

Reconstruction of Teachers' Professional Identity: The Case of Secondary School Teachers in Vietnam

Duong Thanh Hao

Lecturer, English department, Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration, Vietnam and PhD student- Vietnam National University- University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam

Nguyen Huong Ngoc

Lecturer, English department, Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business administration, Vietnam

Abstract

All the characteristics that “specify who are and also how we see other people” belong to identity. Some of the characteristics of identity that determine and describe professional part of identity are regarded as professional identity. While the teachers’ identity crisis is a recurring dilemma, it has acquired its own set of characteristics at the end of modernity. Therefore, this topic must be placed within the broader framework of the modernity crisis. From a narrative-biographical perspective, identities are constructed within a socialization process, like a story. This article describes the design of a study on the professional identity crisis of secondary school teachers in Vietnam. The study sequentially combines different individual interviews and focus groups. The research can be considered a collective case study, a multiple case study (individual interviews), and a greater collective study (focus groups). Finally, this article presents some of the study’s main conclusions. Identity is crucial to how teachers construct the nature of their work on a daily basis (motivation, satisfaction and competence). Therefore, and given the current crisis, it is necessary to evaluate alternative discourses that can lead to better school systems and a reconstruction of teachers’ identity in the academic community

Keywords: *Late modernity, lower secondary education, narrative research, Vietnam, teacher’s professional identity*

INTRODUCTION

The professional teaching identity, especially in Secondary education, is based on the possession of a specific knowledge that can only be taught and whose acquisition is controlled. This identity has been seriously restructured in the information or knowledge society. At the same time, other factors stemming from social change and new demands placed on schools force its reconstruction. Furthermore, when approaching teachers’ professionalism today, one must consider the impact of individualization on new ways of living [2], such that any possible integrated sense of collective action must be constructed on other bases. Inadvertently, as the rules of the game and lifestyles change, essential aspects of teachers’ professional identity, commitment, and daily practice are being rebuilt [8, 45-64].

Parallel with professional identity, the concept of “teaching professionalism” is understood as the set of knowledge, competences, actions, attitudes and values that specifically constitute what it means to be a teacher. Teacher identity has a subjective dimension (individual experience and social perception), while teaching professionalism is more objective (a set of traits or standards determined objectively, apart from their fulfillment by individuals). However, in these current times of individualization [2], or deinstitutionalization [13], teaching professionalism is identified, in practice, with teachers’ professional identity. The professional identities, in a late modern age context, have become a crucial element by which teachers build their lives and approach their work.

The information or knowledge society has many dimensions and faces which are restructuring the ways of practicing education and, at the same time, forcing the reconstruction of teacher identity. On all fronts (academic discourses or educational experts, educational policy, etc.), it has been pointed out that teaching profession must change, given that it must adapt to the social changes that have occurred in the knowledge society [16]

A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO IDENTITY

As one researcher [24] suggests, identity can be understood as a story with all the characteristic elements of a narrative (story line, time sequence, character/s and setting). A narrative conception of identity is defended given the modern crisis of the belief in a fixed, singular and permanent self. In a conceptualization that we share, an author [27, P.53] points out that: "Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography. Self-identity is continuity (across time and space) as interpreted reflexively by the agent". Therefore, self-identity is explained by the story of oneself in the social and temporal geographic aspects of life. It takes the form of the subject's reflections about the successive scenarios experienced in creating his/her possible self-definition in the entity of a story. People construct their individual identities by making a self-story, which is not just recalling the past, but also re-creating it in an attempt to discover meaning and to invent oneself, so that it can be socially recognizable [4]. Identity is essential to the way in which teachers construct the nature of their daily work (motivation, satisfaction and competence). The narrative identity is the subject's reflections on the successive scenarios he/she has lived leading to his/her own self-definition in the form of a story. By setting the scene for his/her own life, the subject can reveal and build his/her own narrative identity. Thus, people construct their own identities by making a self-story, which is not just a collection of memories from the past, but a way of re-telling them, in an attempt to make sense of their lives. In this way, we create ourselves by the way we live our story. Auto-biographical narrations not only represent the self and express it, but also create it. They put a set of past events in order, finding a thread that establishes the necessary relationship between what the narrator was and what he is today. In this way, the narration mediates the past, present and future. It narrates past experiences and the meaning they have acquired now for the narrator in relation to future projects. For this reason, a life story is not just a recollection of past memories (exact reproduction of the past) or fiction; it is a reconstruction from the present (identity of the self), according to a future trajectory. Therefore, in relating their own stories, people acquire an identity by recognizing themselves in the stories they tell others

THE CONSTRUCTION OF TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Nancy Frazer [14, P.109] rightly analyzed recognition of identity, stating that it "starts from the Hegelian idea that identity is constructed dialogically, through a process of mutual recognition. Recognition designates an ideal reciprocal relation between subjects, in which each sees the other both as its equal and also as separate from it. This relation is constitutive for subjectivity: one becomes an individual subject only by virtue of recognizing, and being recognized by, another subject. Recognition from others is thus essential to the development of a sense of self". Some author [16, P.48] states, "Professional identity should not be confused with role. Identity is the way we make sense of ourselves to ourselves and the image of ourselves that we present to others". The personal identity is constructed in a process and in the relational space that is, at the same time, a subjective construction and a social inscription. The individual constructs his/her identity through the eyes of others. It is common, therefore, to distinguish two dimensions of identity: "identity for the self" and "identity for others" [12, 24].

The professional teaching identity is the result of a long process to construct one's own way of feeling like a teacher. However, it also includes competences for the daily practice of the profession. In this process, based on our research [7], several factors play a key role in configuring the identity one way or another: their school experience as students, the possible attraction of teaching, their first modeling in the initial university training, and the beginning of their professional practice. Mockler's research [20, P136] states that "The findings of this study point to the possibility that teachers' professional identity might be explicitly shaped and formed out of professional learning and development experiences that focus not only on 'what to do', but also on the kind of teacher it is possible to be". Meanwhile, in another study [8, 9], authors claim that professional identity is composed of three influential groups:

- (a) Socio-cultural/policy. This cluster of influences reflects cultural, social and political expectations of teachers and teaching, as well as the teacher's educational ideals, and ethical and moral purposes.
- (b) Workplace or socially located influences. These influential factors are located in the micro-politics and social relationships of specific school, department or classroom contexts. They are affected by local conditions (pupil behavior, and the quality of leadership, support and feedback in the teacher's immediate work context).
- (c) Personal influences. These are located in life outside school and are associated with personal history, present life, family, social relationships and a personal sense of efficacy and vulnerability. These components are involved in a dynamic interaction in which one component can take precedence over another, depending on the contexts or life cycle phases, giving rise to more or less stable or fragmented identities. In a similar manner, it distinguishes three areas [21, P.517]: personal experience, professional context, and the external political environment within and through which significant aspects of their work are constituted. These aspects are

superimposed and interrelate between building the life of the teacher and the job. The impact of each one in configuring the professional identity depends on the circumstances and the context.

INVESTIGATING THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY CRISIS

We have specifically studied the process of the professional identity crisis experienced by secondary teachers in Vietnam as a result of the educational Reform [6, 3]. Based on the training received and teaching practice that has forged their professional knowledge, teachers cannot respond to the new demands and functions or to the changes in society and in the students. Therefore, a professional reconversion has occurred. This identity crisis [11] is manifested with diverse symptoms. It has created an obvious demoralization and discomfort among the teaching staff, seriously affecting the objectives of public education. We have tried to diagnose the situation, understand the causes, describe the experiences, and propose routes for future improvement. The teachers' identity crisis is provoked by a set of factors (school and social), and its evolution is linked to a difficult reconstruction of identity. Our study was designed based on its methodological suitability in the context of current educational research. The professional identity is a socially constructed and personally re-created experience with its own meaning, sense and intentionality. Therefore, it seems logical to complementarily employ, using data collection techniques, individual interviews contextualized and broadened by focus groups. Both techniques, duly triangulated, can allow us to see how individuals construct their professional and personal realities by interacting in their social worlds. As this is a qualitative study, we give importance to "understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" [19, P.13].

If people construct their individual identities through personal stories, methodologically we give them a voice in order to discursively represent their experiences and concerns. We were interested in how teachers subjectively experience their work and in the conditions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, in terms of the diversity of their professional identities. These identities are understood as their space of personal identification, their perceptions of the job, their attitudes toward educational change, their professional trajectory and its projection in the future, their perception of their status and social recognition, and their relationship with the social environment. The biographical narrative approach to identity [15] states that people build their individual identities by creating an autobiography. We therefore collected the subjects' personal comments in order to allow their professional identity to emerge. In this way, we tried to take the discourses of the agents and actors as a means to allow the professional identity to emerge. The commonalities among the different individual biographical narratives were used as the way to get to know the professional group. Narratives are the stories of our lives and the stories of the lives of others. We asked a set of teachers to tell us their "life stories" in a narrative-biographical interview three separate times [17]. The biographical dimension is composed of the teachers' experiences in their professional lives over time. The narrative dimension refers to "the central role of stories and story-telling in the way teachers deal with their career experiences" [18, P.30].

Later, based on the Protocol-Report elaborated by the voices of these teachers with our own interpretation, Focus Groups of teachers contributed to interpreting and contextualizing these individual discourses in a more general structural framework. The focus group allows for social constructs to appear, from which the actors articulate their views about teaching. We tried to make a triangulation of perspectives, comparing and complementing ideographic personal contributions of individual interviews with the group in the focus groups.

Our study was set up as a collective case study (Secondary teachers). The interviews of the ten teachers were used as a multiple case study (single intrinsic studies), while in the second part, using a cross-case analysis, we performed the collective case study [25]. The latter study consisted of an intensive crossover study of the collective, which was amplified by linking it with the Focus Groups. In the first part, with the life story and history, our purpose was to examine and understand the individual cases of two male and two female teachers, without trying to generalize; in the second part, the collective (Secondary teachers) was the object of interest, through the crossover interviews and the participants in the Focus Groups.

Based on the biographical interviews (each of which was treated as an individual journey) a transversal analysis was performed and collected in a Protocol Guide-Report. The Focus Groups corroborated and complemented these perspectives, in order to, above all, contextualize them within a more synchronic perspective. There are numerous reasons to integrate different methodological strategies in the designs [26, 22]. For example, the complementarity increases the comprehension, validity, and sequential triangular qualitative perspectives.

Thus, it is necessary to combine two aspects of the identity processes: (a) the "subjective" trajectory, expressed in diverse biographical stories that return to the social worlds experienced by the subjects; and (b) the "objective" trajectory, understood as the set of social positions occupied in life, placing the individual biography in a broader structural framework. The first was investigated through narrative-biographical interviews, and the

second by means of focus groups. The subsequent conjunction of these two strategies in analysis is especially useful for understanding the professional identities as institutional and biographical processes through which individuals have subjectively constructed their professional and cultural worlds.

DATA ANALYSIS

Our case study, due to its sequential design, had three parts. The first consists of the individual biographical interviews as descriptions of four cases with their own peculiarities, but analyzed within a common framework (presentation and bio-gram, descriptive analysis of the process of constructing the professional identity, and outstanding dimensions of the professional identity). Second, as previously mentioned, the transversal analysis crossed the four life stories through a set of common categories extracted from a joint analysis of the interviews. Third, as indicated above, a reduced version of the Protocol Guide Report served as a guide for developing the Focus Group sessions. Thus, the report that was made from the analysis of the Groups was validated and added a new dimension. It collects the key dimensions of the professional identity of **Secondary teachers**.

Dimensions for the Analysis of Teachers' Professional Identity.

* Components of Professional Identity

- A. Self-image
- B. Social recognition
- C. Degree of satisfaction
- D. Social relations in the School/Dept.
- E. Attitude toward change
- F. Professional competences
- G. Future expectations in the profession

* Construction of the Professional Identity

- H. Life trajectory
- I. Professional history
- J. Training received
- K. Identity crisis

In our case study, we read the stories by integrating a dynamic dimension, which resulted from a specific socialization construct (construction of a professional identity). Subjective or personal data, with the more static or common facet of components are represented in the first part. The first is more subjective and singular, while the second, although individual, has more common aspects that make up the central core of the identity. The history of their training and the structure of their actions make up the two axes of the constitution and definition of identity. The different categories are interrelated in specific ways and have combinations at a personal and conceptual level.

In this way, we intend to use the discourses of the agents and actors as a means of discovering the professional identity. The intersection among the different individual biographical narratives was used to understand the narrative of the professional group. On one hand, our case study explores individual trajectories using ten biographical interviews, making it possible to obtain longitudinal and personal visions of the processes concerned in identity development. On the other hand, the group as collective is examined by joining the voices in a crossover biographical story through a transversal analysis of the common elements. Through a sequential triangulation [22, 5], the ideographic or personal dimensions of the interviews give rise to a joint report that is later complemented by the group dimension. As one objective of the research design is to articulate the singular biographical narrative within a more general contextual model, it is necessary to inscribe the longitudinal lives of the teachers and their individual itineraries on a common structural framework as to increase their intelligibility. As once explained by one of the most renowned philosophers [24], the two faces of identity (personal/social, oneself/another) can be captured from the uniqueness of a professional and personal life, along with the experience of the group. While the professional identity crisis is a socially constructed reality, it is also lived personally. Therefore, in addition to singularity, the social dimension should be expressed in a relatively homogeneous group that describes the common experience of the situation [10].

In a case study like ours, where the biographical dimension of events is fundamental, the dynamic development of the personal trajectory is as important as the collective experience. The proposed methodological design consists of articulating and joining both dimensions of the identity (individual identities based on the individual biographies and interactions, and collective identities constructed historically through social processes). While the individual recognizes his or her identity in socially defined terms, the identity remains a personal experience and the perception of a role in a given society. The Focus Group is especially suitable for understanding the

diverse logics that underlie the discourses expressed about the living situation of the same activity, even when the biographical journeys and the contexts are different. In this regard, the Focus Group allows a collective identity to be constructed. Each participant speaks in a double landscape: the general view he/she has of the situation, but also what personally affects him/her or what he/she has known. These verbal representations tell us not only what the participants think, but also who they are and what they feel.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Joining the literary theoretical framework and the field stories has led to the following conclusions:

1. In this first general overview, the current restructuring (reconversion) of schools also requires a restructuring of the professional identity itself. When this does not occur, teaching enters into a deep crisis. Thus, there are continuous calls to "reinvent" a new professionalism for teachers [10].
2. The triangulation of life stories, both personal and collective, has proven to be a relevant strategy in understanding the "emotional geographies" of teaching. Their knowledge allows for the redesigning of work contexts in ways that facilitate suturing broken identities.
3. Given that during this time the training, work and organizational culture conditions in Secondary Schools have not changed much, contexts have not been created to reconstruct a new type of professional identity for Secondary teachers. Meanwhile, the existing one has entered into a serious crisis.

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