

Investigating Teachers' Professional Identity and Development in Malaysia Preliminary Findings

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Abstract

As the correlation between teacher professional development (TPD) and student achievements has gained evidence in both the scientific and political discourse, issues related to TPD have become a crucial component of nearly every national education policy. It has been widely acknowledged that teachers are not only one of the numerous 'variables' that need to be changed in order to improve the educational system but are also the most significant agents in this reform. The experiences and ideas of educators about their career, working conditions, prestige and achievements have a great impact on their actions and on the quality and effectiveness of their teaching. The current study is aimed at obtaining evidence about the identity of Malaysian teachers, and their narratives about their school, teaching and the policy and practice of TPD.

Keywords: teacher professional identity, teacher professional development, Malaysian education system

1. Background

In the context of reforms aimed at the improvement of educational systems, it has been widely acknowledged that teachers are not only one of the numerous 'variables' that need to be changed in order to improve the educational system, but are also the most significant agents in this reform (Hazri et al., 2011). The experiences and ideas of educators about their career, working conditions, prestige and achievements have a great impact on their actions, as well as the quality and effectiveness of their teaching (Grion & Varisco, 2007). Identity and mission have an essential impact on the quality of teaching. At the same time, these subjective notions of the personality are very difficult to change, being strongly linked to the self (Korthagen, 2004). Similarly, Alsup (2006) finds professional identity as a core process of the development of an effective teacher, while another study proves the strong relationship between the self-assessment and the professional development of educators (Ross & Bruce, 2007).

In this sense, teacher professional identity (TPI) is a key factor of development which has a substantial influence on student achievement, rather than a mere indicator of the well-being of

educators. In other words, TPI is not something teachers have, but something they use in order to formulate their roles as teachers (Coldron & Smith, 1999). This approach is supported by some studies on the role of emotions in teaching, which claim that the feelings of teachers about teaching and students are as important for the outcome of teaching as technical competence or curriculum standards (Hargreaves, 1998). Dissatisfied, alienated, stressed identities are proven to create negative emotions that take away creativity and success from one's professional practice (Fineman, 1999).

The theoretical discourse on identity is dominated by several different approaches, each of them focusing on a specific dimension of its formation. These dimensions involve (1) the dynamics of the formation of identity, (2) the determining role of the broader social context, and last but not least, (3) the role of the discourse in its construction and constant negotiation (Varghese et al., 2005). Among the various concepts and theories on TPI, the dynamic approach is predominant, though in most studies, the contribution of the social context and the discourse of teachers and teaching are also considered to an extent.

TPI is widely considered to be an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences throughout the professional career of educators, which reflects the various successive stages of the transformation from student roles and behaviour patterns into professionalism (Beijaard et al., 2004). Watson (2006) describes this process as the constant production of narratives about one's own teaching practices. These narratives are developed by both social interaction and cognitive reflection about the position, roles and professional achievements of the self.

Ten Dam and Blom (2006) regard the construction of a professional identity as equal to the process of becoming teacher, which includes the interpretation of education, the teaching profession, and the self within this educational practice. This process enables the educator "to become a teacher whose activities are relevant to the profession and practice and who is prepared to take responsibility for his or her actions; in other words, a teacher who is competent of acting as a fully fledged participant in education" (Ten Dam & Blom, 2006: 651).

In the current analysis we accept a dynamic approach to TPI, that is focused on the ongoing interpretation of classroom and extra-classroom experiences by the teachers, concerning their teaching, their beliefs, values and emotions, as well as the surrounding school setting with its social, professional and human background.

2. The Malaysian Context

In Malaysia, most secondary school teachers are Master's or first-degree graduates, while primary school teachers are predominantly first-degree or diploma graduates. In addition to the

sharp disparities in qualification, salary and prestige between primary and secondary school, the public school network is divided into various types of schools according to content, language, mission and quality (Table 1). Beyond the multiple division of schools by levels, types and titles, individual teachers are also divided by various groups, titles and incentives, such as primary and assistant teachers, 'excellent teachers', teachers of crucial subjects, teachers who teach in remote locations, and several age groups based on the years in service (Petras et al., 2012).

Table 1: Types of schools in the Malaysian public education system.

<i>Primary education</i>	<i>Secondary education</i>	<i>Special titles for schools</i>
national primary school (sekolah kebangsaan)	national secondary school (sekolah menengah kebangsaan)	cluster school (sekolah kluster)
national Chinese primary school (sekolah jenis kebangsaan Cina)	national Chinese secondary school (sekolah jenis menengah Cina)	smart school (sekolah bestari)
national Tamil school (sekolah jenis kebangsaan Tamil)	technical secondary school (sekolah menengah teknik)	vision school (sekolah wawasan)
Islamic primary school (sekolah rendah agama)	fully residential school (sekolah berasrama penuh)	sports school (sekolah sukan)
complementary Islamic school (sekolah agama rakyat)	Islamic secondary school (sekolah menengah agama)	
junior science college (maktab rendah sains MARA)		
hut school (sekolah pondok)		

This pattern has directly led to the strong hierarchy of positions, where the status of a teacher within the system may have a disproportionately huge impact on their professional identity (Rao & Rohana, 2011). The great working load of educators and particularly their numerous administrative duties beyond direct teaching tasks make a further challenge to the construction of a healthy professional identity. The lack of time has a reportedly serious impact on the use of new tools, ideas and practices (Thang et al., 2010). Another threat is posed to quality teaching by the relative under-payment of educators, especially in the case of subjects who have no strategic role in the national education policy.

3. Method

The current analysis is based on the currently available data of an ongoing nation-wide survey of Malaysian teachers, which has been conducted since 2011. The survey is aimed at the investigation of the professional identity of Malaysian primary and secondary school teachers, addressing the following issues:

- (1) Opinions on the prestige of the teaching profession, such as personal devotion, satisfaction with teacher salaries, as well as with the public opinion about the teaching profession.
- (2) The assessment of teachers' own skills and competences in the field of both the implementation of teaching methods and standards, and communication with different groups of students.

- (3) The organisational climate of the teachers' own school, i. e. the perception of the respondent about the efforts and achievements of one's own school in terms of quality teaching, as well as the level of cooperation and trust among the staff members, and the attitudes of the school management towards the educators.
- (4) Opinions on teacher professional development, including both the teachers' own attitudes and experiences, and the broader institutional and political context of TPD, such as the effectiveness of formal activities and the perceived obstacles to successful professional development.
- (5) Non-formal TPD activities, as part of the daily teaching practice, such as sharing ideas and experiences on teaching, doing individual experiments or research, observing teaching, co-teaching and networking.
- (6) Frequency of participation in formal TPD courses organised by educational authorities, along with the rating of the effectiveness of these activities.
- (7) Opinions on the various potential obstacles to successful professional development.

The survey data is constantly growing along with the implementation of our nation-wide research. The currently demonstrated evidence includes the responses of 467 teachers from Malaysian primary and secondary schools, accessed by convenient purposive sampling based on those practicing teachers enrolled in postgraduate studies in Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang. The principles of our sampling include the balance of subject matters and the involvement of all dominant types of the government schooling system, regarding both school levels and languages of instruction.

Likert-type scales were applied to obtain data from the respondents. With a regard to the nature of the different statements, we only used our scales as ordinal data. While designing the survey instrument, we supposed that even in an anonymous situation, a central tendency bias can occur in the case of sensitive questions demanding a subjective opinion on the contribution of educational authorities and local school managements. To avoid this potential distortion, a forced choice situation was generated through the use of 4-point Likert items for the more sensitive questions.

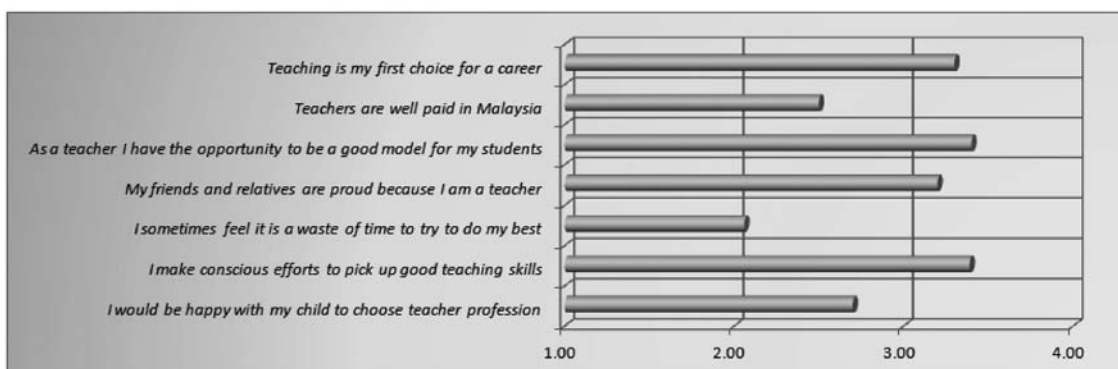
Most respondents teach multiple subjects, among which English is the most prevalent. Novice teachers with less than 5 years of service account for 27.4% of the respondents and half of our sample have more than 10 years of professional experience. Reflecting the feminine character of the teaching profession in contemporary Malaysia, our sample is dominated by female educators (Table 2).

Table 2: The composition of the sample by gender, years of professional experience and subject matters. (per person; N=467, the missing responses are not demonstrated)

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>			
GENDER	97	369			
	<i>5 years or less</i>		<i>6 to 10 years</i>	<i>More than 10 years</i>	
YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	125		105	227	
	<i>English</i>	<i>Vernacular languages</i>	<i>Mathematics</i>	<i>Science</i>	<i>Other subjects</i>
SUBJECTS TAUGHT	180	126	106	97	255

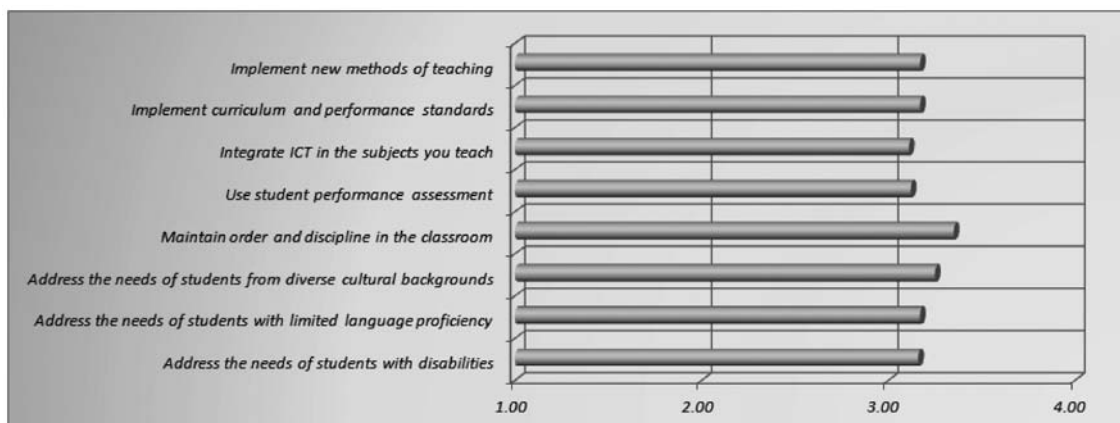
4. Results and Discussion

The teachers in our sample have predominantly positive opinions about the importance of their professional contribution to the society, and this is well reflected by their almost unequivocal approval of those values concerning the quality and output of teaching, their motivation to choose the profession, along with the prestige of teaching among friends and relatives (Graph 1). In terms of financial conditions, however, the teaching profession is deemed far less prestigious. The majority opinion about insufficient teacher salaries is also reflected by the relatively high proportion of those respondents who would not be pleased to see their children follow the same career path, in contrast to the high professional prestige they attribute to teaching. In the light of our data, the career choice of most respondents seems to be rather a personal devotion than a rational decision.



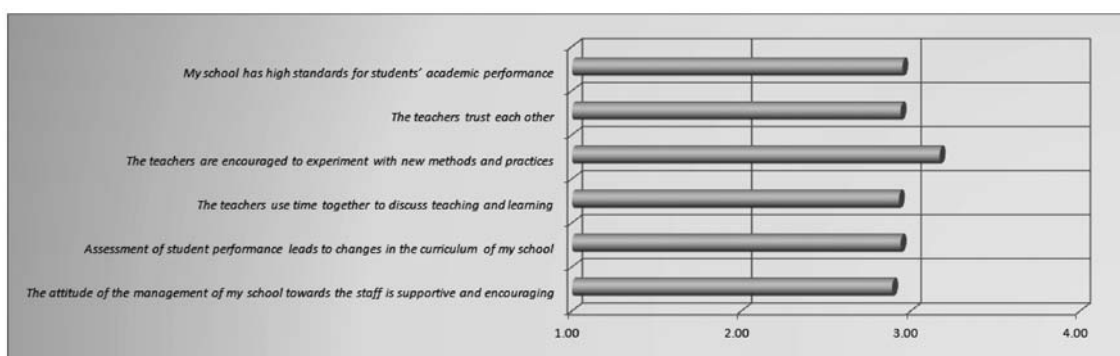
Graph 1: The approval of different prestige elements by the teachers, related to teaching profession. (Four-item Likert-scale, N=467.)

Similar to the opinions about prestige, the self-assessment of our respondents is overwhelmingly positive, with strong perceptions of their capability to maintain order and discipline in the classroom and to address such issues as multiculturalism and multilingualism prevailing in the Malaysian schooling system (Graph 2).



Graph 2: Self-assessment of professional competencies by the teachers. (Four-item Likert-scale, N=467.)

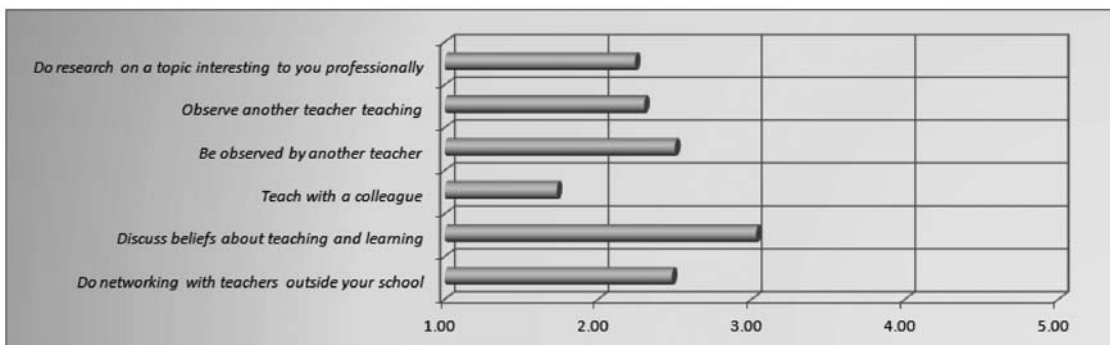
Our respondents proved to be slightly more critical about their institutions than their own competences, though most of them are still satisfied with the conditions, institutional climate and quality of their schools. The strongest value is the encouragement of teacher experiments with new methods and practices. It is remarkable that the least approved statement is the one which envisions a swift cooperation between staff members and a caring but flexible school management (Graph 3).



Graph 3: Perception of the own school by the teachers. (Four-item Likert-scale, N=467.)

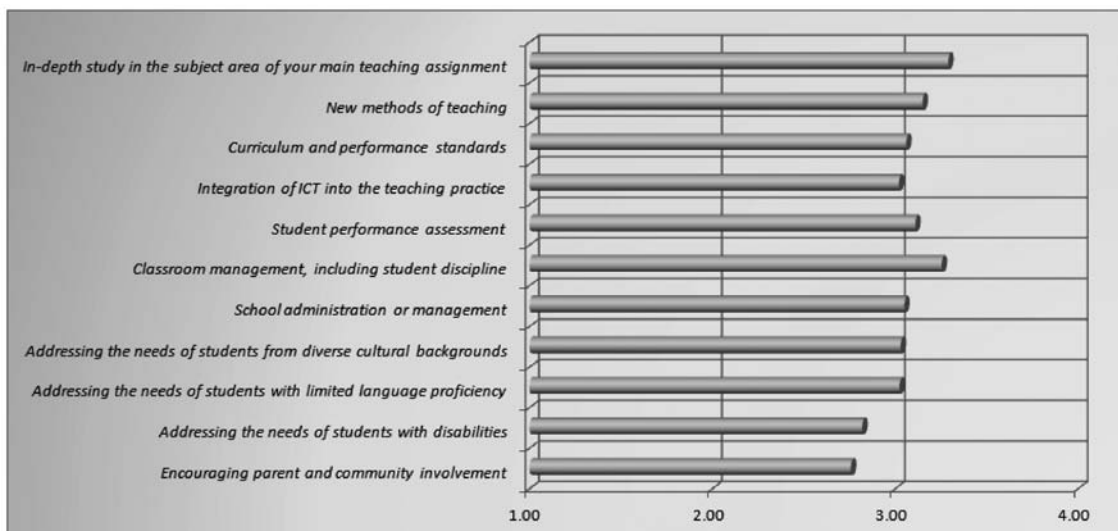
These findings, along with the overwhelmingly favourable self-assessment of teachers suggest that the professional identity of our respondents is rather individual than collective. While individual identities hold a high esteem of the effective classroom teaching, collaborative teaching practice is deemed as less important in this pattern (Sachs, 2001). On the other hand, the less supportive attitude of school management, as reported by our respondents, may be related to the great hierarchy dividing teachers in the Malaysian system. The strong ties between power relations and teacher identity are supported by a recent finding about the role of power relations in the construction of identity (Zembylas, 2010).

Non-formal professional development activities are very rarely practiced by our respondents. For a great majority of the sample, discussion about teaching and learning is the only form of non-formal TPD they have ever engaged in, and even this activity happens just few times a year for most of them. On the contrary, joint teaching is the least frequent non-formal TPD activity, virtually never practiced by most teachers (Graph 4). A potential reason for this pattern is that these activities, being less spontaneous than informal discussions, require more time and advance planning.



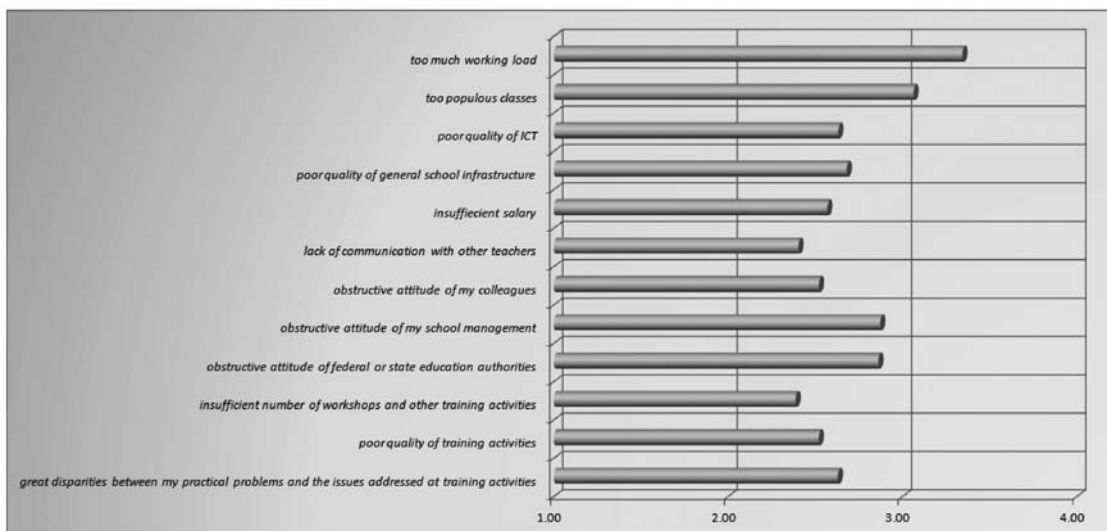
Graph 4: Frequency of non-formal TPD activities the teachers do. (Five-item Likert-scale, N=467.)

Regarding the formal TPD activities, an average of 6.5 different events were attended during the previous year. The overall assessment of these courses is relatively favourable, as in most of the content areas addressed by the activities, the majority of the sample noticed some improvement of their classroom teaching practice. Subject matter study and classroom management are the highest rated content areas, while dealing with student disabilities and community affairs are the least effectively addressed fields of professional development (Graph 5).



Graph 5: Effectiveness of formal TPD activities according to the teachers, by content area. (Four-item Likert-scale, N=467.)

The immediate physical background of teaching is perceived to make an obstructive impact on TPD, however. The great working load on teachers along with the huge number of students pose the heaviest burden on our respondents. Some less frequently approved, but still problematic issues include the conflicts with the school management and the educational authorities, the poor quality of school infrastructure and the disparities between the practical issues of teaching and the content of formal TPD activities (Graph 6).



Graph 6: Obstacles of professional development as perceived by the teachers. (Four-item Likert-scale, N=467.)

The different values, attitudes and experiences about professional development by the various sub-groups of the teacher community have yet to be analysed, but they will be examined once the size of our growing data becomes sufficient to enable such an insight.

5. Concluding Remarks

By the evaluation of our preliminary data, we found that the identity of teachers is dominated by individual values, while the elements of a collective professional identity are weak among our respondents. Although the prestige of the teaching profession is deemed relatively high, an array of problematic issues became evident, such as the excessive working load of teachers and the disturbingly big size of classes. This prestige pattern suggests that the career choice of teachers is a result of personal devotion rather than rational decision.

Some less prevalent negative experiences of teachers suggest the presence of conflicts between educators and the management of their schools, as well as the educational authorities. We suggest that these conflicts have partly resulted from the complex and extensive hierarchy of the Malaysian educational system, and similarly, the hierarchical divisions of the teacher community within this system. Furthermore, this finding highlights the role of power relations in

the construction of teacher professional identity.

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