Global Social Sciences Review (GSSR)
Vol. IV, **No.** I (Winter 2019) | **Page:** 312 – 318

Investigating Teacher Identity Construction through the Study of Narratives and their Identity Portraits in Pakistan

Shagufta Moghal — Lecturer, Department of Professional Studies, Lahore College for Women University Lahore, Pakistan, Email; shagufta.moghal@lcwu.edu.pk

Dr. Asma Shahid Kazi — Assistant Professor, Department of Professional Studies, Lahore College for Women Universities, Lahore, Pakistan

Dr. Aishah Siddiquah — Assistant Professor, Research and Evaluation Department Lahore College for Women University Lahore, Pakistan,

Abstract *The current article investigates teacher identity construction at the tertiary level educational institutions of Pakistan. Identity is the sense or perception about oneself and the position or role one has in a given context and environment; teachers construct their identities in the specific work and Institutional environments they face every day. This research adopted the Life History approach to narrative inquiry, where five participants were selected through purposive sampling. The data were collected through a semi-structured interview protocol that focused on the narratives; the narratives were inductively analyzed vertically and horizontally to reconstruct identity portraits for each participant. The portraits also presented commonalities and convergent issues and themes in identity development, such as the effect of positive or negative educational experiences; the role of the organizational culture, leadership and colleagues in shaping identity; the difficulties, negotiations and challenges experienced in the construction of identity; time and workload management issues.*

Key Words
Teacher identity, Identity Construction, Identity Portraits, Semi-structured interviews, Life History Approach to Narrative Inquiry

Introduction

Over the past century, the profession of teaching has evolved from an industrial model, where teachers replicate pre-set instructional tasks, to a more "complex, dynamic, interactive [and] intellectual activity" (Smylie & Conyers, 1991, p.13). Research has shown that teachers need to be effective participants in learning, inquirers, curriculum designers and "reflective practitioners" (Schön, 1983: 68) who question assumptions and consciously assess goals, practices, and contexts of education.

A change in the teacher orientations and the roles expected from teachers leads one to suppose that there are shifts and changes in the teachers' sense of 'identity'; the way they see themselves as teachers and what they perceive to be their roles. This is an important area of study, as a strong sense of professional identity is crucial for self-efficacy, motivation, commitment and job satisfaction (Day, Stobart, Sammons & Kington, 2006), and is an integral part of becoming an effective teacher.

Teacher Identity Construction

Teacher identity is influenced by internal factors, such as emotions (Rodgers & Scott, 2008) and a range of external experiences, such as life experience (Flores & Day, 2006). Sachs (2005) brings attention to the two-way negotiation between an individual's experiences and one's meaning-making processes of those experiences. In the case of teachers, he proposes that identity "provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of "how to be", "how to act" and "how to understand" their work and their place in society" (Sachs, 2005, p. 15). Sachs (2005) also proclaims that "developing teacher identity involves the (trans)formation of the teacher identity, which is a process known to "being open, negotiated and shifting'" (p. 6).

From another perspective, as explained by Day et al. (2006), identity is formed by the interaction of many factors which may be from the personal, social, contextual or situational and professional dimensions. Personal factors are those that lie outside the domain of schools or institutions; whereas professional factors are related to the by policy, rules as well as social trends. The situational factors are defined by the specific environment and classroom traditions of the schools where the teachers work (Day et al., 2006).

© 2019 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

p-ISSN 2520-0348 | e-ISSN 2616-793X | L-ISSN 2616-793X | DOI: 10.31703/gssr.2019(IV-I).41 | URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2019(IV-I).41

Maskit's Dimensions of Identity

Maskit (2013) conducted research, in which he presented four dimensions of identity: personal, personal-professional, interpersonal and professional. For better understanding, the personal dimension pertains to how individuals negotiate and balance their professional and personal or family lives; the second dimension, the personal-professional one, deals with how individuals transform and transition from being students to handling internship and finally to new teachers; the third dimension deals with the interpersonal relationships with colleagues and family, and how well teacher handles being connected with them etc.; and the last dimension deals with professional issues which may include facing the challenges of the profession, the workload and the responsibilities. These dimensions have been utilized to develop the questions for this study.

Methodology

This study has employed narrative inquiry as to the methodology of research; narrative inquiry proposes that all human beings better understand and make meaning of the events of their lives through stories and storytelling (Andrews, Squire, & Tambokou, 2008). According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), there is a "reflexive relationship" between "living a life story, telling a life story, retelling a life story, and reliving a life story" (p. 71). Five participants were selected through purposive sampling, with minimum teaching experience as professional teachers of 2 years, at the tertiary level. The participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and freedom in choosing what they wanted to share in their stories.

The approach to data collection within narrative inquiry which was selected as the 'life history' approach (Lu, 2005). In this approach the participants were required to share the narrative and stories of their lives and journeys in a chronological manner; the focus was on the meanings and feelings associated with the event or incident, but not the bare facts or surface information. An interview protocol based on four dimensions of identity mentioned by Maskit (2013) was also developed.

The data was analyzed vertically and horizontally by employing the Miles and Huberman framework for data analysis (1994); the vertical analysis for each participant sifted through the narratives to develop cohesive identity portraits, whereas the horizontal analysis across the participants led to the formation of converging themes and commonalities.

Results: Identity Portraits of the Participants

The participants for this study were purposely selected to offer a cross-section of the teachers of tertiary level institutes of Pakistan. The participants were assigned pseudonyms for anonymity, which are Atiqa, Saima, Amna, Gia and Faiza. This section presents itsdentity portraits considering the narratives and interview data.

Amna: Overcoming Inhibitions and Obstacles

Amna's narrative is laced with a constant undertone of struggle in many dimensions: personal, professional, organizational, collegial and technical. Her process of identity formation is based on an ethos of 'helping'; helping herself discover her potential and strengths, helping her peers in their professional tasks with the spirit of learning, and helping her students learn a language with ease and the minimum anxiety. Her educational process was a difficult one as her family, except her father, was against educating girls; this infused her with a lack of confidence in herself.

Although she is doing her MS at a prestigious women university, overcoming the inherent lack of confidence and building an identity as a professional teacher. She overcame her inhibitions about becoming a professional teacher and joining the career at her father's instigation. She then faced a shock when confronted with an unsupportive administration and a judgmental behavior: '*Initially, my HOD assessed me and was undecided as to whether I could teach or not. She thought I was too young and maybewould not be able to handle a class'.*

She handled that difficulty as well, by adopting a proactive and responsible demeanor, and took on challenging students and demanding workloads, even if they taxed her skills to the utmost. She mentions a lack of time and difficulty in fulfilling her duties initially, to which she readjusted her attitude and worked harder. Amna also mentions the difficulty in coping with the practice related aspect of her job: '*You read one thing theoretically, but the practical or real experience is something very different. I became stressed and depressed. I had to change myself and my assumptions about teaching radically'.*She also mentions the initial lack of support of some of her colleagues but is quick to point out that some of them are very helpful and likeminded, and she usually associates with them: '*My department colleagues too were initially unsupportive. They throw you into the deep end in our institute; and treated you badly because you were a new teacher*.'

She conformed to the demands of the culture of her organization and obeyed their regulations and instructions without demur initially. Later when she felt self-sufficient and confident enough in her abilities and judgment as a teacher, she negotiated with the administration for what she felt was the right methodology or practice in class. She began introducing her own methods in her class and teaching the students in a manner she feels is helpful for them. She never openly defies or negates the dictates of the administration, but neither does she blindly follow orders. She has learned to walk a fine line between the 'dos and don'ts' of her organization: '*We have to obey them completely and then if we want the students to learn by our way, we have to make an extra effort.'*

The acceptance of her family and social circle has also proven to be a boost for her identity and self-image as a professional teacher and she feels pride in being a teacher at the tertiary level: '*When the parents of students come to meet me, I too feel a sense of self-satisfaction and accomplishment, that I have done something on my own; I am someone'.* She has achieved a sense of identity which is firmly based on the philosophy that a teacher should be available and ready to help her students all the time; she practices this, even though it sometimes causes time management issues for her.

Atiqa: Discipline and Perseverance in Teaching

Atiqa is a teacher in a private sector degree college, and her narrative reflects a sense of organization and discipline, which is evident in her behavior and demeanor. Her story is interspersed with incidents that highlight how she faced many challenges and shocks initially in her profession, but she used her sense of discipline and the 'can do' attitude to tackle them all. She did not originally plan to be a teacher but was inspired and motivated by her father to become one when her ambitions were not met with. Her view of the responsibility of teaching is that of a responsibility bordering on the sacred: '*I consider the students to be entrusted to us for a short time, and to neglect their education is a violation of our professional responsibilities*'.

Her initial experience of teaching was not very positive as her preconceived notions were at completes to the reality: '*I thought teachers just wore pretty dresses, got ready for college in the morning, had tea in the staff room and then went home'*. She was shocked to find out the duties of the teacher: '*Teaching was really a shock for me because my expectations were very different from the reality and I found teaching to be more difficult than I had imagined.*'

Even though she faced difficulty in adapting to the responsibilities and demands put upon her from her administration, she persevered and worked at overcoming the challenges. The routine, workload, time management, and extracurricular responsibilities were difficult for her to handle initially. She readjusted her beliefs and concepts: '*I became more responsible and concerned, changed my attitude, I was on my toes all the time*'.

She focused all her attention on making students understand and learn: '*I do not rest until my students do not understand what I have taught them*'. As per her organization's instructions, she focused her energies on getting her students to pass with good grades. The result-oriented approach of the institution is something she does not agree with personally, she feels there should be some added criteria to assess teacher performance. But this is not the case and all benefits and increments are based on how well students perform in their external exams: '*Any increments or rewards we get are based on these results alone, which is quite unfair. The administration should set criteria for judging the efforts and hard work of the teachers.*'

Even though she is at variance with this organizational policy, she adheres to it strictly and goes the extra mile to ensure her students perform well in their exams. This sometimes becomes difficult due to time constraints and limits. She aspires to be an inspiration to them and cherishes the moments when old students come to her and reminiscent about her classes. This is the driving force and motivation behind her identity as a professional.

She is open to seeking help and advice from her seniors and peers in all areas if it means she may improve or learn better ways to teach. She appreciates her organization's culture of sharing and learning together, and not hold back useful knowledge. A major factor in her identity is what she has learned being a part of her organizational culture: '*I feel that 50% of all my teaching knowledge comes from this culture of sharing experiences'*. She feels discussing and finding a common solution in teaching is the best way to grow as teachers: '*Reading a dozen books don't help as much as sharing and talking to an experienced colleague*'.

Atiqa's narrative shows the picture of highly dedicated professionals, focused on benefitting and bettering the future of her students, with room for little or no distractions at all. She deems it the responsibility of the administration to monitor and assess when extracurricular duties affect a teacher's performance in the classroom and to adjust her/his workload accordingly.

Faiza: A case of Redefined Identity

Faiza is currently a teacher of a semi-government educational university for women, which has enjoyed autonomy for over a decade now. Faiza's narrative traces her journey from being a '*timepass'* teacher, who taught because it

was a prerequisite for her degree; to one who is passionate and committed to being a professional TESOL teacher. She views herself as the accidental teacher, who later found that teaching came naturally to her. Her story is one of self-discovery and redefining one's self-image. She began her teaching journey with many reservations and felt out of her element for some time: '*I have always thought it is very tedious; money-wise it's not worth it. It's very boring, there is no scope for growth, I would be stuck at the level I begin at*'.

She took the time to settle in the professional and organizational environment and found it challenging to identify and build a connection with her students. She dwells at length on how she did not fit in the environment and her social circle still is skeptic about her working there. But she feels she has made her place and built a comfortable working and teaching relationship with her boss and students. Initially, her personal differences with the environment interfered with her teaching performance but later she has become aware of a feeling of acceptance and fitting in. Her story hints at personal strife, out of which she found a haven in her work.

Now she cannot conceive of her life without her profession. She relishes the feeling of being needed and wanted as a professional: '*Earning my own money, being wanted in my workplace; having my own status, my own identity as a person, not just as someone's daughter. I am this person; this has given me a lot of confidence, which I badly needed for myself*'. She never conceived that teaching could be so multi-dimensional and multi-faceted. She handles practice-related challenges and demands with equanimity despite there being time and workload issues: '*As for the workload I never imagined I would be working as much as I am right now*'.

But she has learned to look beneath the surface to what is important to achieve her goals. Her Head of Department plays a pivotal role in the process of redefining her identity and is a constant source of motivation and inspiration for Faiza: '*She has inspired me, motivated, pushed me, she has stretched me, but all in a positive way*'. Faiza cannot conceive of working in the same organization without the leadership of her HOD.

Also, the collaborative and research-oriented approach of her department keeps her motivated about her profession. She also points out that politics and leg-pulling are prevalent in the overall organizational culture; she and her colleagues make conscious efforts to let only positive influences affect them.

Throughout her narrative, Faiza repeats that her profession provides her life a sense of direction and she tackles uncomfortable situations and classwork with a sense of humor. The sense of being someone and being important enough to matter in her department as well as her organization is a boost to her self-confidence and self-image: '*but I am not disappointed, as the sheer kick that she (HOD) needs me, compensates for everything'*. Her written narrative also points to her interest in developing new courses and taking on challenges even if she may fail in achieving her goals at times. She is interested in returning to her studies in the near future and completing her Ph.D.

Saima: Realizing Self-worth and Potential

Saima works in a semi-government educational institute, which promotes and focuses on faculty development and research. Her story reflects how she realized herself worth and talents through the process of becoming a teacher and working as a professional in her organization. Saima was one who never thought much of herself, be it in studies, goals, ambitions or skills. She reminisces that she experienced some bad schooling and was often neglected as a child. She had low self-esteem and confidence in her abilities as a teacher. She says that she never imagined that she would one day teach in the current organization. For this, she takes immense pride in her profession and working where she is. She attributes an important part of her success to her teacher and HOD who encouraged and motivated her: '*They are so vigilant, cooperative, accommodating and nice people, and that affects your performance…the leadership has a pivotal role. They appreciate me and my contribution and give me opportunities to grow professionally'*.

She also praises the culture of her organization which is open to innovation and change; there is a culture of proactive teaching, where the teacher monitors everything going on in the class. '*The department and the teaching should never be neglected, even if the teacher has to neglect herself. Even if one must clean the table, it does not matter*'.

The role of tolerance and friendliness, as well as concern for students and their learning in her identity as a teacher, cannot be undermined. She owns that her empathy towards students is cultivated out of going through similar experiences as a student, and not wanting others to feel neglected like she did: '*I think I can refer to the feeling of neglect from my family or my school. That's still in my mind whenever a student approaches me for guidance'*.

Her narrative is laced with incidents of difficulties at the very beginning of her career; challenges in time management, in discipline, in implementing teaching methodologies and teaching practices. She also felt that she lacked in the knowledge of the language itself and had to study extensively to make up for it. She admits that

through the encouragement and advice of her HOD she slowly overcame her inhibitions and fears; fear of rejection, of failure, of appearing incompetent and fear of failing as a teacher.

She gradually built a positive self-image, one firmly based on belief in herself as a teacher. '*I began to grow into a teacher, from being a student. I said to myself that I was a professional and I had to behave accordingly'*. She faced challenges with hard work and courage, and firmly trusting in her department and the organization's goals. Her identity is based on the conviction that a teacher is a role model for the students and should teach by setting an example. The trust and respect shown to her as a teacher both from the administration and the students have restored her belief, her abilities and potential as a teacher and she plans to keep serving others in the future as well. She feels she has much to learn yet and needs to constantly mould and change herself for the better, professionally.

Gia: Breaking the Stereotype

Gia is a very focused and committed teacher, who works on ad-hoc or contractual basis for a number of institutes in Lahore, teaching courses of TESOL, linguistics and language skills. Her story is unique and quite different from the typical teacher's story; she continuously denies her identity as an English language teacher or teacher trainer; but conversely takes pride in her ability and success in teaching: '*I never thought of myself as a teacher, I never wanted to be a teacher. So, I never viewed myself as a teacher. The profession just came to me, I never chose it; it chose me*'.

She acknowledges her innate potential as a teacher but refuses to join teaching as a full-time profession. She mentions that she excelled in studies and had a highly analytical and critical mind even as a student. While studying she used to assess and dissect the way her teachers taught and formed firm opinions about what worked or did not work in the classroom: '*I would rethink and redesign the way they taught and planned that if she had done it in a certain way, the students would be satisfied*'.She used her class fellows input and comments to reinforce her thinking, and says that she redesigned the teacher's lecture in a manner she thought would work: '*when I listened to the response of my fellow students, their comments about her teaching, I used to think that if she had taught this topic in this way, they would not have been saying this*'.

She is a teacher who sets great store by the principles of organization, sequential scaffolding, and logic. She believes that the teacher should impart all these skills by the way she teaches. She learned this from one of her own teachers in school: '*she conveyed the proper sequence of learning to us. By that, we became more efficient learners. She did all this by just the way she guided us'*.

She is also very firm in her work ethics and sets a limit to how far she can adjust within the parameters of a job, before walking away: '*I discuss their expectations from me. If there are outrageous demands, or something unexpected, ask them to specify a time period for it'*.

She has not been forced to make conflicting choices, but this, she feels, is due to not working in one place as a permanent employee.

Her relative freedom and open options keep her interest alive in the profession and she feels she will leave teaching once it becomes only an obligation. Her passion for teaching is based on the conviction that teachers should selflessly devote themselves to broadening the world view of students and introduce them to new concepts and knowledge by inviting them to think critically.

Discussion and Conclusion

The cross-comparative analysis of the participant life histories, narratives and identity portraits provided many common factors, which were recurrent in their responses and stories. All of them reflect an inherent interest in teaching and learning that surfaced at different times in their life stories, sometimes before and sometimes after induction as professional teachers. They all share a common thread of no formal planning to pursue careers as professional teachers, but entering the field through accidental circumstances, or chance; later finding they have a certain aptitude for teaching.

They touch upon six themes including family background and parental influence as motivation; the effect of positive or negative educational experiences; the role of the organizational culture, leadership and colleagues in shaping identity; the difficulties, negotiations, and challenges experienced; time and workload management issues; and the purpose or personal conviction that forms the basis of professional identity.

The themes have been supported to foreign research on teacher identity; for instance, the theme of role of the organizational culture finds support in the research mentioning the role of the situational and environmental factors as mentioned by Day et al., (2006), The theme of difficulties, negotiations, and challenges experienced by novice has been described in the work of Sachs (2005). The themes of personal conviction and reflection as a basis of identity has been discussed at length in the research by Schön (1983) and Smylie and Conyers (1991).

The study of identity portraits and narratives of the tertiary level teachers in the Pakistani educational context brought the researchers to the conclusion that:

- The process of teacher identity construction is a complex phenomenon, with many factors influencing how the teachers construct a unique sense of identity.
- The process of identity construction is a highly individualized and subjective process; no two cases are exactly or mostly similar, even if they are from the same context and same organizational environment and culture.
- The process of identity construction is a conscious and dynamic phenomenon; the teachers make judgmental calls and choices in their daily interactions as professional teachers.
- There are many adjustments and changes at the initial stages of the career as professional teachers. These adjustments mostly belong to the personal-professional, professional and interpersonal dimensions of teacher identity.
- The past influences of an individual play a significant role in forming some images and preconceptions about what a teacher should be, which when exposed to the real-life contexts of teaching, leads to the reshaping of the initial identity.

References

Andrews, M., Squire, C., &Tambokou, M. (Eds.) (2008). *Doing narrative research*. London: Sage.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Day, C., Stobart, G., Sammons, P., & Kington, A. (2006). Variations in the work and lives of teachers: Relative and relational effectiveness. *Teachers and Teaching*, *12*(2), 169-192.

Flores, M. A., & Day, C. (2006). Contexts which shape and reshape new teachers' identities: A multi-perspective study. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 22,* 219–232.

Lu, Y. H. (2005). *Stories of teacher identity: A narrative inquiry into East Asian ESL teachers' lives* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Maryland at College Park.

Maskit, D. (2013). First Months in Teaching—Novices Relate to Their Difficulties. *Creative Education,* Vol.4, No.4A, 1-8. Published Online April 2013 in SciRes (http://www.scirp.org/journal/ce).

Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rodgers, C. R., & Scott. K. H. (2008). The development of the personal self and professional identity in learning to teach. In *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education. Enduring Questions in Changing Contexts*, ed. M. Cochran-Smith and S. Nemser-Freiman, 3rd ed., 732-755. New York and London: Routledge.

Sachs, J. (2005). Teacher education and the development of professional identity: Learning to be a teacher. In P. Denicolo & M. Kompf (Eds.), *Connecting policy and practice: Challenges for teaching and learning in schools and universities* (pp. 5–21). Oxford: Routledge.

Schön, D. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.

Smylie, M. A., & Conyers, J. G. (1991). Changing Conceptions of Teaching Influence, the Future of Staff Development. *Journal of Staff Development*, *12*(1), 12-16.