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THE IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES OF TEACHERS AND THEIR IMPACT ON
TEACHING PRACTICE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The present research explores language teacher professional identities and their impact on teaching practice. The main purpose of this study is to explore the awareness of formation of professional identities of teachers. In the microcosm of the classroom, teachers sometimes act out multiple roles of an educator, facilitator, prompter, participant, resource, tutor, language teacher and culture teacher discipline keeper, supervisor of all the pupils, motivator, leader of learning, culture educator etc. These roles and responsibilities form a particular professional identity of a teacher and this identity affects their teaching practice. The sample includes government schoolteachers. The data were collected through questionnaire and classroom observation. Based on the hypotheses that language teachers possess multiple professional (academic background, teaching experience, training etc.) identities and these affect teaching practice. The findings of the study reveal that teachers are aware of the professional identities that they possess and they affect their teaching practice (professional factors such as educational background, roles and responsibilities in and outside the classroom). The study suggests that awareness of the formation of teacher's professional identity helps in growing professionally by attending seminars, conferences and presenting papers at national and international conferences which will better their teaching.

Key words: Teacher Identity, Professional identities and Teaching Practice

Introduction

The concept of identity has been explored in the context of English Language Teaching, though not as extensively as in other educational contexts. Many of the studies within ELT have focussed largely on cultural attributes of teachers. Professional identities are conceptualised as stories professionals tell about themselves at a specific moment in a specific context (Vloet & van Swet, 2010: p.149), characterised by attributes reflected upon in their stories that have shared meaning with others as well as meaning for the individuals. Professional identity of teachers can be described as a tension between the subjective or personal aspects of teaching and inter-subjective or collective aspects. The identity of teachers as professionals can be seen as maintaining a dialectic between teacher-as-magician or creative performer, or teacher-as-scientist or scholar. This professional identity is an ongoing process, being constructed and formed through interactions with mentor teachers and students in the classrooms.

Each teacher's personality can affect the way they perform, the issues they emphasize in their teaching, and the way they feel their roles and what roles they consider important for a teacher to perform in the first place. However, there are many other issues that have to be taken into account, for example, the environment, one's personal past experiences, each school, class and pupils separately, culture, and the requirements that society sets. It seems simply impossible that the roles of a teacher would just depend on one's personality.

The Research Problem

The present study explores the professional identities of teachers and their impact on teaching practice. Language teachers' selves are multifaceted and are in continuous formation and transformation owing to the multiple roles and responsibilities accorded to them within diverse classrooms. Their identities are negotiated, manipulated and modified all the time in relation to the locales they are embedded in, both temporally and spatially. These identities impact their practice in real time in terms of how they organize the delivery of instruction, their decision making, the interaction climate, and a host of other classroom dynamics. Moreover, it would be of interest to ascertain such impact and the present research is a step in that direction. While attempting to gauge the impact of multiple identities, the study also attempts to investigate the beliefs that teachers hold about the influence such influence can have on their practice. The study also aims to examine whether the awareness of the impact of identity can lead to professional development of teachers.

Review of Literature

This paper reviewed a few researches. The following are some of such studies.

Watson (2006) investigates the construction of a secondary English teacher's professional identity. An in-depth interview, where the participant narrates the story of his life (mainly concentrated on his professional life), is the method that Watson (2006) used to collect her data. She presents the reader with a series of excerpts from the interview, which mainly narrate atypical teaching episodes and uses narrative analysis to infer how these episodes influence the participant's construction of a teacher self and how the participant's identity is enacted in each of these teaching episodes. The results reveal that professional identity in education and teacher education, however, cannot be so simplistically defined since researchers and teacher educators conceptualise it in differing ways.

Another study is from Virta et al. (1998) who examined the development of subject teachers' professional identity. The study focused on student teachers' views of teacherhood, teacher development and what kind of professional identity the students possessed. The data was gathered by questionnaires filled in by different subject teachers, i.e. religion, history and civics, biology and geography, mother language, languages and mathematical subjects. Virta et al. (1998: 27) point out that developing as a teacher and thus becoming a teacher is a matter of development in the areas of skills, knowledge and personality. One has to become conscious of the relations between the profession and oneself, i.e. how and why one is a teacher. The student teachers in this study perceive professional identity as inclusive of an individual's personality, which in turn is characterised by toughness, perseverance, dignity, self-confidence. They also highlight developmental skills, abilities to interact and knowledge of human nature. Most of all, they considered teachers' job to be teaching and taking care of the classroom situations and no challenges in the field of work community or societal roles were mentioned. Issues students teachers longed for were practical matters, concrete guidelines and patterns, managing with problematic pupils, and guidance for assessment and exam composing.

Day, Kington, Stobart and Sammons focus upon the nature of and influences on teacher identities. They begin by discussing theoretical and empirical studies on identity, which represent different historical and cultural perspectives in different changing contexts. These focus upon:

- i. Early notions of teacher identity: Archer (1996, 2000) states that an understanding of teachers' selves, their cognitive and emotional identities, is a central to the analysis of variations in teachers' work, lives and effectiveness in which structure (external influences) and agency (one's ability to pursue the goals that one values) are perceived to be in dynamic tension.

- ii. Teachers' identities: personal and professional: in teacher education, much research literature demonstrates that knowledge of the self is a crucial element in the way teachers construe and construct the nature of their work (Kelchtermans & Vandedberghe, 1994) and that events and experiences in the personal lives of the teachers are intimately linked to the performance of their professional roles (Ball & Goodson, 1985; Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996; Acker, 1999). Several researchers (Nias, 1989, 1996; Hargreaves 1994; Sumsion, 2002) have noted that teacher identities are not only constructed from technical and emotional aspects of teaching (i.e. classroom management, subject knowledge and pupil test results) and their personal lives, but also 'as the result of an interaction between the personal experiences of teachers and the social, cultural, and institutional environment in which they function on a daily basis' (Slegers & Kelchtermans, 1999, p. 579).

Geerth Kelchtermans (1993, pp. 449-450) suggests that the professional self, like the personal self, evolves over time and that it consists of five interrelated parts:

- Self-image: how teachers describe themselves through their career stories;
- Self-esteem: the evolution of self as a teacher, how good or otherwise as defined by self or others;
- Job-motivation: what makes teachers choose, remain committed to or leave the job;
- Task perception: how teachers define their jobs;
- Future perspectives: teachers' expectations for the future development of their jobs.

Thus, Day (2004) expresses that a positive sense of identity with subject, relationships and roles is important to maintaining self-esteem or self-efficacy, commitment to and a passion for teaching.

- iii. For Beijaard, the concept of identity refers to 'who or what someone is, the various meanings someone can attach to oneself by others' (p.282). His research showed that, overall, the teachers' actual perceptions of their professional identities were influenced in a positive manner by: a). the transition in schools from teacher-centred towards pupil centred education, b). schools' directedness towards pupil counselling, c). the co-operation between those who teach the same subject in particular, d). the possibility of having additional jobs in but also outside the school, and e). the opportunity to influence the development of school policy. (p.288) Negative influence included: a). colleagues, for example by the feeling that one's subject is not taken seriously by colleagues or as a result of different levels of previous education, b). effects of mergers (for example by possessing no adequate teaching style when one has to teach other categories of pupils, in particular pupils of schools with a 'lower status') and c). the school organisation and its structure (often criticised for being obscure and insufficiently open, it remains unclear whether this is really the case or a reaction of teachers to personal frustrations). (pp.288-289)
- iv. The multiple 'I': agency and structure in the early years of teaching: Cooper and Olson (1996) and Reymonds (1996) investigated the interconnections between the personal and professional elements of teachers' identities exposed by Nias and Beijaard. Their work goes beyond these, however, by its identification of 'multiple selves' of teachers, which they suggest, are continually reconstructed through the historical, cultural, sociological and philosophical influences which all shape the meaning of being a teacher.
- v. Fragmented selves: MacLure, (1993) through her empirical research with 69 teachers at the beginning of a period of radical systemic reform in England, advocated a post-structuralist understanding of identity which is formed and informed through the 'discursive practices' and interactions in which individuals engage. Here, identity is not a stable entity that people possess, but rather, is constructed within social relations and used by individuals as an interactional resource.

The studies reviewed above conclude that identity is affected, positively and negatively, by classroom experiences, organisational culture and situation specific events which threaten existing norms and practices (Nias, 1989; Kelchtermans, 1993; Flores, 2002). The studies mentioned above validate the claim that the professional identities of teachers impact their classroom practice.

Rationale for the Study

A number of researchers have examined how a teacher's experience of identity – gender, race, class, culture, or sexual orientation – both shapes and is shaped by the process of instruction and interaction that evolves within specific sites of bilingual and second/foreign language education. However, research on teacher identity remains a relatively undocumented in the Indian context and therefore deserves attention. A lot of research has already gone into teacher cognition as a part of teachers' professional development, but the identity aspect of teachers' professional development in the Indian context is unexplored. Though Borg's (2003) review of research on teacher cognition contains no mention of teacher identity, yet thinking, knowing, believing and doing are enacted in classroom contexts in a way that cannot be separated from identity formation. Thus, research in teacher identity is the need of the hour.

India is a multicultural and multilingual country. The education system in India has to address the complexities of pluralism. Teacher education addresses the kind of problems that teachers face. As teachers come from different socio, economic, cultural and academic backgrounds, the way they teach affects the way the students learn. Teachers have different kinds of identities - personal and professional. What teachers know and do is part of their identity, which is continuously performed and transformed through interaction in classrooms. Therefore, it is apt to probe into the area of teacher identity.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the impact of teacher professional identity on teaching teaching and learning (e. g. decision making, classroom interaction, classroom management).

The following are the objectives of the study:

- a. To explore whether teachers are aware of professional identities and their impact on their teaching practice.
- b. To gauge the quantum and quality of the impact of identity on teaching practice.
- c. To explore how their awareness of the impact of identities on classroom practice contributes towards professional development.

Hypothesis

The present study is based on the following hypothesis.

Language teachers possess multiple professional (academic background, teaching experience, training etc.) identities and these affect teaching practice.

Assumptions

Based on the hypothesis above the following assumptions are made. It is assumed that:

1. Teachers possess multiple identities that impact their everyday teaching.
2. Awareness about the impact of identities on teaching practice leads to teacher learning and therefore professional development.

Research Tools

Data were collected using a questionnaire and classroom observation.

Profile of the Sample

The participants for the study were six teachers from different schools. The subjects were handpicked from different socio, economic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds looking at the nature of the study.

This information is presented in a tabular form below.

Table 1 – Profile of the Teachers

Teachers	Age	Educational background	Teaching experience	Institutional affiliation
A	43	M.A. M. Ed	16 years	Govt. High School
B	43	M.A. M. Ed	15 years	Sarathi School
C	32	M.A. B. Ed	5 years	St. Anns High School
D	37	M.A. B. Ed	14 years	St. Mary's High School
E	55	M.A. M. Ed	32 years	Seventh Day Adventist
F	50	M.A. M. Ed.	26 years	Govt. High School

The participants of the study are qualified with ample years of teaching experience, teaching in different schools in Hyderabad.

The Setting

The research is carried out in six different schools. These schools are intentionally chosen as per the need of the research problem. All the six schools are located in and around twin cities Hyderabad and Secunderabad. Teachers, working in these institutions, develop a particular identity depending on the institution they are working in. Thus, the setting contributes to know and understand teachers' selves better.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data were collected for this study were responses to the questionnaire and classroom observation which were designed to explore identity factors which affect teaching practice. The following is the presentation and analysis of questionnaire and classroom observation.

Analysis of the Questionnaire - Awareness about Formation of Professional Identities

Teacher responses to the questions included in this section are presented in tables, each table consisting questions and responses. An analysis of the responses is provided after each table.

Table 2:– Awareness of Formation of Teacher Identity

Awareness about identity	What constitutes teacher identity?	Are you aware/conscious of teacher identities?
Teacher A	Professional experiences	Yes
Teacher B	-	Yes
Teacher C	Her teaching ability and her attitude towards her profession	Yes
Teacher D	Individual	Yes
Teacher E	Understanding and having a desire to learn and develop themselves. Having patience in dealing with children.	Yes
Teacher F	Personality of the teacher, competence and conveying ability	Yes

From the table it can be observed that most of the teachers agree that they are aware of the formation of multiple personal and professional identities that they possess. A teacher's past becomes part of his/her identity. The responses of the teachers confirm and endorse these views. For instance, teacher F defines teacher identity as the personality of the teacher which is composed of one's attitudes, competence, patience etc.

Table 3: – Awareness of Formation of Teacher Identity

Awareness about identity	Are you aware (possess) of your gender, social, religious, family and professional identities?	Give one instance of your identity as male/female teacher that made you comfortable/uncomfortable in the class.
Teacher A	Aware	As a female teacher I am comfortable in the class. I can understand the girl student problems. Once one boy in the class X was not listening. By observing his face I asked him what was the problem. He said that he was hungry and did not eat anything, so I let him go and had lunch.
Teacher B	Aware	As a female teacher the shades of a motherly concern and affection can be shown to the students.
Teacher C	Aware	I teach in a girl's school so I never felt uncomfortable handling them.
Teacher D	Aware	Teaching in co-ed institution girls feel more comfortable with a lady teacher boys take some time to adjust.
Teacher E	Aware	When some of the X standard boys behaved in a arrogant manner, when I shouted at them and was about to slap them.
Teacher F	Aware	In spite of being a class-teacher, I could not have one-to-one response from the girl child for their uninformed absence.

From the responses, it can be stated that teachers possess and are aware of personal identities - gender, social, religious, family and professional identities. It is also observed that a teacher is a female, a Hindu, a mother, a wife, a friend, a colleague before entering the language classroom. A teacher is an educator, facilitator, tutor, discipline keeper, culture educator etc. after entering the language classroom. Teacher A says "As a female teacher I am comfortable in the class. I can understand the girl student problems. Once one boy in the class X was not listening. By observing his face I asked him what was the problem. He said that he was hungry and did not eat anything, so I let him go and had lunch". This clearly shows that teachers are indeed aware of their identity and this teacher exploits an aspect of her identity (gender identity) with empathy to build an environment of care and trust which is supportive of learning. Thus, it can be concluded that a teacher's gender plays an influential role in the language classroom.

Analysis of the Questionnaire - Impact of Identity on Teaching Practice:

Impact of identity on teaching practice is elicited in this section of the questionnaire. An analysis of the responses is provided after each table.

Table 4 – Impact of Identity on Teaching Practice

Impact of identity	How do these multiple identities affect the organization of lessons?	How do these multiple identities affect activities (whole class/group/pair) in the class?
Teacher A	The multiple identities help teachers to organise lessons more effectively.	These multiple identities help to plan different activities for the students of different levels and attitude which makes learning easy for them.
Teacher B	It makes it more creative.	-
Teacher C	It helps us teach well.	The identities help the children in the classroom activities.
Teacher D	Does not affect in any way.	Does not affect in any way.
Teacher E	Might create more interest towards the lesson. Sometimes the opposite way also.	If we make the class interestingly by drawing students' complete concentration than it may affect the whole class if not in groups or pairs.
Teacher F	It may give a different impact.	It is sometimes lead more challenging.

From the responses above it can be stated that the multiple identities affect the organization of lessons and classroom activities. Almost all the teachers express that they have a positive effect on lesson planning and execution. The past experience of lesson planning and execution enables them to make the class more interactive. One way to maximize interaction is to organize varied interactional patterns such as small groups, pairs etc. However, teachers are cognizant of the fact that the mixed ability levels of the students have to be borne in mind while deciding on interactional patterns. Teachers' roles and their perceptions of what they are capable of and are inclined to do become important issues here.

Table 5 – Impact of Identity on Teaching Practice

Impact of identity	In what ways do these identities influence classroom practice?	In what way are the following classroom decisions influenced by personal/professional identities? Whether to do an activity, what to do, when to do, how to do, who will do is: the influence of personal identity or the influence of professional identity
Teacher A	-	Professional identity helps in deciding the activities, the type of activity for different groups.
Teacher B	It is made more interesting	Influence of professional identity
Teacher C	If you are confident, it does not influence classroom practice.	The influence of professional identity
Teacher D	Does not affect	The influence of professional identity
Teacher E	Lot of learning is done through watching and doing. Since the pupils are constantly watching the teacher it may influence them.	Teacher at the appropriate time in a situation it needs anywhere it could.
Teacher F	Classroom practice is an independent act many of the times but still influenced in some situations with target achievements.	The influence of professional identity

Teachers state that some of the classroom decisions such as whether to do an activity, what to do, when to do, how to do and who will do are influenced by personal/professional identities. Their teacher education programmes (pre-service and in-service) help in making classes more interactive. Their professional exposure also makes them decide what kind of activities would suit what kind of texts and learners. Teachers acknowledge the fact that students learn more from what they are and how they behave than from what they actually say. This indeed is a period of apprenticeship and learning for the students and hence teachers have to be past masters in their craft, which is a huge responsibility.

Analysis of Classroom observation

The classes of the six teachers were observed. Teachers were quite comfortable in the class though the researcher was observing the class sitting at the back of the class and making note of what was happening in the classroom. It was observed that all the classrooms looked very traditional in terms of seating arrangement, the place of the teacher, use of black board, absence of modern technologies etc. It was observed that teachers performed multiple roles and responsibilities in the classroom. The observation revealed that all the teachers have three different roles as part of their identity – educator, language teacher and culture teacher. The various roles that teachers played during the classroom observation included: discipline keeper, supervisor of the pupils, motivator, role model, subject informant, leader of learning, culture educator, moral teacher, facilitator, advisor, counsellor, etc. From the different roles that the teachers play in the class, it can be claimed that all of these roles form teachers' personal and professional identities. It is also observed that teachers are flexible in the classroom, they are aware of the complex needs of the different learners. It is clear from the classroom observation that teachers are conscious of multilingualism and multiculturalism of the students and the classrooms. The way teachers presented their personality (attitude, behaviour, motive etc) gave the researcher the impression that they love their teaching and have a lot of respect for their profession and they strive to be good role models to their students.

Discussion of Results

In this section, the findings from the current study are briefly discussed. The data for the current study was obtained through questionnaires and classroom observation. An analysis of the data obtained from the two tools reveals that language teacher identities are orchestrated as well as operationalized through the trajectory of the roles and responsibilities that are designated for them in any given socio, cultural and institutional contexts. The hypothesis of the present study that language teachers possess multiple professional (academic background, teaching experience, training etc.) identities and that these identities impact classroom practice, has been proved. For example, the kind of roles they play, the transmission of knowledge, the transaction of culture, the instructional strategies and activities planned in class – all have personal, social, cultural and institutional significance. The results of the study show that a teacher is a subject-expert (who imparts knowledge and guides students) and a pedagogic-expert (a leader of learners, friend, motivator and role model, facilitator). The results reveal that teachers try to gear their personal and professional selves to suit the challenges inherent in multilingual and multicultural classrooms peopled by students of mixed abilities and needs. Thus, classrooms become a microcosm of a world where teachers' personal and professional identities continuously constructed, co-constructed and adjusted.

Summary of the Findings

Findings from the Questionnaire

The findings from the questionnaire reveal that the teachers are aware of the multiple professional identities that they possess. The responses also indicate that there are several professional factors which become part of teachers' personality and they in turn become part of the multiple identities of the teachers. Five out of six teachers who are female, felt that they quite apart from being language instructors, they also act as surrogate mothers at times. It can be concluded from their responses that teachers play the role of educator, language teacher and culture teacher. Teachers' experience shows that their identities seem to be constantly and continuously constructed and reconstructed throughout their lives. All the teachers believe that

personality factors such as attitude, motivation, behaviour etc become part of teachers' personal identity. They also agree that the personal aspects such as gender, region, religion, caste etc form personal identities. They claim that awareness of formation of teacher identity helps them to know where they are and how they relate to the students and interact with them. This awareness of personal and professional lives is a step towards keeping themselves up-to-date and abreast with the educational changes and advances.

Findings from Classroom Observation

The classroom observation is based on themes such as teachers' roles and responsibilities, teacher-student interaction, methods and techniques of teaching, and the depth of the subject knowledge. The findings of the classroom observation indicate that teachers play a role of an educator, culture teacher and language teacher. It is noticed that they are quite effective and efficient in teaching English language. It is also observed that their lessons are well-organised. All the teachers are fluent speakers of English and have good language competence. It is clear from the findings that they are flexible in the classroom, and are aware of the complex needs of different learners. The findings also imply that they are conscious of multilingualism and multiculturalism of the students and the classrooms. Teachers give the impression, through their attitude, behaviour, motive etc, that they love their job and have a lot of respect for their profession and that they strive to be role models.

Implications of the Study

Implications for Teachers

- i. teachers to be aware of the various personal factors which become part of teachers' professional identity.
- ii. be aware of what is happening to their professional selves as they as they grow in teaching experience.
- iii. reflection makes teachers effective and efficient in their interaction with the students. Teachers thus become role models to the students.

Implications for Teacher Educators

- i. teacher educators think of the personal lives of teachers. Teacher educators would not only pay attention to subject matter issues, but also the various personality factors, personal and professional issues which become part of teacher identity.
- ii. this understanding of the attitude and behaviour of teachers can help teacher educators to respond to them in a healthy manner.
- iii. as a part of continuous professional development, teacher educators can provide opportunities for the teachers to grow professionally.

Limitations of the Study

The study has certain limitations.

- The study explores only the teachers' professional identities not personal identities. It could even explore to study students' identities and how they affect teacher identities and vice-versa.
- The study limits itself to the government schools and the teachers working in them. The focus of the study is limited to primary schools, colleges and universities.
- The present study adopted three tools such as questionnaire, classroom observation and informal interviews.

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