

An Educator's Professional Identity Transformation: PST a "chaotic" transformation

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ABSTRACT

The study presented a situative understanding of ESL PSTs' PI construction. This study differs from other studies on PI development in presenting a clear and holistic description of the emerging PI versions, starting with simulated teaching classes and through the teaching practicum stage. Four different types of PI (Low PI, High PI, PI crisis and PI awareness) emerged while PSTs were doing their teaching practice. PSTs start their simulated teaching at university with low PI that is transformed into high PI through practice. Upon shifting to actual teaching at schools, PSTs' evolving identity conflicts with their new community of practice resulting into PI crises and PI awareness later on. The study recommends more collaboration between policy makers, universities and schools to enhance the PSTs experience in constructing PI.

KEYWORDS

Pre-service teachers, Professional identity, Social theory, Simulated teaching, Practicum, Community of practice, Teacher preparation program.

1. Introduction

The pre-service preparation stage is significant to PSTs' PI development (Grow, 2011). PSTs can benefit from understanding their own teacher identity and how it affects learning and engaging in their coursework, "informing what they learn" (Horn, Nolen, Ward, & Campbell, 2008). Adding to this, PSTs need to understand how their learning, under the effect of different personal and contextual factors, will modify their PI over different stages creating different sub-identities (e.g., being knowledgeable, compassionate, innovative, follower, conformer, etc.) (Horn et al., 2008; Izadinia, 2013). Besides, Izdania (2013) noticed, most of the studies examining the phenomenon of PI construction were conducted in developed countries such as UK and USA while very few studies were done in developing or underdeveloped countries such as Malaysia. This research explores PI construction 'in situ' (Cho, 2014, p. 3) (i.e., at the local level of practice in under-researched contexts) by listening to novices' voices in that context. Creating a local knowledge pertaining to PI development could also inform the policy makers and teacher education programs designers to devise plans that empower PSTs and enable a smoother emergence of their PI (Ledger, Ersozlu, & Fischetti, 2019).

2. Literature Review

Professional identity is an area of interest for different professions “because of the significance it has on the future practice of students in the workforce and the possible challenges that are associated with [working] settings” (Matthews, Bialocerkowski, & Molineux, 2019). In its denotational meaning, identity refers to how we see ourselves or who we are (Luk, 2008). The emergence of the social theory stance has geared the understanding of identity construction to include the individual and the society in which one lives as well (Farrell, 2017). In response to the complexity of identity construction, Clarke (2009, p. 189) framed teacher identity as “a complex matter of the social and the individual, of discourse and practice, of reification and participation, of similarity and difference, of agency and structure, of fixity and transgression, of singular and multiple, and of the synoptic and the dynamic.”

To frame this study, the features of PI will be discussed in light of Clarke’s definition under three major aspects: (1) social and individual contribution to PI construction, (2) discourse and practice and (3) agency and structure. The first aspect of identity is that it entails both the individual and the society. Understanding one’s identity regards how the individual sees her/himself and how others see her/him (Burke & Stets, 2009; Clarke, 2009; Tsui, 2007, 2011). A teacher, for example, needs to identify him/herself as a teacher as well as the students, colleagues and community where he/she lives. Wenger (1998) asserted that identity is part of the socialization process. This feature is directly related to engaging in a CoP, associating oneself with its members to define how similar or different they feel compared to others. PSTs in an ESL context, for example, can claim a teacher identity when they act and behave as typical ESL teachers in that context.

Throughout the learning to teach journey, ESL PSTs will keep trying to increase their sense of sameness to the ESL teacher community through negotiations of practices, beliefs and understandings with others. Within CoPs, engagement in practice either by participation or non-participation, “gives us certain experiences of participation, and what our communities pay attention to reifies us as participants” (Wenger, 1998, p. 150). In line with this view of identity, Richards (2017) and Karaolis and Philippou (2019) believed that identity is neither fixed nor static, rather it is open to change and negotiation since it is subject to social influences where the individual interacts with people and takes part in different activities.

The current study opts to give a detailed description of PI transformations and the different features of such PI to gain a better understanding of what PSTs go through while constructing their PI. How they behave, what they believe, how they feel over the different stages of PI construction may enable teacher educators supervise their PSTs more efficiently and mitigate the complexities PSTs encounter through their becoming journey. This study attempts to answer the research question:

RQ- What professional identity (PI) shifts do pre-service teachers (PSTs) experience during their student teaching practice (i.e., simulated teaching classes and teaching practicum stage)?

3. Methodology

3.1 Case Study

A case study approach was most appropriate to capture the complexities of PI construction. Yin (2008, p. 18) defined a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.” This approach corresponds to the notions of constructivism, which implies that the researcher can better understand participants’ actions by listening to their stories (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This exploratory case study

includes indepth interviews and observations of the case in an attempt to capture the complexity of the phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2008)

3.2 Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at two sites in Malaysia: a major public university and Malaysian public schools in the urban area of Kuala Lumpur. The Bachelor of Education in teaching English as a second language (TESL) aims to prepare competent and skilled TESL graduate teachers. Being good communicators in English with excellent social skills is another objective of the TESL program. Such skills could help PSTs negotiate their understanding and development in the professional context. In addition, program designers declare being aware of the significance of developing PSTs PI during the simulated teaching course and practicum. Hence, PSTs are engaged in different practical experiences starting with one-week observation of a school teacher. During their final year they join a simulated teaching class before they are sent to their practicum at a public secondary school. Their practicum lasts for 10 weeks in multi-national classes (Malay, Chinese, Indian and other minorities). The present study participants were 8 PSTs in one of the simulated teaching classes taught by first author's PhD supervisor. The participants come from various places in Malaysia. Two are from urban areas, three are from suburban areas and three are from rural areas. The age range is 22-25. Purposive sampling was employed to choose these participants. They may not be representative of the entire population of PSTs.

However, they were selected because they have something to say regarding PSTPI construction.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

Two types of data collection for qualitative studies were used in this work: interview and classroom observation. Interpretive researchers emphasize understanding the world through first-hand experience, truthful reporting and quotations of actual conversations from inside perspectives (Merriam, 2009). These data gathering methods were employed in this work because they are more likely to enable rich and detailed, or thick descriptions of the features of constructed PI. These methods have the potential to encourage participants to speak freely about their lived experience regarding the phenomenon under study. Interviewing enabled the researcher to delve deeply into the PSTPI construction issue by understanding PI transformations during the student teaching stage. For triangulation, Merriam (2009) suggested using observation to support the interviews. Merriam contended that observation can stand out as an informative data collection technique by enhancing understanding of the context and the participants behaviors. Data collection was done in two phases and all interviews were audio taped to be transcribed and analyzed.

The first researcher joined this ESL class from the beginning of the semester until the end. As an outsider, the researcher needed to engage fully in their practices and dialogues. She observed these PSTs, attended their microteaching lessons and interviewed them. Informal talks were also important to build a rapport with them, thus bridging the gap between them and increasing their confidence level. In addition, she held group interviews to reflect on the classes and what they had learnt. She followed the same group to schools and attended their classes. She also interviewed them three times each over the 10 weeks of their teaching practice. Prolonged engagement (Merriam, 2009) with the group in the real context where they learnt to teach helped her construct an understanding of their lived experiences.

The constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to analyze data. Merriam (2009) and Saldana (2009) recommended using it throughout a qualitative research even when the intention is not to build a grounded theory. Creswell (2009) and Merriam (2009) proposed three major steps in data analysis: open coding, focused coding and theoretical or selective coding. In open coding, the researcher should read data to identify segments or codes (Merriam, 2009) that are related to the research questions. In focused coding, descriptive codes are examined and then grouped based on the researcher's interpretation and reflection.

Comparing these segments helps identify any recurring regularities and develop categories (Merriam, 2009) and/or themes. The last analysis step entailed utilizing theoretical coding to recognize central interpretable and meaningful themes in data.

5. Results and Discussion

The social theory that guided this study postulates that identity construction is a dynamic ongoing and nonlinear process (Wenger, 1998). The PSTs' sense of PI is based on personal interpretations of the self as a teacher through the ongoing interaction with their context (Beijaard et al., 2004). The current study findings are in line with these social theory and PI construction premises, as the participants experienced four shifts in PI: low PI, high PI, PI crisis and PI awareness.

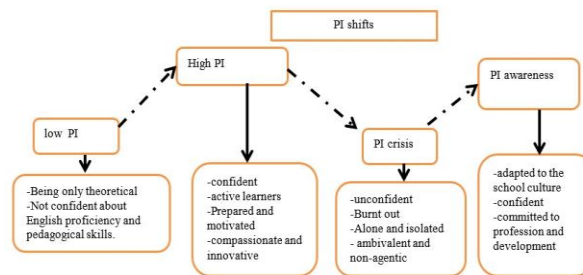


Figure 1. Study Findings: Professional Identity Shifts

The study revealed that the participants began their journey of student teaching with a low sense of PI, feeling theoretical, unconfident and inexperienced. They felt their theoretical knowledge contributed to the low PI, since PI implies practical knowledge more than theoretical. For example, Noor believed she had theoretical knowledge of language skills and TESL: "I learnt about teaching and learning methods. I took courses on language skills such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. We also had classes on literature and linguistics. So basically, our knowledge is theoretical."

The participants believed that a PI should involve practical and experiential components in addition to the theoretical part.

Another feature of the participants' low PI was the low confidence in English language proficiency. The ideal English teacher for all participants was one who possesses high English proficiency. The PSTs were afraid their secondary school students' proficiency would be higher than theirs. Suzan revealed she was concerned that school students may have higher language levels than she:

I'm worried about the students' proficiency level at school... Because if they are smarter than I am (class laughs quietly)... In terms of grammar... You know... I find grammar difficult for me. I'm afraid if students ask me anything in grammar... you know, like, "what is that? Why do we use that?"... I cannot answer them. That's my major concern .

By adapting to the school culture the participants also regained self- confidence, especially as they succeeded in attempting to come up with activities (e.g., group-work) suitable to their students' interest and levels. Fulla set up debating group work for her students, because she discovered they liked having presentations and debates:

Because I know they can do presentations well, I got them in groups and discussing because I know they can think and they can come up with answers from the discussion. I think that was one strong point about my lessons near the end of my practicum.

Asmira also stopped complaining about the lack of technology and used wallpaper sheets for student work presentation instead. That enabled her to regain confidence in her ability to teach. The participants managed to experiment with different teaching strategies. According to observation data the participants still struggled with classroom management, activity management and the depth of subject content knowledge, but not as severely as at the beginning of the practicum.

Separated from mentors, peers and other school teachers, the PSTs' sole shelter was to build good relationships with their students. Such relationships gave meaning and value to their presence in the school context. Classroom control shifted from keeping students completely silent, listening to their teacher and answering questions to somehow noisy but manageable classes. Fulla, for example, accepted that her students are "just children whose nature may surface sometimes."

A similar finding was reported by Lerseth (2013), who examined PI development among four American Arts PSTs during their teaching practicum. The participants in the aforementioned study reported becoming compassionate and understanding of their students' needs and interests while growing professionally.

At the end of the practicum stage, the participants were proud of their achievement so far and felt committed to the teaching profession and development as teachers. Muna reflected, "I do feel enthusiastic about teaching. I love teaching those kids. It's tiring but still it's rewarding when you see their interaction." This echoes Jarvis-Selinger et al.'s (2010) proposition that PI development is related to commitment to the profession and the teacher's desire to remain in the profession. Moreover, they found it was possible to adapt to the context and remain open to the different possibilities a teacher may have to deal with such tensions. For instance, Muna declared that she became more realistic in her expectations from the secondary school context:

I don't want to be idealistic in my expectations regarding secondary school sites. I think we suffered a lot earlier in our training because we thought the practicum sites would be similar to our simulated teaching class. Once we responded to what the practicum site offered us and became more realistic, we managed to adapt and develop our PI.

Similarly, Phelan (2005) found one of the participants came down from her theoretical knowledge tower to more practical grounds, where she benefited from learning more about her students to build new understanding of her practice.

Participants gave themselves scores of 7-8 for their teaching abilities to reflect their perception of the progress made as teachers. They showed more awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in teaching. They also believed that longer training time would benefit them more. Furthermore, they found it was necessary to develop social relationships with others to negotiate the challenges and PI shifts experienced.

In contrast to the others, Iman described a 'lack of fit' (Jarvis-Selinger et al., 2010, p. 84) with teaching. She thought that teaching ESL in a public school was not something for the future. Iman gave her own teaching abilities a score of 6, which signifies that she did not believe her teaching abilities progressed much. When asked if she still wanted to become a teacher, she replied:

Truthfully... no, sadly. I used to have at least this slight passion to become a teacher. Now, I don't think so. A teacher has many things to do. We need to be prepared, do admin work, handle our students and negotiate our positions with the others at school.

6. Concluding Comments and Recommendations

The current study showed that Malaysian ESL PSTs experienced four PI transformations/shifts, from low PI to high PI and then back to a PI crisis before reaching PI awareness. The nature of these shifts is parallel with the proposition that identity development is nonlinear and constantly changing. The fluctuation in the participants' self-confidence and self-efficacy, which is connected with PI shifts, is not an isolated theme. As reported by McKay, Carrington, and Iyer (2014) reported in their study, PST's journey of becoming an educator is a 'messy' transformation: growing and changing, then changing in another direction and growing again. Similarly, Iswandari (2017) used a theoretical framework of three imagined PIs: language expert, learning facilitator, and spiritual guide. The findings showed that all three types of imagined identities occurred in the participants' reflective journals. Moreover, the PSTs' understanding of teaching shifted towards becoming facilitators in class. Iswandari's (2017) study focused only on a microteaching course and did not expand to the practicum stage as the current study did.

In other studies (Cattley, 2007; Chong et al., 2011; H. T. M. Nguyen & Sheridan, 2016; Smith, 2006) reference is usually made to the entrance and exit points of student teaching with focus on the social factors that influence PI construction. Cattley (2007) and Nguyen and Sheridan (2016) took practicum teaching as a starting point to investigate PI development. They neglected the value of simulated teaching classes as an important stage in PI development. Their participants were considered to have a tentative PI at the beginning of the practicum in public schools. Unlike the present study, Cattley and Nguyen and Sheridan did not describe or indicate what professional identity the participants constructed. Focus was on social factors influencing PI development, thus leaving readers unable to decide what PI the participants developed. A similar limit occurred in Chong et al. (2011) study who quantitatively examined PI development among 148 PSTs upon entry into the teacher training program (TEP) and upon finishing after 4 years. The researchers reported that the participants' perceptions regarding their PI changed over time without giving comprehensive description of such PIs.

The study presented a situative understanding of ESL PSTs' PI construction. Based on such understanding, a number of practical recommendations are discussed.

At the practical level, this study encourages closer collaboration between the Ministry of Education, schools and universities to form and abide by a clear training policy for PSTs. Such shared policy can provide a blueprint to mark the journey of PSTs in facilitating their transformation from university to school and to pave a clear path of action to illustrate how PSTs can learn to teach. Adoniou (2013) concluded that teacher preparation of PSTs was the most effective when there was collaboration and greater partnership between universities and schools. Universities and schools ought to agree that more focus should be directed to PSTs' learning to teach in the first stage, and once they have gained confidence in managing their classes and activities, they may be assigned co-curriculum and administrative activities.

Another way of collaboration could be inviting school teachers to share their experiences with teacher preparation program designers (Gerardo and Contreras (2000) Inviting professionals to simulated teaching classes can facilitate conveying their experiences and comments to the PSTs. This may promote shared educational philosophies among mentors and PSTs. Instead of closing one door (university) to open another (school) with a different mindset, universities and schools should take joint responsibility for facilitating PSTs' transitioning from student to teacher.

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