

STRENGTHENING TEACHER IDENTITY AND PROFESSIONALISM AS A WAY TO INCREASE THE APPEAL AND STATUS OF TEACHING PROFESSION

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***Abstract:** Improving the status of the teaching profession is seen as an important prerequisite for increasing its appeal for both practicing teachers and university graduates who have obtained a teaching qualification. This state-of-the-art review looks into recent research in the field of creating and maintaining teacher identity and a sense of belonging to the profession of teaching in general, and foreign language teaching in particular. It provides a commentary on a number of issues related to the role of identity in conceptualising professionalism in the field of language teaching. Current research views teacher identity as a multifaceted, dynamic, and context-bound phenomenon, which is closely related to defining and negotiating one's self, and managing the affective domain. Different interpretations of professionalism are discussed, starting from the externally imposed form, sponsored and delineated by policy-makers, to its independent variety, stemming from individual teachers' views and reflections on their own beliefs and actions. Sponsored professionalism is linked to the recent call for measurable accountability in education worldwide and in Bulgarian higher education.*

***Key words:** teacher identity, professionalism, foreign language teaching*

1. Introduction

Recent research on teachers' job satisfaction and general well-being shows a special interest in the concept of identity as a critical component in the sociocultural and sociopolitical landscape of the L2 classroom and in L2 teachers' professional development (Burns & Richards, 2009; Johnson, 2003; Singh & Richards, 2006; Varghese, 2006; Tsui, 2007). In general, teacher identity is viewed as relational, discursively constructed and context bound, and formed in the process of enacting one's role (Burns & Richards, 2009; Tsui, 2007). However, despite the significance of identity and its nature and development, it remains a widely disputed topic, and "researchers are still in the early stages of understanding how teacher identities are formed, the factors that influence changes of identities, and the role these identities play in students' and teachers' motivation and learning" (Schultz, Hong & Francis, 2018, p. 3).

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Closely linked to and dependent on the concept of identity, the notion of professionalism is of primary importance in the current educational climate of accountability, managerialism, and demand for quality teaching. Helsby (1999) links professionalism to having personal and behavioural characteristics of dedication, commitment and highly skilled practice, qualities which are part of one's personal identity as well. Therefore, modern teacher education should aim at strengthening teacher identity, an integral part of teacher professionalism, as a way of increasing the status of teaching and its appeal to prospective teachers.

2. Defining teacher identity

The concept of teacher identity first emerged as a separate research area in 1970s within the more general prototype of 'educator' (Beijaard et al., 2004). Bucholtz & Hall (2005) define identity as the way in which one sees his/ her role as a teacher as being important, attractive and in harmony with the other roles the person has, while Chong et al. (2011) view it as an individual's set of internalized expectancies regarding one's professional role.

Summarising current research, Rus et al. (2012) state that research history in the area shows a variety of meanings, and an absence of widely accepted definition, much in line with Beijaard et al. (2004, p. 108), who argue that identity is not "a fixed attribute of a person, but a relational phenomenon". Schultz, Hong & Francis (2018, p. 4) also point out that the field of identity research has been growing "without adequately addressing differences and similarities among diverse approaches, discerning strengths and weaknesses, and evaluating effectiveness, applicability, and the value of various frameworks".

Research on identity requires a multi-disciplinary approach which employs diverse research paradigms and methodologies, such as Philosophy and Psychology of Education, Teacher Education, Multicultural Education, Cultural Studies, Psychoanalysis, Phenomenology, Post-structuralism, Post-positivism, Race theories and Gender studies. Researchers can make use of qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods tools so as to reveal the multifaceted nature and complexity of the studied phenomenon.

3. Identity as belonging

According to Wenger's social theory of identity, identities are formed as a result of the "tension between our investment in the various forms of belonging, and our ability to negotiate the meanings that matter in those contexts" (Wenger, 1998, p. 188). Wenger differentiates between three modes of belonging as sources of identification: engagement, imagination, and alignment. Engagement involves investing ourselves in what we do, as well as in our relations with other members of the community, which gives us a sense of who we are. Imagination

is the process of relating ourselves to the world beyond the community of practice in which we are engaged and seeing our experience as located in the broader context. Alignment is a process in which participants in a community become connected by bringing their actions and practices in line with a broader enterprise, e.g. the identity of an institution becomes the identity of its participants. According to Wenger, alignment which is achieved purely through coercion and oppression might lead to dissociation and alienation. This means that the community's core practice can shape teachers' identities, and teachers can develop different identities in different schools depending on the extent to which opportunities are provided to them to participate in core activities (Tsui & Edwards, 2009).

Identity has been described as the factor which influences teachers' behaviour at work, their general well-being and work effectiveness (Abednia, 2012; Ashforth & Tomiuk, 2000). Recent studies have focused on the link between teachers' identity and their status as native or non-native speakers of the language they teach, with results pointing towards the fact that non-native speakers' identity might be characterised by conflict and struggle (Varghese et al., 2005). These conflicts can either lead to new forms of engagement and new relations with the community members, or they could lead to identities of marginality, disengagement, and nonparticipation (Tsui, 2007). In a similar vein, Day (2018) conceptualises the constraints of policies on teacher identity, which he sees as a blend of the personal and professional selves, emerging during transactions among workplace structures and cultures.

4. Identity as a personal investment

The findings of case studies of teacher trainees, conducted and described by Calderhead and Shorrock (1997, p. 200) show that being a teacher and performing one's duties involves "a personal investment, a feeling of being at ease in the role of a teacher, an acceptance of teaching as being part of one's identity, being able to reconcile one's own values with those of the institution and the colleagues with whom one works". This is what researchers call 'agency' and describe as a key basic psychological need for an active pursuit of one's goals, and the self-efficacy to achieve those goals (see Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan, Huta & Deci, 2008). Agency involves managing one's learning and development actively and intentionally. Schultz, Hong and Francis (2018, p. 245) similarly define it as a "key construct in teachers' pathways to authoring their professional identities".

5. Professional identity through culturally imbedded roles

Teacher's professional identity is closely linked to developing relationships with students and fellow-teachers, establishing a rapport with others involved in the

education process, and contributing to its success through one's own personal efforts and qualities. Professional identity affects the roles teachers perform as experts in their subject; as facilitators of students' learning; as motivators and sources of inspiration for other teachers and students. These roles and the ways they are perceived by society are culturally embedded and differ depending on a variety of factors, such as the type of school management system in the country, and the degree of responsibility and freedom teachers have. What is more, professional identity is a continuous process of interpretation and reinterpretation prompted by professional experiences and contextual factors (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), whose dominance might change over time. There are both core and peripheral features comprising identity, which can assume different significance depending on a number of contextual factors. Rus et al. (2012), for example, studied these features in a survey with 80 Romanian teachers tracing short and long-term changes in their identity depending on the context variables and the length of teachers' professional experience.

6. Current areas of research on identity

Currently, the general topic of teacher identity is subdivided into several areas of research interest: defining and re-defining the scope and nature of identity; tracing its formation and development, and looking for context and culture-specific manifestations of identity. In addition, Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) emphasised the place of the self in the concept of identity, and the role of emotion, personal narrative, and reflection on experience. The process of defining and negotiating one's self is seen as crucial in developing teacher identity (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018). Researchers also aim to trace the key processes involved in identity development, such as agency, resilience, efficacy, attributions, and the need for vulnerability (Schultz, Hong & Francis, 2018, p. 4). They believe that teacher identity is strengthened and reinforced by overcoming challenges and conflicts in enacting authority while experiencing vulnerability (Alsup, 2018). Another prism, through which researchers view identity, is its close link and dependence on the affective domain, and more specifically, handling emotions. The way teachers reflect on and describe emotions is thought to be related to critical events in their practice, which might serve as identity-generating pathways (Schutz, Nichols & Schwenke, 2018).

A large number of current studies trace the formation of teacher identity in the process of teacher education and training, when trainees encounter theories and ideas which either support or contradict existing views and expectations based on their own experience as students. Identity formation is also seen as a result of interactions between trainees and their mentors and supervisors in the process of their professional preparation (Isadinia, 2018; van Rijswijk et al., 2018). As Velikova (2019, p. 15) points out, "a major concern in initial teacher education

today is how to support student teachers during their identity transition from students being taught to teachers who teach students”. Discussing identity formation in the context of teacher training, Velikova (ibid, p. 32) argues for a ‘pedagogy of becoming’, which draws on candidate “teachers’ views of education and of themselves as a foundation of meaning-making and professional learning”.

Furthermore, it is important to trace the processes of integration into the professional communities of practice (Pennington & Richards, 2016) which support teachers’ further development and professional growth. Collaboration is an essential part of teacher development as it empowers teachers to generate knowledge and understanding together, thus helping them develop collegiality and sense of belonging. As Ivanova (2017, p. 45) points out, “it conceptualises teacher development as necessarily social and advocates investing in collegial relationships to enhance teachers’ capacity building”.

Another perspective on studying identity and its repercussions in the context of education is presented in research which focuses on the intersection of identity, race and gender (Jackson, 2018; Journell, 2018), and identity and politics (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018). While these aspects of identity are thoroughly researched in Bulgarian media discourse in comparison with the British (see Cheshmedzhieva-Stoycheva, 2018; Todorova & Todorov, 2015), such issues remain underresearched in the Bulgarian educational context. An attempt to bridge this gap is the inclusion in the teaching curriculum of courses which raise future teachers’ awareness of the close links between identity and ethnicity (Cheshmedzhieva-Stoycheva, 2013).

All these seemingly diverse views on teacher identity are nevertheless united by an overarching holistic approach, which emphasises individual meaning making and self-bound conceptualisation of identity. This approach allows us to view identity as multifaceted and dynamic, and it is these two features that can be used to outline and summarise the current situation in the field of teacher identity research.

7. The nature of professionalism

There is no single definition of professionalism, and it is difficult to discuss it in isolation from a specific context (see Fox, 1992; Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996). The conceptualisation of professionalism is in a state of constant flux, and as Helsby (1999, p. 93) points out, “it is constantly changing and constantly being redefined in different ways and at different times to serve different interests”. In an attempt to avoid the pitfalls of a strict definition, Troman (1996, p. 476) describes professionalism as “a socially constructed, contextually variable and contested concept defined by management and expressed in its expectations

of workers and the stipulation of tasks they will perform”. In its most general interpretation, the concept of professionalism refers to practitioners’ knowledge, skills, and conduct.

Professionalism, as a collective notion, is sometimes differentiated from professionalism (Evans, 2002, 2008; Hoyle, 1975), which is defined as “an ideologically-, attitudinally-, intellectually-, and epistemologically-based stance on the part of an individual, in relation to the practice of the profession to which s/he belongs, and which influences her/his professional practice” (Evans, 2002, p. 6). Frequently, professionalism is interpreted as relating to quality, in the sense of “enhancement of the quality of service rather than enhancement of status” (Hoyle, 2001, p. 148). This conceptualisation, sometimes referred to as ‘new professionalism’ is linked to a focus on practitioner control and proactivity, mainly in terms of professional development initiative.

Ur (2002, p. 389) links professionalism to “preparing oneself to do a competent job through learning which continues throughout the professional’s working life”. She draws attention to the professional’s responsibility in trying out new things not because they are fashionable or fun, but because they are confident that they will benefit students’ learning. In doing so, the teacher as a professional brings about real-world change. Another interpretation links professionalism to professional culture, defined as “a configuration of beliefs, practices, relationships, language and symbols distinctive to a particular social unit” (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005, p. 103).

8. Sponsored and independent professionalism

There are two opposing interpretations of professionalism: externally imposed, sponsored and delineated by policy-makers in the respective field, on the one hand, and independent professionalism, stemming from individual teachers’ views and reflections on their own beliefs and action, on the other (see Leung, 2009). The so-called ‘sponsored’ professionalism is linked to the recent call for measurable accountability in public service, including education.

Market forces and competition internationally lead to a curtailment of professional autonomy, and a reduction of independent professional decision making outside the prescribed criteria. In this context, a successful professional is someone “who works efficiently and effectively in meeting the standardised criteria set for the accomplishment of both students and teachers, as well as contributing to the school’s formal accountability processes” (Sachs, 1999, p. 3).

Criteria for professionalism differ worldwide, depending on the governmental or local policies. Thus, in the United States individual states have different frameworks for qualifying English language teachers who work in the publicly

funded school systems, whereas in England, since the early 1990s, the education authorities have provided no public funding for full-time initial schoolteacher preparation for English Language teachers (see Leung, 2009).

9. Professionalism in the field of English language teaching

In the modern globalised world, sponsored professionalism in the field of English language teaching is closely bound with the status of English as a language of science, trade and a means of communication. There are a number of issues in ELT related to its status as a lingua franca, such as changed perspectives on learners' needs, communication skills and literacies. The reconceptualisation of the role of native speaker norms, and the recent developments in the field of digital literacies have also had their impact on the idea of professionalism. These changes also necessitate constant engagement of policy makers and teachers with the emerging social, political, and technological realities.

In addition to belonging to a community which shares common professional culture, teachers engage with the established norms of professionalism on a personal level as well. This happens through critical reflective examination of the 'sponsored' models, regulatory requirements and their associated values, and questioning their educational, pedagogic, and social validity. In this way, teachers develop "a sense of independent professionalism" (Leung, 2009), and become more open to alternative perspectives on routinised practice, which are compatible with their developing views. However, both sponsored and independent professionalism remain a hypothetical concept unless they are implemented in teachers' everyday practice.

In the field of foreign language teaching Richards (2011) defines competence and professionalism in terms of 10 qualities or characteristics of exemplary language teachers. These characteristics involve:

1. A threshold language proficiency level, i.e. language-specific competencies, defined as "the ability to provide good language models, to maintain use of the target language in the classroom, to give correct feedback on learner language, and to provide input at an appropriate level of difficulty" (Richards, 2011, p. 3);
2. Content knowledge, consisting of disciplinary knowledge (e.g. history of language teaching methods, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, phonology and syntax, discourse analysis, theories of language, critical applied linguistics, etc.), and pedagogical content knowledge (e.g. study of language teaching and language learning), including curriculum planning, assessment, reflective teaching, classroom management, teaching children, teaching the four skills, and so on);

3. Teaching skills, such as a repertoire of techniques and routines, including routines and procedures for such things as opening the lesson, introducing and explaining tasks, setting up learning arrangements, checking students' understanding, guiding student practice, making transitions from one task to another, and ending the lesson. Skills also involve: engaging in sophisticated processes of observation, reflection, assessment, and making on-line decisions;
4. Contextual knowledge, related to understanding the dynamics and relationships within the classroom and the rules and behaviours specific to a particular setting, as well as socialisation into a school professional culture with its own goals, shared values, and norms of conduct;
5. Language teacher's identity, or the differing social and cultural roles teacher-learners enact through their interactions with their students during the process of learning (Miller, 2009);
6. Learner-focussed teaching, meaning that the input from learners defines the shape and direction of the lesson, the quantity of student participation and interaction that occurs, the ability of the teacher to present subject matter from a learners perspective, so that it reflects learners' needs and preferences;
7. Pedagogical reasoning skills, i.e. the special skills that enable English teachers to analyse potential lesson content and identify ways in which it could be used as a teaching resource; to identify specific linguistic goals that could be developed from the chosen content; to anticipate any problems that might occur, and the ways of resolving them, to make appropriate decisions about time, sequencing, and grouping arrangements;
8. Theorising from practice, i.e. the development of a personal system of knowledge, beliefs and understandings drawn from the practical experience of teaching;
9. Membership of a community of practice, which provides opportunities for teachers to work and learn together through participation in group-oriented activities with shared goals and responsibilities, involving joint problem solving;
10. Professionalism, where membership is based on entry requirements and standards, and which has two dimensions – institutionally prescribed professionalism, and independent professionalism.

Burns and Richards (2009, p. 3) claim that “there is a much higher level of professionalism in ELT today than existed previously”. This can be seen in the fact that ELT as a career requires a specialised knowledge base obtained through both academic study and practical experience. Moreover, the career status is based on entry requirements and performance standards.

10. Professionalism and teacher certification

The trend toward professionalisation of teaching has raised the importance of certification as a guarantee that an individual meets the minimum standards of competence in a profession. Certification as a legal proof that someone is qualified to exercise a profession is closely linked to meeting professional standards in a given area. Among the variety of ELT qualifications worldwide, the Bachelor's degree is the usual qualification required, and yet in certain contexts, in order to teach, "it may be sufficient to have passed certain English language exams, or to have attended a few workshops, or even just to be a native speaker with or without qualification or experience" (Barduhn & Johnson 2009, p. 61). Pennington (1992), however, considers the Master's degree as the most basic qualification and feels that the desired level of qualification for all teachers is a PhD. These two levels of qualification are usually required, but might not be sufficient for teaching English in higher education.

One of the most widely known initial qualifications for ELT teachers is the Cambridge University Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults – CELTA, with 10,000 candidates completing it each year in training centres in 135 countries, 118 of which are in the UK (see Senior, 2006). Teachers with at least two years of experience can upgrade their qualifications and do the Diploma in English Language Teaching for Adults (DELTA). They can also take the Cambridge Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT), which is a series of internationally recognised modular teaching qualifications, which test knowledge in a specific area of English language teaching. Other internationally recognised initial qualifications are the Trinity Certificate, TESOL (offered by Trinity College, London), and the SIT TESOL (awarded by the SIT Graduate Institute, Vermont, USA). The courses to obtain these certificates are usually intensive 4-week courses with at least 6 hours of teaching practice (Riddell, 2010). In Bulgaria, CELTA, DELTA and TKT training and certification is provided by AVO Centre in Sofia.

The majority of English language teachers, however, especially the non-native speakers in countries, where English is not an official language, receive their initial training from universities or teacher training colleges. In Bulgaria there are 7 state universities (in Sofia, Plovdiv, Veliko Turnovo, Shumen, Burgas, Blagoevgrad, and Ruse) and 2 private higher education institutions (New Bulgarian University and Burgas Free University), which provide initial English language teacher preparation. These institutions offer various programmes for both pre-service and in-service teacher training and development opportunities, the most popular of which are English Studies with an optional teacher qualification (Bachelor and Master); Primary School Education with English Language (Bachelor); Pre-school Education with English language (Bachelor);

English and Bulgarian Languages (Bachelor); English and History (Bachelor), etc.

The possession of a teaching certificate is not a guarantee of a teacher's effectiveness and professionalism. It is only the first step in the process of continuing development, in which subject knowledge interacts with practical experience, and the teachers, while doing their job are learning about teaching from their own experience. There are a number of issues with teacher training courses in terms of their adequacy, complexity, practicality, reliability of assessment procedures and the appropriateness for the range of jobs they cover (see Eraut, 1994).

Nowadays, there is a fast-growing industry which offers teacher training and qualification adapted to the needs of various national and vocational contexts. Teachers and researchers have easy access to a vast number of professional journals and teacher magazines, conferences, conventions, seminars, webinars and membership in professional organizations. On the other hand, there are continuous attempts to create, develop or update standards for English language teaching and for English language teachers. Non-native speaker English teachers are required to demonstrate their level of proficiency in English as a component of their certification (Kamhi-Stein, 2009); while native speaker teachers have to have appropriate teaching qualifications.

11. Teacher appraisal and quality assurance in Bulgaria

Sponsored professionalism in the field of education in Bulgaria is closely linked to the idea of accountability, and the attestation or appraisal of teachers and other educational staff. It requires an ongoing assessment of individual educational practitioners' performance by authorities or stakeholders. According to the recent regulations in Bulgaria, the appraisal process is based on the principles of objectivity, fairness and transparency. The Strategy for Development of Higher Education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the 2014-2020 period identified some major issues and weaknesses in the system of higher education (HE), which prevents it from functioning properly and achieving the desired results. According to the Strategy, the main problems in higher education in the country are related to:

1. the difficult access to HE for some social groups, and the low share of higher education graduates among the people of working age;
2. the quality and compatibility of Bulgarian higher education with European HE systems;
3. the fact that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) do not meet the needs of businesses and public institutions;

4. the poor link between training and research;
5. the poor quality of HEIs' management system and the HEIs network within the country;
6. the lack of transparency and public control of the current funding model of HEIs;
7. the need for attracting and ensuring career advancement for HEI lecturers;
8. inadequate opportunities for lifelong learning.

In an attempt to overcome the last problem, in most of the HEIs there are units for continuous, ongoing or post-graduate training and career development centres, which aim to strengthen the links between the universities and the labour market. However, a lot of the programmes they offer lack flexibility, are not innovative, or do not meet the needs of the trainees. To overcome these difficulties Bulgaria adopted a National Strategy for Lifelong Learning for the period 2014-2020, which foresees strengthening the role of HEIs as institutions for lifelong learning, and stimulating trainees for further training within the higher education system in accordance with the needs and demands of the labour market. One of the ways to achieve this is the development and promotion of flexible electronic forms for distance learning.

The issue of quality assurance and control in HE was addressed with the creation of the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency, which is a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance (ENQA). At a local level, each HEI has its own internal system for quality evaluation and maintenance, which monitors the quality of the education process through different evaluation tools and mechanisms, including student opinion surveys. At a national level, HEIs are evaluated by the Bulgarian University Ranking System, established in 2010, based on a set of unified criteria and indicators. In addition, the transparency and accountability of HE are ensured by the Ministry of Education information system which hosts registers of higher education institutions, their academic staff, and graduate and postgraduate students.

12. Conclusion

The overview of the issues related to strengthening teacher identity and professionalism in the field of foreign language teaching has identified some common topics and trends which researchers and educators need to take into consideration. For example, at a global level, Barduhn and Johnson (2009, pp. 63-64) have identified some issues which undermine the reliability of certified teacher qualifications and are thus detrimental to the idea of professionalism. This is, in the first place, the need for acquiring higher language proficiency before non-native speaker teachers are allowed into teaching programmes.

Unfortunately, this is still a serious problem in Bulgarian universities where school graduates with low language proficiency are admitted to teacher training programmes.

Second is the need for fairer and more rigorous assessment. At present, in-service training is not followed by any form of control to check if and to what extent teachers implement the ideas presented in the training events, and whether there are any consequences or improvements in the quality of teaching. As a result, there is no adequate feedback to educators and teacher trainers about the effect of the training on improving the quality of teaching and students' results.

Researchers recommend improved curriculum content that leads further toward practical rather than academic syllabi which take psychological aspects of learning into account. They also suggest retraining of lecturers and more partnership schemes between national bodies and teacher-training institutes. More exchange programmes, funding and scholarships for teachers and better access to courses, qualification exams, and opportunities for further development are also necessary as part of teaching profession internationalisation. All these measures will increase teachers' opportunities for employment, the appeal of the teaching profession, and the respect it deserves in society.

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