Exploring Teachers' Identity: Reflections and Implications

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Abstract

With the rapid developments and changes with digital technologies, teachers are challenged to develop their thinking and practice to instill critical minds able to participate actively in the knowledge society. Indeed, students need to develop the necessary 21st century skills that enable them to thrive for today's economy. According to the Educational Testing Service (ETS) (2007), the 21st century learning skills refer to the ability to a) collect and/or retrieve information, b) organize and manage information, c) evaluate the quality, relevance, and usefulness of information, and d) generate accurate information through the use of existing resources. To achieve this goal, teachers' professional identity has been further questioned, thereby generating debates and issues regarding their role. What teachers need to know, what beliefs they should hold and how they can achieve their professional development, are among the core intentions of today's teacher education. Within this concern, this article aims to explore teachers' professional identity to support teachers and teacher students understand their role and the conception of learning in 21st century education.

Keywords: beliefs, emotions, knowledge, professional development, teacher identity

Introduction
Since teaching is based on interpersonal relationships and relating to others begins with self-knowing and self-understanding, exploring the personal self along with the professional self in language education is deemed essential for teachers. Indeed, such exploration is likely to reveal what kind of teachers we are, where we are in the teaching learning process and what remains to be done to enhance our practices. As Csikszentmihalyi (1993) sates if we understand what we are made of, what motives drive us, what goals we strive for, and how we became to be human, we can create a meaningful future.

The importance of knowing the "who", or the personhood of the teacher is also stressed by Palmer (1998) where he maintains that good teaching comes from the identity (the self) and integrity of the teacher (what contributes to the selfhood). Exploring the teachers' professional selves has been considered an integral part of on-going professional development as "the way one teaches […] is tied to the ways teachers see themselves" (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 47). In fact, teacher identity can be a useful research frame that serves teacher development:

> Teacher identity is a useful research frame because it treats teachers as whole persons in and across social contexts who continually reconstruct their views of themselves in relation to others, workplace characteristics, professional purposes, and cultures of teaching. It is also a pedagogical tool that can be used by teacher educators and professional development specialists to make visible various holistic, situated framings of teacher development in practice. (Olsen, 2008, p. 5)

A large part of current research interest on teacher identity is concerned with the construction and development of teachers' professional identity (e.g., Kelchtermans, 1993), teachers' perceptions of their professional roles (Beijaard et al.,2000 ; Roberts, 1998), and the relationships between teachers' perceptions of their roles and their self-image (Ben-Peretz et al.,2003; Day & Kington, 2008). Still, more clarification is required regarding the meaning of teacher identity and how it evolves in the course of teachers' careers.

This article aims to take a holistic approach to defining this concept. This is since as Palmer (1998) claims the inner landscape of the teaching self must be charted fully by embarking on three paths – intellectual (the way we and conceptualize teaching and learning), emotional (the way we and our students feel about the teaching learning process) – and spiritual (how to be connected with the largeness of life) and none of them can be ignored. Teachers' practices, knowledge, beliefs and emotions are regarded here as the components of this professional identity. Since the latter is not static, but rather it develops over experience, the importance of teachers' professional development is discussed along with some possible ways to flourish in language teaching context.

Teacher Identity
Teacher identity has been used and conceptualized in different ways in teacher education. It has been referred to as professional identity, work-based identity situational or occupational identity. Different conceptual frameworks, methods and tools were used to explore it and several definitions of the concept were provided characterizing its major aspects. These cover both the social aspect and the personal aspect as figure 1 shows.
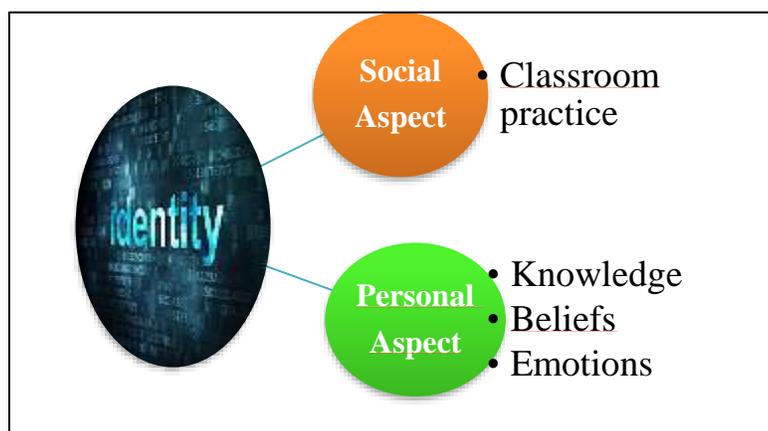
Figure 1. Teacher Identity Components

The Social Aspect

The majority of researchers have investigated teacher identity specifically from the professional aspects, i.e., the construction and development of teachers' professional identity teachers' perceptions of their professional roles and the relationships between teachers' perceptions of their roles and their self-image (e.g., Atay & Ece, 2009; Brown, 2006; Day & Kington, 2008; Kincheloe, 2003; Maguire, 2008; Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008; Smith, 2007). In fact, when exploring teacher identity the first question that comes to mind is: What is the role of the teacher? With the challenging demands of a globalized society and the overwhelming growth of educational technologies teachers' role has changed as educational perspectives have widened and new skills are being targeted. Teachers are no more the sole dispensers of knowledge, but they act rather as prompters for students' active learning and engagement, through facilitating and furthering their learning process. They have different roles to undertake ranging from planning lessons, designing materials, managing classrooms, to assessing students, evaluating their teaching and collaborating with colleagues and parents.

Figure 2. The Teacher's Role

Figure 2. illustrates the visible domain of teacher identity or the social element where teachers struggle to achieve their intended objectives. To this end, teacher identity has been defined

as a continuing site of struggle and a continuing site of contestation, struggle and reworking (MacLure, 1993; Maguire, 2008), a lived experience of participation (Wenger, 1998), and as being multifaceted, multidimensional and multi-layered (Cooper & Olson, 1996). Hence, teaching is not a technical enterprise but it is also linked to teachers' personal lives. Therefore, teacher identity has to do as well with the teacher-self which constitutes the invisible domain.

The Personal Aspect

Palmer (1998) interprets teacher identity in a holistic fashion and goes beyond focusing only on the professional aspects of being a teacher. The author maintains the integrity between the intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects of teacher identity that can lead to a "new wholeness". According to him, this wholeness does not mean perfection, rather "it means becoming more real by acknowledging the whole of who I am" (Palmer, 1998, p. 13). Research has therefore attempted to explore the relationships between teacher identity and several related components that contribute to its development, e.g., teacher knowledge, professional development, language learning, and the role of emotions. To explore the personal or invisible side of teacher's identity, teacher knowledge, beliefs and emotions are to be accounted for.

Teacher Knowledge

Teacher knowledge, also termed teacher cognition (e.g., Borg, 2003, 2006; Grossman & Richert, 1988; Tamir, 1988; Woods, 1996), has been considered as a valuable component of teacher identity. Johnston et al. (2005) highlight such connection claiming that "teacher knowledge is seen in relation to teachers' lives and the contexts in which they work" (p. 54). Yet, the question that can be raised here concerns the kind of knowledge base second/foreign language teachers need to possess. Since the mid-1980s the literature on the knowledge base of teacher education has grown in general education and in second language teacher education (e.g., Bartels, 2005; Fradd & Lee, 1998). According to Day and Conklin (1992) the knowledge base of second language teacher education consists of four types of knowledge:

1. *Content knowledge*: knowledge of the subject matter; e.g., English language ESL/EFL teachers teach (as represented by courses in syntax, semantics, phonology and pragmatics) and literary and cultural aspects of the English language.
2. *Pedagogic knowledge*: knowledge of generic teaching strategies and practices (decision-making, classroom management, assessment, etc.).
3. *Pedagogic content knowledge*: how to represent content knowledge in diverse ways so that students can understand; how students come to understand the subject matter, how to interpret their responses and provide constructive feedback , how to support them overcome their problems are all underlying elements of pedagogic content knowledge. (how to teach the different language skills, TESOL materials evaluation and development, EFL/ESL testing, etc.)
4. *Support knowledge*: the knowledge of the various disciplines that inform our approach to the teaching and learning of English; e.g., psycholinguistics, linguistics, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, research methods.

Additionally, since educational technologies are widely advocated and used in the language classroom, Koehler and Mishra (2008) emphasize the importance of technological knowledge

(TK) which includes how to use technology to enhance students' learning, technological content knowledge (TCK) covering the knowledge of how using technology can enhance the sharing of the subject matter taught, and technological pedagogical knowledge (TPK) which refers to "an understanding of how teaching and learning changes when particular technologies are used"(p.16).

In constructing teacher knowledge emphasis is also drawn on student teachers' prior experiences and the way their existing knowledge influences how they learn and what they extract from teacher education courses (Calderhead & Robson,1991). Calderhead and Robson (1991) refer to Lortie's (1975) concept of the "apprenticeship of observation", which leads to the development of a body of values, commitments, orientations and practices" (Calderhead & Robson, 1991, p. 1). Similarly, Clandinin and Connelly (1999) who developed the notion of "personal practical knowledge" maintain that teacher knowledge is created from their previous experience, it is learned in context, and it is expressed in practice.

The relation between teacher knowledge and identity has been investigated among pre-service teachers. For instance, Smith (2007) finds that preservice teachers' professional identity formation is complementary and connected to the development of teacher knowledge in teacher education programmes. Accordingly, he claims that such programmes should focus both on pre-service teachers' identity work and knowledge growth. In the same vein, Varghese et al. (2005) emphasize the role of teachers' knowledge in building up their professional identity stating: "teacher knowledge is seen in relation to teachers' lives and the contexts in which they work" (p. 54).

However, as Richards and Lockhardt (1994) put forward "what teachers do is a reflection of what they know and believe" (p.29). Indeed, research findings reveal that teachers' beliefs have a greater influence than the teachers' knowledge on the way they plan their lessons, on the kinds of decisions they make, and on their general classroom practice (Pajares,1992). Therefore, the beliefs teachers hold are responsible for shaping their identity and need to be considered here.

Teacher Beliefs

For Borg (2001), "a belief is a mental state which has as its content a proposition that is accepted as true by the individual holding it, although the individual may recognize that alternative beliefs may be held by others" (p.187). Each teacher holds a set of beliefs that determine priorities for pedagogical knowledge and how students proceed with their learning. These are called pedagogical beliefs, i.e., a specific type of belief that teachers hold pertaining to the nature of teaching and how classroom instructions should be implemented (Chai, 2010). According to Pajares (1992) one of the most common distinctions made between beliefs and knowledge is that beliefs are associated with subjectivity and emotion, whereas knowledge tends to be more empirical. Such subjectivity is highlighted in Richardson's definition of teacher beliefs which states that "teachers' beliefs are the "psychological understandings, premises or propositions felt to be true" (cited in Tondeur et al., 2008, p. 2543). Since pedagogical beliefs tend to be broad they are as Pajares (1992) states "too context-free" (p. 316).

Teachers' belief systems are rooted in various sources: their own experience as language learners, teachers, personal factors educationally-based or research-based principles, and principles derived from an instructional approach or method (Richards & Lockhardt, 1994).

Indeed, There is a common consensus that beliefs depend on teachers' experience, and are true for the person who holds them (Freeman, 2002, p. 11; Kasouta & Malatmisa, 2009, p. 69). Besides, "they can be changed or reoriented as a result of input from other professionals and activity type interventions" (Danielson & McGreal, 2000, p. 12; Díaz & Bastías, 2012, p. 248).

Different types of pedagogical beliefs have been suggested. For instance, Pajares (1992) mentions four main categories of educational beliefs, namely, teacher efficacy (affecting student performance); epistemological beliefs (regarding knowledge); teacher's or students' performance (regarding the different motivational spheres), and self-efficacy (confidence when performing a task). Kumaravadivelu (2012) distinguishes between "core and peripheral beliefs" (p.67). The former are more influential in shaping teachers' instructional approaches whereas the latter can cause divergence between what teachers claim they do and what they actually do in the classroom. This distinction between core and peripheral beliefs reflects teachers' diversity in their practices.

As aforementioned, teachers' beliefs are ―far more influential than knowledge in determining teachers 'planning, decision making and attitudes in the classroom thus influencing students' learning as Davis and Andrzejewski (2009) state that their beliefs guide their decision-making, behavior, and interactions with students and, in turn, create an objective reality in the classroom, what students experience as real and true. For instance, Melodie Rosenfeld and Sherman Rosenfeld (2008) claim from their studies that effective teachers act on the belief that all students can learn, meet the needs of diverse learners, and believe that teachers can intervene to make a difference. Badizadegan (2015) found that teachers' pedagogical beliefs influence their approaches to technology integration into their classrooms. There is also overwhelming evidence from research (Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 86; Masuda, 2012, p.239) that indicates the link between beliefs and practice in teacher education which is fundamental to understand the quality of language teaching and learning.

Additionally, research on beliefs shows that "teachers who possess clearly defined theoretical beliefs teach in a way that reflects these beliefs" (Youngs & Qian, 2013, p.251; Zhang, 2013, p.71). It is necessary, therefore, to be aware of one's pedagogical beliefs to align them with our practices and avoid any kind of mismatch. This can be achieved through systematic reflection as Farrell (2013) maintains "the systematic reflection of the alignment between beliefs and practices can help teachers develop an understanding of both what they want to do in their classrooms and the changes they want to implement to their approaches to teaching and learning (p.14). For this purpose, teacher education programmes need to provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their beliefs and surface them.

Teacher Emotions

Emotions have been defined differently reflecting various theoretical viewpoints including physiological, philosophical, historical, sociological, feminist, organisational, anthropological and psychological perspectives (Oatley, 2000). Yet, there is a common consensus that emotion is multi-componential; that is, each emotion consists of a number of more or less unordered collections of components, jointly activated by how an event is appraised and by component propensities (Scherer, 2000). For example, Sutton and Wheatley (2003) refer to components of emotion as appraisal, subjective experience, physiological change, emotion expressions and action

tendencies. Izard (2010), while referring to similar components, uses the terms neural systems, response systems, feelings or a feeling state, expressive behaviour, antecedent cognitive appraisal and cognitive interpretation. Thus, emotions are the foundation for feelings, which are "mental events that form the bedrock of our minds" (Damasio, 2003, p. 28).

Teachers experience different emotions during their work (Keller et al. 2014), which are triggered by multiple factors and their interplay (Schutz, 2014). Investigating the role of emotions in teaching and teacher identity development has been the focal concern of researchers (e.g., Day & Leitch, 2001; Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996; O'Connor, 2008) to explore teacher change and teacher identity. Empirical findings showed that though teachers interact with different people (colleagues, parents, etc.), but their interactions with their students seem to be the most powerful in terms of evoking positive or negative emotions (e.g. Sutton & Wheatley,2003). Negative teacher emotions (e.g., anger, frustration, etc.) were found to be engendered by lack of classroom discipline (Tsouloupas et al. 2010) while their positive emotions can be attributed to positive interactions with students such as showing appreciation to the teacher's work and being actively engaged in learning (Hargreaves, 2001).

Teacher emotions play a crucial role in the teaching learning process. Research findings revealed that emotions may influence teacher cognition and teacher motivation (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). Being anxious, angry or exhausted, a teacher is likely not to concentrate in explaining, lose control of the classroom and get demotivated to pursue his/her intended goals. In fact, emotions can affect memory. Research on memory suggests that emotional stimuli are often remembered better than unemotional stimuli (Mogg & Bradley, 1999). Also, emotions were found to be indispensable to rational decision-making (Damasio, 1994); and good professional practice (Goleman, 2005).

It follows that, emotions are central to the construction of teacher identity. They contribute in shaping teachers' state of mind and attitudes in the classroom, thereby influencing teaching quality and students' learning. Accordingly, the emotional component of teacher identity can yield richer understanding of the teacher self. It is necessary, therefore, that teacher education programmes encourage teachers to explore their own emotional experiences in teaching, to inform their pedagogies. By doing so, they can develop 'philosophies and histories of emotions' (Woodward, 1991; Rousmaniere et al., 1997). Indeed, teachers need to identify how their emotions affect their practices through reflecting on them continuously.

To conclude, teacher identity is a complex construct of personal and social aspects. Teachers' practices, knowledge, beliefs and emotions, are to be tied to their identities. Yet, teacher identity is not a fixed property of a teacher, but rather a process that changes as teachers gain experience from classroom practice. Still, experience alone is not enough to achieve their professional growth. To this end, professional development opportunities are critical for teachers to counteract the issues facing their profession.

Professional development
Several terms have been used to describe teacher's professional development such as in-service teacher education, staff development, teacher development, professional development,

professional growth, and teacher change. According to Day (1999), professional development refers to:

> The process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purpose of teaching; and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice with children, young people and colleagues throughout each phase of their teaching lives (p.4).

This notion of acting to bring up change is also highlighted by Guskey's (2002) definition of this concept: "systematic efforts to bring about change in the classroom practices of teachers, in their attitude and beliefs, and in the learning outcomes of students" (p. 381). Being initiated by the teacher or the school system, professional development requires teachers' motivation and willingness to improve and responsibility to commit themselves to change.

The notion of continuing professional development in education (CPD) is gaining more momentum as the idea of teacher learning is considered a life-long learning process. Indeed, there is a widespread view that it is healthy for professionals to have an active role in their own development processes (Hill, 2000; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000; Crookes & Chandler, 2001). A large number of studies have shown that effective professional development enhances the quality of education (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990; Sander & Rivers, 1997). This is through improving the teaching skills of individual teachers and the organizational system as a whole.

Within professional development, teachers "need to restructure their knowledge and beliefs, and, on the basis of teaching experiences, integrate their new information in their practical knowledge" (van Driel et al., 2001, p. 140). To achieve this objective, such experience needs to engender positive feelings among teachers. Harland and Kinder (1997) maintain that enthusiasm and motivation resulting from activities are indicators of high quality CPD. This was confirmed by Edmonds and Lee's (2002) finding that teachers felt the most effective CPD was that which resulted in increased confidence and enthusiasm.

In fact, several models of CDP have been suggested in the literature. For example, Freeman (1991) accepts that teachers' knowledge is attributed to their experiences in their careers which are ranging from professional to personal perspectives. According to him, these experiences' phases are: the experience of imitation, the experience of control, the experience of competence, the experience of humanness, and the experience of balance. In Clarke and Hollingsworth's (2002) model, there are two domains: *the teacher's professional world of practice* which includes the personal domain (teacher knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes), the domain of practice (professional experimentation), and the domain of consequence (salient outcomes); and *the external domain* (including sources of information, stimulus, or support), which lies outside the teacher's personal world.

Conclusion

Identifying what constitutes teacher identity has always been the subject of research and debate among scholars and educators. Though there is no clear cut definition of this concept, a common consensus has been generated regarding its holistic nature, besides the need to explore it to support empowering teacher education and professional development programmes. Therefore, in this article an endeavour has been made to clarify this kind of professional identity through accounting for the social and personal aspect including: teachers' practices, knowledge, beliefs and emotions.

Professional development remains the key opportunity for teachers' identity to grow. This embodies continuous learning through ongoing reflection, collaboration, and attending workshops and programmes that target teacher development. In doing so, teachers can cope with the increasing challenges of 21st classrooms.

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