



Exploring Teacher Professional Identity: A Thematic Analysis Of Qualitative Reflections

Swati Dhonchak
Assistant Professor,
SCERT, Delhi

Abstract

This study explores the multifaceted concept of teacher professional identity through thematic analysis of reflective narratives provided by teachers. It analysed open-ended responses to identify how teachers perceive their roles, values, and the challenges inherent in maintaining a coherent professional identity. The findings suggest that identity is fluid and contextually embedded, shaped by personal values, institutional environments, professional relationships, and evolving pedagogical commitments. Implications are discussed in light of teacher education, policy reform, and sustainable professional development.

Keywords: teacher identity, thematic analysis, reflective practice, qualitative research, professional development

Introduction

Professional identity is central to how teachers view themselves and their actions in the professional setting. It is more than roles and responsibilities, it is the ethical, emotional, and intellectual energy teachers dedicate to their profession. As schools evolve in response to globalization, technological innovation, and changing learner demographics, teachers are required to adapt while preserving their sense of self and identity.

This study explores Teacher Professional Identity through the lens of teachers from a bottom-up perspective using qualitative practitioners' reflections. By concentrating on teachers' voices, the researcher learnt about the day-to-day experiences, the tensions that shape them, and the dynamics that inform their professional lives. The objective is to contribute to the understanding of the construction of identity and supports for the maintenance of identity.

Literature Review

Researching Teacher Professional Identity has been a major line of inquiry in educational discourse, especially how teachers perceive their identity and their role in dynamic, accommodating learning environments. Researchers generally contend identity is not static but is relatively fluid and alters over time through personal, social, and institutional forces (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). This section will summarize significant researches documenting various aspects of teacher identity, including how their identity develops, the factors that shape it, and the influence it has in practice.

Teacher professional identity intersects with professional development and career. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) illustrate that identity is developed through narrative and story, where teachers constructed meaning and interpreted their professional lives by contemplating both individual and collective experience. As a narrative construction, identity suggests that how teachers come to understand their identities may be as influenced by their practice as identity goes on to influence the role and responsibilities of teachers, and their professional development over time.

Sachs (2001) theorizes teacher identity as being multi-faceted and shaped through competing discourses, including managerial, democratic, and professional, and maintains identity is negotiated between internal beliefs, and external dictates.

Several studies have shown that the core values and beliefs of teachers underpin identity. Van den Berg (2002) states identity has a moral foundation based on emotional commitment. He further suggests the inner world of teachers is what they care about most and indirectly influences their practices.

There are many institutional organizations and policy benefits that can support and at times constrict teacher identity. Kelchtermans (2005) argues that teacher identity is highly embedded in outside influences; the strongest of these being performative environments encompass accountability measures that standardize a teacher's identity.

Day, Kington, Stobart, and Sammons's (2006) conclusion; identity is closely coupled with both commitment and resilience. Their longitudinal study; found identity changes as a result of changes (policy, school life, and personal life) in practice.

Flores and Day (2006) drew attention to the filtration of identity through individual histories, pathways, and the position and environment. Flores and Day even stated that value clashes often emerge when policy and/or school culture collides with people's beliefs.

Similarly, Olsen (2008) offers the idea that identity formation occurs in a bigger mixed reality of experience, whether it is in preservice education, the classroom, or culture.

In more current research, Ruohotie-Lyhty (2013) examined the shape of novice teachers' professional identity construction, largely framed by agency and reflection. She familiarizes idea to results that demonstrate identity shape is facilitated by teachers moving from theory to practice. Reflective dialogue with people and making use of collaborative culture increases agency and self-efficacy perceptions especially when they are at the beginning of their teaching career.

These studies highlight that teacher professional identity is complex, evolving, and deeply relational. It is informed by values, shaped through social interactions, and mediated by broader institutional and policy contexts.

Methodology

• Research Design

A qualitative, descriptive research design was adopted to explore how teachers conceptualize and navigate their professional identities. Reflective questions were distributed among a diverse group of teachers, who responded in an open-ended format. The data collected illustrated how teachers' beliefs about teaching and their professional identity development.

• Analytical Framework

The qualitative data were thematically analysed using a descriptive and interpretive framework consistent with exploratory research. The researcher read and re-read each participant's responses iteratively to identify common themes, recurring ideas, patterns, and shared understandings connected to the research questions. Themes were constructed from analysis of the responses received through survey conducted.

- **Ethical Considerations**

All participant responses were anonymous. The researcher adhered to ethical principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality.

Findings

The thematic analysis revealed seven primary domains, each corresponding to the reflective prompts posed to participants. Across all responses, teacher professional identity emerged as a dynamic, relational, and values-driven construct. Below is a detailed analysis of each thematic domain -

Theme No.	Main Theme	Sub-Themes
1	Meaning of Being a Teacher	1.1 Teacher as a Facilitator 1.2 Moral and Social Responsibility 1.3 Passion and Service
2	Defining Professional Identity	2.1 Dynamic and Evolving 2.2 Relational Identity 2.3 Learner-Centred Commitment
3	Influences on Teacher Identity	3.1 Mentorship and Role Models 3.2 Experience and Practice 3.3 Institutional Context
4	Role of Values in Practice	4.1 Ethical Teaching 4.2 Equity and Inclusion 4.3 Passion and Purpose
5	Challenges to Professional Identity	5.1 Policy and Administrative Pressure 5.2 Workload and Burnout 5.3 Societal Expectations
6	Navigating Conflicts Between Beliefs and Institutions	6.1 Compromise and Adaptation 6.2 Advocacy and Negotiation 6.3 Personal Reflection
7	Envisioning Future Roles	7.1 Lifelong Learning 7.2 Mentorship and Leadership 7.3 Digital and Global Shifts

Discussion

The results present teacher identity as an ongoing negotiation between internal meaning and institutional structures. As long as teachers' intrinsic motivations are secure, extrinsic pressures threaten coherence and sustainability. Above all, identity is not fixed—it changes in interaction with policy, pedagogy, and professional relations.

This coincides with earlier research (Sachs, 2001), which sees teacher identity as constructed and reconstructed by discourse and practice. The results imply reflective spaces, mentorship, and institutional support are essential to maintaining a healthy professional identity.

- **How Do Teachers Construct Their Professional Identity?**

The teachers in the study view their professional identity as an evolving, multidimensional, and value-based construct that is influenced by personal belief systems, interpersonal contexts, and systems. Their views can be summarized into the following analytical dimensions:

- **Identity as Dynamic and Evolving**

Teachers do not conceptualize identity as something that remains constant. Instead, it is an ongoing process of becoming—one that shifts with the change in experience, challenge, and context. This understanding is consistent with developmental and constructivist conceptualizations of identity. This flexibility is core to the way they survive and flourish in ecologically diverse schools.

- **Identity as Relational and Contextual**

Teachers perceive identity as being developed by relationship with students, peers, mentors, and the institution. Not only who they are, but also how they are seen and valued in the school environment.

Identity is developed through being connected—with students, with the school community, and in moments of affirmation and tension. It is rooted in social validation, working collaboratively, and institutional recognition.

- **Identity as Ethical and Value-Laden**

Professional identity is founded upon moral purpose. Teachers see themselves not as mere conduits of information but as models and moral agents. Their philosophies, practice, and decision-making are founded upon strong notions of fairness, justice, and the well-being of learners. This is an ethical foundation that directs how they define their role and responsibility, particularly in the face of system pressure.

- **Identity as Centred on Learner Success**

A teacher's identity is deeply rooted in their dedication to students. Most answers reveal that professional value is gauged by the learning, involvement, and flourishing of learners. Teachers identify with the difference they make in student lives. This student-focused perspective is what keeps them motivated despite institutional limitations.

- **Identity as Resilient yet Vulnerable**

While teachers show resilience—through reflection, compromise, and advocacy—they also demonstrate vulnerability to outside forces: workload, policy, lack of autonomy, and undervaluation by society. These tensions threaten their capacity to maintain an identity. Teachers use personal strategies (such as reflection and peer support) to continue to align with purpose despite this.

- **Identity as Forward-Looking**

Teachers see their identity as extending forward—one that encompasses lifelong learning, leadership, and technological integration. They welcome change, not only as a professional requirement but as an integral part of what they are developing themselves into. This forward-thinking attitude indicates a robust growth mind-set being deeply rooted in their identity.

Conclusion

The existing research provides in-depth knowledge about the professional identity of teachers as a multi-layered and changing construct. The thematic analysis of the reflective answers suggest that identity is closely embedded in personal values, is shaped by relational aspects present in their experiences, and faced with systemic and social constraints and limitations. Teachers do not view their position as simply being providers of knowledge; instead, they view themselves as lifelong learners. Their professional self-concept is subject to tension from their inner beliefs and external pressures like administrative requirements, policy reforms, and public perceptions.

Finally, the on-going sustaining of teacher identity is not the sole responsibility of the teachers, rather it is a responsibility that should be shared across institutions, communities, and policy-makers. It is crucial for the ethical, committed, and effective development of the teaching profession as a whole that teachers are empowered to define, shape, and sustain their professional identity.

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