reported the absence of inquiry/safeguarding procedures and leadership practices that normalised shouting (“children sometimes need to be shouted at”), raising the perceived cost of speaking up; she located institutional responsibility squarely with the placement for negligent handling and lack of investigation (“the greatest blame lies with the centre [placement]”; CCGM). Clara described feeling “voiceless, silenced” and expressed a wish to have been “more dialogic and proactive” (Interview). Lucía was “shocked by the poor handling of everything” by both the school and the university, characterised the removal as “disloyal or underhand,” and questioned the absence of investigation (CCGM).

Read through a possible-selves lens, routinised scripts—taken-for-granted, rule-bound routines about who may speak, through which channel, and when—pushed *present selves* to the margins; *ideal selves* reached for dialogic problem-solving, while *feared selves* anticipated marginalisation and foreclosed learning opportunities. With due process absent, escalation pathways opaque, and supervision delayed, candidates’ micro-moves (Clara’s bids for dialogue, Lucía’s protective non-engagement, Kali’s post-hoc recalibration) were narrowed to near-inaction. Agency, then, was not absent but systematically constrained by micropolitical arrangements that fixed voice, timing, and audience.

Personal–Professional Boundary Work: Between Biography and Role Expectations

All participants’ narratives portray identity work as boundary management between lived personal selves and anticipated professional selves. The incident compressed biography, care obligations, and student status into a single moment, reshaping what participants felt able to voice. This compression was experienced not only as cognitive tension but as embodied uncertainty, captured in the collective anticipation preceding the sanction—

what did we do?, what’s going to happen to us? (CCGM).

In this way, *ideallought* trajectories (the teacher one aims/ought to be) met feared outcomes (sanction, exclusion), yielding ongoing negotiation rather than settled resolution.

Kali’s overlapping roles—as a first-grade parent, preservice teacher, and partner—collapsed into a single WhatsApp post that made child advocacy indistinguishable from institutional critique:

I thought about my daughter, and I also thought about the classmates who were indeed experiencing mistreatment (CCGM).

Her subsequent moves exemplify reflexive re-bordering and identity integration (“personal and professional aspects must go hand in hand”), shifting towards a more assertive communicative stance, where emotional self-regulation and calibrated disclosure operate as professional craft knowledge (CCGM; Interview). Clara’s expulsion reclassified her from learner to liability, fracturing belonging and converting a dialogic, due-process ideal into a feared self of lost learning and stalled development (RWG). Lucía’s bid for recognition was continuously checked by an anticipated social sanction (“that someone... would hate me”), producing protective non-participation despite valuing assertive, collaborative talk (CCGM; RWG). Across these trajectories, the sociomaterial medium (WhatsApp) functioned as a governor of visibility and consequence, amplifying reach, collapsing roles, and raising the stakes of speaking out.

Taken together, these trajectories frame boundary work as the governance of voice, channel, and disclosure under uneven protections: role collisions, sanctions, and anticipated rejection condition what can be said, which channels feel usable, and how far disclosure can go. The identity positions that emerged were plural and provisional, assembled through small, strategic moves to keep *ideallought* selves viable while containing feared consequences, within institutional scripts that, in participants’ accounts, normalised shouting and bypassed due process.

Discussion

Pre-Practicum as an Identity Space

This study examined how three preservice early childhood teachers negotiated their emerging Professional Teacher Identity (PTI) in the pre-practicum phase, following a shared WhatsApp-mediated critical incident that culminated in the unilateral removal of two candidates from their placement. Across cases, identity work clustered around three interrelated tensions—*emotional labour*, *micropolitical agency*, and *personal–professional boundary work*—showing how *Actual and Possible Selves* were reconfigured as participants interpreted risk, voice, and responsibility within a hybrid practicum ecology. In line with prior research (Hamman et al., 2013; Maddamsetti & Yuan, 2023; Ryan & Irie, 2014; Weise & Rojas-Sasso, 2024), our pre-practicum cases suggest that early placements already operate as identity-relevant spaces, in which recognition, participation, and exposure are actively organised. Within these settings, some identity

positions become more readily speakable, while others entail higher relational or institutional costs, shaping how preservice teachers evaluate the plausibility of different imagined teacher futures under specific institutional conditions.

Feeling Rules as Curriculum: Emotional Labour and the Professionalisation of Restraint

Across participants' accounts, emotional labour emerged as a structurally cued professional demand. What counted as "professional" conduct was repeatedly framed as emotional restraint, while visible dissent or affective expression was experienced as reputationally and institutionally risky. In Hochschild's (2012) terms, these narratives point to *institutional feeling rules* that organise what can be expressed, to whom, and at what cost. In this way, emotional control operated as a condition for being taken seriously rather than as a pedagogical resource such that managing expression became part of the professional role rather than a private coping task (Fairchild & Mikuska, 2021; Kelchtermans, 2005; Zembylas, 2005; 2023).

The WhatsApp-mediated escalation intensified these dynamics not only by amplifying visibility and consequence, but by charging the episode affectively—turning concern into exposure and uncertainty into anticipatory fear. As a semi-public, easily circulable space, the platform heightened reputational risk and recoded reflective critique as institutional complaint, collapsing roles and accelerating sanction. Within a schoolified ECEC context—where compliance-oriented routines and accountability logics narrow the legitimacy of pedagogical dissent—such exposure rendered care-based concerns particularly risky and emotionally costly (Pardo & Opazo, 2019). In this setting, emotional labour became inseparable from morally charged responsibilities of care and safeguarding, revealing how hybrid digital–institutional ecologies govern expression and containment. These findings align with evidence that recognition, trust, and emotionally safe climates are preconditions for sustainable identity development in early childhood education (Cumming & Wong, 2019; Su, 2024).

When Procedures Fail: Gatekeeping, Sanction, and the Erosion of Learning

In relation to *micropolitical agency*, in the case analysed, participants described pre-practicum settings marked by unilateral decision-making and opaque escalation pathways, requiring forms of micropolitical literacy that were unevenly accessible to preservice teachers. Gatekeeping operated vertically: sanctions were imposed without due process, preservice voices surfaced only post hoc, and supervisors intervened with limited leverage. Clara's and Lucía's removal from the placement reclassified them from learners to liabilities, revealing their restricted access to institutional scripts for negotiating conflict, protection, and accountability. By contrast, Kali attempted to navigate the school's institutional logic by attributing responsibility to the site for failing to activate inquiry and safeguarding protocols, drawing—albeit precariously—on a nascent understanding of procedural accountability.

These micropolitical arrangements fixed the timing, audience, and legitimacy of preservice voice, narrowing agency to defensive, risk-averse, or post-hoc adjustments, as evidenced in participants' accounts. Read through a possible-selves lens, routinised institutional scripts marginalised present selves, undermined the attainability of aspirational futures, and intensified feared selves linked to exclusion or stalled development (Hamman et al., 2013; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Ryan & Irie, 2014), effects that can be understood as arising from weak contextual cues and limited institutional pathways for enacting future-oriented teacher identities (Oyserman & James, 2011). More broadly, our participants' accounts suggest that when preservice teachers have limited opportunities to develop micropolitical literacy—or access to institutional knowledge about channels, audiences, and consequences—critical incidents are more likely to be lived as silencing rather than as learning opportunities (Figueroa-Céspedes, 2024; Kelchtermans, 2005; Monereo, 2023). This interpretation aligns with research showing that identity construction and participation in ECEC are deeply shaped by institutional micropolitics, particularly in contexts where professional recognition is fragile and novices lack protected spaces to rehearse dissent, judgement, and ethical positioning (Figueroa-Céspedes, 2024; Lagos-Serrano, 2022; Scherr & Johnson, 2017).

Role Collision as Boundary Work: Biography, Care, and Institutional Visibility

At the same time, participants' identity work centred on managing *boundaries between personal biography and anticipated professional roles*. In this case, the critical incident foregrounded role collision and made identity positioning consequential, because participation was filtered through hierarchical gatekeeping and the perceived risk of being sanctioned. These pressures were unevenly experienced: for Kali, biographical commitments were rapidly re-aligned with emerging professional expectations under heightened exposure; for Clara and Lucía, anticipated sanction narrowed voice and belonging. This pattern is consistent with micropolitical accounts of teacher vulnerability, recognition, and constrained agency (Figueroa-Céspedes, 2024; Kelchtermans, 2009), and it extends our prior argument that professional identity in ITE is biographically sedimented and negotiated at the personal–professional boundary (Figueroa-Céspedes & Guerra, 2023a). Such tensions are especially visible in early and intermediate practicum experiences, where preservice teachers are still learning to translate personal commitments and emerging professional ideals into situated practice under institutional conditions (Vanegas & Fuentealba, 2019).

Read through a dialogic lens, accounts of the critical incident bring into view polyphonic identity work, as preservice teachers mobilise shifting internal positions to interpret and respond to tensions at the personal–professional boundary (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beijaard et al., 2004; Hermans, 2001). From this perspective, possible selves can be understood as dialogic configurations through which expectations, emotions, and responsibilities are negotiated in and through practice (Weise & Rojas-Sasso, 2024). Crucially, these negotiations are not only biographically grounded but also institutionally mediated: procedures, hierarchies, and communicative infrastructures shape visibility, risk, and consequence, thereby delimiting which identity positions and forms of participation become enactable (Davidson & Turin, 2021; Kelchtermans, 2009; Moyano et al., 2023). Taken together, the incident can be read as a site of identity liminality, where biography, internal dialogue, and institutional expectations intersect, shaping how possible teacher futures are imagined and sustained within initial teacher education.

From Possible Selves to Design: ZPD Scaffolds and the Viability of Teacher Futures

Conceptually, this study extends possible-selves theory by showing that the attainability of *ideal and ought selves* is shaped by institutional imaginaries and micropolitical literacies, rather than by internal adjustment alone. While self-discrepancy theory foregrounds the cognitive–affective tensions that arise when *actual selves* diverge from *ideal, ought, or feared selves* (Higgins et al., 1994), our findings suggest that such tensions are worked through in socially organised and politically situated ways. Consistent with dialogical–developmental accounts (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Figueroa-Céspedes & Guerra, 2023b; Figueroa-Céspedes, 2024; Hermans, 2001; Monereo, 2023; Weise & Rojas-Sasso, 2024), identity emerges at the boundaries between selves, roles, emotions and contexts, and is patterned by norms of recognition and opportunities for participation.

From this perspective, we re-specify Vygotsky's (1978) *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) as a design space for Professional Teacher Identity, where recognition, dialogic mediation and reflective artefacts (e.g., critical-incident work) may help preservice teachers move between enacted and imagined selves across the actual–potential continuum. Under a sociocultural reading, discrepancies between *actual and possible selves* appear developmentally productive to the extent that institutional conditions legitimise voice, participation, and fair process. In line with constructivist accounts that treat self-discrepancy as a driver of identity reconfiguration (Bay-Alarcón et al., 2024), our case material points to the ambivalence of possible selves in pre-practicum: they can organise meaning, motivation, and action around hoped-for, obligated, and feared teacher futures, yet their enactment is continually recalibrated through biographical commitments and shaped by affective and micropolitical conditions. Where recognition and clear escalation pathways are in place, critical incidents may function as ZPD-oriented scaffolds for ethical judgement, professional conflict, and empathic positioning; where they are not, similar incidents can narrow viable positions and mute emerging agency.

As candidates move through practicum ecologies, multiple—sometimes competing—possible selves

are dialogically voiced, intersected, and renegotiated across situations. These selves are self-authored projections that crystallise in the transitional space between being teacher students and becoming future teachers, shaping who preservice teachers hope, ought, or fear becoming under specific institutional conditions (Vanegas & Fuentealba, 2019; Weise & Rojas-Sasso, 2024). Building on Zittoun's (2014) account of semiotic movements across temporal orientations, degrees of fiction, and levels of generalisation, we conceptualise this reflexive process as an *identity multiverse*: a delimited analytical space in which candidates actively "run" alternative scenarios—testing, in practice and imagination, different communicative moves, ethical stances, and likely consequences—thereby anticipating different professional outputs and recalibrating which positions feel viable in context. In this framing, critical incidents function as prompts for iterative identity work, making salient how biographical traces and institutional conditions reorganise the salience of possible selves, and underscoring a design implication: recognition-rich ZPDs are needed to convert these simulations into mentored learning through reflective dialogue and ethical, de-escalatory communication, rather than withdrawal, silencing, or fear-based trajectories (Han et al., 2020; Vygotsky, 1978).

Designing Recognition-Rich Practicum Conditions in ITE

In terms of ECEC policy and practice, our study underscores the urgency of evaluating practicum and pre-practicum ecologies not only as technical arrangements, but as lived, narrated spaces where recognition is granted, withheld, or abruptly withdrawn. Under schoolification and compliance logics, hierarchical school cultures can enforce belonging through public reprimand and abrupt removal—forms of institutionalised shaming/humiliation that can undermine learning and legitimate participation (Scherr & Johnson, 2017; Wu & Chen, 2013). In early childhood education—where professional recognition remains fragile—dissent is costly and silence rational (Lagos-Serrano, 2022). Safeguards such as *due process*, *confidential reporting*, *supervisory mediation*, and *transparent protocols* can therefore operate as *developmental resources*, *opening conversational spaces* where concerns can be voiced, interpreted, and ethically worked through, rather than sanctioned (Kamenarac, 2022; Pardo & Opazo, 2019). Our findings extend Olsen's (2024) claim that identity consolidation relies on institutional recognition and align with Davies' (2023) argument that epistemic safety is a prerequisite for novices' legitimate participation.

Building on Kamenarac's (2022) account of how market-driven and standardising pressures shape early childhood teachers' agency, we argue that ITE should equip candidates to critically navigate schoolified logics—adopting what supports learning and equity, adapting to local contexts, and resisting what erodes care and justice. From a narrative–dialogical perspective, this requires creating curricular spaces where preservice teachers can tell, retell, and collectively reframe their experiences, experimenting with different professional positions without disproportionate risk. We therefore propose three complementary curricular moves to legitimise reflective dissent and enable experiential learning: *critical-incident laboratories*, *simulated family–school communication*, and *possible-selves journals* integrated into ongoing triadic dialogues among mentors, candidates, and supervisors (Han et al., 2020; Monereo, 2023; Weise & Rojas-Sasso, 2024). Jointly assessed through university–site co-governance, these measures braid emotion, micropolitics and boundary work into the curriculum, turning vulnerability into ZPD-aligned growth and supporting well-being through fair process and dialogic mediation (Cumming & Wong, 2019; Irvine et al., 2024; Vanegas & Fuentealba, 2019). Complementary institutional reforms include *auditing incident-handling protocols*, *monitoring staff well-being*, and equipping sites with *crisis-response repertoires* (clear role delineation in supervision, de-escalation scripts, family-communication templates, after-action reviews), alongside *preservice micro-toolkits rehearsed prior to fieldwork*.

Methodological Boundaries and Future Directions: Capturing Identity-in-Motion

Methodologically, the narrative design and reflexive thematic analysis delimit our claims: the study draws on a small, information-power sample from a single programme/site; it relies on retrospective accounts of a single incident (with potential recall bias); and it is shaped by researcher positionalities. Because the corpus and analysis were conducted in Spanish and the manuscript was subsequently translated into English, there is also a risk of nuance loss or interpretive drift in the translated excerpts. We

mitigated these constraints through relational ethics, reflexive journaling, coherence checks, and a bilingual translation process in which a professional translator reviewed all quoted extracts against the Spanish originals and the authors verified meaning preservation. Accordingly, transferability is framed as conceptual rather than statistical. Future research should triangulate multi-actor perspectives with ethically feasible contemporaneous artefacts (e.g., supervision records, messaging traces), adopt longitudinal and multi-voiced designs to capture identity trajectories over time, and test the proposed scaffolds through multi-site, design-based research. Comparative studies across ECEC settings with differing organisational structures, staffing models, and community contexts would further clarify how institutional conditions shape the viability of emerging teacher identities.

Conclusion

In sum, our study suggests that critical incidents expose the affective, micropolitical and biographical tensions through which preservice early childhood teachers recalibrate their possible selves—functioning as internal simulations that can open alternative “teacher futures” rather than merely foreclose participation. Conceiving the ZPD as a design space underscores how strengthened, rights-bearing and dialogic practicum ecologies—especially in a field where professional recognition remains fragile—can help transform vulnerability into situated, justice-oriented agency, widening preservice teachers’ corridors of action while keeping learning aligned with child-centred safeguarding.

Declarations

Authors’ Declarations

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