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Professional Identity Construction Issues in Becoming an English Teacher

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Abstract

Teachers' professional identity construction (TPI) is how teachers define their professional roles and integrate them with personal roles while becoming and being a teacher. TPI is influenced by various factors and conditions both inside and outside the classroom. The present paper reports a study of TPI in relation to prospective English teachers currently learning English at Iranian tertiary level of education. The study attempted to summarize the main findings of recent studies of teachers' professional identity. These findings were classified under three categories: a) the construction of TPI, b) the characteristics of TPI, and c) practicing teachers' narration of TPI. The major factors affecting TPI were also summarized in four categories, based on the related literature: 1) historical factors, 2) sociological factors, 3) psychological factors, and 4) cultural factors related to perceptions and notions of professional community. Informed by these ideas, the study presents findings of a survey of TPI issues reported by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student teachers. 47 randomly selected student teachers in their senior undergraduate or graduate studies in EFL in a major university in central Iran responded to a five-point, Likert-scale, researcher-made questionnaire on TPI. The initial analyses of their responses, strengthened by follow-up focus-group interviews with eight of these participants, revealed that student teachers expected more support given from the authorities, sought for more cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries, expected a lax attitude toward the use of the Internet, audio-visual materials, and multicultural reading and writing materials. They would like to be equipped with more communicative teaching techniques and more power to develop up-to-date materials. This study has some implications for teacher education programs in Iran.

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1. Introduction

Research has not yet shown a very clear historical account of the development of teachers' professional identity (TPI). Even in early childhood, many people may claim that they want to be a teacher. The formation of professional identity as a teacher can, therefore, be said to start early in life. But what is TPI?

Identity is "people's concept of who they are, of what sort of people they are and how they are related to others (Gee, 2001). It is a broad and complicated concept, and as time passes, new dimensions are explored and added to the original notion. Social identity, professional identity and local identity are just some of the extensions of the term. These sub-branches constitute the identity of a person as a whole. It is worth mentioning that these identities affect the construction of each other. As these identities are not the focus of the study we will not here elaborate more on these different types of identities but try to write a few words on teachers' professional identity.

Teachers' professional identity is a recent research area that has attracted scholars only in the last decade and studies are limited. In available studies, the concept of professional identity has been operationalized differently or not operationalized at all. Some researchers have tried to define the features of professional identity, whereas others have tried to define this concept in explaining professional identity formation (e.g., Coldron & Smith, 1999; Volkman & Anderson, 1998; Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 2001) mainly through the analyses carried out on narratives told by teachers.

Teachers' professional self-image is about how they define their professional roles, how they see themselves as teachers, how they integrate with personal roles such as social or family roles, what kind of personality character they would have, and what role they would take as a teacher.

Teachers' professional identity (TPI) is influenced by many factors and conditions inside and outside the classroom. Factors and conditions inside the classroom include issues such as how successful the teacher thinks he is, or how successful students think he is. Factors and conditions outside the classroom refer to issues such as whether the teacher has a family or a second job, etc. The other factors and conditions refer to teacher's attitudes, beliefs, mindsets, etc. These factors affect the way his identity as a professional is formed. Finally, there are societal pressures and conditions such as others' expectations that shape a teacher's identity (see Nias, 1987).

Experts in this area of research (e.g. Doেকে, Locke, & Petrosky, 2004) have referred to at least four views on teachers' professional identity. A psychosocial view sees the development of TPI in the same pace as the growth of the teacher himself. In a discursive view the teacher's past, present and future are the factors that control his or her identity formation. Based on a third view, the narrative view, a teacher takes on different identities in different situations and becomes a father at home, a colleague at work, a teacher in the class, a friend with teammates, and so on. Finally, in a dialogic view, a teacher defines his role and others' roles depending on each interactional situation (e.g. Doেকে, Locke, & Petrosky, 2004). Finally, according to a dialogic view, a teacher defines his role and others differently in various interactional situations.

For learners of English, initial personal education may convey the idea that exposure to Standard English in related disciplines such as translation, literature, Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), etc can enhance the sense of value in a professional setting. Interaction with students and colleagues, interaction with institutions, and the anxiety of learning English in a society where this language is not the medium of communication can make TPI development more complex (Abednia, 2012).

From this short introduction, it seems that TPI is a legitimate area of research that can contribute to a better understanding of the conditions under which teachers work as the complexities of the dimensions of TPI and the nature of its effective factors have not been fully explored yet.

2. The Aim and the context of the Study

This study began with an attempt to summarize the main findings of recent studies of teacher's professional identity to clarify how they may apply to the conditions of prospective English teachers (would-be teachers) currently learning English at Iranian tertiary level of education. Thousands of English language teachers are trained each year in Iran without paying sufficient attention to the development of professional identity. The certainly receive training and education in pedagogical, psychological, social, and even ideological dimension. However, little attention is paid to how their identity is shaped in the course of this educational program. This study aimed to highlight some relevant issues in this relation and to survey professional identity issues reported by learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) who planned to be future EFL teachers in Iran. Teaching English is one of the first reasons why learners come to English department of universities in Iran. To achieve these goals, to research questions were addressed in this work: 1) what factors affect TPI development based on related research? And 2) what professional development issues are important for undergraduate and graduate would-be teachers?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This is a descriptive cross-sectional study conducted at the University of Kashan in Central Iran. Simple random sampling was used to select the participants from a population of undergraduate learners of English. The participants were 47 students who reported that they would choose EFL teaching as a profession. This sample included 15 male and 32 female student-teachers aged 19-26. They were all currently studying EFL at the university. In proportion to the size of the population, the sample size was purposefully selected to make sure it was the representative of the learners of English at the institution who planned to become English teachers.

3.2. Data Collection Instruments

A five-point, Likert-scale, researcher-made questionnaire on TPI was used for data collection. The first part of the questionnaire was on demographic information. The second part of the questionnaire contained items on problems that they encountered in professional identity development. The last part asked them about their views on priorities for EFL teacher professional development. This questionnaire showed Cronbach's Alpha reliability of 0.87. The content and face validity of the questionnaire was checked by two EFL teachers whose comments lead to the modification of a few items. Findings

3.3. Factors affecting teachers' professional identity development

The achievement of learners of English highly depends on teaching quality or teacher competency. Therefore, ministries of education invest in teachers' professional development. However, little is known about the various factors at individual, team, organizational, and social levels that can affect teachers' professional development.

Four categories of factors affecting TPI were found in the related literature. These factors include historical factors related to personal experiences such as early childhood experiences or early teacher role models; sociological factors related to what surrounds a prospective teacher, what parents expect of her, or where she stands compared to a native speaker; psychological factors related to the significance of self-perception in TPI formation; and cultural factors related to (student) teachers' perceptions and notions of professional community in their geography, of government policies, of language education policies, and of power and status issues.

3.4. Professional development issues raised by the participants

The findings of the present study showed that student teachers saw lack of support from administration as the most important limitation in the development of their professional identity. They believed that authorities helping them in finding their ways into schools did not support them as much as they expected. One participant boldly stated “all what the people in charge do isto control you, to see where your qualifications are weak, what may wipe out your name from the list of teachers...; they never give you a hand to lift you up to the position you deserve...”(participant 3/8). The class size and the instructional methods were also what the participants reported as the major block in their opportunity to show their real identities as teachers. The findings showed that teachers’ own misinterpretations and cultural clashes were ranked the lowest among the factors that may negatively affect TPI (Table 1).

Table 1. Discouraging factors affecting teachers in their professional development

Factors negatively affecting TPI	mean
Lack of support from administration	4.28
Large class size	4.28
Traditional grammar-based testing	4.17
Gaps between EFL and ESL teaching standards	4.15
Limitations in using authentic teaching materials	4.09
Teachers' little preparation time	3.87
Inefficient teacher evaluation practices	3.87
Students' low English proficiency	3.79
Lack of training and updating time	3.60
Student resistance to communicative activities	3.57
Teachers' insufficient oral competence	3.43
Teachers' lack of target culture knowledge	3.28
Teachers' misinterpretation of modern ELT	3.04
Unsuitability of western educational assumptions	3.04

The traditional view of language teaching was also viewed as a limitation for the desirable development of language teachers’ professional identity. On the basis of the descriptive statistics presented here, the participants also reported that they liked to exercise more freedom in the use of authentic materials that could bring them closer to the standards of international teaching contexts. Response frequencies also revealed some of the expectations that the teachers had of the process of the of their professional identity development.

Table 2. Teachers’ expectations for their professional development

Teachers’ expectations for Professional Development	Mean
Being able to use the internet to teach English	4.55
Achieving higher fluency in English	4.28
Practicing current techniques	4.17
gaining more cultural knowledge of English countries	3.87
Being helped in preparing English language material	3.83

Being helped in using videos in the classroom	3.38
Practicing reading and writing in English	3.19
Gaining more knowledge of language acquisition	3.09
Being helped in assessing students	3.04
Being helped in grammatical explanations for English	2.13

As the data summarized in table two shows, teachers hoped to be able to freely use the internet to teach English, to be helped in improving their proficiency, and to be equipped with current techniques in language teaching. Few of them reported that they failed in assessing students or in providing grammatical explanations about the language.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that the population of future teachers, addressed in this study, liked to be equipped with up-to-date teaching techniques and to be given more power in the design and use of modern language teaching materials. It is recommended that policy makers and teacher trainers grant more to teacher for developing up-to-date EFL materials and constructing professional identity. The professional role played by model EFL teachers currently at work in senior and junior high schools needs to be modified and improved. This can then contribute to the enhancement of TPI for future teachers. It is also suggested to conduct research studies on modifying, expanding and exploring the four views of TPI and its effective factors.

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