

THE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF NEWCOMER TEACHERS IN ENGLISH EDUCATION THROUGH REFLECTIVE WRITING

Yuliyana

Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

my.yuliyana@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores teacher identity among four newcomer teachers who are taking their master degree in English education. Specifically, it engages a holistic perspective to research the connection between personal and professional life experiences that shaped their teacher identity. This study tries to look into to what extent the teacher identity is constructed during English education master program. The researcher gathered reflection writing from the participants about their life stories, journey, and their motivation of continuing study. Their institution and formal courses are not the only aspect that could construct their identity. Work experiences and others' sharing stories also give the big influence on their teacher identity.

Keywords: *teacher identity; reflective writing; newcomer teacher*

INTRODUCTION

Identity construction is a significant aspect of becoming a teacher by looking at the number of studies on novice teachers. As Norton & Toohey (2011) explained, "over the past 15 years, there has been an explosion of interest in identity and language learning, and "identity" now features in most encyclopedias and handbooks of language learning and teaching" (p.413) A person tends to form a teacher identity through the personal and professional discourses that enclose him to demonstrate himself as a teaching professional. This notion is related with identity construction theories which propose the identity is discursively created, made and remade by the many discourses that encompass the person. Commonly, the teachers make the reflective writing to describe the discourses to attain understandings about their personal and

professional identity (Beauchamp, C., & Thomas, 2009).

Students enter to an education program, including English education, with expectations about becoming teachers. Becoming teachers is a more complicated process than many early career teachers have imagined (Beltman, S., et al., 2015). During their study, they construct identities as students, which later change into those of teacher by the end of time study. In this study, the researcher identifies 'newcomer' as a teacher who is still apprentice in education life. Teachers explore a new identity over time and create the sense of what it means to be a teacher (Chong, Low, & Goh 2011). This process is recognized as learning to teach and it is essentially constructed from background, skills, practical and pedagogical knowledge, classroom practice, and professional development. As a part of this process, a

teacher either construct connection with the teaching profession or desists from it. This study explores teacher identity among four newcomer teachers who are taking their master degree in English education. Specifically, it engages a holistic perspective to research the connection between personal and professional life experiences that shaped their teacher identity.

Thus, my research question is the following:

To what extent the teacher identity is constructed during English education master program?

By exploring teacher identities through students' own reflective writing, the researcher hopes to shed light on identity construction in an integrated teacher education program as well as to explore student teachers' developing teacher identities.

McIntyre, J. & Hobson (2016) explained that teacher identity is subject to the actions on how the individual teachers can control different factors; both personal and professional identities. The teacher identity is formed by event and the perception of the event; it presents an image for the teachers to build their own beliefs of 'how to be', 'how to behave, and 'how to perceive' their actions.

According to Bukor (2014), personal and professional identities are clearly different when both are constructed discursively. Personal identity is related to our significance of personal agency and a continuing aspect of our belief in life, meanwhile our professional identity is the identity that we show to various conditions in which we involve with daily activities. It is also mentioned that institutions including schools are relevant to the alignment of certain kinds of professional identities above others, both restraining and allowing identity formations. Apart from schools, identity is

also expose to social and historical practices, covering discourses around work and teaching.

Novice teachers, also called early career teachers face many challenges and difficult situations. They get much pressure, but less encouragement. Clark (2012) stated the first year of teaching was usually a temperamental time filled with nerves, excitements, and riskiness. The experiences of early career teachers are regarded as the toughest time in a teacher's career. Unfortunately, the teaching career is often left behind in the first two years because of the daily negative exposures at school without having had an opportunity to work with the positive (Gavish & Friedman, 2010; Lambson, D, 2010; Pennington & Richards 2016)

According to Alsop in Jones (2012) she describes the crossroads between personal and professional identity in novice teachers along with the notion of 'situated identities' and establishes the complexity of the process of professional identity development. There are some types of discourse cross as part of the process including the early professional identities that appear during teacher preparation courses. She also states that these 'borderland discourses' enable teachers to build bridges between the discourses of their university courses and the new discourses of their profession.

METHOD

As stated before, this research's focus is to investigate how 'newcomers' in education construct their identity to become a teacher. To the extent of it, the researcher needs to understand teachers' behaviour and experiences thoroughly. So, this research is a qualitative research. According to Ary et al. (2010) "...qualitative research sees social reality as unique; thus, researchers can only

understand human behavior by focusing on the meanings that events have for the people involved.” (p.23) The research should look into what participants’ think and feel so can appreciate their truth, not only observe what they do.

According to Creswell (2012), on the condition that the goal of a study to gain an in-depth understanding of teacher identity, a case study design seemed to be the most appropriate. This research also can be affirmed as a case study. Ary et al. (2010) define a case study “...is a type of ethnographic research study that focuses on a single unit, such as one individual, one group, one organization, or one program.” This research involved two newcomers who are taking their education master’s degree in a private university in Yogyakarta. A case study intends to present a specific explanation and comprehension of the case. There are some methods can be used in a case study include interview, observation, and records to collect data.

Researcher conducted this paper in April up to June 2018. Since the participants are students of a private university in Yogyakarta, this study will be taken place at their campus. It is done so that they may feel comfortable and free to recount their backgrounds and experiences until they ended up in the education campus.

As mentioned before, the researcher chooses four novice teachers as participants. They are taking their 2nd semester of English education master’s degree. They do not have much experiences as formal teacher. Three of the participants do not have education background as their undergraduate study. Besides, they enter the master’s degree after two until three years they got their bachelor’s degree. The participants will be questioned how they construct their identity to become a teacher.

It can be concluded; the researcher uses purposive sampling-also referred to as judgement sampling which involves nonrandom procedures for selecting the members of the sample. The participants are considered to be typical, or elective, chosen from the population. Ary et al. (2010) mentioned the assumption is that errors of assessment in the preference will compensate for one another.

In order to collect the data, the researcher gathered reflection writing from the participants about their life stories, journey, and their motivation of continuing study. Researcher will gain some insights and deeper understandings about their ups and downs. Then, the researcher does the data analysis and code the descriptions, impressions, and recordings according the research focus. After that, the researcher must describe and interpret the data. The researcher tries to explain the findings according of the research problem. The next part involves a description of the topics that are discovered. In condition of qualitative research, the interpretations and explanations are described in narrative form. The last step in methodology is reporting results. Researcher should make their approach, findings, conclusions, and also limitations in a form understandable to others who may be concerned, involved, and attentive.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This category consisted participants’ story of their biggest dream and critical moment why they ended up continuing their master degree. Alan has big interest in video games and computer, so his biggest dream job is related to those things. After he graduated from English literature in 2015, he tried to find a job but could not find one. With parents’ background as teachers, he was suggested to continue his study so that

later he will get a 'safe and stable' job as a teacher like his parents believe.

The same thing happened to Ellen, she enjoyed herself to be a project or human resource manager, which she has experienced in few years ago. She had to come back to her hometown due to family affair, which made she left the job. Back then, she did not find any other alternatives besides continuing study in her alma mater. She told me that she is still not sure whether it is right decision to continue her study. Back to my alma mater never crossed her mind.

In the contrary, Jaclyn decided where she continued her study based on her own choice, which also a bit influence from her mother. She is highly positive to be a teacher:

I want to be a teacher. I think I will teach till I die. I want to teach various level of students: kindergarten students, elementary school students, and junior high school students. I also was amazed by the undergraduate program of English Education in this university. That was why I chose this university to continue my study. As time went by, I realized the importance of taking master's degree for teachers nowadays, even for junior high school teachers. Both private and public schools valued master's degree very much. My master's degree certificate would be very useful for many things.

Each of the participants has different background and dreams. They had turning point which made them finally chose to continue the study in English education master program. It is hard to conclude whether their continuing study is right decision or not. They are trying to go through day by day until they graduate later.

Furthermore, the participants described their challenges and difficulties in their master degree study. This includes assignment tension, physical condition, and adaptability to new environment. In Mary's case this challenges links to her different undergraduate background:

Because I came from Bachelor of Communication Science; I have to catch up pretty fast with those who have learned English Education in undergraduate level. It is pretty exhausting but also challenging. To be honest, I am still trying to adapt to many things. It took a pretty long time for me to adapt in campus (people and environment). Studying here is like "another new world" for me. I also have difficulties in doing many assignments. Because, doing master program's assignment take lots of time in a day. Sometimes, it is not enough to do one assignment in a day.

All participants are not fresh graduate. They tried to find a job and other activities after they pass their undergraduate study. They feel that it is hard to keep their motivation up and their energy is deteriorated much.

All of the participants are also asked how university courses contribute to the construction of their identity. Theory about teacher identity is given to in some courses in their master program. Alan and Mary do not have experience in teaching yet and they agree they get important knowledges from the courses:

The courses give some of the ideas how teacher identity constructed, which most of the times comes from their teaching experiences and the courses give me various perspective what the teaching difficulties and how they overcome it. I can try to learn from other's experience before I start to teach on my own.

A bit different with Jaclyn who has teaching experience in English course, she gets bigger impacts from it. She explained that the critical incidents while studying are not as critical as her critical incidents while working at an English course. In Ellen's case, she told that it is really hard to keep her motivation up. In many times, she wanted to give up. In her deepest heart, she does not want to be an English teacher. If she could describe studying in English master program in one word, that is "depressing". She also believes that her identity is not constructed in university, but in her workplace.

However, the (teacher) identity could be constructed not only in academic institution. Teacher identity is built of a long and complex process so that participants open themselves up to learn from others' experience and new adventures.

The university prepares the students of master program to be an English teacher (or called educator) and researcher. All participants agree that English is truly important language to learn beside our native language. They think that English later become common language that connect most people around the world. Alan, Mary, and Jaclyn believe that the goal of teaching English are to create the students to be able to communicate well, have big interest in learning and reading, also have mature characters. They want to keep practicing their skill, learning from others' experiences, and trying to understand students' need.

In the contrary, Ellen could not tell her goal of teaching English:

"I have to say that I do not have goal of teaching English. It is because this is not my main objective attending this master program. I just want to graduate soon."

The motivation of participants to continue their study is more than just learning English. They want to get deeper knowledge and much more experiences. Still, there is another reason why they are still holding on, it is because there is not any other alternative.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study therefore argue that teacher identity may be constructed during English master study program, it all depends on each individual.

The participants are given theories and knowledge about teacher identity in some courses, which are really useful to create some perspective what education world looks like. However, that is not the only aspect that could construct their identity. Work experiences and friends' sharing moment also give the big impact to their teacher identity. Their identity is in constructing phase, so it is not stable yet. They are still trying to figure out whether it is right or wrong decision to continue their master study.

It is concluded that the importance of positive experiences could play a big role in teachers' identity development although the real life in the workplace turn out to be dissimilar from the memorable experience that early career teachers attain from teaching practicum. As Anspal, T., Eisenschmidt, E., & Löfström, E. (2012) stated that through reflection writing as one of the reflective tools, the early career teachers become acquainted with their self-awareness, their beliefs, feelings, and approaches of dealing with different challenges in whatever situations the reality offers them.

With regard to further research, the researcher suggests that identity construction of more teacher continue to receive attention. Many novice teachers are still struggling to identify themselves as teachers. They expect from surroundings to help them to be convinced and confident of their identity. Further research may develop in other method, including case study, observation, and interview.

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