

Rawia Hayik, 2018

Volume 4 Issue 3, pp. 551-565

Date of Publication: 10th December, 2018

DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2018.43.551565>

This paper can be cited as: Hayik, R. (2018). Arab Student-Teachers' Professional Identities between the Personal and Cultural. *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(3), 551-565.

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ARAB STUDENT-TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES BETWEEN THE PERSONAL AND CULTURAL

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Abstract

“Everyone not only has a story but also has a right to tell their story” (Bamberg, 2012, p. 79). Grounded in theoretical discourses that underscore the significant role of narrative in teachers' identity construction and disclosing (Connelly and Clandinin, 1999), this study invites a group of 15 third-year female students from the English department at an Arab teacher-education college in Northern Israel to narrate their stories of meaningful experiences and life events that have contributed to shaping their professional identities. Students-teachers' narratives are collected in a two-phase process to illuminate the various experiences that have contributed to shaping their identities. Narrative and discourse analyses of students' narratives shed light into the individual, professional, and socio-cultural factors that have shaped their professional identities as English teachers. The significance of the study lies in contributing to the scarce literature on identity construction of a population often absent from professional-identity research (female and minority Arab EFL student-teachers). Additional contributions are raising students' awareness of the resources and constraints in their history that have affected their professional development as well as raising my awareness as teacher educator to my students' experiences and helping me to become more tuned to their voices and struggles.

Keywords

Professional Identity, Narrative Inquiry, Minority

1. Introduction

Becoming a teacher is “an identity-forming process whereby individuals define themselves as teachers and are viewed by others as teachers” (Danielewicz, 2001, p. 3). A teacher identity, as Danielewicz argues, constantly develops and evolves. It is “shaped and reshaped through the discourses in which teachers engage” (Alsup, 2006, p. 236), hence the need to study teacher identity since, as Varghese et al. (2005) argue, “in order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are: the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them” (p. 22).

In their recent publication on identity research, De Costa and Norton (2016) emphasized the need to focus on diverse research populations in future research on identity development. Following such recommendation, this study attempts to enrich identity research through shedding light on the identities of an underrepresented research population, Israeli Arab English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) student-teachers.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 The Development of EFL Teachers’ Identity

Research in the English teaching field has investigated teachers’ professional identities through focusing on different aspects such as personal dimensions identities (e.g. Antonek, McCormick & Donato, 1997), racial and gender identities (e.g., Lin et al., 2004; Norton, 2000; Norton & Pavlenko, 2004), ethical aspects of identities (Miller, Morgan & Medina, 2017), cultural and intercultural identities (e.g. Menard- Warwick, 2008), sociocultural identity formations (Gu & Benson, 2015; Johnson & Golombek, 2002), pedagogical and emotional factors in identity formation (Benesch, 2017; Loh & Liew, 2016), ethico-political perspectives of identities (He & Lin, 2013), and the NNEST/NEST dichotomy within identities (e.g. Aneja, 2016; Reis, 2015; Wolff & De Costa, 2017).

McKinney and Norton (2008) highlighted the significance of “making the classroom a space that accommodates multiple identities” (p. 193). However, little attention, as Tsui (2007) argues, “has been given to understanding the processes of identity formation, the interplay between these processes and the identities constituted as teachers position themselves” (p. 658). In addition, limited research has explored pre-service EFL teachers’ identities from a holistic rather than fragmented angle (identity as a combination of the individual, social, cultural, intercultural, racial, etc...). This study encourages such multiplicity, attempting to investigate the

identities a group of EFL student-teachers' acknowledge or claim for themselves (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002) in broader terms. Departing from a view of identities as fluid and situated in the local context (Clarke, 2008) as well as "a site of struggle, constructing and constructed by particular language and literacy practices" (De Costa and Norton, 2016, p. 594), the way participants choose to define their identities in this data oriented study dictates its foci, be it personal, professional, political, cultural, sociocultural, intercultural, or else.

2.2 Narrative Discourse and the Construction of Teacher Identity

This study is grounded in theoretical discourses that underscore the significant role of narrative in teachers' identity construction and identity disclosing. Narrative inquiry can illuminate how identity is negotiated (Early and Norton, 2013) since it is in the telling of the experience that teachers create their identities (Britzman, 2003), through verbalizing experiences in discourse. The imagined stories they create enable them to reflect on future possibilities for their students' learning and their own teaching practice (Barkhuizen, 2016).

Underscoring the significant role of narratives in teachers' identity construction, Connelly and Clandinin (1999) argue that teachers' identities lie in the stories they tell about their lives and experiences in their classrooms. Teachers construct their identities through sharing their stories (Soreide, 2006). According to McAdams (1993), "identity is a life story" (p. 5), and the stories people narrate about their lives contribute to their awareness of themselves and thus to creating their identities. Stories are the foundation for identity work since they allow understanding of "human desires, goals and social conduct" (p. 29). It is through narrative that people define who they are for themselves and for others (McAdams, Josselson and Lieblich, 2006). In other words, identities are constructed as people tell stories about themselves to those surrounding them (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005). They are shaped by "the autobiographical narratives by which we tell about our lives" (Bruner, 2004, p. 694). As Bruner argues, identities are the narratives told about the "selves." "A life as led is inseparable from a life as told... a life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (p. 708).

According to Bamberg (2004), the ideal and most salient site for self-construction is the narrative. Identity is constructed when a person narrates his life story (the "narrative construction of self," p. 368). The stories verbalized in autobiographical life history stories reveal identity and provide researchers not only with the "what" –what narrative tells us about the construction of self– but also the "how" –"how do we do self (and other) in narrative genres in a variety of sites of engagement" (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 128, italics in the original).

Within these stories, the use of linguistic means such as repetition, figurative language, pronouns, rhetorical questions, and evaluative/positioning devices constitute the building blocks of communication (Hanks, 1996). Such linguistic devices are not neutral; they help disclose the speaker's/writer's identity. Utilizing a functional approach to discourse analysis (Schiffrin, 1994), this study assumes that scrutinizing these devices in students' narratives will glean implicit meanings in their stories and illuminate how they are positioning themselves versus others (other individuals, professionals, the Arab society, etc...). How are these Israeli Arab EFL student-teachers defining their professional identities? How do they construct the crystallization process of their professional identities in their narratives?

3. Methodology

The research context of this qualitative study is a large Arab teacher education college in Northern Israel. The student body consists only of Arab students, mostly of Muslim faith with a few Christians. Students at the English department take a practicum course in their third year of academic preparation to become English teachers. They practice teaching EFL at elementary schools in their area for one day a week (5 hours) under the supervision of a pedagogical advisor, and then meet with the advisor for one hour for reflection and further learning.

Last year, I was the pedagogical advisor of a group of 15 students, all females and nonnative speakers of English. They agreed to participate in this study and signed informed consent forms. To protect their privacy, their identities are safeguarded through hiding identifying information and using pseudonyms when publishing my work.

The methods of life interviewing and writing stories were used to generate data that was collected in two phases. The first phase included collecting students' life stories through "Your Life as a Story" technique (McAdams, 1993). Students were asked to imagine their life as a book, divide it into several chapters, and think of 1-3 events that are meaningful to them in each chapter. They were invited to write those events ("life chapters") in the language through which they could express themselves the best. These were produced during the first semester of the academic year 2016-2017, during meetings organized and facilitated by me in a site convenient for them.

The second phase was asking students to write three meaningful stories (Denzin, 1999) related to their work as prospective EFL teachers (that happened in the college or classroom/practicum), including events that affected their professional life. These stories were

produced during the second semester. This two phase process can help shed light on students' identities from different perspectives.

Inspired by the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), content analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to analyze the explicit content in students' writing (the "what"), coding for the different themes that emerged in each narrative. Reoccurring themes within the various narratives of each participant and amongst the different participants were categorized into overarching themes. Such analysis highlighted the explicit content of students' responses.

To explore the implicit content, positioning analysis (Bamberg 2004) was used. As a person narrates his/her story, he/she positions his/her self and identity (Georgakopoulou, 2007) through the use of linguistic devices such as pronouns and metaphors, and analyzing them enabled me to uncover implicit meanings in students' professional identities, the "how" (Georgakopoulou, 2006).

Integrating two data analysis methods (content analysis and positioning analysis) helped elicit different dimensions of students' identities and assure the trustworthiness of the findings. In addition, member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used when returning to students and finding whether they endorse my analysis.

4. Findings

An analysis of the narratives illuminated that the student-teachers' professional identities were affected by personal and socio-cultural factors they have experienced in their past or present.

4.1 Personal Experiences: Teachers that Made a Difference

Reflecting on the personal experiences that have contributed to their professional identity construction, the student-teachers focused both on positive and negative experiences. Most of these experiences involved teachers that made a difference in their lives.

Siham, for example, narrated that after being undecided about her career choice while growing up, watching the film "Freedom Writers" made her realize her calling. "It left an immense impact on me. When watching it, I decided that I wanted to become an English teacher like the one in the movie." Encountering an influential English teacher in the movie influenced her professional decision.

Shams also described how an excellent English teacher at high school who believed in her abilities made her choose to become an English teacher:

“The teacher’s continuous support made me love English more and more and put extra effort to get higher grades, not for me or my parents, but to satisfy my teacher and see a smile on her lips. To show her that I’m up to the challenge.”

That teacher’s impact on Shams was tremendous. She was a positive role model that inspired her to become an English teacher herself.

Reem stressed the significance of having a supportive teacher as well. After experiencing several abusive teachers in elementary and middle school, she was “blessed,” as she described, to get a supportive English teacher in high school:

“She was very close to me. We were close friends. She constantly inspired me and told me that I should be a teacher in the future. The successful people like me should be teachers. And I became a teacher to mend what the teachers negatively did to me, to help students become psychologically sound, to help them remember their teachers positively, not negatively as I do.”

Reem’s words emphasize the significant role of teachers’ closeness, inspiration, and encouraging words on students’ fragile souls. Inspired by her compassionate and caring teacher, her decision to become a teacher is in a way a corrective action to counter all the bad teachers she had experienced and act differently.

The three student-teachers in these examples stressed that the influential teachers were an exception throughout their schooling years. They positioned those successful teachers versus all the other teachers who were discouraging, abusive, ridiculing, or non-supportive. Such positioning highlighted the contrast between the two types of teachers and helped the student-teachers realize the importance of becoming good teachers, “just like them,” so that they can leave a positive impact on their future students.

As opposed to these teachers who have impacted the student-teachers positively, some student-teachers’ narratives focused on negatively-influencing teachers. Sana’s narrative, titled “Your daughter is holding twenty watermelons in one hand,” was one of those, featuring a systematically-bullying high-school physics teacher who kept reiterating in her ears that she would not be able to succeed in his subject.

I tried to eliminate my fears and be patient in the face of his disgusting words and study. ... I continued being determined that no one would stop me from achieving my goal. ... He tried to discourage me more and more, but I ... succeeded despite all the negative energies... I graduated from high school with an average of a 100 in the computer science track.

In this narrative, Sana positions herself versus her physics teacher, with him incessantly discouraging her. She resisted his harassment and managed to succeed in his tests despite all the “negative energies” he sent towards her and despite all his negative words and actions. Such positioning of herself on one side and the teacher on the opposite side portrays her as strong and distinguished as opposed to him as a failing teacher who tries to impede the success of his students. In addition to using linguistic devices (Hanks, 1996) such as pronouns to convey her oppositional positioning (I versus him), her use of metaphors amplifies the picture. Trying to eliminate her fears “in the face of his disgusting words” presents a picture of herself facing a fierce storm that attempts to defeat her, yet fails to do so. In reality, the teacher’s harassment and abuse could not diminish her self-confidence or belief in academic capabilities.

Sana’s narrative reveals confrontational aspects in her identity, ones that illuminate how powerful and defiant she was. The teacher’s metaphor of her as “holding twenty watermelons in one hand” pinpoints to the unbearable academic load she chose to carry when selecting the most challenging track. While the teacher considers her choice as beyond her abilities, she proves at the end that she actually can “hold twenty watermelons in one hand” and excell.

The four examples in this subsection demonstrate the effect of teachers on students’ identities. Be it a positive effect, as was the case in Siham’s, Shams’, and Reem’s cases, or negative one, as reflected in Sana’s narrative, what teachers say and do in the classroom bears immense consequences on students’ developing characters and souls. That was obvious in the student-teachers’ narration of their identity crystallization and in their evolving determination to act in a way that would positively impact their future students. Inviting them to scrutinize and reflect on such experiences and influences helped open their eyes to their huge potential to make a difference in their future students’ lives.

4.2 Socio-Cultural Experiences: Politics and Privilege

A reality of power and local politics permeating the educational system in Arab schools was also reflected in most stories. In one of her narratives, Shams described an incident she experienced with one of the fifth-grade male students. He misbehaved while she was teaching, so she rebuked him. She approached the homeroom teacher to inform her of the incident. Upon knowing who the child was, the homeroom teacher warned her from talking to him since his father was powerful political figure in their town. When the lesson was over, the boy went to the principal’s office and called his father. Later, she was called to the principal’s office, where the father was waiting, and, to her words, “the principal was shocked as if a meteor descended from

the space.” His father scolded her and demanded: ‘Let my son do whatever he wishes.’ She left the room astonished, and found the homeroom teacher waiting outside and said:

‘I told you to leave him alone. I’m his homeroom teacher and still don’t do anything to him out of fear from his father. I told her: ‘Okay, next time even if he plays soccer in class I will shut up.’

And indeed, this student has influenced my personality as a teacher. My real personality would never accept such a behavior, but this experience has taught me that the value of teaching and education has deteriorated, and educating students is not a top priority anymore.

The permeation of political power into the educational system was manifested in the narrative. The prospective teacher is silenced not only by the powerful father but also the homeroom teacher who felt afraid of the father. Even the principal backs the father up in his irrational demand to “let (his) son do whatever he wishes,” either because of belonging to the same party of the mayor and his deputy and thus blindly supporting them, or fearing that the municipal financial support of his school could get negatively influenced if upsetting the deputy. Shams’ sarcastic portrayal of the “shocked” principal “as if a meteor descended from the space” reveals her disapproving attitude towards his disproportionate reaction.

The request of the father to let his son do whatever he wished reflects the sad Israeli-Arab reality where those in power raise their children to be inconsiderate of others, especially the less privileged ones. Such reality shocked Shams and affected her professional identity. Her morals that oppose disrespectful behavior conflicted with the twisted reality and resulted in her questioning of the value of teaching and education in general. She started reassessing her educational and pedagogical beliefs and forming a professional identity of a teacher who would conform, although unwillingly, to political powers in the future.

As opposed to student-teachers like Shams whose professional identities were negatively affected by the socio-cultural context, others’ identities were strengthened by such negative context. One of Fedaa’s narratives, for instance, characterized teachers who mistreated students coming from lower socio-economic status. Those teachers continually shouted at them and did not tolerate their misbehavior while tolerating similar misbehavior of students coming from a high socio-economic status or being related to the teacher. Observing such reality, Fedaa started morally questioning such behavior, wondering whether it was right for teachers to treat students according to their parents’ status or affinity to the teacher. Other student-teachers also asked similar questions upon encountering preferred treatment of certain students and rejected this phenomenon, stressing the need to change such gloomy reality.

A few student-teachers even narrated that they themselves have experienced similar incidents as college students. Dima, for instance, wrote how one of her lecturers at the college mistreated her due to having an old family feud with her family. His ridiculing and insults for her in front of her classmates in several occasions caused her to helplessly cry and leave the classroom. Her strong feelings of powerless in those occasions prevented her from speaking up. However, she vowed that “as a teacher, I will never do the same. I will never insult students or treat them based on their family backgrounds.”

Similar feelings of disappointment resurfaced in other student-teachers’ stories. In their narratives, they all positioned themselves in powerless positions versus the powerful teachers/principals/lecturers. They felt helpless during the narrated incidents since they lacked power and authority in those circumstances to confront their mentoring teachers/lecturers. However, except for Shams, they all vowed to act differently in their future classrooms. Their negative feelings could instigate positive change in their future pedagogy (Zembylas, 2003).

5. Discussion

Teacher identities are not isolated from other identities but are extrinsically linked. Gu & Benson (2015) examined the identities of English student-teachers in China and Hong Kong and found that their identity formation involved “a continuous interweaving of the individual and social” (p. 199). Such interplay between the individual and the social was prevalent in this study. As was reflected from the student-teachers’ narratives, their professional identities were extrinsically linked with the personal and socio-cultural context within which they were situated. Their emerging identities mirrored and were influenced by personal and culturally-specific challenges.

The stories of privilege and power permeating the Arab schools reveal coercive relations of power that the student-teachers experienced. According to Cummins (2009), “coercive relations of power refer to the exercise of power by a dominant individual, group, or country to the detriment of a subordinate individual, group or country” (p. 263). The abusive teacher in Sana’s story, the authoritative father in Shams’ story, and the discriminating teachers in Fedaa’s, Nelly’s, and Dima’s narratives all held powerful positions, but unfortunately misused their power. The coercive power relationships that surfaced here conflicted with the student-teachers’ expectations, beliefs, and values. They considered the principals, teachers, and parents (including the most powerful ones) as responsible for educating children to values of respect, equity and

justice and expected them to act according to such values. However, confronting a reality that contradicted their utopian imagined world has deeply shocked them. With the exception of a few influential teachers who have affected them positively, what the student-teachers encountered at schools was the exact opposite of those ideals. Such clash between idealistic values and the gloomy reality surprised and shocked them and left them feeling suppressed, intimidated, and powerless in the face of such coercive powers. Those feelings deeply affected the prospective teachers and their evolving professional identities.

Negative emotions can play a significant role in shaping professional identities (Zembylas, 2003). In this study, the effect of such emotions differed among the different participants. When feeling powerless in the face of powerful parents and principals or abusive and discriminating teachers, most student-teachers were determined to challenge injustice upon induction into the teaching profession in the future. A few, however, like Shams, expressed their hesitation to challenge the status quo and act differently in the future due to fear of the negative consequences involved in standing up in the face of unjust powers.

6. Research Significance and Concluding Thoughts

Since student-teachers' professional, social, political, and cultural identities are reflected in their classroom practices (Varghese et al., 2005), it is essential to provide spaces for them in teacher education programs to divulge their identities and discuss the factors that influence their construction. Such process helps teacher educators to become more tuned to their students' voices and learn about the experiences they have encountered. Personally, shedding light on my students' professional development through narrative means highlighted to me the meaningful experiences and life events that have contributed to shaping their identities as prospective EFL teachers, thus enabling me to better understand them and their teaching decisions.

Additionally, this process can potentially bear beneficial effects on the student-teachers' future practice as well. "Narrative inquiry enables teachers to make sense of their professional worlds and to make worthwhile changes in themselves and their preaching practices—to develop as teachers" (Golombek and Johnson, 2004, p. 309). The process of narration and reflection on the narrated experiences can help student-teachers "identify the cultural resources and constraints that arise from their personal and social histories and then decide how to incorporate this self-understanding into their teaching." (Menard- Warwick, 2008, pp. 636-637). It can enable them better understand their professional identity development and probably empower them to follow

their values rather than the dictates of the unjust system. Since power differentials will always exist and “it is impossible to eliminate power,” Kayi-Aydar (2017) argues that “teachers and teacher candidates ... can use power differentials to their advantage only when they are prepared” (p. 13). Creating spaces for student-teachers to reflect on their professional identities as was the case in this article can assist in preparing them for coping with power differentials and challenges that exist in schools.

Focusing on a population that is often absent from research in this field, this study also contributes to the scarce literature on the identity crystallization of this specific population. This is highly significant given the fact that the participants are all female student-teachers and part of a minority group, those whose voices are often missing from academic discussions of teacher practice (Canagarajah, 1996; Pennycook, 1999). Despite of the limitations of this study in researching the identity construction of a limited number of participants (15) and deriving data only from their written narratives, analyzing each student-teacher’s life story and three professional stories provided a glimpse into their identities and the context within which they were constructed.

To minimize the effect of the study limitations and provide an even more comprehensive picture of professional identities, future research can be conducted on a larger number of student-teachers from other areas within the Arab community in Israel as well as other Arab communities in the Middle East and around the world. In addition, the scope of the data collection can be extended beyond written narratives to include more in depth interviews with the participants as well as observations of them involved in practice teaching. Expanding the scope of future research beyond identity-in-discourse to include identity-in-practice (Varghese et al., 2005) can help illuminate additional perspectives of professional identities.

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