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Professional identity of EFL teachers and the missing links in Kosovo schools

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Abstract. Understanding the process of identity construction, its dynamics, influencing factors, and the roles teachers adhere to while exercising their profession, has become a challenge many researchers are trying to overcome. In the Kosovo context this field of study result utterly unresearched. Therefore, this study aims to understand the identity perception of the novice and experienced EFL (English as Foreign Language) teachers involving the following features; gender, role, qualification, teaching experience, methodology, teaching curriculum. The study took place in public and private elementary schools in Pristina region, Kosovo. A group of 32 EFL teachers engaged in urban and rural areas and 400 students constituted the sample of the study. Multiple-choice questionnaires were used to test, measure teacher’s perception about themselves and students’ perceptions about the professional side of their teachers. Classroom observation was used as supplementing element in this study. The study contributes to the understanding of EFL context in Kosovo and provides a starting point to focus on quality teaching and strengthen the professional identity in our country.

Keywords: teacher identity, professional identity, EFL teacher, Kosovo education system.

Introduction

Teachers’ professional identity construction has been the focus of many researchers, each trying to un-puzzle this complex process each teacher undergoes from the very beginning of their career. The concept of teachers’ professional identity in the Kosovo context remains merely explored as a result of the country’s bitter past. The period of crisis between 1990-1999 produced a parallel education system which had a disastrous impact, especially on teacher’s professional identity, which development lagged behind. The transitional post-war phase covered the restoring of dignity and proper working environment and conditions. However, the changes although necessary and needed, it did not take into account teachers’ readiness for such a rapid shift, which has caused them to exhibit another professional identity crisis.

Until recently the educational institutions all over the world were focused primarily on achieving universal access on education, nowadays the objective has shifted putting all the forces on quality education as an element for sustainable development. (United Nations (UN), 2015). A report from Moon &Wolffenden (2012), emphasizes the needs for qualified teachers through an international collaboration of developed countries with less developed countries in the field of professional development, set as the UN target by 2030. Among others, this agreement document demands proper construction, reconstruction, and transformation of the teacher’s professional identity in order to meet 21st-century demands, making all countries become part of the same struggle. Such demands have attracted the attention of many researchers. In one of her articles Trudie Steyn (2011) thinks that what is required from teachers is to develop professionally,
readjust their roles and responsibilities and transform their professional identity between the high standards and dynamic context in order to achieve the set objectives. Despite some progress made and many attempts to overcome the difficulties recent evidence from a study on constructivism indicates that EFL teachers still have a vague and incomplete professional identity even after the application of enormous reforms and changes in the system. (Rexhaj, 2016). Yet, if we rely on the teacher practices observed in the classroom and feedback from teachers and specifically student questionnaire on professional identity of EFL teachers engaged in primary schools, we can by reason, predict that teachers have developed a rigid professional identity that occurs in an unconscious manner at most times, as the classroom observation confirms teacher-oriented classes with an evident lack of constructive approaches. Teachers place the central focus in their selves, leaving no or very little space for interaction for their students.

**Statement of the problem**

This study intends to provide a contribution that expands the discussion on how language teachers' selves are constructed and identify possible gaps and barriers within a teacher's identity.

**Purpose of the study**

The aim of this study is to contribute to the understanding of professional identity through its exploration.

**Research objectives**

This study aims to:

- Identify the way English teachers teaching primary school learners construct and feel about their professional identity.
- Explain identity formation in our country.
- Identify the elements and factors important for the development of teachers’ professional identity.
- Explain professional recognition, status/autonomy
- Understand and analyze the occupation in terms of certain aspects such as; gender, role, qualification, teaching experience, methodology, teaching curriculum.
- Explain common interaction between teacher/learner and the teaching content.
- Explore learners’ perceptions and feelings towards their teachers.
- Analyze in depth the importance of learners’ feedback on teachers’ professional growth.

**Research Questions / Hypothesis**

The H0 hypothesis states the following: English foreign language teachers in primary schools’ construct and develop their professional identity. The process of professional identity is an
ongoing process of interrogation of personal and professional sides of becoming and being a teacher.

The H1 hypothesis states the following: English foreign language teachers in primary schools do not construct and develop their identity.

In order to test H1 hypothesis the following research questions will be examined:

(a) How do English teachers teaching primary school learners construct their professional identity?
(b) What are possible elements and factors that influence the development of teachers’ professional identity?
(c) How does the teachers’ experience contribute to the construction of their identity?
(d) Is the qualification a key element in their occupation? Why?
(e) Is it necessary to have a higher degree in order to teach primary school learners? Why?

**Literature Review**

Researchers are still struggling to provide a proper and applicable definition of what constitutes professional identity and indeed identity in general. It is not very clear yet what should be included or left out, but what is known is that there is no previous historical account on the evolvement of professional identity. Therefore, the purpose of this literature review is to gain a better understanding of teachers’ professional identity and determine what is compulsory and noncompulsory for them to be able to teach 21st-century skills.

From the teachers’ point of view, identity begins in the early stage of professional life. Initially, the concept of identity was frequently described in terms of the self and one's self-concept. In his article 'Identity, youth and crisis’ (1986) Eric Erikson provides us with an interesting viewpoint on identity. He refers to the theory of George Mead (1934), where identity is perceived as the “self” growing out of the mind as the latter interacts with its environment to solve the problem of sustaining the biological organism (person) that holds it. Erikson’s concludes that the identity of the self is to be established and maintained through negotiations within social situations. Douwe Beijaard (2000) points out that the development is perceived as the process of integrating one’s personal knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, norms, and values on the one hand, and professional demands from teacher education institutions and schools, including broadly accepted values and standards about teaching, on the other. Holly Nias (1989), emphasizes the importance of professional identity in the sense that it strongly determines how teachers teach, how they boost professionally, and how they approach educational changes.

More recent evidence Hargraves and co-workers (2012) highlight the significance of professional capital a newly introduced concept that provides us with an explanation of what should be done in order to have effective teachers. According to their theory, teachers need human capital (the talent of individuals), social capital (collaboration with co-workers) and decisional capital (the wisdom to make sound judgments for successful teaching. Basically, this formula asserts that teachers need to have proper knowledge and skills, but they get better within collaborative expertise while bringing together the evidence they get more focused, build, strengthen and deepen their relations and show more care and solidarity against new demands and challenges.
Research methodology

The study was organized in two stages. A multiple-choice questionnaire was distributed to 400 students and 32 elementary school teachers: teachers were subject to several questions aiming to test, assess, measure and find out their perception of their identity. Another multiple-choice questionnaire was used to find out the students’ perception and feelings about the professional side of their teachers. The second stage included classroom observation conducted in a number of public and private institutions in rural and urban areas of Pristina region. The administration and retrieval of questionnaires were done by the researcher within a period of six weeks. Thirty-two copies out of 400 student’s questionnaires were invalidated, and eighteen failed to return the questionnaire. In total 350 students replied.

Findings and Discussion

The following paragraph presents the data obtained upon the successful administration of questionnaires. The first part of questionnaire covered multiple-choice questions, determining age group through the fulfillment of norms set by MEST (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, Republic of Kosovo). According to the data obtained, the average group age of teachers is 30-39 years with 41:59 male to female ratio. One of the main reason females choose to be in this profession is due to the flexibility of the working hours. We further explored the qualification level of teachers, which resulted in 53% holding a BA degree while 47% hold an MA degree, though not all of them have the degree equivalent to English teaching. Teaching experience is an important feature in developing a professional identity. Our results show that 1/3 of respondents have 1-5 years of professional expertise as an English teacher, whereas 1/4 between 6 to 10 years, 16% of them are 11-15 years in service and the remaining 1/4 have more than 15 years in service. Teachers were also asked about the same school experience as an important determinant of teacher’s professional identity. Changing schools often brings along the time to adopt for teachers that can directly affect teacher's performance. We found that 2/3 of the teachers have been engaged in the same school permanently. The majority of respondents, namely 81% are from public schools, with respect to 19% engaged in the private sector.

In addition, we tested the norm filling aspect as well as based on the core curriculum, teachers are obliged to complete 20 hours of teaching on a weekly basis. According to the data 24 teachers are fulfilling the norm of 20 hours per week. Out of 32 respondents, 5 of them correspond to 10-20 hours. In order to fulfill the norm, they are forced to teach another subject that is irrelevant to their subject. The most frequent subject they are asked to teach is social studies and ecology. The last 3 respondents admitted the problem with the norm; therefore, they are engaged in two working places.

The data obtained from the second part of the questionnaire show that there is a problem with teacher identity in our country. Data shows that teachers are not so prepared professionally and that causes them confusion in deciding upon their roles. 37% of respondents said that they see themselves more as assessors, 8% of them agreed to diagnostician, 16% thought of themselves as facilitators, 12% took the role of the monitor. Whilst all of them failed to answer the question about management, and 26% considered they carry the role of a planner. Homework assignments appear to a nonstandard, 44% of teachers assign homework more than twice a week, 31% twice a week, while 25% every class.

Use of auxiliary media to enhance teaching plays an important role, especially in learning foreign languages. However, audio auxiliary media are poorly utilized. The majority of teachers said their access to the internet is limited. And for whatever initiatives they depend directly on their
school principals leaving them with no autonomy at all. The data also shows that concerning the teaching mode approach EFL teachers are having problems to switch to a new modern approach. Majority of them declared to have problems with classroom size, family factors, student attitudes, etc. The next question shows that EFL teachers aren’t so positive about the implementation of the new competence-based curriculum being implemented in the majority of public schools in our country. Further, the data shows a failure to stimulate creativity and innovative thinking in EFL classes with only 15% of them implying these two techniques important when teaching 21st-century skills.

The third part of the teacher questionnaire shows a failure to provide additional support for students with learning difficulties. Apparently, most of the respondents focus on the strengths and weakness of students. However, with overcrowded classes, despite goodwill, such an approach is not feasible. There appears to be little motivation for continuous learning and professional development. Only 21% of teachers admitted to having participated in a recent activity for continuous learning and professional development.

Teachers’ perception of their professional identity is not at the satisfactorily level expected. Only 16% have a positive opinion about their teaching skills, while 84% do not consider themselves as ideal teachers. From a teacher’s perspective, it appears teachers in our country aren’t appreciated, with only 28% think the opposite. The teacher-student relation is an important factor in teaching. 2/3 of them thinks that teachers should have a formal approach to students, with a remainder who disagree or are not sure which approach they should maintain. The majority of teachers finds it imperative, if students like their personality, with only a few who disagree or find it not relevant. The majority of teachers consider they must have interpersonal skills as the new curriculum obliges them to possess these skills. They consider the current system old fashioned, subjective, and often influenced by parents. 350 students were subject to study, within the age group 8-14, with a 46:54 male to female ratio. Age groups 11-14 years were more responsive to participating in the study. The reason behind this is that they are more mature and more confident in their English. It is apparent from the results that the majority of students that responded to our questionnaire were sixth, seventh and eighth grade.

We further explored the number of students taking supplementary private courses in English. The results show that 2/3 of the students are taking private English courses. This reflects well that English classes they are taking in regular schools are not sufficient and therefore needs to be supplemented with private courses.

According to the data obtained about the teachers’ qualification, the majority of them are qualified, holding MA, BA degree in English while the number of students attending private courses is significantly high. Interestingly, 53% of students responded they do not like their school, though 2/3 of them consider they belong there. This paradoxical answer can be explained by the fact that traditional families in Kosovo are not mobile, and therefore most of the students do not change schools frequently. Therefore, although not satisfied with their school, they feel they belong there, as that’s the only school they have attended.

Teachers should be motivating their students, encouraging and building a relationship that translates into effective learning and personality building of students. Apparently 50% of students do get such incentives from their teachers, such result is far from satisfactory. Teachers should not focus their energy on the best students only. Teachers should be helpful to students, especially with students that are struggling in classes.

Results from classroom observation

Teachers in the majority of classes do not conduct any prior preparation for the class, using the same old-fashion pattern, a teacher-oriented class with no space for interaction. A typical EFL
class seems more of a controlled environment than a joyful learning class having the teacher at the center of attention all the time. In most of the classes the teachers’ voice was very loud and dominating. Whilst the classroom observation conducted in private institutions present in our country shows a higher level of awareness of the construction of teachers’ identity.

Conclusion

The construction of the professional identity of English teachers teaching primary school learners in Kosovo is embedded in the rules of a traditional teacher. As the findings of this study indicate that English teachers involved in teaching primary school learners fail to construct their professional identity in compliance with the standards set forth by MEST. The findings also confirm that the stagnation of the professional identity of EFL teachers is a result of inappropriate planning and lack of consciousness.

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