

# Unveiling Teachers' Perception: Cultural Influences on Educators' Decision-Making in High-Stakes Exams

Maya Puspitasari  
Universitas Terbuka  
Muhammad Arifin Pelawi  
Influx

*E-mail address: maya\_p@ecampus.ut.ac.id*

**Abstract:** This study analyses the diverse motives of educators entering the teaching profession and their impact on pedagogical decisions during high-stakes exams. Semi-structured interviews with eight participants (six male and two female teachers) from secondary schools in Kabupaten Bandung, Jawa Barat, Indonesia, lasted up to forty minutes. These interviews aimed to elicit insights into the participants' beliefs on their professional calling. Three key themes emerged from the interviews' thematic analysis: the trajectory of a teacher's personal history, the influential role of degree choice, and the weight of accountability. Furthermore, the findings highlighted how gender identity not only influenced the teachers but also echoed across their familial spheres, guiding them towards a profession in education. This investigation underlined the critical significance of cultural beliefs in developing educators' motivations, which serve as the foundation of their professional identity. As a result, this identification has a substantial impact on their pedagogical practises in the classroom, particularly when confronted with the demands imposed by high-stakes exams. This study sheds insight into the intricacies underpinning educators' decision-making processes, particularly in circumstances typified by rigorous assessments, by providing a comprehensive view of the delicate interplay between cultural factors, individual motives, and professional practice.

**Keywords:** Accountability, cultural influence, professional vocation, secondary education, teaching

Teaching has been one of the most in-demand jobs in Indonesia (Chang et.al., 2014). While teaching is considered to earn low income yet have a workload, “careers in teaching are once again among the most pursued careers for thousands of job seekers in Indonesia” (Rahman, 2016: 31). Prestigious belief that the teachers have might interest other family members to follow the same path being a teacher. In 2010 more than 1 million students registered at universities in Indonesia majoring in education while five years earlier, the number was only at around two hundred thousand students (Chang, et.al., 2014). In 2014, World Bank reported that “almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  of higher education graduates working in the public services sector in Indonesia are employed in the education sector, mostly as teachers” (p.25).

Teaching is considered a safe job with high social status thus a lot of people decided to become a teacher. This consideration might be connected to how the system of education developed in Indonesia

in the past time. As primary schools expanded in the 1970s, Indonesia faced a scarcity of teachers. In the past, the government from 1975 to 1987 constructed massive new schools and hastily trained and hired “hundreds of thousands of new teachers” (Chang, et.al, 2014: 14). Soon after students graduated from their teacher education training called Sekolah Pendidikan Guru (SPG), they were recruited to be teachers (Zein, 2016).

SPG is a vocational school (equivalent to a senior secondary school) for teaching training that trained students to be a teacher within three years of their schooling. However, the 1989 Law of the National Educational System set a new policy that expected schoolteachers to have a higher educational level than a graduate of SPG. They only needed to hold at least a two-year post-secondary diploma in teaching before they could be a teacher hired by the government. By the end of the 1980s, SPG was permanently closed all around the nation.

Chang et.al. (2014) portrayed that in Indonesia, the government launched a teacher certification programme to encourage more qualified students to pursue a career in education and to improve teachers' professional growth. Since its introduction, more and more people have chosen teaching as their profession. Suryahadi and Sambodho (2013) illustrated that this program doubled the monthly salary of teachers who aspired at upgrading the competency of teaching. However, the Teachers Act of 2005 demands educators to have the basic qualifications of an S1 (bachelor's) degree, while in the beginning having a two-year post-secondary Diploma was accepted to become a teacher at primary school. Chang et.al. (2014: 97) stated that the new policy was implemented to "ensure that all teachers in the system had minimum levels of defined competencies". In addition, Darmawan (2020) argued that this new policy was also meant to strengthen the teaching profession by broadening the concept of quality beyond academic qualification, competency, and certification to incorporate teachers' life quality and taking into account rewards system, status and welfare for teachers.

Under the new regulation, teachers are expected to have at least an undergraduate qualification and they must be qualified for the Teacher Certification. Once they have been qualified, they are entitled to have professional benefits from the government such as their salary will be double their monthly salary. They can earn additional special benefits that amount to their salary if they teach in remote areas (Suryani, 2021).

World Bank (2014: 6) reports that this change causes the appeal for admittance to teacher training institutions for teachers to massive increase and the peak was in 2013. However, once the teacher has the job, Suryahadi and Sambodho (2013) stated that career advancement has no clear guidelines, and the financial incentive has weak or no connection with professional development and or performance evaluation system. Meanwhile, being an elementary and middle school teacher can start once a person graduates from high school was a common occurrence in Indonesia (Basikin, 2007). This 'extra' teacher's job is "a major reason for the constant oversupply of teachers in the Indonesian school system" (Chang, et.al., 2014: 103).

A new policy in the 1990s required English subjects must be learned by students from the first semester of lower secondary school and be permitted to be learned by students in fourth graders at primary school (Lauder, 2010; Zein 2017). Zein

(2016: 120) described that as a result of the social demands appealing for a better foundation of English training at elementary schools to keep with the needs of globalization, English was later also incorporated into the elementary school curriculum. As a consequence, English teaching became one of the most demanded professions throughout the country. To teach English at primary school, 47,577 English teachers were recruited, "of whom 41,304 teach in the public primary schools, whereas 6,271 teach in the private ones" (Zein, 2016: 120). To fill the shortfall of English teachers, several primary schools hired ungraduated students majoring in English.

Kagan (1992) suggested that three elements: content, content, and personality might influence teachers' attitudes and perceptions about their profession. He said:

"A teacher's knowledge of his or her profession is situated in three important ways: in context (it is related to specific groups of students), in content (it is related to particular academic material to be taught), and in person (it is embedded within the teacher's unique belief system)" (p. 74).

Furthermore, Pajares (1992) proposed a similar argument that a teacher's behaviour in the classroom is affected by his or her perceptions and judgment. As a teacher is "a central agent in the delivery of all versions of schooling" (Goodson, 2003: 57), there is a need to gain deeper insights into this research area. It might be interesting to explore the identity of other teachers within various topics including their backgrounds and how their backgrounds influenced their teaching in the classroom.

The concept of professional identity refers to how a person considers himself as another professional in the same role (Richter et al., 2021). It consists of a collection of professional cognitions and is influenced by one's experiences, attributes, beliefs, values, and goals. They describe the idea of professional identity for teachers as a frame through which educators reflect on their work, create meaning in it and then engage in it. Consequently, a teacher's professional identity creates a personal frame that directs their thoughts, meanings, and actions in teaching-related circumstances (Tateo, 2012).

In contrast to the concept of function, which examines an entity's professionally decided character and commonly held hopes, the concept of identity describes how agents reflexively and emotionally control their subjectivity (Beijaard et al., 2004). As a result, because professional identity

cannot be said a stable idea, it cannot be considered as permanent or unitary. A teacher's self-image and the different roles they believe they must play are nuanced and changeable. They highlighted the conflict between structure (awarded by social context) and agency (the individual dimension in instruction) in this context (Beijaard et al., 2004; Tao & Gao, 2017). Therefore, to be a teacher, one must be recognised as such by both oneself and others; this requires debating and then revising a socially acceptable identity.

In these years, there is one main policy that has had a significant impact on teachers' identities: accountability. Many people around the world believe that many schools regularly fail to provide kids with a good education, resulting in a slew of negative results and, in the opinion of some, jeopardising the country's progress (Berryhill et al., 2009). Because of this apparent problem, rules have been enacted to make instructors accountable for instilling greater academic standards with high-stakes standardised testing made as the main judgement. Accountability has been a recurrent component of education policy reform internationally, in part because countries aspire to stay competitive in the globalization of the marketplace. However, the accountability from high stake tests itself in the end affects the identity as teachers. Perryman and Calvert (2020) defined performativity as a technology of discipline using judgements and comparison to what is perceived to be efficient as a tool of control, and a performativity culture leads to performances that evaluate efficiency. Based on the accountability culture in the educational field, efficiency is likely to be a good thing. However, it has cost by treating the beliefs of teachers that are foundations of their identity. It comes from making teaching and learning determined following learning outcomes and objectives only which can be a big difference from what they got on what needs to be a teacher from their history and education.

While it is clear that teachers have a focal role in the classroom, studying their perceptions as individuals and professionals can contribute to a better awareness of what their identity entails in teaching. The questions addressed to examine the issue are: 1) What history was behind teachers' decision to be a teacher? 2) Why do teachers choose to be English teachers? 3) How does the identity affect their teaching in high-stake examinations?

## METHOD

### Research Design

This qualitative study included six female and two male English professors. They came from eight secondary schools in Kabupaten Bandung, Indonesia, ranging from a public school to low-, middle-, and high-cost private schools. Individual interviews were undertaken to acquire a better understanding of teachers' lifestyles and attitudes of their work. This study was collected with ethical permission and a signed consent form. The interviews were videotaped in order to capture nonverbal communication that would not have been possible with an audio interview. The interviews lasted up to sixty minutes and were conducted in Indonesian to allow participants to express themselves freely. To protect their privacy, their names are kept unknown, and pseudonyms are utilised throughout this article. To test the validity of the interview questions, a pilot study was conducted to three English teachers. The questions were also based on the suggestions provided by an expert in educational assessment. Thematic analysis was chosen to analyse the transcripts gained from the semi-structured interviews. Though certain software can be used to analyse the qualitative data, the interview transcripts were evaluated manually to allow for a more personal interpretation of the transcripts, such as nuances of participants' speech, as well as to allow for more critical thinking about the phenomenon under inquiry.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three themes were generated from the transcripts: teachers' history, degree choice and teaching accountability.

### Teachers' history

This theme is related to the interview question: "Why do you want to be a teacher". Most of the participants in this research provided similar answers: their families or extended families were or are presently teachers. Putri for example, said:

"My great grandfather was a school principal, who used to be a teacher, then my grandfather was also a school principal, and he was a teacher as well. Then my uncle was also a teacher. They are my father's relatives. From my mother's, some relatives became teachers and school principals as well.

A recurrent element mentioned by the teachers interviewed was the desire to enter the teaching profession at an early age. Siti stated, "I've always wanted to be a teacher since I was a child." Indri and Husna both made similar statements. They stated that teaching had been their desired job since they were children. Respondents also stated that their relatives pushed them to pursue a career in education.

More and more people are choosing teaching as a profession thanks to a programme developed by the Indonesian government called the teacher certification programme. To increase teaching quality, this programme doubles teachers' base salary (Suryahadi & Sambodho, 2013). However, the Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 14 of 2005 about Teachers and Lecturers states that teachers are expected to have a minimum bachelor's degree when earlier possessing a D2 (Diploma degree) was sufficient to become a teacher.

Adolescents' future job choices may be influenced by their home environment, which is surrounded by those who work in the education sector. This is consistent with the notion advanced by Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) that parents' participation in children's learning may be affected by their know-how with prior concern, schooling, and current experiences with people associated with the education of children (e.g., teachers, their colleagues). A 2014 World Bank report (2014: 25) found that about 34% of university-educated working in the state services sector were working in the education area in Indonesia, most of them as teachers. Following the passage of the Teacher and Lecturer Act No. 14 in 2005, more than one million students registered in education majors at Indonesian universities, compared to only 200 thousand students in 2005 (Chang, et.al., 2014).

How respondents' decisions to make teaching an occupation were most likely determined by the expectation that teaching is a high-paying job. Teacher Law No. 14/2005 awards financial incentives to teachers with a bachelor's degree or senior teachers, whether they are civil servants or private ones as long as they meet certification requirements.

### **Degree choice**

"Why did you choose to major in English education?" is the next question posed to English teachers in interviews. While most teachers have strong family ties to teaching and are therefore advised to them as a profession, the choice of English is a personal decision. There may be an assumption that by learning English, there is a

chance to get a better job or salary. In contrast, all teachers interviewed in this study stated that their decision to major in English education for their undergraduate degree was either because they liked English as a subject in their school or because they liked watching English programs and listening to western songs. Nopi for example asserts:

"When I was in primary school, I wanted to be a teacher. After I enrolled in lower secondary school, English lessons were fun and I also like western songs, but I didn't understand what the meaning was, so I translated those songs and I started loving the English language."

According to Lamb (2007: 759), the determination "with a future self whose competence in English provided access to academic and professional opportunities as well as diverse forms of entertainment" generates Indonesian students' cognizance of the need for English language mastery. The degree of similarity between participants' cultural origins and the context provided by English as a foreign language culture is likely to influence their views towards the second language and, more broadly, their motivation to study it. Gardner (1985: 10) claims that learning a language is motivated by "a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity."

Teachers have a poor value in the job market in many countries in the world because of the global capitalism that governs today's economy and views people and labour as commodities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Skinner et al., 2021; Wiggan et al., 2021). The way that occupations are categorised, stratified, and paid reflects how people view labour or job. In this case, Indonesia is quite different. In Indonesia, a teaching career especially as a civil servant can be said a high-status job. Even though many teachers have low-paying jobs, they would endure. The job as a teacher is not only about payment but also having a high status in the community:

"... in my opinion, being a teacher, it doesn't matter whether he or she is a civil servant or an honorary teacher, though his or her wage is low, society will treat him or her more respectfully than those who are teachers. Though the salary is very low compared to those who work in a factory (blue-collar worker), people still give more respect to the teachers." (Mahmud)

The idea of "self," which is commonly blended with other concepts, seems to be crucial in making a teacher's identity (Beijaard et al., 2004). The acceptance of the identity as a teacher to be successful needs to be inextricably linked to one's

narrative or story; one develops a sense of self as a teacher through stories. These narratives are built on the link between self and social award. In this regard, a reflection of what is important for identity construction is regarded as a pertinent idea and recognised as a crucial element linked to the concept of the importance of teaching. In other words, when there is no reflection, it is impossible to talk about acceptance of identity as a teacher. Here, we can say the acceptance of the teaching profession identity in Indonesia as a high-status job is not only related to the economic concept but also the socially given high respect.

Although the article makes the case that teachers could receive job prestige and social standing in Indonesia, however, pay proportionate to their work should be given to the teachers. Here, we want to point out that there is a big discrepancy between teachers. Some teachers are civil servants that not only have big prestige but also make teaching a high-paying job. On other hand, some teachers not only have jobs not permanent but also become low-paying jobs. The contradiction of conditions on the same job would create a big discrepancy in identity that also bring a difference in the classroom practice. As teachers in poverty would affect negatively their quality of teaching in the classroom (Wiggan et al., 2021).

Two other teachers (Fera and Husna) further stated emphatically that they decided to choose majors at a university that was close to where they lived because they had to follow their parents' wishes. Their parents were afraid of a daughter who lived far away alone. Fera mentioned that:

“My parents asked me if I would like to continue my study, I needed to find a higher education institution nearer to home because I was a girl. ...My parents didn't trust me to study far away.”

Most parents in Indonesia, especially those living in rural areas, do not allow their daughters to live away from them. They fear their daughter living away from their family even though they are old enough at the age of eighteen. This phenomenon might occur since children in Indonesia are very dependent on their parents (Yulianti, et.al., 2019), especially their mothers and they are often afraid of the mysterious and dangerous world they will face if they are away from their families. The relationship of family members to each other in this study suggests that it may be influenced by the beliefs of solidarity that they hold within the family structure. Sometimes parents still actively maintain

their role in their daughter's life even though they are married. This situation may be triggered by the perception that adult children who are married and become parents themselves tend to have a greater recognition of their parental actions and to act appropriately (Lawton, et.al., 1994).

Beijaard et al. (2004) emphasised the multifaceted nature of identity as a teacher. The teacher's awareness of who they are as an educator may be affected by sociological, historical, cultural, and psychological variables. In addition, the identity may involve several sub-identities that could complement or conflict with one another. It is preferable to acknowledge that there are numerous sub-identities when defining identification. Although teacher embraces various identities built on the self and social context, there is a need to make connections between these identities. It can be said that life as a teacher would be better if the connections between the various identities are synchronous.

Based on the need to accept the identity as a teacher, the self must be creating synchronization with the need for a teacher. This is what Fera and Husna do to make themselves accept the profession to be in harmony with themselves:

“Day by day, I started to enjoy teaching until now. Besides it doesn't take much time compared to other occupations, I can still manage my house chore as well, then it's a part-time job, so Insha'Allah I love more this job more since then.” (Husna)

“Here I feel the students are my children. So, I feel in this school my humanity, and my motherhood is improved. It's amazing, alhamdulillah. So, it's not my choice, it's what I meant to be. So, I enjoy it.” (Fera)

Here, we can see that the acceptance of teaching jobs is based on the need for gender. One is motherhood and the other is the need to do house chores as a wife. Interesting fact that the acceptance based on gender comes out as they are “forced” to become teachers for gender reasons too.

### **Teaching accountability**

Based on the identity theory, the agency of the teacher has been viewed as a critical component of individual purposeful actions, underpinning teachers' creation of self as professionals (Tao & Gao, 2017). Teachers interact with the agency through their self-described values. Teachers' identities must be addressed while making agentic decisions and behaviour. According to these studies, identity mediates and shapes agency practice, which is notably obvious in how teachers

conduct themselves in the classroom as the student population and educational regulations change. Teacher identity can be characterised by a variety of beliefs or by a determination to become the kind of educator that is desired. Though they are focused on the future, teachers' professional commitments are a crucial part of their character because they have a significant impact on how they act as agents of change. Here, we argue that the identity that comes from history based on family connection and a high-status job brings them high pressure because of accountability in high stake assessment.

Assessing teacher and school accountability based on national examination scores caused two participating teachers in this study to develop a very negative attitude towards the national examination: humiliation. "...I would feel ashamed," Nopi said, "...if later there is even one student who does not graduate, I would be ashamed that as a teacher I failed." According to Nopi's statement, there was a strong belief in the outcomes of the national test and their relationship to being a part of high-status positions. She believed she deserved to be a teacher provided her students performed well on the national exams. In contrast, she saw herself as a failure when any of her students did not graduate. Her sentiments over the national exam were driven by embarrassment and remorse. A similar feeling was also shown by Mahmud. He said:

"There is like a burden on the teachers when we face the national examination. Because a teacher would feel ashamed or would feel bad when there were students who failed in the national examination... If the average score of this school is low, then automatically we would be ashamed".

Mahmud stated that the national examination was putting a lot of strain on the school and the staff. He argued that society linked the outcomes of the national test to the idea of reward and punishment. Failure to satisfy societal expectations would result in feelings of humiliation. Failure, such as receiving low scores on national exams, was not regarded as the norm in society. According to Nopi and Mahmud, the national examination score was a sacrosanct factor in society, thus they had to ensure that their individual, professional, and school identities remained acceptable by teaching to the test.

Because the grades of the exam were freely accessible in Indonesian culture, there was a widespread notion that the quality of teachers and school ratings were dependent on the results of the national examination. It remained troublesome

since the success or failure of the teacher was determined by how their students fared in the national examination. This issue was raised in an interview with Endang, who indicated that his principal intended to replace the current science and math teachers because their exam marks were on average lower than the other two courses evaluated. It is in line with Barksdale and Thomas' (2000: 386) argument evaluating the effect of washback on high-stakes examination in the USA:

"School-by-school, district-by-district, and state-by-state comparisons published in local newspapers coupled with tremendous pressure to produce high test scores from administrators, school boards, and state legislators make testing the focus of teacher thinking about instruction."

The implementation of the national test for teacher accountability purposes could have a favourable impact on teaching since teachers' performance could improve. However, the benefits of using the data to improve teaching performance were contingent on instructors' decisions to adjust their practices, whether to conform with the norm or to focus more on teaching for the test, as the latter was thought to have an impact on the national examination outcomes.

Throughout the interviews, the institutional emphasis on objectives and results success is described as dramatically affecting the teacher's position as an educator and "getting in the way" of the student-teacher connection. The study concluded that a target-driven culture harms children's learning opportunities and psychological needs. The constraints imposed by performance targets reduced teachers' experience and expertise gained via practise. As this quotation indicates, the importance of the student-teacher relationship was eclipsed by the necessity to meet the expectations of new reforms:

"I feel I'm not creative in teaching in the second semester. I think it's because the situation forces me to do such a thing. We have good intentions, to teach what the children need; we have no means to pressure the children. But we need to follow the system, then we determine the method to do the system, we arrange the goal, then we think about how to reach the goal." (Fera)

"We're confused about where the government wants to lead this education system. In the national examination, sometimes the government teaches us to be dishonest. When graduation was determined by the national examination, we looked for a cunning solution how to help the students pass the national examination..."

Regarding education, it is the teachers who become smarter (rather) than the students. We haven't had a good pattern of education for this nation." (Endang)

These teachers are arguing that high stake testing that administrators and politicians are pushing unwarranted and politically motivated actions. The testing devalues many students and damages teachers' identity as caring professionals. The response of teachers to high-stakes exams can be considered in the framework of teacher identity, and this has important implications for the formulation and execution of assessment policy. It entails how teacher sustains their identities that in turn affect their work practises. Our findings imply that teacher identity is crucial in helping to shape the validity of high-stakes exams. Informed by the identity approach, we contend that studying teacher agency and role in the context of high-stakes exams requires an understanding of teachers' identities are being formed to make sense of their influences on teaching practises. We can only offer better assessment methods with this knowledge.

Identity commitment determines not only how teachers position themselves towards testing, but also how they act in response to what is required of them. Under the burden of high stakes standardized examinations, participants in this study implemented agency to improve their "accountability" and engaged in relevant classroom initiatives to maintain their identity. This finding suggests that teacher agency and identity commitment are related and interconnected.

It is in line with Buchanan's (2015) argument. He said:

"Agency and identity are intertwined. Both are shaped by the macro level discourses and historical forces, but teachers have the opportunity to actively construct themselves in particular ways. Teachers make and remake themselves by drawing on their current self-conceptions and then acting in ways that seek to match those self-conceptions" (p.705).

## CONCLUSION

This research has important consequences for both high stakes testing and teacher identity. In the first place, it indicates a need to comprehend how teacher identity is formed. It does not stem solely from the restricted conceptions of 'teacher identity' represented in technical-rational norms. Teachers gain a concept of their identity as they train to become teachers, while they teach, and as they are socialised. Teachers in Indonesia probably

begin to shape their professional identities before beginning their teacher education program, as many of them make teaching an inherited job from family members. They live with their family members and study what and how to become teachers from a young age. It is also important to note that teaching is a highly regarded profession in Indonesia. It is a high-status career because it pays well if they can become civil servants and receive government subsidies. Teachers are very highly regarded in Indonesia because their students hold them in high regard. As they progress in their teaching career, their professional identity is constantly shaped by their concrete classroom and experiences. The high-prestige job of teaching made them feel a lot of pressure to be accountable for more than simply their kids. It is about their identity: their identity as a member of the family of teachers, the subsidy from the government and the respect they got from the community as a teacher.

We stressed how high-stakes testing jeopardises teachers' identities. Tateo (2012) implied that it is critical to know what teachers think about learning and teaching, as well as their own identities as teachers. As a result, teacher identification is important in developing teachers' agency and should be taken into account in a way that affects testing validity. Our primary conclusion here is that teacher dislikes changing their identity. Their identity is the most important belief they have about themselves. As a result, they must ensure that the one they cherish is not harmed by changing the way they educate, which reduces accountability because the emphasis is not on the teaching but on the test.

The most significant finding to arise from this research concerns the tensions caused by the participants' identities being threatened by accountability asked from English language teachers in the high-stakes exams. If these two are viewed as a dichotomy, then there is no brainer in how the participants identify what they need to do is beating the test that becomes a threat to their identity.

Given the complexities of accountability in English high stakes testing on classroom practice, researchers could give more time and effort to understanding the connection between accountability and teacher identity in the educational context, and investigating the mechanisms that can bring positive washback effects on classroom practice. Scholarly works on the accountability of English language tests in classroom practice could also help teachers by using

theoretical knowledge to support them decide whether an exam is having a prospective positive impact on their schooling and properly integrating exam subjects with the learning and teaching process. The ideal condition would be for the beneficial effect of English exams to complement classroom instruction to promote the language development of students while also improving their testing scores.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The research was fully funded by the Indonesian Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education in 2014 to 2018. This article was a part of the first author's thesis under the supervision of Prof. E. Louise Hayward and Prof. Oscar Odena from the University of Glasgow.

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