

Language Teacher Identity and its Effect on CPD: A Study with Teachers of ZPH School Indiranagar

Monishita Hajra Pande

Abstract

The English teachers of Zilla Parishad High School, Indiranagar, Hyderabad, seem to be highly motivated, take initiatives and are appreciative of the school ecosystem. Their teacher identity requires close examination to understand what sets them apart from other teachers operating in similar contexts. How do their teacher identities influence Continuing Professional Development (CPD)? This is the central question that this study sets out to address and attempts to look at teacher agency and the institutional role in shaping teacher identity. Through a questionnaire, unstructured interviews and reflective conversations, this paper throws light on the complexities of teacher identity and its effect on CPD.

Keywords: Teacher identity, language teacher agency, continuing professional development (CPD)

Introduction

The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad (EFLU) under its University's Social Responsibility (USR) initiative has recently adopted a Zilla Parishad High School (ZPHS) located in Indiranagar, Siddipet district (approximately 100 kilometres from Hyderabad) in Telangana. This collaboration between higher education institutions and schools is in line with NEP's (2020) vision of creating interfaces at different levels of institutional structures thereby facilitating exchange of resources, skills, and expertise. I have been part of this initiative and my interactions with the five English teachers of ZPHS Indiranagar prompted me to undertake this study on teacher identity (TI).

The complexity of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers' identity needs to be explored since the ways teachers perceive themselves as professionals impact teacher development. TI as defined by Danielewicz (2001) is "our understanding of who we are and who we think other people are" (p. 10). Specifically, TI is used to describe how teachers seem to understand themselves as teachers (Ball & Goodson, 1985; Nias, 1989). Ball and Goodson (1985) highlight the importance of this concept and state that "the ways in which teachers achieve, maintain, and develop their identity, their sense of self, in and through a career, are of vital significance in understanding the actions and commitments of teachers in their work" (p. 18). Research in TI has focused on understanding various aspects related to teaching English (Richards, 2006; Clarke, 2008). Several studies have been conducted to study TI and its impact on classrooms and schools (Rochsantiningsih, 2019). A few studies have examined the impact of TI on teachers' professional development practices. This study will explore how teacher identity influences teachers' Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

Definitions of Teacher Identity (TI)

The term Teacher Identity has been defined in several ways in teacher education literature.

- Clarke (2008) defines TI as "identity references, individual's knowledge and naming of themselves, as well as others' recognition of them as a particular sort of person" (p. 8).
- Varghese et al., (2005) state that "the influence on teachers, how individuals see themselves, and how they enact their profession in their settings is TI" (p. 34).
- Morgan (2004) defines TI as "instantiations of discourse, systems of power/knowledge that regulate and ascribe social values to all forms of human activity" (p. 173). This definition situates TI within the complex web of various factors within a socio-political context.
- Johnson (2003) provides a definition of TI that emerges from interactions and experiences. He defines TI as "relational, constructed and altered by how I see others and how they see me in our shared experiences and negotiated interactions" (p. 788).
- Gee (2001) defines TI as "being recognized as a certain 'kind

of person'; identity is connected not to internal states but to performances in society. It is also "an important analytical tool for understanding schools and society" (p. 99). This definition takes into consideration external actions instead of internal states.

In this study, I have primarily considered teacher identity as how teachers see themselves which is influenced by how others see them. I conceptualize TI as a mix of internal and external factors. Therefore, Gee's, Johnson's and Morgan's definition of TI as being connected to external actions, negotiated interactions and systems of power and Clarke's and Varghese's definitions based on perceptions (of self and others) provide a balanced understanding of TI. To understand the effect of TI on CPD, it is important to adhere to a holistic definition of TI that draws from both internal and external factors influencing TI.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is at the heart of reflective practice that marks the characteristics of a self-conscious, critical, and reflective teacher who views herself as a lifelong learner. Teachers learn from varied sources, through training and development opportunities, from peers, and through self-reflection of their own practice. Such constant learning constitutes CPD and is as Hayes (2014) suggests a multi-faceted and lifelong experience. Olsen (2016) highlights that CPD also signifies a constant engagement with the act of becoming. It allows teachers to engage with their teacher identity in an active manner, enabling them to critique practice to improve performance (Borg, 2011). Since reflection is at the core of CPD it enables teachers "...to develop new understanding and insights about students, teaching, and themselves as teachers ..." (Farrell, 2015, p. 81). Thus, CPD and teacher identity are closely related.

Language Teacher Agency and Teacher Identity

In-service teacher development activities need to assist teachers in continually negotiating their dynamic professional identities, which are closely connected to the dynamic pedagogical contexts in which teachers operate. Agency is an important aspect of teachers' professional identities because it allows them to act in line with their goals for continuous professional development. However, when teacher agency does not find a proper channel to operationalize itself, it can lead to

frustration, burnout, dissatisfaction, and demotivation (Trent, 2017). Agency, within the area of language teacher identity, is often defined as the capacity for an individual to act, as connected to and influenced by the individual's social contexts (Feryok, 2012; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Tsui, 2007). Vahasantanen (2015) emphasizes the need to understand agency as "both socially and individually resourced" (p. 1). In this study, teacher agency is viewed as both teacher-directed and institutionally mediated that gets operationalized in teachers' professional development activities.

In the Indian context, a doctoral research conducted in a Vishakhapatnam secondary school context titled *Impact of teacher identities on teaching practices: A study on English language teachers in selected secondary schools of Vishakhapatnam* (2021) examines the connection between English teachers' multiple identities and their impact on classroom practices. It throws light on the beliefs and assumptions that guide teacher action in the classroom and shape teacher identity but fails to explore teacher agency within a TI framework. It does not go beyond the classroom space. The questionnaire used for this study provided useful insights for the development of the tool for this study. A more detailed discussion on the tool of this study will be included in a later section on tools and data.

Context of the Study

As outlined in the introduction, this study is motivated by the EFL University's adoption of ZPHS Indiranagar as part of its USR initiative. At present, the EFLU faculty meets students and teachers online twice a week and visits the school for face-to-face classes during weekends.

During my visits to the school, I observed that this Zilla Parishad school was visibly different from others in terms of infrastructure, student enrolment, number of English teachers and teacher motivation and skill sets. Also, I observed that the students are continuously engaged in several activities in collaboration with other organizations. The government aims to make this school a model school for other schools in the neighbouring districts to emulate and to adopt its template of holistic development.

At the time of this study, there were five English teachers in this school to teach Classes 6 to 10 out of which two teachers have been working in the school for a long time and three were on deputation for a stipulated

period. These teachers exhibited a high degree of motivation, advanced technological skills, and involvement.

The Study: Tools and Data

My initial interactions with the teachers revealed that all the five English teachers were actively involved in CPD activities and were part of teacher networks. Their participation, involvement, and enthusiasm to talk about their school and initiatives made me curious about their perceptions of their teacher identities. My researcher hunch made me guess that their teacher identities must be shaping their participation. This triggered the central question of this enquiry: How do their teacher identities influence CPD? To understand the connection between teacher identity and CPD, a questionnaire was administered to all the five English teachers.

Unstructured interviews and reflective conversations were also used to collect data and understand teacher responses to the questionnaire. Discussion with the principal and another important administrator of the school (mentor-teacher) revealed important aspects of institutional mediation that play an important role in the construction of teacher identity.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into four parts. The first part aimed at collecting information about the profile of the participants. The second part of the questionnaire included statements aimed at tapping into the teachers' perception about themselves as English teachers and their understanding of good practices in the language classroom. The third part of the questionnaire focused on CPD activities, and the fourth included open-ended questions to understand the initiatives they have taken for themselves and the students.

The interviews and reflective conversations with the teachers enabled me to go deeper into the responses of the questionnaire. Discussions before administering the questionnaire shaped the construction of the tool and in refining the analysis of data.

Discussion and Analysis

In this section I present the teachers' profiles and the data collected from the questionnaire. The unstructured interviews and reflective

conversations with the teachers have also been incorporated in analyzing the questionnaire data. All the five teachers who participated in the study have more than ten years of teaching experience and their age ranges between 36-49 years. Two teachers are female and three are male. They are mid-career professionals and are highly motivated to expand their professional skills and expertise. All of them hold a Master's degree in English. While T1 to T4 teach grade levels 6 to 10, T5 teaches grades 6 and 7. Additional discussion revealed that T2 and T3 have been teaching in the present school for more than ten years whereas T1, T4 and T5 are on deputation and have been with ZPHS Indiranagar for one to two years. However, the teachers on deputation also have more than ten years of teaching experience in their parent schools.

Perceptions about Self and Teaching of English

The statements that aimed to understand teacher perceptions about their identity revealed some interesting insights. The table below presents the data of the questionnaire.

SA: Strongly Agree, A: Agree, NAD: Neither Agree nor Disagree, D: Disagree, SD: Strongly Disagree

Table 1

| <i>Statements</i> | <i>T1</i> | <i>T2</i> | <i>T3</i> | <i>T4</i> | <i>T5</i> |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| I consider myself a language teacher first and foremost. | SA | SA | A | SA | A |
| I am a role model for my students. | SA | SA | A | SA | NAD |
| I believe that being an English teacher is an integral part of my identity. | SA | SA | SA | A | A |
| I feel a sense of pride in being an English teacher. | SA | SA | A | A | A |
| I feel my English skills are excellent. | SA | SA | SA | A | NAD |
| I have enough self-confidence. | SA | SA | SA | A | NAD |
| I continuously reflect on my teaching practices for my professional development. | SA | SA | SA | A | SA |
| I feel connected with other English teachers. | SA | SA | NAD | A | D |
| I need to continue to improve my English. | SA | SA | A | A | SA |

| | | | | | |
|---|----|----|----|-----|-----|
| I feel I am responsible for my students' English language skills. | SA | SA | A | SA | SA |
| I am an empathetic teacher. | SA | SA | SA | A | NAD |
| There is a mismatch between my expectations of life as an English teacher and the realities of the classroom. | SD | SD | D | A | A |
| Teachers should be authoritative in the classroom to teach effectively. | D | SA | A | NAD | SA |
| I feel it is very important that my students like me as a person. | SA | SA | A | A | A |
| The way a teacher dresses and looks constitute part of his/her identity. | SA | SA | D | A | SD |
| Multiple identities influence teaching negatively. | SD | SD | D | D | D |
| Classroom interaction enhances a student's social skills. | SA | SA | SA | A | A |
| I consciously modify my personality because I'm a non-native speaker of English. | SA | SD | A | NAD | A |
| I often discuss my religious views in class. | SD | SD | SD | D | SD |
| I consider English teaching involves value/moral education. | SA | SA | A | A | A |

The above table, along with interviews and reflective conversations, reveals interesting insights about teacher identities of the five English teachers of ZPH School, Indiranagar.

T2 and T3 have been associated with the same school for more than five years. They consider themselves to be important stakeholders in various decision-making processes of the school. T4 has been in the present school for one and a half years and wishes to continue here for some more time. T1 and T5 have been with the present school for only one year and are on deputation. They believe that soon they will be transferred to another school. It is also interesting to note that T5 has just transitioned from primary to secondary school teaching. His responses reveal his lack of confidence with English, and he also confessed that he needs more time to feel part of the community of English teachers.

All the teachers perceive their role as the English teacher as an important component of their identity. They all take pride in their profession; however, two out of five teachers feel there is a mismatch between their expectations and classroom realities as a language teacher. These teachers confessed in the interview that they are still unsure about language pedagogy and often feel the need to upgrade their professional knowledge about teaching language skills. All the teachers see themselves as reflective practitioners and most of them are confident about their language proficiency. However, all of them believe that they need to continue to work on their language skills. The interviews revealed that most of them believe that they need to improve their vocabulary and pronunciation.

Three out of five teachers feel connected with their community of English teachers while two confessed that they are yet to find a long-term network of teachers that is enabling and supportive. They narrated their experiences of taking part in professional development programmes where they felt connected with some teachers but were unable to sustain those spaces of collaboration.

Most of the teachers viewed the authoritarian role of a teacher in a positive light. Although they agreed in principle when asked about learner-centred teaching in the interview, they also believe that discipline is important, and a teacher must exercise her authority in the classroom. Teachers have positive perceptions of classroom interaction on learners' social skills but when they were asked how they increased classroom interaction, they expressed issues such as learner reticence and low learner participation in the class.

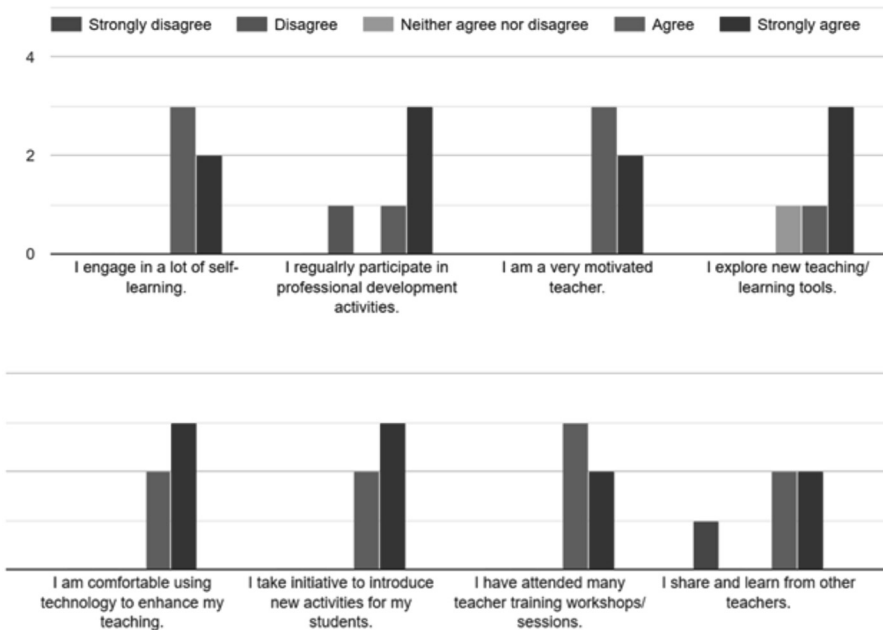
All the teachers agreed that an English teacher carried multiple identities, and these enrich their practice instead of impeding it. All the teachers believe that value education is a part of English education. They consider it to be their responsibility to teach students to differentiate between good and bad. When they were probed further, they said that most stories in the textbook carry a message. Therefore, the English class often becomes a ground to discuss moral values. Three out of these five teachers stated that they have taken initiatives to instil moral values and behavioural changes in the students outside the curriculum. They said they consider it to be their moral responsibility to make their students better persons. Almost all the teachers see themselves as empathetic teachers striving to be good human beings as it is important

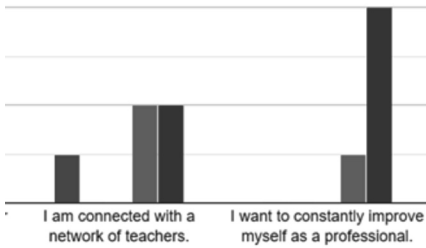
that their students consider them to be good people. This is in line with their response on English teachers’ role in inculcating value education. Three out of five teachers confessed that they consciously modify their personality as they are non-native users of English. Conversations with them on this aspect revealed that they feel English is not their language and therefore they need to be more conscious while communicating in English than while doing so in their mother tongue. However, the other two teachers felt strongly about their perception of English as one of the languages among others. It was interesting to note that their perception of English had a strong impact on their identity as an English teacher.

Continuing Professional Development: CPD

This section discusses responses of the teachers to the section of the questionnaire on CPD.

Figure 1





The above data reveals that all the teachers take part regularly in CPD and perceive themselves as curious people with a growth mindset. Except one teacher (who has just transitioned from primary school into secondary school as an English teacher) the other four teachers are part of professional networks of teachers and feel connected with their community. Two out of five teachers have taken part in Action Research initiatives and have also mentored other teachers in their clusters.

Table 2

The following table shows the range of CPD activities that they have been part of in recent times:

| T1 | T2 | T3 | T4 | T5 |
|---|--|---|---|--|
| Has attended ICT-related workshops and training programmes. | Has taken part in Action Research projects. Has attended training programmes in the teaching of skills. | Has taken part in Action Research projects. Has attended online seminars on pedagogy. Actively attends cluster level meetings of teachers | Has attended state level training programmes. | Has mentored programmes organized by the State Education Department. Has acted as resource person in cluster level initiatives. |

The above table shows that their recent CPD activities range from action research to online webinars. Some of them are active mentors and resource persons for other teachers. Their connectedness with the community of teachers reflects their collective teacher identity as English teachers who take pride in their profession. The teachers also highlighted that they were part of these CPD activities voluntarily and benefited from them in many ways. This shows how their identities are operationalized in terms of teacher agency in their CPD initiatives.

Table 3: *Recent Initiatives Taken by the Teachers for Students*

| T1 | T2 | T3 | T4 | T5 |
|--|--|---|---|--|
| Has initiated behavioural programmes for students to develop emotional balance and readiness for learning. | Integration of technology with content and pedagogy. | Has initiated behavioural programmes for students to develop calmness and concentration in students | Has initiated and developed a morning routine for the students in the school. | Developing questioning skills of learners through storytelling (pedagogy). |

The above table shows that the initiatives taken by the teachers are either in the domain of pedagogy or behavioural intervention. This is in line with their perception of their identities as being that of instilling moral values and good behaviours.

Institutional Mediation and TI

The teachers compared their school to corporate schools and acknowledged the resources that have been made available to their school in terms of technology and infrastructure.

They view the school's top priority as providing holistic education and its thrust area being the development of twenty-first century skills. The school management encourages teachers to take students out of the school premises—for instance, to *Swacha Badi* (an initiative to make Siddipet into a self-sustainable district with 100 per cent waste management system) to engage students in community work and enable holistic development. One of the teachers mentioned that he wanted to run parallel sessions for students who come into secondary school with some learning deficit (from primary classes). These sessions were also supported by the school administration which motivated him to work harder for his students beyond school hours. Unanimously the teachers highlighted how the school administration was different from other schools in being responsive, democratic, and innovative. Since one of the mentors of the school was himself an ex-principal, his awareness of the context contributed greatly to supporting the teachers. He also works closely with the state education ministry and thus facilitates policy level interventions and support to the school from time to time.

Findings and Conclusion

This study shows that language teacher identity influences teachers' CPD initiatives. When teachers are placed in an educational context where the institution mediates their agency and supports growth and development, it has a positive effect on teacher identity and CPD. The data collected revealed that teachers' sense of identity is closely connected with agency and their willingness to take initiatives for their learners and themselves. Although the teachers operate within a government school system which often struggles with challenges of infrastructure, student dropouts, teacher and learner motivation, this study reveals how teacher identity mediated by a proactive institutional system can have a positive impact on teacher development and institutional growth. This study in the Indian context contributes to the understanding of the complex construct on teacher identity and its effect on teacher development.

References

- Ball, S.J., & Goodson, I.F. (1985). *Teachers lives and careers*. Routledge.
- Borg, S. (2011). The impact of in-service teacher education on language teachers' beliefs. *System*, 39(3), 370–80. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2011.07.009>
- Chukka, S.R. (2021). *A study on English language teachers in selected secondary schools of Vishakhapatnam* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Andhra University. Shodhganga.inflibet.ac.in. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/417935>.
- Clarke, M. (2008). *Language teacher identities: Co-constructing discourse and community*. Multilingual Matters.
- Danielewicz, J. (2001). *Teaching selves: Identity, pedagogy and teacher education*. State University of New York Press.
- Farrell, T.S.C. (2015). *Promoting teacher reflection in second language education: A framework for TESOL professionals*. Routledge.
- Feryok, A. (2012). Activity theory and language teacher agency. *The Modern Language Journal*, 96(1), 95–107. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41478807>
- Gee, J.P. (2001). Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. In W.G. Secada (Ed.), *Review of research in education* (Vol. 25) (pp. 99–125). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Hayes, D. (2014). Overview: Innovations in continuing professional development: Sector-wide, institutional and personal perspectives. In D. Hayes (Ed.), *Innovations in the continuing professional development of English language teachers* (pp. 5-15). British Council.
- Johnson, K. (2003). Every experience is a moving experience: Identity and growth through mentoring. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 19, 787-800.

- <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2003.06.003>
- Kayi-Aydar, H. (2015). Multiple identities, negotiations and agency across time and space: A narrative inquiry of a foreign language teacher candidate. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 12(2), 137-160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2015.1032076>
- Morgan, B. (2004). Teacher identity as pedagogy: Towards a field-internal conceptualisation in bilingual and second language education. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 7, 172-188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050408667807>
- Nias, J. (1989) *Primary teachers talking*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Olsen, B. (2016). Knowledge, learning, and identity for teachers. In B. Olsen (Ed.), *Teaching for success: Developing your teacher identity in today's classroom*, (19-36). Routledge.
- Richards, K. (2006). Being the teacher: Identity and classroom conversation. *Oxford Journals*, 27(1), 51-77. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/ami041>
- Rochsantiningasih, D. (2019). Exploring language teacher roles as teacher identity. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 461, 10-15.
- Trent, J. (2017). Discourse, agency, and teacher attrition: Exploring stories to leave by amongst former early career English language teachers in Hong Kong. *Research Papers in Education*, 32(1), 84-105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2016.1144215>
- Tsui, A.B.M. (2007). Complexities of identity formation: A narrative inquiry of an EFL teacher. *TESOL Quarterly*, 41(4), 657-680. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40264401>
- Vahasantanan, K. (2015). Professional agency in the stream of change: Understanding educational change and teachers' professional identities. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 47, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.11.006>
- Varghese, M., Morgan, B., Johnson, B., & Johnson, K.A. (2005). Theorizing language teacher identity: Three perspectives and beyond. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 4(1), 21-44. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327701jlie0401_2

Monishita Hajra Pande is Assistant Professor in The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. She works in cross-linguistic transfer of skills, bi-/multilingualism, teacher education, writing pedagogy, and language policy.
moni.hajra@gmail.com