Who am I? Omani English Language Teachers' Professional Identities

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Abstract
This article examines the concept of teacher professional identity within the context of a centralized and prescribed curriculum in Oman. Focus group interviews with English language teachers and semi-structured interviews with authorities have been analysed to explore how teacher professional identity develops within such a context. The preliminary findings from this ongoing qualitative research reveal the importance of certain factors that contribute to the development of teacher professional identity, such as teacher beliefs, their social life, emotions and past experiences.

Keywords: teacher professional identity, curriculum, teacher education.

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Introduction

The concept of teacher professional identity has merged in literature since the last two decades and has been researched in various disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, anthropology, psychology and education. The researches done on teacher professional identity agree on similar characteristics that could contribute to reach a definition for teacher professional identity. It is seen as a concept that is dynamic and on-going which develops over time across teachers career lives and is affected by both internal and external factors (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Research on teacher professional identity focused on more than one element of this concept. The most researched elements are its characteristics and the kind of influences that effect teacher professional identity.

Research shows that teachers personal and professional histories, their biographies, their pre-service teacher training programmes, the school culture in which they work, the kind of leadership they have in schools and the interaction they have with their context, all of these influences play a role in shaping and reshaping teacher professional identity (Flores & Day, 2006; Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000; Korthagen, 2004). Thus, the external and internal influences on teacher professional identity seem to have been researched comprehensively in literature. The curriculum that teachers teach could be considered as one of the external influences that impact upon teacher professional identity.

In addition to the research carried out on the influences that effect teacher professional identity, some other research focused on the components or factors that indicate teacher professional identity. These components or factors are related to how teachers see themselves as teachers (self –image), self -efficacy, self -esteem, job satisfaction, motivation, future perspectives, task perception, beliefs and values, professional development, teaching and learning, occupational commitment and knowledge (Kelchtermans, 1993; Hong, 2010; Canrinus, Helms-Lorenz, Beijaard, Buitink, & Hofman, 2011; Mockler 2011; Cheung 2008). This study locates itself within a theoretical framework that relate to the work on the identity theory and some other relevant theoretical concepts. The concepts of self and society in the identity theory by Mead (1934) includes the concept of roles and how individuals act according to the roles assigned to them in the society, such as the role of a mother, teacher, professor…etc. The discursive identity is based on dialogue and talk and how individuals are recognised by others and the affinity identity is about being part of a group that have distinctive experiences and practices in a shared culture by Gee (2000); Giddens (1991) concept of identity relates to being reflexive and the negotiation an individual has within their society and how this identity is affected by the interaction that occurs in a certain context and Erikson (1968) who points out that identity develops and changes across one's life. These concepts form the theoretical framework for this research as teacher professional identity is recognized by the role they undertake in the school culture and the society and how they and others see them as professionals. The extent to which this professional teacher self is affected by external factors such as the curriculum they teach forms

the focus for this study. Although the concept of teacher professional identity has been researched intensively, literature still lacks research that links this concept with the curriculum teachers teach. This research tries to fill in that gap and contribute to the field of research by adding to the little research carried out on the impact of the prescription of curriculum on teacher professional identity.

Impact of prescribed curriculum on teacher professional identity

The term curriculum is wide and involves all of the aims and objectives ought to be achieved, the principles, methodology and philosophy that underpin the curriculum, the content, the teaching methods and the assessment procedures that need to be implemented. As studying all of the curriculum elements is broad, this research confines itself to the content ought to be taught to the learners and to the teaching procedures that teachers use; this is referred to as curriculum in this research. The prescription of curriculum means that all of the above listed areas within the curriculum are decided on beforehand externally and is given to the teachers by authorities. The teachers within the prescribed curriculum context are required to implement the curriculum according to the instructions given to them by the policy makers. Based on the literature review, there has been much research on the impact of the prescription of curriculum on learners but less on teachers.

The research findings on the impact of curriculum prescription on teachers vary; where some teachers find it beneficial, others think that it controls and limits their thinking. Ball and Cohen, (1996) state that as prescribed curriculum is appreciated for being able to support and shape student learning, this type of curriculum can de-professionalise teachers because of the amount of control over their work that doesn't leave much space for decision making from the teachers side. The qualitative study carried out by Shkedi, (2009) on teacher implementation of an externally written and prescribed curriculum in the classroom showed that teachers did not follow the prescription of curriculum and created their own tasks for their learners. The teachers in this study saw the prescription of curriculum as a source that stems, stimulates and inspires their ideas rather than something to follow and stick to. Another study that focused on teacher learning from scripted instructions or prescribed curriculum done by Reeves, (2010). The findings from this ethnographic and descriptive study identified the benefits the two teachers involved got from this type of curriculum. The teachers learned about language and language learning as there was one-sided dialogue with the teachers book. This means that the scripted instruction has added to the teachers' subject and pedagogical knowledge. Although the findings from this study seem positive, Reeves, (2010) claims convincingly that within the sociocultural perspective, scripted instruction does not support teacher development as it controls teacher talk and thinking because it follows the behaviorism theory. In line with the previous studies, a study conducted by Kauffman, (2005) on the prescription of curriculum took place in the USA and examined how curriculum control can affect the support teachers receive. The findings from this large scale quantitative study revealed that on average teachers were satisfied with the support they got from the prescribed curriculum, although the level of support differed according to school and teacher comfort when teaching

language arts. This study also showed that while the teachers who appreciated the prescribed curriculum saw it beneficial for their learners, yet they thought that prescription of curriculum affected their creativity and freedom by taking it away from them. The other teachers in the same study thought that they could still be creative even with a highly prescribed curriculum. The new teachers in this study seemed to be satisfied with the outsider control of curriculum content and methodology. This explains that prescribed curriculum is more suitable for new teachers as they still lack confidence and teaching experience unlike the more experienced teachers who are supposed to be more confident and can make use of their experience while teaching.

In relation to how teacher experience, their beliefs and knowledge can influence their teaching, Blignaut, (2008) carried out some research to explore the way teachers understand, interpret and apply a new curriculum that is highly prescribed in its policy and instructions. The findings of this research support the findings from previous research that teachers practice is influenced by their beliefs and prior experiences. The teachers in this research did not teach the new curriculum as it was expected of them, rather they modified it and implemented the teacher centered approach and summative assessment which they feel comfortable with. This is because teachers adhered to their beliefs and prior experiences; something that is referred to as a core self in the identity theory according to Mead, (1934). The core identity or the " Me" is strong and does not allow for adaptation to new contexts and in the teachers case for example they don't accept educational reforms easily as the picture of who a teacher is, has grown up with them since their childhood; this is called the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975). However, according to the identity theory the self has another identity called the "I". According to Mead, (1934) the "I" is the active self that acts creatively to the "Me". This supports the fact that teacher professional identity is influenced by the internal and external factors that they face in different contexts and explains why some teachers respond positively to educational change and others don't. Whether or not the implementation of the prescribed curriculum supports the development of teacher identity forms the focus of this research.

Research aims

This research aims to explore how teacher professional identity develops within a context of prescribed curriculum. Thus, it tries to answer the following main and specific research questions

How does teachers' professional identity develop within the context of a prescribed curriculum?
- How has the English language teachers' professional identity developed?
- How is the development of teachers' professional identity influenced by the prescribed curriculum?
- What are the factors that impact upon or influence the development of the professional identity of teachers'?

- What is the policy context for teacher professional identity in the Omani curriculum?
- What are the implications for practice and policy development?

This research targets the Omani English language teaching context.

Research context

This research takes place in Muscat the Omani capital area. It involves a number of male and female English language school teachers from a range of experiences. It also involves authorities from the departments of curriculum, supervision and training. This qualitative explanatory research adopts the socio-cultural approach to its theory as it is about the role of context and culture in shaping teachers professional identity. The data for this research at this stage is collected from only two focus group interviews with teachers whose teaching experiences ranges between 5-15 years and some semi-structured interviews with the authorities.

The analysis of the focus groups has been based on the four factors indicated for teacher professional identity bearing in mind the theoretical concepts and the empirical studies that this research is based on. These are teacher beliefs and values about themselves as teachers and about teaching and learning, teacher knowledge and skills, teacher professional commitment and teacher professional autonomy. Each of these factors will be discussed separately in the next section.

Discussion and findings

The preliminary findings from this research are grouped according to the four factors indicated for teacher professional identity.

1. **Teacher beliefs and values**

Teachers (Self-image)

This section talks about the image that teachers hold for themselves as teachers; in other words, they answer the "who am I?" question. This section also considers the role the prescribed curriculum played in shaping their teacher image. When asked about the type of teacher they think they are, the responses of the target teachers emerged from their personal, social and pre-service experiences. The male teachers described themselves as a person who "cares", "encourages" and "communicates" with their learners.

"actually I am the type of teacher that Communicate with a student as a father, as a brother, a big brother advisor at the same time".

Those teachers think the reasons for this image go back to their social life experiences, emotions, pre-service experiences and to some cultural reasons as well as their personality and beliefs. This shows the influence of the environment and social context on the beliefs of these teachers about their self-image and how they

see themselves. This matches Mead, (1934) ideas on the social aspects of the self or the identity. The caring, encouraging and communicating image has been affected by those teachers social life such as when they were school children and their siblings. Thus the teacher self-image seems to be emotionally and socially driven. Hargreaves and Goodson, (1996) in Hargreaves, (2000) say that teachers are emotionally driven. While the male teachers were emotionally and socially driven, some of the female teachers showed a more practical and profession related image of the self. The female teachers saw themselves as someone who loves the teaching profession and is interested in doing it as well as being a creative person. These images of the female teachers seem to be very practical and relevant to the job of teaching yet emotional. When asked about the reasons behind having this image, the result provides evidence that teacher self is very much affected by the social context they experienced. The female teachers said that their love for the teaching job goes back to their childhood experiences when they were children and played the role of the teacher then. Also as being the first child at home seems to match with the nature of being a teacher. Also the teachers mentioned that their personality of helping others and wanting to know about new things and exploring has helped shape their self-image. One of the female teachers described her-self as being active and creative and her rationale for this was based on her personality. Also, all of the teachers interviewed believed that they are more experienced, confident, possess more ideas and knowledge about curriculum and school environment and manage their classes well unlike when they first started teaching. Some of the female teachers saw themselves as being more motherly than when they first started teaching. They say that they are now more relaxed and friendly with their learners and that they can accept their mistakes unlike before. Thus, the male and female teachers self-image seems to be socially and emotionally bound and is effected by the context in which they grew up, their family experiences and the school context in which they teach. These finding is keeping with the previous research findings in this matter (Flores & Day, 2006; Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000; Korthagen, 2004).

Role of the prescribed curriculum in shaping the teachers' self-image

The extent to which the prescribed curriculum played a role in giving teachers that self-image differs between the teachers according to their gender. While the male teachers did not see any role of the curriculum in shaping their teacher self-image and making them who they are today apart from giving them some ideas, knowledge and skills, the female teachers thought differently. The female teachers say that curriculum did play a role in shaping their teacher self and making them who they are today. For example, it gave them some ideas to be creative, they learned from the variety of the curriculum tasks and the lack of certain issues in the curriculum has helped them to adapt and become creative in order to fill in the gaps in curriculum such as lack of writing tasks. Thus, it seems that the role played by the prescribed curriculum in shaping teachers self-image exist, but it does not exceed the level of adding to their knowledge and skills with teaching methods and ideas. This echoes previous studies findings in this matter such as Reeves, (2010).

Teachers' beliefs about the prescribed curriculum

Teachers believe that the prescribed curriculum is a good guide for them especially in their first years of teaching. It gives them some ideas about teaching methods and refreshes their minds about those methods. They also said that they learn new vocabulary and new knowledge about language when they teach higher grades and change the level they used to teach. Teachers also think that they learned from their adaptation of the lessons. Only one teacher mentioned that they feel confident when they teach this type of curriculum because it has been written by experts and they feel that they are doing something right

" I go to class I feel look at more confident   I know what to do I am following something right". Another teacher though that they don't need a prescribed curriculum because "You know your students, their level, their personalities, so when you know these things no need to use and follow teachers book"

 Thus, it seems that the teachers feel comfortable and secured using the prescribed curriculum as it is written externally by authorities. It also seems that the prescribed curriculum equips teachers with subject and pedagogic knowledge, something that the teachers consider as a source for their ideas and knowledge as previous research has shown (Shkedi, 2009; Reeves, 2010). However, this might indicate that teachers became passive and dependent on the prescribed curriculum. They did not mention the need for becoming knowledge creator as they are more interested in adaptation rather than creation of knowledge. This is inevitable as the knowledge is given in such curriculum, so teachers do not dare to think about creation.

2. Teacher knowledge

Teacher knowledge in this research is based on the knowledge that Shulman, (1987) stated as essential. These are content knowledge which is about the subject teachers teach, pedagogical content knowledge which refers to knowledge about teaching methods, knowledge about learner development, knowledge about schooling system and the knowledge that relate to the values, principles and aims of the educational system. The two types of teacher knowledge this research is concerned about are the subject knowledge and the pedagogical content knowledge, as they coincide with the research focus and definition of curriculum. This research is only concerned about what ought to be taught to leaners and how. Thus, the other types of teacher knowledge will not be referred to in this research. Teacher knowledge is inferred from the focus group interviews.

Content knowledge about subject was hard to infer as the teachers rarely referred to this in the focus group interviews. They mentioned grammar items such as "present continuous, past simple, argumentative language", however, that does not indicate whether teachers have a professional level of this knowledge or not. Only one teacher referred to the grammar translation method and their description of it does not seem to match the theory. The teachers seemed to be clear about the pedagogical content knowledge as they referred to their teaching methods that relate to learners being active, constructing knowledge and learning by doing, such

as working in group to construct their own text, questions or answers, reading in focus groups and doing debates Generally, the teachers in this research saw themselves as subject experts; this matches the findings reached by Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, (2000).

3. Teacher autonomy

Teacher professional autonomy refers to teachers' ability to make proper decisions regarding the teaching and learning process that they are part of. In this research teacher autonomy is at the level of individual autonomy, which refers to the teachers' ability to take decisions inside their classroom and school context. Teacher autonomy is inferred from the teachers explanations of the lessons they taught recently and the kind of decisions they made when adapting elements of it and why. All of the interviewed teachers said that they adapted their lessons from the teachers' book and that they did not follow the instructions given to them in the teachers' book exactly. This goes in line with previous research findings such as Shkedi, (2009). Also this is an indication of teachers' ability to adapt and take decisions regarding how to deliver their lessons. The question that imposes itself here is what kind of decisions did these teachers made and why. This is explained in the table below,

Target taught	Reasons for adaptation
Language focus: use of so, therefore and consecutive and the use of because	"No time in class" "I asked them to do it at home"
Reading a story	"I felt that I should use something that my students can manage"
Reading	"I prepared some questions that are not included in curriculum to make sure they read and understood the text"
Grammar present continuous	"It's an old method about the grammar rule I think it works with my students"
It was in curriculum read and match I changed it to speaking and writing	"coz they don't have writing in grade 7 at all and in each lesson I give them writing"
Argument camping project in Jabal Akhdar (a mountain in Oman) They learned argumentative techniques , they gave their views	"I made a debate for and against" "So I was discussing with them from Muslim point of view so girls outside sleeping in a tent"
Famous people	"I gave them variety and chance to give more sentences I don't allow them time as it said in curriculum to search on the internet and write coz they might just copy".

Thus, it is clear from the table above that teacher adaptation to the curriculum instructions was based on their knowledge of their learners needs and on their assessment of the teaching situations. Although not all of the adaptations were

managed properly as some of them changed the whole focus of the lesson and the other decisions were inappropriate such as doing it at home, yet the teachers proved to be autonomous to some extent with the prescribed curriculum and managed to adapt it. These findings support the fact that teachers practice and decisions in the classroom is guided by their professional identity; something that reflects their beliefs, knowledge, experiences and epistemology (Blignaut, 2008).

Regarding the authorities views on teacher autonomy, there seems to be an agreement amongst authorities that teachers become more autonomous with experience. However, their opinions differ regarding the level of autonomy that's available for teachers. For example, some believe that autonomy is limited and that teachers cannot exceed boarders

"we are not against it but of course there are some boarders which they cannot exceed which they need to stick to but at the same time we encourage teachers to be innovative to be autonomy and to think creatively". This means that teachers are only allowed to add to what already exit in the curriculum in their free time or at the school activity level. "Autonomy is still there every now and then within the school year or a semester".

  Also, some other authorities think that curriculum is being neutral about autonomy; it neither says it explicitly nor denies it. Another authority says that the curriculum does not support teachers to be autonomous; it doesn't tell them how to adapt their lessons.

"It doesn't say or promote autonomy doesn't give strategies for how to become creative and autonomous teachers".

Thus, autonomy seems to be a loose concept that authorities quietly call for.

4. Teacher commitment

Teacher commitment has been discussed in relation to teacher's role using the prescribed curriculum and the key responsibilities of a teacher.

Teachers' role using the prescribed curriculum varies between authorities and teachers. While authorities think that new teachers are required to stick to the curriculum and follow it and that adaptation is only allowed when they get more experienced, teachers think that they should adapt the curriculum in order to meet the needs of their learners regardless their experience. Although teachers said that they benefited from the prescribed curriculum in their early years of teaching and that it was like a guide for them, it seems that teachers do not follow the prescribed curriculum as it is.

Authorities and teachers agree that learners come first and that they should work hard to help them learn better and improve their levels. Teacher professional development does not seem to appear as a key role or responsibility of a teacher

neither for the teachers nor authorities. Surprisingly only a few of the authorities and teachers mentioned the development of teacher knowledge and skills as their responsibility. Only one authority mentioned teacher beliefs and said that teachers need to believe in themselves and work according to the ethical act.

Implications for policy and recommendations practice

Based on the initial findings of this research, teacher professional identity development seems to be effected by their social and emotional backgrounds and experiences. This goes in line with previous research findings regarding the characteristics of teacher identity. It matches it in terms of being dynamic, on-going and develops with time as well as being affected by both internal and external factors (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Teacher professional identity also seems to guide their practice. The prescription of curriculum does not seem to have played a big role in shaping teacher professional identity apart from equipping them with some professional knowledge and skills. This would become clearer as this research goes further. The image that teachers hold for themselves seems to be socially and emotionally based. This is not surprising as the interaction one has with their context shapes who they are (Flores & Day, 2006). Although the teachers did not show a big favour of the prescribed curriculum in the interviews, all of their actions and the lessons they taught prove that they adhere to it and that they do not want to leave it. This means that they do not see themselves as a source of change in the educational system. This is simply because the prescribed curriculum is there for them to guide their practice and acts as a safe guard for them. Teachers did not see themselves as knowledge producers, rather they located their role in the adaptation part and saw themselves as adapters only. Thus, it is crucial to work on the importance of teachers becoming aware of and know their professional identity. For this to happen, pre-service teacher education needs to explicitly cater for this concept and have courses that focus on the concept teacher professional identity through teacher education programmes. Also, curriculum documents and policy needs to bring up the concept of teacher professional identity and promote it so that teachers know who they are and think about the decisions they take inside their classroom. In-service teacher education programmes need to consider teacher professional identity and talk about it and help teachers deal with the curriculum in order to help them make use of their knowledge, skills and experience.

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