



Teachers' Perception on Identity Construction: Lived Experience of Community School Teachers in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This article shows how rural community school teachers use potential resources to construct and negotiate possible teacher identities. Moreover, this article explores how teacher identities can be constructed and understood in the rural society. Five teachers from different disciplines were purposefully selected and interviewed through the semi-structured interview guidelines in a natural setting. The interview responses were transcribed verbatim and analyzed by developing the themes to draw a conclusion. In the teacher's narratives, themes such as professional ethics and competency, community respect, and societal participation were identified from the discussion of teacher narratives. This article discusses how the negotiation between multiple identities is a crucial part of the teacher identity construction. The findings of this study implicate that rural teachers construct their professional identity with their competency and community participation. It can also contribute to developing values, beliefs and commitments that are emotionally adhered to the teachers' identity construction.

KEYWORDS: Teacher identities, professional ethics, societal participation, community respect

INTRODUCTION

The researchers have experienced in teaching and learning since 2055 and onwards in the rural community schools that embrace the community with diversified caste and ethnicity. The study found that teachers were from different ethnic backgrounds such as Rai, Tamang, Brahmans, Dalits and Kshetri. They were treated as respected people in the community. In performing duties in their schools, the teachers interacted with different types of people who respected them solely and greatly. The people in the community used to inquire about their problems, seek solutions and act as guardians and counselors. Teachers were invited by the community people to participate

in their cultural festivals and ceremonies. The fusion of values and beliefs with the community members provided a foundation for the teacher's identity (Darling, 2001).

The teacher identity is important for professional development and retention (Natale-Abramo, 2014). The teachers' identity construction is not only the natural process for professional development, but also it is a crucial part of conserving teachers' commitment to responsibility and adherence to professional norms of practice (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008). It is shaped through their dispositions in which they put them to seek out professional development opportunities and regard them as inherent in their employment (Natale-Abramo, 2014, p. 384). Moreover, Hoffman-Kipp (2008) proclaims that the teacher identity is a core element of the teaching profession. The teachers whose identity is intertwined with the teaching role have a strong emotional attachment (Van Lankveld et al., 2017). The teacher identity development is a continuing process of interpretation and reinterpretation of who one considers oneself to be and who one would like to become (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017). To instill the teacher identity, the socio-cultural contexts and personal narratives are used to construct an individual's identity (Schussler et al., 2008).

In the present context of community schools in Nepal, the teachers are categorized into different types such as Rahat, Niji, contract, permanent (Pherali, Smith & Vaux, 2011). In this context, different teachers perceive their identities from different perspectives as experienced by the community interaction. In this perspective, this article aims to explore the teachers' perceptions towards identity construction and a process of constructing the teacher identity in the society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teacher education is embedded with two crucial themes: teacher identity and emotion (Zembylas, 2005). The first teacher's identity is blended with the process where the teachers generate ideas and construct the pragmatic knowledge about what it is to be and act like a teacher (Teng, 2017). This knowledge is expected to dig out the qualities essential for an ideal teacher and the assets to acquire such attributes in the course of a teaching career (Sachs, 2005). The teacher identity is observed to be fluid, dynamic and multifaceted based on the teacher participation and practice (Beijard, 2004). According to Rodgers and Scott (2008), the teacher identity is embedded in four models such as identity is formed in multiple contexts: society, culture, politics and history; identity is formed while interacting with others; identity is unstable, fluid and dynamic; and identity is constructed and reconstructed over time. As a result, identity is both unitary and multiple, continuous and discontinuous, and both an individual and social process (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011).

A complete state of feeling that results in the physical and psychological changes refers to the emotion representing love, anger, fear, pride, anxiety and so on (Lazarus, 1991). As a practitioner, a teacher can decide whether to make the classroom exciting or dull by delivering an appropriate action.

According to Brown and Duguid (2002), individuals establish a social identity as they grow into social beings. In turn, the identity under development impacts what the individual learns and how he or she assimilates knowledge and information. In the case of learning about identity, the identity they acquire impacts what they pay attention to and what they learn. What people learn is always filtered through the lens of who they are and what they are learning to be (Brown & Duguid, 2002, p. 138). The interrelation between the teacher identity (social and professional) and learning to become a fundamental basis for this study.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed hermeneutic phenomenology as a research design that studies lived experiences and the shared meaning of similar experiences (Manen, 1997). This design helps to study the teachers' lived experience in the identity construction. The experiences and narratives are drawn from the social setting based on values and beliefs (Van Lankveld et al., 2017). The teacher who participated in this study had many years of experience in teaching and learning activities in the rural areas. Furthermore, they have participated in social functions and ceremonies as invited by the community nearby the school. Purposively, four teachers were selected from a community school located in the rural areas of Dhankuta district, one of the hilly districts of Province 1. The reason for taking the district as a study site is that we had been taught in the community school of Dhankuta district and we both were the students of Dhankuta Multiple Campus for pursuing higher studies. In this district, most of our colleagues have been teaching in different schools. All the participants were close and familiar so that they could give rich information in the ways of teachers' identity construction.

Regarding the ethical issue, the participants were given informed consent via a telephone call. Confidentiality has been maintained by using a pseudo-name. The interviews were taken in their natural place wherever they belong to. In our first meeting, we shared our purpose of research and took their permission to be involved in the interviews. Then interviews were conducted under the guideline questions followed by the research questions. The interviews were recorded using a tape recorder. The recorded interviews were transcribed and developed a code for the basic theme. The transcribed data were sent to the participants for memo checking. After their debriefing, the basic theme was organized and developed as an organized theme and the main theme was drawn based on an organized theme. The main theme was given the title theme that was analyzed linking with coding. Literature and theories were connected with the main theme and critically analyzed. A detailed information was gathered through the in-depth interviews using semi-structured questions. The teachers who participated in this study had many years of experience in teaching students in the rural areas.

Data analysis revealed the themes of collaboration and interactions with the teachers. The interviews with the participants were recorded using an audio recorder. The recorded interview responses were transcribed verbatim and developed into a code. The similar codes were organized to generate a theme. The similar themes were organized as the main theme of the study. The themes were illustrated based on the ground data, which were compared and contrasted with data to data and data to literature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section reveals the results obtained from the information given by the participants, which are based on study objectives linked with theory. The themes are developed from the information provided by the participants' quotation that is presented thematically below:

Professional Ethics and Competency

Professional ethics refers to the teacher's accountability and responsibility for the development of his or her teaching career (Biesta, 2004). The professional efficiency that produces the momentum of quality in teaching is reminiscent of teacher competency. Professional ethics is the guiding principle for the individuals to govern for professional development. In this regard, teacher T1 asserted:

I have been teaching in my school for long years before and all the students are satisfied with me. Every day I go to school at a time and have a class without

any delay. I teach health and physical subject. Every day I convey the message about health and sanitation with the latest news in the world by using the google search engine. Sometimes I encourage my students to prepare seminar-workshops in the rural areas about how to keep the environment clean.

In the above assertion, the teacher who teaches health in school is more competent because he tries to transform theoretical knowledge into applied knowledge by conducting the seminar-workshops in the rural areas with the participation of students.

In this way, education is the change and modification of behavior into the practice (Kazdin, 1981). In such a situation, the teacher needs to be a change agent and facilitator for students whose role is to modify the culture of society. In this condition, another teacher T2 expressed:

I have been teaching English permanently for the last five years at the secondary level. Sometimes, I am performing administrative tasks in the school as provided by the headteacher of the school. I focus on teaching English as a language rather than a subject. Always I encourage the students to make an English-speaking environment within and out of the school among their peers.

In such a manner, the teacher has understood English is a foreign language and needs to be taught on the basis of language. Most teachers in the community schools have taught in a way that English is the subject, not the language (Nawab, 2012). The decreasing rate of passing students in English is increasing every year in the community schools is due to such types of teaching strategies. Therefore, the English teacher has to modify their traditional teaching style into the modern method using an ICT-based approach.

Community Respect for Teachers

The attitude towards teachers and respect for their contribution represents the community respect (Swift-Morgan, 2006). Teachers contribute to the nation by educating the children that improves the quality of life. The rural community people offer good respect for teachers because teachers make their children great people in the country and world. In this context, the teacher T1 said:

My home to school distance is one-hour walk. On the way to my journey to school, I come across the Rai and Brahmin communities. Through each community, I get good respect from them who sometimes requested me to have tea and snacks.

It is clear from the above statement that he is contributing more to his school as well as his nation; however, he has to spend more time for his school. The community people respect him because he has taught their children efficiently and deliberately (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006).

The community people have perceived that the teacher is acting as a leader for making their children more potential. In the favor of above statement, the teacher T2 said:

I go to school every day and teach mathematics for 9 and 10 classes. The parents of our students request me for home teaching. I am giving my classes regularly, so the course will be completed in time before the exam begins.

So one of the qualities of a good teacher is to be punctual and accountable for their profession. The competent teacher is always respected and recognized as a resource person. So such type of teacher has demanded the learners as an additional support (Bryson & Hand, 2007). The teacher who is regular and punctual in his teaching does not need to have an extra class for the completion of the course. In this way, honesty and punctuality are the essential attributes of an ideal teacher.

Participation in the Society

The effective presence with expressive potential in any community function refers to the participation in the society (Bryson & Hand, 2007). Being a social activist and social mobilizer, the participation of teachers is actively submerged in the culture. In this regard, the participant T3 said:

I am invited to every social activity in the community. At the festival of Rai, I am invited and get the opportunity to participate in a cultural program because most of the community members are my students. In the Brahmin community, I was also invited to participate in their cast-wise festival. In the cultural program, I am respected as a guest and requested to speak a few words about their festival and its importance for a harmonious society.

Here, it is clear that the teacher is respected in the community and is becoming a leader for transforming a society. Relating the teacher to the community is also highly appreciated in their locality (Johnston & Davis, 2008). Being a responsible person for the society, he can have the power to back up the community. Another community member can follow his advice to run the society. In this context, the participant teacher, T4 stated:

I have been teaching for 25 years. I have huge experiences in the community nearby our school. In each community when I visit I get more respect and sometimes I have been invited for the cultural ceremony. I have not noticed to spend much more time in this school. In this way, I am satisfied with the teaching profession and local community around my school.

In this quote, the teacher is satisfied with his profession because he has spent an unlimited duration in the school. This profession is not so satisfactory financially, but it is a good job because the teacher is respected at every step of the pathway (Watt & Richardson, 2012). The teacher in schools acts as a sailor of the boat in which the client riches anywhere when he coves water but the sailor remains in the same position.

Satisfaction with the Teaching Profession

The prolonged dedication and accountability towards the teaching profession inform the satisfaction towards the teaching profession. A strong attachment to their profession and an ethical commitment for the job shows the job satisfaction of teachers (Batugal & Tindowen, 2019). The satisfaction with the teaching profession constructs their identity. In this aspect, the participant teacher T5 said:

I have a long time experience in the teaching field. In my teaching life, I could not earn more money and was unable to build a skyscraper but I got a bundle of salutation and respect. If I converted this salutation and respect in monetary value it would become a billionaire. That is why I am a rich person and very much proud of this profession.

Thus, the overall satisfaction of teacher rests on the respect that they receive from their students. In the context of Nepal, teachers are not satisfied due to their inadequate salaries. They are satisfied with their profession because they receive greetings and respect from their society all the time rather than the money. In this way, the teacher identity is constructed in the community. In the same context, another teacher T1 said:

At the beginning of my study, my hobby was devoted to social service and I did a bachelor's in sociology. Now, I have been teaching social studies for the last ten years. In my opinion, teaching is one of the social services for the community. I think we are producing the future workers for the nation. The children to whom we teach are the future pioneers for the development of a nation and they become the leaders who will lead our country successfully. So I

claim that the teaching profession is one of the prominent and respectful jobs in the world.

In the above statement, the teacher has constructed his identity with social services. The teacher has transformed ideal teaching into social dignity in which he or she feels pride and happiness when students are able to provide a great contribution to the nation.

In a real sense, the teacher is the path builder for students as the teacher guide them according to their need and interest. In the teacher's view, the teaching profession is a highly respected and prominent job (Gibbs & Miller, 2014). Regarding the teaching profession, another participant teacher T2 said:

I teach in early childhood classes. I need to work hard, but I receive less salary than other teachers. With my low salary, it is difficult to manage fundamental needs. So the teaching profession is not so good for me because the government is biased toward all the early childhood development (ECD) teachers like me. Every two years, the government decides to increase the teacher salary for others, but it remains the same for us. In such a condition how can I survive with this job and recite that it is a life carrier?

The above assertion states that the government has biased against the ECD teachers without a proportional salary for all teachers. In this connection, teachers seem unsatisfied with their teaching profession (Korthagen, 2004). So, they want to terminate and try to shift to another profession. In the same context, another teacher T3 said:

There are different categories of teachers such as temporary, including *Rahat* (compensation), *Nijishrowt* (local) and *Anudan* (grant). The permanent teachers are governmentally funded and the nature of the job is permanent. The temporary teachers are is governmentally funded, but the status is is temporary. In the community, the permanent teachers are valued and respected much.

Thus, the permanent teachers have secure jobs, so they are valued in the society. They are satisfied and become committed and accountable towards their job (Stander & Rothmann, 2008).

The above statements demonstrate that the teacher recruitment needs to be made systematic and regular. The government needs to advertise the teacher vacancy announcements on the regular basis. The teachers' vacancy needs to be announced for the permanent teachers only without any categorization (Kumashiro, 2015). In schools, the teachers' participation is reflected from the political ideology in any cluster called progressive or democratic (Francia, et al., 2005). At the local level, the teacher participates in every activity as a leader because he is financially sound. Some people are economically poor and illiterate (Bush, et.al, 2010). They follow the teachers' ways of life and blindly support the teachers' ideology as ideal. In addition, sometimes the local teachers are involved in conflict resolution in the community.

Identity Formation Depending upon the Nature of Job

The identity formation process is not only related to the psychosocial functioning, but it also influences what is perhaps the most significant objective indication of the adolescent successful functioning, which is called 'scholastic accomplishment' (Leigh et al., 2009). According to them, students with higher levels of educational dedication are more likely to complete college without missing classes. In this respect, the participant teacher T3 asserted:

I have been teaching mathematics in my school for five years. When I was recruited as a permanent secondary level mathematics teacher, I duly performed my duty under the rules and regulations of the school. There is no math teacher

in the secondary level besides me. I need to take an extra class for SEE and +2 level, so I can't get leisure time except Saturday.

Therefore, it is clear that the aforesaid teacher has constructed his identity by his inner potentiality and full engagement in teaching. Due to a scarcity of mathematics teachers, this teacher is fully engaged in the teaching and imparting knowledge efficiently.

In this way, teachers are highly respected by the community as the permanent secondary level mathematics teacher (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001). In a similar context, another teacher T3 said:

In teaching mathematics at the primary level, I need to have grade teaching which refers to the teaching of all subjects. Although I have done a bachelor's degree in mathematics, I have not got the opportunity to teach mathematics at the secondary level. In such a way, I am recognized as the primary level teacher.

It suggests that the primary level teacher has to adopt grade teaching rather than subject teaching. This teacher has done a bachelor's degree in mathematics, but his appointment is for the primary level teacher. In this way, the teacher's identity is constructed on the basis of the structure and nature of the job. The teacher who teaches at the secondary level feels proud of being a secondary level teacher; in contrast, another teacher is not introduced by the mathematics teacher due to the primary level appointment (Maulucci, 2013) as the participant teacher T4 said:

I have been teaching science and mathematics at the lower secondary level and sometimes at the secondary level. I was also appointed as a *Nijishrot* teacher from the school management committee. Sometimes the school management committee proclaims that they have no resource to pay for me and probably I need to resign by the end of this year.

According to this teacher, the teaching profession is not a satisfying job. From the perspective of this teacher, teaching with a *Nijishrowt* is not a durable and prestigious job. The *Nijishrowt* teacher always feels fear and anxiety about their termination due to the financial situation of the school. In such a situation, he or she cannot feel pride in the teaching profession and always face the unbearable threat of underestimation from the permanent teachers. In this way, the quality of education becomes a fairy tale. Therefore, there are different teachers who are treated differently due to their differing job status.

CONCLUSION

This study gives detailed information about how rural teachers are dignified in their teaching profession that is emotionally attached to values, beliefs and commitment. Furthermore, it provides a narrative account of how those teachers negotiated and navigated conflicting emotions to become ideal teachers and well accepted by the community. The unseen emotional rules embedded in professional ethics can remarkably impact their emotional experience and identity construction. Being the school as a miniature of society, the democratic relationship between the teacher and community can play a crucial role in enhancing professional efficiency and institutional development. The teacher in the community is constructing their identity through social involvement in the society. Due to the structure imposed by the nation, it is not easy to transform fragmented mentality and practice in the teaching practice of contemporary situations because of the attitudinal barriers impacted by the deeply-rooted school structure and social practice. The teacher must learn about professional ethics in education although the school structure has made a distinct category in the teaching profession. Teachers are the pioneer for the nation's future, so they need to develop professional efficiency through interaction with the community. In this study, the findings implicate that the rural teachers construct their professional identity with their competency and community

participation. In this way, it can contribute to developing values, beliefs and commitments that are emotionally adhered to the teachers' identity construction.

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