Unveiling Teacher’s Professional Identity- A Case Study of Teachers in Karachi, Pakistan

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Manuscript Information
Submission Date: December 15, 2022
Reviews Completed: March 04, 2023
Acceptance Date: March 18, 2023
Publication Date: March 25, 2023

Citation in APA Style:

DOI: https://doi.org/10.20547/jess1112311105
Unveiling Teacher’s Professional Identity- A Case Study of Teachers in Karachi, Pakistan

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Abstract: This research study delves into the perceptions of secondary-level teachers regarding their professional identity, seeking to illuminate their understanding of themselves as professionals. The study employed phenomenological case study. Five teachers from the selected private school participated in the interviews. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The teachers’ professional identity was found to be in a developing stage, primarily attributed to their limited experience and their exposure to professional identity exploration. Teaching identity of educators can be strengthened through their proactive engagement with reflective practices. In addition, digital literacy is the key to their learning identity development.

Keywords: Professional identity, teachers, identity exploration, identity development, teaching identity.

Introduction

The concept of identity encompasses a combination of experiences, exposures, connections, expressions, and affiliations. It defines individuality and how we perceive ourselves to be. The formation of identity is a multifarious approach, which is developed in this social process of interacting with self and others. The well-being of an individual is influenced by both psychological and social factors. When a person possesses a deep understanding of themselves and can respond rationally to various circumstances as a result of this self-awareness, they are more likely to experience happiness and enjoy a fulfilling life. The development of a person’s identity plays a significant role in taking decisions through conscious filtration. Having a strong sense of identity can further foster a feeling of connection and supporting overall well-being, which is essential for building confidence and overall well-being.

According to Zhao (2022), a teacher’s professional identity encompasses their philosophy of roles and responsibilities, adaptability to changes in syllabus and academic approaches, classroom practices, application of pedagogical skills, and their ability to address daily challenges. It reflects how a teacher views their professional outlook and the extent to which they embrace and expand the scope of their profession. The development

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Received December 15, 2022; Received in revised form March 04, 2023; Accepted March 18, 2023; Available online March 25, 2023

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of professional identity is rooted in one’s personal identity, and is influenced by various factors (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004).

**Figure 1**
The constitutive characteristics of the concept of identity (Castañeda, 2011)

Teachers’ professional identities (TPI) involve self-reflection on past practices and personal identities, guiding their present actions with an eye on students’ future. Competent teachers establish connections between students’ past, present, and future actions, positively influencing their knowledge (Tabassum & Malik, 2017). A well-developed and recognized professional identity enhances teachers’ effectiveness, leading to students’ betterment as contributing members of society. Teaching experiences shape the professional identity of the teachers through connectivity with diverse audience and situations (Beijaard et al., 2004; Vokatis & Zhang, 2016). One of the reports highlighted significance of professional identity for teachers to take ownership, participate in reflective narrative practices, and authenticate the existing associations in concept and practical life (OECD, 2022).

The formation of a teacher’s identity is not solely determined by societal or cultural factors, nor it is solely influenced by internal or psychological processes. Instead, identity emerges and remains through the interplay of external and internal variables. Moreover, identity is not fixed or rigid; rather, it evolves and adapts based on how individuals interpret and reinterpret their interactions with the public over time (Hong, Greene, & Lowery, 2017; Volchenkova & Ph, 2019). According to Flores and Day (2006), teachers’ professional identities are shaped and reshaped in various circumstances, through collaboration of
contextual (classroom practices, school culture and the leadership) and personal (teachers’ practices and their perception about themselves as teachers) factors. Elements that influence teachers’ professional identity are training, workload, experience and exposure. In a qualitative synthesis conducted by Van Lankveld, Schoonenboom, Volman, Croiset, and Beishuizen (2017) on teacher identities, several factors contributing to teacher identity were identified. These include staff training programs and interactions with students, which were seen as influential in shaping their professional identity. On the other hand, the general culture of university education was perceived as a limiting factor in the formation of teacher identity. According to Karousiou, Hajisoteriou, and Angelides (2019) work pressure, lack of training and availability of limited resources have negative influence on teachers’ identity.

The curriculum of teacher education programs, along with practicum, classroom instruction, and pedagogical practices, play a significant role in shaping teachers’ work-related identity. Additionally, the effects of their initial instructional years have a lasting impact on teachers. Teachers professional identity is also associated to their well-being. The OECD’s conceptual framework on occupational well-being emphasizes the significance of workplace understanding and enjoyment. Physical conditions, resource allocation, task delegation, and benchmarks significantly impact teachers’ well-being, influenced by policy setting and working environment, with uncontrollable school and personal variables. Outcomes vary from inward (motivation to leave, stress, burnout) to outward (classroom processes, students’ well-being) based on the framework’s predetermined aspects.

Woods and Carlyle (2002) described three phases which creates identity passage in teachers. The first stage is the stage of separation from the society in which the teacher’s identity becomes weak and they separate from self. During the period of transition, rock bottom is achieved, yet the beginnings of restoration may be seen via ‘cocooning’ and the impact of key persons. At the last stage self-renewal follows, during which some develop a new personal identity, mostly by moving and changing the teacher job, or by re-routing out of teaching entirely. The identity crisis if not dealt well has severe impact of even losing the professional identity. During the transition stage the teachers needs support and guidance to survive and reconstruct their identity to reduce burnout.

Teachers’ understanding regarding their professional identity can facilitate their professional growth (Mockler, 2022). Some studies have investigated teachers’ professional identity. The literature review aimed to explore the scope, purposes, methodologies, and findings of these studies, emphasizing the importance of understanding professional identity’s impact on teachers’ and students’ well-being. Cordingley et al. (2022) examined teachers’ professional identity construction in seven contrasting education systems uncovering how individual and contextual factors influence their integration, adoption, and adaptation of characteristics. These teachers engage in continuous understanding and reinterpretation of their practices, leading to the development of sub-identities in various work contexts and professional relationships. The study also highlighted the importance of teachers’ agency in developing their professional knowledge and skills to enhance their efficacy individually and collectively. Another study conducted with Chilean teachers by Darragh and Radovic (2019) aimed to comprehend collective identity performances fol-
lowing professional development. Thematic data analysis revealed that teachers’ appealing identities, particularly as a ‘mother-savior’ or ‘successful’ teacher, clashed with their understanding of the teacher’s role as encouraged by professional development. Likewise, Tsybulsky and Muchnik-Rozanov (2019) investigated the formation of professional identity in 17 Israeli teachers using in-depth interviews and reflective reports, analyzed through multi-level analysis. The study identified meaningful experiences in two areas that shaped teachers’ professional identity: overcoming problems when using project-based learning and engaging in constructive and helpful collaboration. Findings of the study conducted in Cyprus by Karousiou et al. (2019) revealed that teachers’ professional identities, along with supporting structures like loyalty to the profession and access to learning opportunities and resources, influenced their identities. Tabassum and Malik (2017) conducted a local study comparing the professional identities and learning methods of college teachers in public and private sectors, with 633 participants. Findings indicated that private college teachers were more motivated for professional growth compared to their public college counterparts. Similarly, Moghal (2017) conducted research in Pakistan using narrative inquiry and an ethnographic approach to analyze the elements impacting college teachers’ personal and professional identities, revealing considerable similarities in identity building across various contexts. Likewise, Vokatis and Zhang (2016) conducted research in New York and described elementary school teachers’ professional identity through grounded theory analysis of interviews and field observations, identifying five distinct areas: teachers as a source of knowledge, co-learners, problem solvers, members of a professional community, and having an empowering relationship with the principal.

Though a good number of studies have highlighted significance of identity exploration, limited research studies have explored teachers’ professional identity. This study will explore teachers identity of secondary school located in Karachi in case context.

**Method**

The study utilized a Phenomenological Case Study approach to delve into the conscious experiences and perceptions of five secondary level teachers, specifically teaching grades 9 and 10. Purposive sampling was employed for participant selection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain insights into the teachers’ views on their professional identity, using the adapted TALIS Survey (Teaching and Learning International Survey, 2018) as a guide. The data was analyzed using deductive thematic analysis. Ethical parameters outlined by The British Educational Research Association BERA (2018) was used to adhere ethical principles while collecting data.

**Research Findings**

Under the first category of Learning Identity the sub-themes of teacher development and living in comfort zone emerged from the interviews. The second category was of Teaching Identity which surfaced the subsequent sub-themes of pedagogical competencies, ICT
integration, assessment strategies and classroom environment. The data revealed that the teachers do not pursue professional qualification but the connection of professional qualification with identity exploration is not yet established by studies. While sharing about their experiences in the field of teaching it was discovered that most of them have good professional experience.

**Figure 2**
Themes derived from the data

![Diagram]

**Learning Identity**

**Teacher Development**

Professional development help educators to uplift themselves, reform working practices, consider professional identities, and stay passionate about education. To be professionally developed teachers, they must be present in a number of exterior and interior states of affairs, with their professional identity at the center of focus (Hanna, Oostdam, Severiens, & Zijlstra, 2020). A good number of the teachers feel difference between their past and present selves due to the professional developmental activities undertaken by them.

One of the teachers echoed;

“I have witnessed a revolutionary change in myself due to these trainings. They have made me efficient enough to control the most difficult class and also have developed the skills to present enhanced content.”

Another teacher commented;

“The most impactful professional developmental activity undertaken by me was doing B.Ed. (Hons) which has drastically improved my classroom management, lesson planning and teaching methodology. I have changed professionally.”

These narrations resonate with one of the studies conducted in Pakistan (Dayoub & Bashiruddin, 2012) which found that the teachers learn from their in-service experiences, professional activities organized by the school and the home support.
Professional development and experience is believed to have improved teachers in developing resources and planning for class. One of the teachers commented;

“I learnt how to make students ready to learn. I also learnt how to design lesson plans. I am prepared and focused what to teach and now don’t get stuck.”

Correspondingly, a research study conducted by Yoo (2016) indicated a positive change in teachers due to professional development experience. The professional developmental experiences thus have positively impacted the teachers’ professional life resulting into improved professionals.

**Living in Comfort Zone**

Living in the comfort zone has been the easiest choice a person makes which consequently depicts fixed mindset of that individual. Most of the teachers stated that they cannot avail professional development opportunities due to time constraints. A teacher opined,

“The only challenge I face to take up any opportunity is lack of time because now the life has numerous problems and tasks to be done that I am unable to avail the opportunities which come by, though I want to avail new trainings.”

One of the teachers shared,

“The biggest problem is attending the courses on weekend because this is the only time which we give to our homes. Secondly, sometime it is due to financial reasons.”

Most of teachers found it challenging to prioritize their professional development needs while choosing among the alternatives for themselves. Another teacher mentioned the same reason,

“The problem is that I am unable to manage time because other activities than school gets disturb.”

A teacher commented,

“Honestly speaking the first issue is of timings because most of these courses are of weekends. We don’t want to avail the opportunity because we don’t want to spoil our weekend. Second issue is of interest that if we know things what will we do by attending the trainings.”

One teacher had a different view regarding availing these opportunities,

“There are no such challenges until we want to learn. I think everyone likes to live in their comfort zone but some people require a push. If I will be pushed by the institute then I may take out time from my time to attend certain course. If you will give responsibility then I will take it. There is no barrier in doing any learning.”
It is inferred that teachers are not much willing to step out of their comfort zone and put some efforts to avail the professional developmental opportunities until and unless these trainings are forced or during school hours. These exercises are not their priority.

Teaching Identity

Pedagogical Competencies

Pedagogically competent teacher can use an array of tangible assets (such as teaching aids and tools) and non-tangible assets (such as expertise, abilities, and expertise) that are coordinated and synergized (Ningtiyas et al., 2018). The data unmasked teachers ability of employing need based pedagogical competencies dependent on the need of their subject and topic.

A teacher opined,

“Irrespective of the subject one teaches it is required to have a grip over the content then think of two to three strategies for explaining that content to the students. Then decide the time duration to achieve the objectives. This is how I decide upon the classroom objectives beforehand.”

Another teacher shared,

“Motivation is the most crucial part of teaching to make students agree to learn. Storytelling, visual presentations help a lot to focus in studies. Teaching aids (PPTs, charts, flashcards, models) are really important elements of teaching.”

Teachers highlighted various approaches that they apply in their routine teaching practices. One of the teachers opined,

“Sometimes I use Lecture Method and sometime I advise my students to refer certain websites and sometimes I guide them under my supervision and sometimes leave them independent.”

Similar notions were captured by Channa and Sahito (2022).

One more teacher shared,

“I believe in practical based teaching. According to cognitive theory listening helps you to remember 5% of the information, through demonstration 65-70% things are well remembered and recalled.”

A teacher mentioned,

“Mathematics is not real-world subject because when we teach formulas students ask about its usage. I connect all these concepts with their practical life to develop interest in the subject, involve them, eradicate the element of fear of asking.”
The pedagogical competencies of teacher include cognitive abilities (Content Knowledge and Pedagogical Content Knowledge) and their beliefs and professional motivation (Kaiser et al., 2017). The narrations reflect that most of the teachers possess cognitive abilities but they are unable to employ them in their instructional practices.

**ICT Integration**

The digital natives require the teachers to be technologically advanced to keep them motivated towards the studies. While giving the interview, the teachers enumerated various benefits of integrating ICT but admitted that they cannot ensure its integration due to various reason mentioned below: One of the teachers was not aware of the term “ICT” after explaining its meaning the teacher shared irrelevant example,

“While teaching the topic Khuda Hai, I gave an example that if the lights at our come cannot be light up on its own then how come the stars, moon and sun can lit up on regular schedule.”

Another teacher shared,

“ICT isn’t used much but sometimes I show PPT on projector. We also taught Urdu typing skills to the students.”

Likewise, Rahim (2013) conducted a study indicating the obstacles faced by the teachers to integrate ICT in education namely lack of awareness, insufficient time for integration, overcrowded class, lack of training and financial snags. One more teacher mentioned,

“I am weak at computer and technology. I think it is very important and I try to use my mobile to refer things to students. To some extent I integrate ICT in the mentioned way. Currently I am trying to learn the use of technology.”

A teacher knew the importance and application of ICT in teaching but shared,

“The way the world is evolving there is a need to integrate ICT but due to bulk of syllabus, paper layout and time constraints ICT integration is not that much possible though it should be. Software like Math lab and Mathematica are useful.”

While highlighting the significance of ICT integration in teaching practice, a research conducted in Malaysia by Ghavifekr et al. (2014) not only emphasized acquisition of ICT skills for teacher but also for the management for better productivity and catering the needs of the new generation.

It is clearly understood that instead of knowing the importance of technology usage in teaching most of the teachers lack the knowledge of its integration.
Assessment Strategies

While sharing the classroom practices for conducting assessments all the teachers focused only on “Assessment of Learning” through low-stake or high-stake testing. A teacher shared,

“I ask expert level questions rather than basic focusing on those who were not paying attention. When attentive students answer the question correctly this develops the feeling of regret for those who didn’t pay attention in class. However, same does not apply in all context.”

This teacher uses higher order thinking questions to awaken those students through self-realization who were inattentive in class. One of the teachers mentioned,

“Assessment helps to understand that whatever we have taught the students have been understood by them. To do so we take test immediately after teaching. This helps us to enlist the students who need special attention and facilitation.”

One more teacher shared,

“Assessment helps us understand that where students stand. To do so, we take classroom tests, ask post session questioning. We pressurize, counsel, arrange extra classes and contact parents to fill the gap in learning.”

Either it be high stake or low stake testing, teacher as a decision maker or the student as a decision maker, formative or summative assessment. The assessments may comprise all three aspects, firstly “Assessment of Learning” which demonstrates the achievement of the learners and include high stakes testing at the end or mid of the semester. Secondly, “Assessment for Learning” which aims to give feedback or feedforward on teaching and learning process to students and teachers for improvement. Thirdly, “Assessment as Learning” for self-regulation and critical evaluation of the students by themselves or peers (National Forum, 2022). The pattern of assessments practiced by the teachers is focused on assessment of learning. They neglect the important aspects of assessment as learning and assessment for learning.

Classroom Environment

The tangible and intangible environment of class represents the philosophy of the teacher. According to the participants their classroom environment is usually calm and good. The students behave with the teachers according to their teachers’ attitude. One of the teachers commented,

“The students know my rules like to set the furniture, roll down sleeves, button their shirt. They are now conditioned to my rules. They are ready to study with their books. The environment of my class is very good.”
Another senior teacher mentioned,

“\[\text{The environment of my class is quiet and calm but we do have healthy} \]
\[\text{noises [discussion, question and answers] in our class.}\]

A teacher shared,

“I am frank but firm with the students of this age because the students
become rebellious when they get corporal punishments. This way they feel
free to speak their heart out. My students are involved with me when I am in
the class.”

Most of the teachers find that the environment of their class is a learning environment. The students are ready to learn and regulate themselves as per the expectations of their teachers.

Findings

Two sub-themes were derived about the perceptions of secondary school teachers’ learning identity namely teacher development and living in comfort zone. It was observed that the teachers feel difference in themselves after attending the professional development opportunities but they don’t want to step out of their comfort zone. While analyzing the insights of the secondary level teachers’ teaching identity the sub-themes of pedagogical competencies, assessment strategies, class environment and ICT Integration were derived from the data. The teachers employ various strategies like motivation and real-life examples to teach the content but lack the skills of ICT integration. They are inclined towards assessment of learning only and claim the environment of their class is a learning environment.

Discussion

Teachers competitiveness and their identity begin with the exploration of their professional identity. However, literature confirms that there is a sense of realization, competence and willingness in the teachers according to their own understanding of the term professional identity. This area of concern has not been much explored in Pakistan. Teachers need to know “who they are?”, “how to act” and “what does the society expect from the?”. Teachers design their instructional plans, classroom activities according to their distinctive reasons manifested by their identities, hence it becomes necessary to explore teachers’ professional identity to answer the needs of academic advancement (Zhao, 2022).

The result of the study indicate that the teachers professional identity is in developing phase because their learning and teaching identities are not comprehensively explored.
One of the most important components of professional identity is developing the learning identity of oneself. Educators are more likely to be successful in their teaching careers if they are aware of what skills and talents they have acquired through professional development activities and what would make them a better professional these aspects enhance their professional identity and well-being. Individuals with a strong professional identity usually take pride in their occupations and develop to their full potential (Jue & Ha, 2018). The second component of professional identity is developing teaching identity through learner-centered orientation. Van Veen, Sleegers, Bergen, and Klaassen (2001) explored that the teacher with a teacher-centered professional identity orientation responded poorly to student-centered school innovations. On the other hand, teachers with a learners-centered approach felt comfortable with their professional orientations and such advances. Learner-centered orientation influences instructors’ intention to utilize technology for instructional purposes by increasing their perceived usefulness and value of technology use (Vokatis & Zhang, 2016).

In order to have sound professional identity, the teachers need to continuously reflect and delve deep down into the several factors that contribute to build teachers’ professional identity such as education, learning experiences, workplace environment, professional experience etc. This practice plays an important role in improving educators’ ownership of identities in their professional trajectories (Zhao, 2022).

**Recommendations**

In order to enhance the learning identity, teachers need to undertake professional development opportunities and step outside their comfort zone. Next, to improve teaching identity teachers are required to have learner centered orientation and employ ICT integration in their daily routine for impactful teaching. Teachers should embrace personal identity before shifting towards professional identity. For this purpose, participating in reflective practices through reflective diary or action research is recommended. Furthermore, teachers should be empowered towards digital literacy so they can dive consciously into the digital world for their professional development.

**Directions for Future Researchers**

Firstly, conduct longitudinal studies to observe the effects of multi-layered professional development approaches on teachers’ identities and practices. Secondly, investigate the role of gender in shaping the professional identity of teachers. Thirdly, investigate the role of teachers’ voices and advocacy in shaping education policies and reforms. Lastly, socio-emotional contextual literacy model may be proposed by future scholars to support teachers professional identity development.
Conclusion

Professional identity of teachers is an important phenomenon which needs to be explored regularly for positive outcome with respect to teaching faculty, students and school environment. It is responsible to induce positive change by helping the teacher to explore themselves as professionals. Professional identity of the teachers should be explored to help teachers become better professionals.

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