

Gaining favorable identities of Iranian EFL teachers: A single case study of transition from elementary schools to universities

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Abstract

Having adapted the self-concept framework as a lens and intrinsic case study as a methodological tool, the present study set out to examine how the professional identity of an elementary school teacher is socially (re) constructed while his transition from teaching at elementary schools to teaching at universities. The design of the study was the intrinsic case study. The focal participant was an assistant professor of TEFL who has been teaching in elementary, middle and high schools prior to starting his academic work ten years ago. For the purpose of the data collection, in-depth interview was conducted. Another source of the data was the participant's stories as well as the diaries he had kept over the years. For the data analysis, thematic analysis was employed. Results indicate that the transition was seen to be in parallel with the transition from lower identity perception to higher identity perception. The transitions can be best expressed in terms of identity promotion. The results indicate that the transitions were two main and noticeable ones. The data analyses also indicate that three themes including personal-self, social self, and learners were the driving forces for the case's professional identity development. The study has a number of implications for teacher education, policymakers, and teachers.

Introduction

Recently, there has been a surge of interest in teachers' professional development (Pennington, 2015; Reynolds, 2015; Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017; Tran & Burns, 2017 ; Yazan, 2018). Reynolds (2015) attributes this fact to a move away from the group (and associated identities) being viewed through a prism of anticollectivism – where groups were sidelined because they were considered somehow flawed or inherently inferior to individual understanding.

The research findings, so far, indicate that identity is discursive and experiential and is constantly negotiated by teachers in relation to their life and learning experiences, teaching colleagues, professional mentors, students, and their teaching environments (see for review Bejjard, 2004;). The notion of identity has been defined in different ways. For example, Pennington's (2015) definition of teacher identity is as follows:

Teacher identity is a construct, mental image, or model of what “being a teacher” means that guides teachers' practices as they aim to enact “being a teacher” through specific “acts of teacher identity.”(p. 17).

Moreover, Beijaard et al. (2004) provide the following definition:

“Teacher identity refers not only to the influence of the conceptions and expectations of other people, including broadly accepted images in society about what a teacher should know and do, but also to what teachers themselves find important in their professional work and lives based on both their experiences in practice and their personal backgrounds.” (p. 108).

The notion of identity has been seen from diverse perspectives and lenses. For example, American psychologist, Erikson, one of the earliest psychologists interested in identity, highlighted two types of identity – ego identity and cultural or social identity. Ego identity refers to a conscious sense of self as unique as well as continuity of experience. A strong sense of self is argued to emerge during adolescence and is central to well-being. One way to think about social identity within this framework is that it captures the extent to which there is a supportive community that validates the identity and gives it strength (e.g., “greater validation of social identity can nurture ego identity,” Côté and Levine, 2002). Erikson argues that “[Ego identity’s] most obvious concomitants are a feeling of being at home in one’s body, a sense of ‘knowing where one is going,’ and an inner assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who count” (Erikson, 1968: p. 165).

From a different perspective, Mead (1934), emphasizes a philosophical stance toward identity, where other people’s perceptions and reactions are argued to shape one’s self-view in a dynamic way. A generalized conception of one’s own self develops through experience and observations of how others act toward the self (the so-called ‘looking’ glass self). The self is social or public in that it contains the internalized reactions, expectations, and judgments of others.

Nevertheless, Akkerman & Meijer (2011) adopted a poststructuralist and postmodernist worldview toward identity. The view sees several recurring characterizations of teacher identity: the multiplicity of identity, the discontinuity of identity and the social nature of identity.

Literature Review

Previous research illustrates how professional identity is formed by the interplay of different spheres of life, including those outside work and education, and that some of these spheres play a bigger part depending on the time and situation (Nystrom, 2009, p. 65). Akkerman & Meijer (2011) pointed out that identity should be defined as a dynamic process of negotiating and interrelating multiple I-positions in such a way that a more or less coherent and consistent sense of self is kept throughout various participations and self-investments in one’s (working) life.

One of the recurring themes in the literature on teacher identity is its discontinuity. It signifies that teachers’ professional identity is not fixed and often changes (Beijaard et al., 2004). More recently, research on teachers’ professional identity has shifted its focus towards the dynamic process of its formation, negotiation, and/or renegotiation (Tran, Burns & Ollerhead, 2017).

In an empirical study, Liu (1999), for example, showed how seven non-native speaker teachers differed in their understandings and acceptance of this label, and how some of them navigated through the native speaker and nonnative speaker identities depending on their contexts. As Liu defends, ‘people can have multiple social identities.

Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000) examined 80 experienced secondary teachers’ perceptions across subject areas about their professional identities along with three knowledge domains: subject matter,

didactic, and pedagogical. In their study, all teachers viewed subject matter knowledge to be most important at the start of their practice, and later, most incorporated more didactical knowledge. The case of subject matter identity was examined by Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000). The study indicated that the notion of identity and subject matter identity are separate entities. Little is known about the teachers' professional identity are constructed and reconstructed over a more extended period of time, over a decade or so. Also, little is known whether one can think of any stages or boundaries in teachers' professional development in longitudinal studies like the current study.

Theoretical framework

Self-concept refers to a person's self-perceptions formed through experience with and interpretations of one's environment (Shavelson et al., 1976). The experiences make the person to get more realization of one's potentials and competencies to act in the future differently. Thus self-concept can be regarded as the self-perception about one's own abilities (Marsh & Martin, 2011). Understanding capabilities leads to better performance. Self-concept is regarded as a highly significant and determinant factor in that it is closely associated with people's academic achievement (Branden, 1995; Marsh & Martin, 2011).

Some key features contribute to promoting self-concept such as internal (personal) and external (social) motivations, academic choice, and coursework selection (Marsh et al., 1999). The early shaping of self-concept in a person leads to shaping long objectives in the recursive form to achieve in mind, primarily when academic achievements are aimed. It goes in line with McNaughton & Billot (2016) notions that academic identity is constructed through a recursive and iterative process. Marsh and Yeung (1997a; 1997b) found that academic achievement and coursework selection were all highly correlated. Their findings made them to innovate a new term of academic self-concept that was a much better predictor of subsequent coursework choice. For the case in the current study, the coursework, English language teaching, selection underpins the developing self-concept, achieving an academic position, and constructing academic identity.

The framework also covers the notion of transition that emerged from the research themes. The transition motion in the self-concept framework occurs among students. Valentine and colleagues (Valentine et al., 2004; Valentine & Dubois, 2005) found that transition among school learners had not improved their self-belief; however, the concept of self-belief is strong when it is based academic measurement. There is a probability that cognitive development among learners plays a more active role in their achievement. The case that we studied in the current research played a role of teacher-learner who is grown metacognitively.

Method

For a qualitative researcher, a 'case' can be seen as a bounded system comprised of an individual, institution, or entity and the site and context in which social action takes place, the boundaries of which may not be clear and are determined by the scope of the researcher's interests (Hood, 2011).

The main objective of this paper is to discuss the process of (re)construct of identity, identity enhancement, and professional identity in a teacher's life during his teaching practices. The interview questions dealt with the process of transformation of identity, and the mechanisms were behind the change. Thus we make a contribution to the level of literacy and knowledge in reshaping professional and social identity. We retrospect to the teacher's life of teaching as a life story in a way he can better elaborate on the process of change. The semi-structured interview, teacher's story, and teacher's diaries direct us to find the answers to the following questions:

1. What stages/ transitions involved in primary school teachers' promotions to university professors in the Iranian context?
2. What factors motivate Iranian professional development through teaching primary schools to teaching at universities?

Design

According to Hood (2011), a quick look at the tables of contents of the leading journals in the fields of linguistics and language teaching reveals a steady trend in recent years toward the use of a case study in applied linguistics and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) research. This trend, he believes, reflects the emergence of a new kind of researcher – one who seeks to understand the world not only in terms of the generalities produced by quantitative methods but also through a close and extended analysis of the particular. Merriam (1988) suggests that a case is a 'bounded system' (p. 9), or a defined individual or entity (like a student, program, school, institution) that the researcher wishes to explore. Qualitative case studies are preferred by researchers who believe that 'reality' is multiple, contradictory, changing and that the researcher inevitably becomes part of the study.

Duff (2008) mentioned that case studies 'are now usually associated with qualitative interpretive research. The adopted type of case study was the intrinsic case study, in which interest lies purely in one particular case itself. There is no attempt at all to generalize from the case being studied, compare it to other cases, or claim that it illustrates a problem common to other, similar cases. The emphasis is on gaining a deep understanding of the case itself (Stake, 1995).

The case

The only participant in this study as a focal teacher is a male teacher, Sayeed (a pseudonym), who has been teaching for about twenty years. Sayeed can be considered as an experienced teacher and well-fit to our study. He is a university professor now. Prior to teaching at university in Iran, He had been teaching to young learners at a state school in Iran for a year. Next, he had been teaching the English language to teenagers at a state school in the same city for eight years. He also has the experience of teaching for

more than a decade at universities. Over his teaching years, he had a diversity of professional identity feelings and emotions; he felt despair and discouraging at times, felt motivated and determined the other times, he had felt highly motivated and hilarious. People, in his hometown, attribute different identities to him, for a group of people he was an elementary school teacher, for another group of the community, he has been recognized as a high school teacher. Still, for a large number of people. He is a university professor.

Selecting him as our focal teacher was significant as he has had different transitions in his professional life. He started teaching elementary schools in 1999. Between 2000 and 2008 he had been teaching in middle schools in his hometown, Miandoab, Iran. Since 2009, he began teaching English at high schools. His academic life began in 2010. Since then, he has been a faculty member in an English department. The focal teacher was selected because the case can enrich our understating of teachers' professional identity development with different transitions and unique path of professional development. This process is scrutinized well in line with the aim of our research. The participant was consented to attend the interview, provided the researchers with the diaries he had kept them over the two decades. The present study is also a valuable source of data for the researchers in so far as it is longitudinal research. Finally, he was assured that his data and identity are kept confidentially.

Data collection

The researchers mainly focused on the questions that cover not only the professional engagement and interaction of the participant with the learners of different ages but also how the dimensions of his work, e.g., research, have developed. Moreover, the way that social and professional identities have been progressing is questioned. The interview took sixty minutes approximately. The reflective interview between the lead researcher and the teacher was digitally recorded. The data were broadly transcribed then presented to the participant for more comments; none were made. After the validation of the data by the teacher, the original recording was destroyed due to ethical guidelines. To triangulate the data and enhance their trustworthiness, two other data collection tools were utilized; the participant's stories and his diaries he had kept over the two decades. Some extracts of his Persian version of diaries were selected by the first researcher and translated by the second and third author to English. The final translated draft was e-mailed to the participant. He revised the translated extract to meet his intended ideas.

Data analysis

In line with our aim in conducting qualitative research, we utilized thematic analysis following the guidelines put by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a sophisticated qualitative tool that helps to research in a precise, consistent and exhaustive manner through recording, systematizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis and detailed enough findings of the study to enable the reader to determine the credibility and validity of the process (Nowell et al., 2017).

Having familiarized with the content of the data, Microsoft Excel 2010 was used to help the researchers code and identify themes (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). As we did not have pre-coding in mind, we used axial coding and code description at the semantic level. Then the relationships among the codes were identified and categorized into themes according to the research questions. In order to establish inter-coder reliability (Armstrong et al., 1997), the second author re-read the raw data, noted similarities, and coded them. On the other way, the author waited a few days, then went through the data and coded them again to gain intra-rater reliability (Saldana, 2016). The similarity and consistency of interviewees' responses were noticeable so that the researchers could find little dissimilarity among the obtained data. Having identified the relationships among the codes, the researchers consented to cluster and collate the codes to themes (see table 1). The themes were 'defined and refined' to organize them into a coherent and internally consistent account (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Table 1 an overview of the emerged codes and themes

| Themes | Codes | Key terms |
|---------------|------------------|--|
| Personal self | Inclinations | Being a teacher, change the level, sensations |
| | Identity | Lower identity, being bothered, lack of appreciation, subject matter |
| Social self | Identity | Positive identity, being called differently, more knowledgeable, researcher rather a teacher |
| | adoption | study more, being a professor |
| Learners | School learners | More dependent, having short aims, the only receiver |
| | Collage learners | More independent, teach, do research, |

Findings

The findings revealed two stages of transition in the professional life of the case. The transitions have contributed to (re)constructing the identity of the participant. Moreover, the data have found some significant factors that help the case to exercise transitions. We labeled the factors as our central themes. Themes are formed from the codes that researchers consented on.

Theme 1, Personal-self

The personal-self theme here concerns the inclination and identity codes that the participant discussed during the interview. These factors imply that internal motivators contributed to the transition. The lead

researcher started the interview by “how did it go to be a teacher?” the answer shows the inclination that it seems to trace to the context he was a primary student in. he replies:

Actually, from the very beginning, I was interested in teaching. I studied my primary school in a rural school, far from downtown. My teacher would ask me to teach my classmates prior to beginning our classes by the teacher. Moreover, my father was an employee of the education office. He encouraged me to be a teacher. Last but not least, I enjoyed teaching and instructing others. Even today, I enjoy teaching people. Teaching gives me a sense of delight and sometimes exultation. Sometimes while teaching I have the feeling that I am a musician in charge of playing a musical instrument in an orchestra which in turn, I enjoy both harmony and melody simultaneously.

The participant claims that he has perceived himself as a musician playing music in an orchestra and enjoys both harmony and melody simultaneously.

We questioned the base position of the participant as a novice teacher at primary school. The answer overlapped with social-self, the second theme of the research. The case had considered himself a knowledgeable teacher while teaching. However, he found himself as a passive person that had not been able to expand his knowledge. He mentions;

I was not under pressure to learn new things; to read the latest papers, books. I was not under pressure to be up-to-date with respect to the latest learning and teaching theories. Most of the techniques I utilized in my classrooms were borrowing from my own primary school teachers, namely two decades earlier.

The transposition of the case is the chief concern of the current paper. The interviewee promoted his degree from school diploma while teaching to Ph.D. in TEFL. He appreciates his current position as a different and more professional person. He reflected his personal reasons to make the change;

When I was teaching in primary school, I did not have a university degree; I did not attend a university. While I was teaching in high schools, I held my M.A. degree from a prestigious university in English language teaching. I would send e-mails to distinguished scholars in my field and ask for their views on teaching issues. I was reading the latest scholarly articles on language teaching. I had grown in self-confidence and self-esteem..... The thought never suddenly came to my mind. Rather, you know, the pass to development is an accumulative one. To go forward, you need to do things one after the other in a regular fashion. To me, one progress led to another. You never think of a series of changes and development in your professional life. You think of one step, and one stage and the remaining stages and steps will appear on your way.

Theme 2, Social-self

The second theme, social-self, refers to the most significant and external motivators that caused a transition in the participant. The most noteworthy codes that were listed in this theme were lower identity and higher identity that the case perceived from the society as well as the adaptability he made. These

dynamics shaped contributed to transit from lower identity to higher positions. The lower identity that the participant had received was bothering. He clarifies;

They {local people} called me as Amuzeghar {teacher of elementary school} which connotes lower position, lower identity, and lower knowledge. The people of the village that I was assigned to teach there had the feeling that I was in a lower position and with no university degree had to teach there. Actually, I was bothered by the fact despite my interest in teaching. I wished to pursue my studies and promote to teaching in middle schools.

In theme 1, personal-self, we wrote about the personal reasons that caused the participant to move to the upper position. Under the same interview question he added the social reasons behind the transition;

People had a lower identity position toward me in the society. They assumed an inferior identity towards my colleagues and me. I was really bothered by their attitudes. They belittled me and my activities as a teacher. In a sense, I wanted to get a promotion in my identity and win the admiration of my fellow citizens.

The participant transited three stages, first from teaching in primary school to teaching in middle schools. The next one was from teaching at middle schools to teaching at high schools, the last one, from high schools to teaching at university. He thinks differently from these three stages. For him, the transitions are better noticeable as two transitions.

He reflected his achievements and accomplishments;

I think, my transition from primary school was sharp and dramatic. It was not the case for my transition from middle school to high school. I can draw a boundary between elementary schools on the one hand and middle and high schools on the other hand. Presumably, because of the learners involved. The boundary can best be supposed between the child and young learners. To educate each group effectively, you need different orientations, considerations and techniques. Child learners need your ongoing and immediate concern and attention; in a sense, they are not independent learners. They need your support and supervision in every phase of learning, in doing their homework, and following school regulations. Unlike young learners, Children are not motivated enough and never think of long term objectives of education. Sometimes, you should push them to learn specific tasks. It is effectively and emotionally a demanding and challenging task to educate child learners. Another related factor is your own perception of your professional identity. In spite of the fact that elementary teachers toil and torture them teaching their students, people do not appreciate their teaching practices and working conditions.

He prefers to call these two transitions and stages in his professional life as dramatic and sharp. He constantly compares and contrasts these two stages, both in terms of internal variables like self- concept and satisfaction and external factors such as social position and sense of lower vs. higher identity perception. He goes on to reflect on the characteristics of these two transitions:

In my view, two dramatic changes and transitions have been made in my professional life. The first and foremost transition was from teaching elementary students to middle school students. The significant and noticeable transition was teaching at universities. Teaching at universities has largely affected my own professional identity feelings and my position in the society. People at the university and in the society call me as " university professor' which connotes lots of positive and prestigious concepts; highly educated, intelligent, and prestigious. Adding to these positive points is the notion of subject matter identity. To a large extent, people judge and value you by the subject matter you teach. I teach the English language to university students and teaching English has satisfied my quest for higher professional identity in society. However, the drive for my quest for promotion is not limited to social factors. It is mainly driven by my own personality traits. My sense of achievement, my sense of learning new things throughout my career leads me to go forward. You know my own motivation in learning and teaching never ever was instrumental; it was ALWAYS an intrinsic and integrative one.

The second step of transition changed the participant career, and he feels high identity and satisfaction. This step has differentiated him from a regular school teacher. He claimed; *People at the university and in the society call me as " university professor' which connotes lots of positive and prestigious concepts; highly educated, intelligent, and prestigious.* Moreover, the participant added that the subject he teaches plays an essential role in constructing his academic identity; *to a large extent, people judge and value you by the subject matter you teach. I teach the English language to university students, and teaching English has satisfied my quest for higher professional identity in society.*

At the end of the interview, the participant concluded that a combination of personal and people's attitudes characterize the construction of professional identity. He expressed;

It should be mentioned that people's attitudes and perceptions of your lower identity can trigger your development; it cannot sustain you motivated. As you pass through the development path, you need an inner desire to remain highly motivated. This motivation, in turn, will assist you in meeting challenges on your way to professional development.

Theme 3, Learners

The last theme that the participant stated as an external element was learners. The theme is shaped by school learners and college learners codes. There are some fundamental differences between these two groups of learners and the way that they played roles in the transition to constructing a new identity. He differentiates school learners as demotivates and talks about their characteristics;

Child learners need your ongoing and immediate concern and attention; in a sense, they are not independent learners. Children are not motivated enough and never think of long term objectives of education. Sometimes, you should push them to learn specific tasks.

On the contrary, college students need more attention and work with. This is because of what the participant expressed;

Moreover, the majority of my Ph.D. students themselves teach at different universities. This makes me think that I am a teacher educator as well as a social reformist. I think that I am an influential person in my society not only affecting our education but also our culture. However, the changes are small-scale and local.

Discussion

The results of the present study illustrate a two-stage of the transition of an elementary school teacher. The paper generally talked about a concept promotion of the case. It shows that promotion involves the transition to a higher social position, with higher challenges, higher social expectations, more responsibilities, and a higher level of dignity and prestige.

The case has taken multiphase courses to his professional development; each stage has led him to the next one. Some changes and transitions from one stage to another stage were not sharp and clear-cut. Some others, however, were dramatic and noticeable, either because of the learners involved or by the social position they involved.

The personal-self impact

In line with the theoretical framework, intrinsic motivation correlates with academic achievement (Marsh et al., 2005) by the use of transition steps. Having found himself as a passive person wondered the case about the current position and the identity he possessed. The first transition occurred in two levels; education and coursework. The case of the current research realized that the methods he had applied were old, and there is a need to be upgraded. Thus he decided to study at university to promote academic self-concept. Moreover, the case has selected the English language as his desired major. His choice of the English major goes in line with Marsh and Yeung (1997a; 1997b) that coursework selection partly mediated the effects of academic self-concept in a specific school subject on subsequent academic achievement.

Doing the transition will increase self-confidence and self-esteem with the participant. The finding on improving self-esteem goes in contrary with Baumeister et al. (2005), who concluded “that efforts to boost people’s self-esteem are of little value in fostering academic achievement or preventing undesirable behavior” (p. 84). Improving self-belief was encouraging and facilitating the path of developing and reconstructing identity as well as being successful in academic achievements.

The social-self impact

Marsh & Martin (2011) consider the social domain as a component of the self-concept. In our study, the social-self is regarded as an external motivator playing a significant role in (re)constructing (academic) identity. The case of our study had perceived a lower identity in comparison with the teachers of upper

levels of teaching. Since teaching at the upper levels needs to be specialized in a subject, he selected the English language as the subject matter. The first transition occurred to teach English in high school. Attending university classes, doing the research, and interacting with teacher educators reconstructed his lower identity into higher identity. The sensation of change in the view of outsiders encouraged the case to follow his education at the Ph.D. level and gain an academic position. Gaining a higher degree of literacy, playing a new social role, and interacting in the new environment contribute to forming a positive social self-concept. As Brookover and Lezotte (1979) claimed, schooling maximizes academic self-concept and academic achievement. The participant's new academic identity is owing to higher schooling in which the perception and expectation of social stakeholders are improving.

The learners' impact

The role that students played in promoting identity is considered as an external motivator. The learners per se did not act in reconstructing identity; furthermore, the extent of the work that the learners required considered the teacher to work more academically. More cognitively developed the learners, more demanding they are; as a result, the teacher is more engaged in the tasks that acquire more professionalism. The transition from being passive in elementary school to being active academically changed and reconstructed his identity from teacher identity to academic identity. At the university level, some learners of the case teach at colleges. This matter deliberated the participant as a teacher educator. Shaping professional identity is partly related to the learners that demand complex tasks like writing research papers. Analyzing the emerged data from the studied case indicated that students' success and satisfaction are in close relationship with self-concept (OECD, 2003), actively support academic achievement (Marsh & Martin, 2011), and encouraging the educators to improve their academic identity in the current position of transition.

Conclusions

The current study investigated how the identity of a primary school teacher reconstructed in two stages of transition into new academic identity ultimately. The analysis of the interview reflected that gaining academic identity is challenging. Making the transition from primary school teacher to high school teacher was moving from lower identity to higher identity while the transition to the second stop, university professor, has been regarded as a marked shift. Self-perception, social attitudes, and the learners of the case have been contributing factors in reconstructing the case identity. Self-concept, as the chief theoretical framework of the research, has been crucial in reshaping new professional identity. The component of self-concept, e.g., internal and external motivators and coursework selection, played an inspiring role in the process of achieving professional and academic identity.

The results show that teacher professional identity formation can be affected by a combination of both internal variables such as self-esteem, self-concept, and external factors such as social position and high identity. Teachers should be highly motivated to be effective teachers. The results show that an effective and good teacher is one who is in the state of development and learning. Qualified teachers are those

who are motivated and continuously inspire their learners and colleagues. Good teachers can make changes in education as well as the culture. To put it simply, teacher development is not a linear pass that from point A one conceives point B, it is neither additive one. Every teacher can have his/her own way of development and learning in a different fashion. We should let the teachers learn and develop.

Implications

This study yielded significant insights into an English teacher's professional identity construction over two decades. The study enhances our understanding of the process, stages, and motivations behind the cases' identity promotion. The fact has a number of implications for policymakers in that they should provide opportunities for teachers' ongoing professional development. In so far as both professional development and professional identity of teachers go hand in hand, teachers perceive positive professional identity to the extent that they develop professionally. It is suggested that both policymakers and teacher educators should beware of the repercussions of lower professional identity conceptions of teachers. Teachers' professional identity perceptions either positive or negative, will affect their instructional practices.

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Availability of data and materials

The data will be available upon requesting.

Authors' contributions

The lead author conducted the interview. The second and third authors codified and analyzed the data. All authors are responsible for all parts of the paper. .

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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