EXPLORING THE FORMATION OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF NON-NATIVE PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH TEACHERS

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Abstract

Teachers’ professional identity development has been receiving increasing attention from teacher educators [1]. However, a relatively small number of studies have addressed the issue of professional identity formation of non-native teachers of English [2].

During the teacher preparation program, the pre-service teachers are continually reconstructing their self identity as well as their professional identity as a result of a variety of university courses and field experiences. Each environment contributes differently to the student-teacher’s construction of knowledge and identity [3].

This study aims at investigating the effect of the pre-service English program on the formation of the professional identity of the student-teachers at the Faculty of Pedagogy at the Lebanese University. Seventeen female participants took part in this study. These student-teachers filled the Professional Identity Survey at the beginning and end of their senior year. Focus group interviews were also used to collect data. Results showed that there was no statistical significance in the difference in means in the pre and post tests although there was a slight increase in the post means. Participants admitted that their enrollment in the pre-service program made them change their mind about the profession of the teacher which they viewed now as more demanding and challenging. This small convenient sample of participants could be a limitation to this study. More research is recommended to explore the formation of the teacher identity of non-native English speaking student-teachers.

Keywords: Identity formation, professional identity, pre-service teachers, teacher preparation program, elementary cycles.

1 INTRODUCTION

The formation of pre-service teachers’ professional identity is quite personal; however, teacher preparation programs can make a difference in the trainees’ identity development [3], [4]. Many students enroll in teacher preparation programs aiming at becoming experienced teachers able to serve the needs of the children in the society. Unfortunately, a number of them struggle to find answers to “Who am I?” and “Who am I as a teacher?”. Many of these students with unclear identities end up dropping out from colleges or leaving the teaching profession after their first year at school. Many researches recommended that teacher preparation programs offer enough opportunities for their pre-service teachers namely field work and student teaching.

Field experience and actual classroom teaching help pre-service teachers to become more aware of themselves as teachers and learners. However, many higher education institutions are trying hard to decrease the gap between theory and practice. Teacher preparation programs are loaded with theoretical courses and are unable to connect to practice due to the lack of coherent experiences [5].

There is another challenge the pre-service teachers have to face when they join a school as a novice teacher. Here also, the teacher preparation program failed to bridge the gap with in-service teacher development. The new teachers find themselves struggling with lesson planning, classroom management, lesson delivery, and identity development. These issues put those new teachers under pressure since the first day on the job with little or no guidance from the schools [6].

As well-supported by the literature, identity is crucial to the teacher’s development [3], [6], [7], [8]. Identity is also considered a powerful factor that can affect teacher commitment, job satisfaction,, and the motivation to change the social, educational, and political environment at work [9]. Teacher identity involves both self-identity and professional identity [10].
1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the formation of the teacher identity for the English student-teachers enrolled in their senior year at the Faculty of Pedagogy at the Lebanese University. These pre-service teachers aim at graduating as English teachers for the elementary cycles.

1.2 Research Questions

The present study aims at answering the following two research questions:

1. Does the teacher preparation program at the Faculty of Pedagogy at the Lebanese University help ESL student-teachers in their formation of professional identity?
2. Is Professional Identity Development a good predictor of Teacher Efficacy and Career Expectations?

2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Teachers' professional identity development has been receiving increasing attention from teacher educators [1], [7], [8]. The university and school settings provide student-teachers with a variety of teacher preparation context in which trainees are continue reconstructing images of the self as teacher while constructing and integrating an emergent sense of professional identity [3], [10]. Each environment contributes uniquely to the pre-service teacher's construction of knowledge and identity [3].

Numerous studies on identity are found in the literature. Some include studies on teachers' professional identity formation, studies on the identification of characteristics of teachers' professional identity, and studies in which professional identity was presented or represented by teachers' stories, as summarized by [11]. The emphasis on teacher identity helps candidates understand what teaching is and who the teacher is [4], [3], [7].

2.1 Impact of the Teacher Preparation Program on Professional Identity Development

In a study, a sample of 105 student-teachers filled the How I Feel about Teaching Survey twice at entry point as they enrolled in the teacher preparation program in 2005 and upon graduation in 2009. The aim of this study was to understand the pre-service teachers’ perception of how they feel about teaching prior to starting their professional development program and to investigate whether there was a change in their perceptions 4 years later. Findings indicated that there was no significance between pre and post means namely because these student-teachers have joined the program with already a high regard for the profession and good attitude towards teaching [3].

Another study explored the experiences of eight pre-service ESL teachers from Hong Kong taking a short-term international experience program in Australia. Results showed how beneficial the course was in changing the pre-service teachers thinking about themselves as teachers – their beliefs, habits, and values [4].

2.2 Effect of Reflection on Identity Formation

In 2010, four female student teachers took part in a research study where data was collected over a one year period. These participants worked on both identities: self-identity through self-reflections on life experiences and professional identity via video diary-based reflections on classrooms. Result showed that identity work has the potential to promote professional development. When student-teachers are given the chance to reflect on their life experiences and actions besides expanding their understandings, they become more aware of their beliefs and values underlying the teacher’s decision making [10].

Education students at Flinders University in South Australia were asked to use reflective writing to help them develop their professional identity. The pre-service teachers had to reflect upon their responses to, and observations of, various teaching elements both inside the class and at school as a whole. The study recommended the use of reflective writing as a personal and professional development tool [12].
In a study exploring identity formation, Minfang, an EFL teacher, used narrative inquiry of his professional identity throughout his 6 years of teaching. Results highlighted the complex process this teacher went through from struggling with multiple identities, identifying and negotiating meanings, and continuously reconstructing his personal identity as well as his professional identity [7].

2.3 Lack of Research on Non-Native Pre-Service English Teachers

Despite the significance of the topic, a relatively small number of studies have addressed the issue of professional identity formation of non-native English teachers although English is spoken worldwide nowadays. These student-teachers are facing unique challenges in negotiating the conflicts in their dual identities: they are not only English teachers but also English learners themselves [2], [13]. Therefore, teacher educators need to guide student teachers to critically reflect on their implicit assumptions about teaching and being a teacher of English taking into consideration their teaching experiences and school observations [1]. Seeking to understand these pre-service English teachers' identity development contributes to the knowledge base of language teaching and teacher education [4], [7], [8].

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Design

This study adopted the mixed model as research design. The quantitative data was analyzed according to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. To conduct the qualitative part on the effect of the pre-service program offered by the Faculty of Pedagogy at the Lebanese University, the case study design was chosen as outlined by [14].

3.2 Site & Participants

This study was conducted at the Lebanese University, Faculty of Pedagogy during the academic year 2012-2013. The Lebanese University is a well-established public higher education institution. Its Faculty of Pedagogy with its first and second branches has been preparing student-teachers to become teachers of Arabic, French, English, Math, Science, or Social Studies for the elementary cycles. Language preschool teachers also graduate from this faculty.

The participants were chosen based on purposeful sampling and were 12 student-teachers from the first branch and 5 student-teachers from the second branch. These trainees aimed at graduating as teachers of English for the elementary cycles. These 17 participants were enrolled in the 5th semester in their 3-year BA education program.

Students aiming at graduating from the Faculty of Pedagogy as teachers of English for the elementary classes have to take a total number of 180 credits spread over three years. In other words, they have 51 courses to complete, 21 of which are given in English and the remaining courses are taught in Arabic, students' mother tongue.

3.3 Methods of Data Collection & Analysis

Data was collected using the Professional Identity Survey and focus group interviews during the participants' senior year.

The Professional Identity Survey was adapted from Simmons (2009). It includes 30 statements divided into 3 subscales: Professional Identity Development (PID), Teacher Efficacy (TE), and Career Expectations (CE) (see Appendix A). Pre-service teachers start to develop their professional identity (PID) when they accept their social role, internalize professional values and norms, and become competent and confident at work. They can also develop their sense of teacher efficacy (TE) when they find themselves able to influence students' learning regardless of the difficulties in dealing with different students' levels. The student-teachers could formulate more realistic expectations related to their jobs (CE) in addition to a greater satisfaction and a better performance at work as a result of relevant information and experiences they were exposed to. Such expectations help them improve their job survival i.e. they would remain longer in the teaching profession [15].

These 30 statements deal with the trainees and their relation with their colleagues and students, dressing style, performance, and ambition to pursue graduate studies. This survey is a four point
Lickert scale where participants rated these statements as strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D), and strongly disagree (SD). At entry point of the practicum II course i.e. in November 2012, the 17 student-teachers participated in the entry survey. At the end of the 6th semester in June 2013, they filled the exit survey.

Data was also collected using focus group interviews in the 5th semester. The 17 participants were divided into 4 groups and interviewed by the researcher who was also the moderator. Below are sample questions asked during the 25-35 minute interviews.

1. How would you describe yourself as an English teacher?
2. How is your personality reflected in who you are as an English teacher?
3. Can you share with us an experience in which your vision as a teacher was changed?
4. What makes a fulfilling career?
5. How can you define a good teacher?
6. How do you know when you are a good teacher?
7. How long does it take for someone to become a good teacher?

The quantitative data resulting from the entry and exit survey was analyzed using SPSS version 20. As for the participants’ responses to the interview questions, this qualitative data was categorized and analyzed here after.

4 RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Reliability of Professional Identity Survey

The Professional Identity Survey is made up of 3 subscales: Professional Identity Development (PID), Teacher Efficacy (TE), and Career Expectations (CE). The 30 items of the survey were grouped as follows: PID 12 items (1-12), TE 12 items (13-24), and CE 6 items (25-30).

The statistical results showed that the internal consistency of the 3 subscales was moderate whereby Cronbach alpha coefficient ranged between 0.57 and 0.70. This indicates that the instrument is reliable.

4.2 Paired Sample Statistics of PID, TE, & CE

A paired sample t-test was conducted to compare PID, TE, and CE at the beginning of senior year and at the end of senior year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1</td>
<td>PID at the beginning of senior year</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PID at the end of senior year</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher Efficacy at the beginning of senior year</td>
<td>35.47</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 2</td>
<td>Teacher Efficacy at the end of senior year</td>
<td>37.11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Career Expectations at the beginning of senior year</td>
<td>16.76</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair 3</td>
<td>Career Expectations at the end of senior year</td>
<td>17.76</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to Table 1, there was no significant difference in the scores for (pair 1) Professional Identity Development at the beginning of senior year (M = 3.04, SD = 0.26), and PID at the end of senior year (M=3.00, SD=0.30). Based on these results, the program has no effect on professional identity; in other words the program doesn’t lead to the development of professional identity. Likewise, there was no significant difference in the scores for (pair 2) Teacher Efficacy at the beginning of senior year (M = 35.47, SD = 3.86), and TE at the end of senior year (M=37.11, SD=2.95). Therefore, the program has no considerable effect on Teacher Efficacy, so undergoing the program doesn’t develop teacher’s efficacy. Unvaryingly, no significant difference in the scores for (pair 3) was reported: teacher’s Career Expectations at the beginning of senior year (M = 16.76, SD = 1.78), and teacher's CE at the end of senior year (M=17.76, SD=2.01). Consequently, the program has no significant effect on teacher's career expectations, suggesting that taking the program doesn’t cause a development of CE.

Although there were no significant differences in the pre and post means, there was a slight increase in the means at the end of senior year. These findings indicate that respondents have already joined the 3rd year of the teacher preparation program at the Faculty of Pedagogy with some clear ideas of what teaching is and who the teacher of English is. Above findings helped answer research question one showing that there was no effect of the pre-service teacher program on the formation of the student-teachers’ professional identity during their senior year [3]. Another reason could be that the teacher preparation program was unable to bridge the gap between theories taught at university and practice in the real school settings [5], [6].

4.3 PID as a Predictor of TE & CE

A regression analysis was done at the end of senior year to find out whether Professional Identity Development is a predictor of Teacher Efficacy and Career Expectations. According to the statistical results, the professional identity variable (PID) was a significant predictor of Teacher Efficacy (t=2.632, p<0.05). Moreover, PID and TE variables are positively correlated (B=0.562). Similarly, findings indicated that PID variable significantly predicted Career Expectations (t=3.267, p<0.05). Also, PID and CE are positively correlated (B=0.667). So, PID was a good predictor of TE and CE. In addition, PID was positively correlated with TE & CE.

These findings showed that the more pre-service teachers internalize the work ethics and norms and become confident in the teaching setting (PID), the more they can make a difference in students’ lives and develop a sense of teacher efficacy (TE). In addition, when the student-teachers accept their social role as a teacher and are comfortable being a teacher (PID), their expectations about their teaching career (CE) become more realistic leading them to reach job satisfaction and to survive the first challenging years at work [15]. These results helped to answer research question two highlighting the importance of the role of the teacher preparation program in aiding pre-service teachers of English to develop their professional identity [3], [4], [7], [8].

4.4 Responses to Focus Group Interview Questions

The 17 participants’ responses to the interview questions were summarized below.

4.4.1 Challenges & Expectations

When asked to describe themselves as teachers of English, respondents reported on their strengths and weaknesses. Concerning their strengths as an English teacher, the participants assured they are good at writing lesson plans on language skills and subskills such as vocabulary and spelling. They added they are also able to choose various activities to integrate language skills in the lesson. One of the trainee claimed that she knows how to teach elementary classes; however, in order to teach intermediate or secondary classes, she needs to improve her English proficiency. Besides their strengths as an English teacher, the whole group of participants worried a lot about classroom management and dealing with students and their individual problems especially in public schools. They added they don’t know how to get the respect of their students, which they consider a crucial element in the relationship between teachers and students. Those observing in public schools said that they didn’t learn from the school teachers how to deliver various lesson plans and found that they need more training courses to learn how to teach grammar, writing, and speaking. Although it is very important, they consider it a lot of work to prepare good lesson plans and extra activities for different students in their class.

Some trainees found that they held expectations as student-teachers which were not fulfilled by the teacher preparation program at the Faculty of Pedagogy. They expected to “perfect their English
language”. They wanted to learn more about English as a language and to improve their English proficiency by taking more language courses. On the contrary, they realized that the pre-service English training program they enrolled in included methodology, practicum and too many Arabic courses. Some added that what was lacking in the training program were more courses to teach them how to teach various aspects of the English language.

Hence, the participants did not feel comfortable as teachers: they worried a lot about lesson planning and classroom management. Moreover, in the teaching setting, they don’t feel confident about their English proficiency. Such worries would delay the development of their professional identity which in turn would affect their sense of teacher efficacy by not being able to impact their students learning [15]. The complaints about their poor English proficiency, classroom management skills, and lesson planning/implementation stressed the fact that the teacher preparation program they were enrolled in did not prepare them well for the real world and did not decrease the gap between theory and practice [5], [6]. As well supported by the literature, the teacher preparation program can help trainees develop their professional identity [4], [7], [3], [8].

4.4.2 Perceptions about Teaching and Being a Teacher

The participants’ vision about the English teacher shifted from being an easy job to a very demanding and responsible job. The student-teachers in both branches had to change the picture of an English teacher they had in their heads due to their enrolment in the pre-service program at the Faculty of Pedagogy at the Lebanese university [4]. When they were school students, they used to think that they only work hard whereas teachers do nothing: “they just explain in class and go home and sleep.” They even considered teaching easier than other professions because teachers don’t need to prepare interesting activities that suit different students’ abilities along with educational games. Some participants explained that they used to hold this poor image of the teacher maybe because of their bad experience as a student in public school where the English teacher rarely showed up and when she did, the class was all chaos. However, when they became student-teachers, they started to believe that teaching is a very demanding job where teachers work much harder than the students both inside and outside the classroom. Now they believe that teaching is a responsible job “because students’ lives and future lie in our hands as teachers”. The positive effect of the teacher preparation program was also supported in [4].

The trainees considered that various factors contribute to a fulfilling career. These factors included: happiness at work [9], a satisfactory salary, a good reputation and position, high self-confidence teaching English, loving and respectful relationships with both colleagues and students, and a supportive and outgoing principal. For some, it was essential to have an understanding husband, which will help them balance between their social life and career. Many pointed at the importance of having reasonable working hours at school to be able to have enough time with their kids in the afternoon. Enjoying teaching, developing professionally, and being able to make a difference in students’ lives were also mentioned. These student-teachers need at first to develop their self identity as well as their professional identity to be able to enjoy a fulfilling teaching career [3], [6], [8], [10].

4.4.3 Characteristics of a Good Teacher

A good teacher, according to the student-teachers, should be flexible, organized, well prepared, caring, and should manage her class well. They explained that a teacher is considered good if students can understand the lesson the teachers is explaining using effective teaching strategies. She should be knowledgeable in her field, include interesting and creative activities in her lessons, and encourage interaction in her class. In managing her class, she should be firm but fair since students love strict teachers and learn better if they care and treat them well. She should also be a role model for her students. She has to be an ongoing learner and inquirer and push students to think. Participants referred to the teachers as “she” because they are used to find female teachers in elementary classes.

This description of a good teacher was different from who these future teachers were as mentioned above. They found themselves about to graduate with gaps in their identity development as teachers of English. They would like to be flexible, confident, competent, and proficient in English. Here also comes the essential role of the teacher preparation program in the formation of teacher identity [7], [8], [1]. These student-teachers were not asked to reflect on their personal and professional experiences during practicum courses although reflection was highly used as a tool to help trainees develop their professional identity [7], [10], [12].
The participants mentioned various indicators to help them know if they are becoming a good teacher. They said they can get the feedback from coordinators/principal, parents, and even students themselves. Some would rely on the coordinator's or principal's evaluation of their teaching. For others, parents can give them a positive feedback when they say they are satisfied with their kids' English learning and that their kids enjoy the English class. Many consider the main indicator to be the students and more specifically the students' love for English as well as their increase in fluency and grades. Seeing the students smile expecting them without talking behind their back is also a valuable index. The participants also said that they can evaluate their own performance and judge whether they are meeting the objectives of the lesson and whether they are feeling more comfortable and confident while teaching. Trainees are seeking to develop their teacher identity to be comfortable in teaching settings besides their interest in influencing their students’ learning [15].

The majority of the student-teachers agreed that time is not a factor to judge if a particular teacher is good. Some explained that a teacher with one year experience can be much better than a teacher who has taught for 20 years. For some, the passion for teaching, talents, and creativity are the factors not time. Some even answered “for ever”: that's how much it takes to become a good teacher. They clarified that there is no time limit since the teacher is an ongoing learner and that there is always room for improvement to become a more experienced teacher. Based on the focus group interviews results, the teacher preparation program at the Faculty of Pedagogy at the Lebanese University did to an extent affect their formation of professional identity. It mainly transformed their vision about the teacher of English and the nature of the teaching profession.

5 CONCLUSION

The importance of the pre-service education program in preparing the student-teachers for the real world by developing their knowledge, skills, and professional identity was highlighted in many studies. Hence, the main role of the teacher preparation program is to adequately prepare student teachers to deal with the realities of school culture and help them through their process of personal growth and identity formation. When pre-service teachers are not well prepared for their first teaching jobs, they become frustrated and could leave the teaching profession at an early stage of their dissatisfactory career. Many studies suggested that beginning teachers' professional identity formations is affected by their personal histories and beliefs about teaching and learning even more strongly than the subject courses taken at university. This underscores the necessity for teacher educators to understand their students' personal histories and beliefs about teaching and learning in an effort to provide adequate assistance for the development of ESL student-teachers' professional identity. The aim of teacher educators should be to provide pre-service English teachers with enough opportunities to construct their professional identity to help them become more confident as an ESL teacher and more competent in various teaching settings.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Professional Identity survey

The survey below is related to your development of professional identity as a student-teacher. It requires 15-20 minutes to complete.

Please rate your level of agreement with the statements below by indicating: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD).

____ 1. The English language training program at the faculty of pedagogy prepares me well for the training practice experience in the cooperating schools
____ 2. I am comfortable teaching in the classroom
____ 3. Intellectually, I can handle the work of being an English teacher
____ 4. I feel comfortable preparing for a school job interview
____ 5. I feel confident when creating, grading, and teaching English materials
____ 6. I have learned how to balance an academic career and family life
____ 7. I feel intellectually overwhelmed by the amount and/or variety of work that teachers have to do
____ 8. Teaching is a rewarding investment of my time
____ 9. I have what it takes to be a good English teacher
____ 10. I have devised a plan to manage multiple commitments to teaching, research and service prior to tenure
____ 11. I am an effective English teacher
____ 12. I dress professionally more often as a result of my involvement in the English program at the faculty
13. I have what it takes to attain tenure at the type of institution where I would like to teach
14. When teaching, I purposely change my style of dress to appear more like a teacher than a student
15. Usually, I independently pursue most of the teacher’s roles and responsibilities introduced by the English language training program at the faculty
16. I know how to dress to look like a "teacher"
17. My students usually improve when I exert a little more effort as a student-teacher
18. Academe is at the core of my plans for my professional career
19. I know how to motivate and deal with students
20. I can identify challenges to students’ Learning
21. Most times, I generally feel more like a professional than a student-teacher
22. My curriculum vita (CV) is competitive
23. I know how to solve most classroom issues
24. I will feel like a professional when I get my master degree
25. I know which professional conferences are important for my field
26. I help my students reach their academic goals
27. I will feel like a professional when I get my first real teaching job
28. I know where to find grant funding for my future research
29. I have a positive impact on student learning
30. I look for ways to apply my future research to community improvement or university service projects

(Adapted from Simmons (2009))