Becoming a Teacher: The Development of Teachers' Professional Identity through Engagement with Community of Practice

Bahijah Abas

Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia, bahijah@fpe.upsi.edu.my

Abstract

This paper explores the development of professional identity amongst students during their commencement in teacher education programme. Particularly, it examines the process of adaption that take place during teaching practice or practicum at school whereby student teachers negotiate teacher identities they assume as they engage in their work with practising teachers and pupils. Lave and Wenger's work on apprenticeship to communities of practice (CoP) is used to examine the effect of teaching practice on the development of professional identity. Group interviews were used to explore student teachers experiences at school. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded line-by-line. Thematic analysis was used to identify the patterns of meaning across datasets to provide answers to research purpose being addressed. Results showed that pupils constitute an important part of the teacher education students' community of practice as well as socialisation agent that influence their professional identity development.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

The teaching practice is one of an important component in the teacher education programme. It exposed the teacher education students to the actual teaching environment. The teaching practice guides students to develop their professional identity as a teacher apart from previous studies found that this programme has become a huge source of anxiety and stress for them. It is reported that student experienced difficulties to build a good relationship with practicing teachers (Maynard, 2001) and were challenged with disruptive pupil behaviour (Kokkino, Panayiotou, & Davazoglou, 2004). Such anxiety and stress had hindered the construction of professional identity among teacher education students. Therefore it is important to gain more knowledge about students' experience during teaching practise. This paper focusing on students interaction and socialisation with practising teachers, including their mentor and, pupils at school, in order to identify how they constructed and developed their professional identity particularly during teaching practice.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AMONG TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

Knowles (1992) views teachers' professional identity as teachers' concept or image of self. It includes professional skills, knowledge and attitudes related to the teaching profession (Glaser-Segura, Mudge, Bratianu & Dumitru, 2010). Scholars agreed that professional identity is built through going a long and complex process in a different context (Chong et. al, 2011; Cohen-Scali, 2003). The nature of the process indicates that the construction of professional identity involves unlimited learning process. Thereby, the individual acquire new or modify existing knowledge, behaviours, skills, values or preferences in terms of profession. Learning may occur as part of personal development, education or training, and the learner becomes an information constructor. Thus in the teacher education programme, students are assumed to become an active participants and learn on how to negotiate their

images of self as teacher in every phase throughout their matriculation in the preparation programme.

Besides an active and constructive process, learning also involves social interaction between the learner and the environment (Chi, 2009; Wenger, 1998; Bandura, 1986). Wenger (1998: 4) sees 'learning as social participation, an activity that can be described as being active participants in social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities'. The concept of 'communities of practice' (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) becomes prominent as a key element in new theoretical perspectives. In addition, it is regarded learning as a social participation rather than cognitive acquisition. To Lave & Wenger

> *'Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind. This means, among other things, that it is mediated by the differences of perspectives among the CoP participants. It is the community, or at least those participating in the learning context, who learn under this definition'* *(Hanks, 1991, p.5)*

With regard to professional identity development, CoP helps in the movement of becoming a member of the profession, and 'engages directly with the mutual constitution of identity and community' through the development of membership and belonging (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003, p.5). The development of membership and belonging thereby are important as students interact and learn with one another for their own survival and to accomplish tasks (Wenger, 1998). At higher education institution, particularly during the internship or practicum whereby students are offered practical work experience, engagement in CoP helps student to negotiate identity by learning, observing, and discussing in relevant knowledge, skills and attitude in a specific group that they become a member/s.

Much has been written in the educational literature on the value of CoP in terms of enhancing learning among students at higher education institutions particularly in Western countries. In most of the literature, the engagement in specific CoP facilitates by working with professional in the field who can be regarded as a master. In the engineering education, for example, the university invites the practising engineers to facilitate the students by mentioning about the roles they play during certain activities (Anderson & Anderson, 2010). The practising engineers shares and discusses their real expertise with the students. Thereby, it helps students to accept that there is no huge gap between theory and practice in engineering education.

While Western literature reported engagement of CoP in various programme at higher education institution, this term is rarely discussed explicitly within the teacher's education literature in Malaysia. In the teacher education programme, practising teachers at school are perceived as a 'master' regarding their teaching experience at school. The practising teachers regarded as a member of CoP as they satisfy three dimension of CoP; mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998; Davis, 2006). Even though numerous studies in Malaysia have attempted to explain positive relationship between teacher education students' and the practising teacher, the concept of CoP was not present as the studies only highlighted one way communication between the two parties. Contrary to that only few studies highlighted the active engagement of a 'community' consists of students and their mentor teacher (e.g., Harun, 2006; Sindhu, 2010). Among others, Sindhu & Kaur (2010) in their study of two English student teachers found that they learned about classroom management during their post-teaching discussion between themselves and mentor teacher.

They also concluded that discussion helps the students to enhance their teaching strategies and ensure that the classroom lessons run smoothly despite the destructive behaviour of pupils.

Despite the role of practising teachers in the CoP, the literatures, however have not concentrated on how students engaged with pupils as one community at school. Much of the educational literatures worldwide emphasis the influence of pupils to shape and reshape teacher education students' beliefs of who and what teacher should do at school (Atkinson, 2004; Stenberg, et. al, 2014;). However, the research to date has tended to focus on students' knowledge, based on their experiences, of what pupils wants and needs in the classroom rather than actively involve with pupils to identify their learning inspiration.

Stenberg and colleagues (2014) found that teacher education student at one teacher training institution in Finland believed that they should support pupil's leaning process at school. This belief has shaped how student represent themselves as class teacher during their teaching practise at school. Similarly, Atkinson (2004) also found that students enrol in initial teacher education in England tried to predict pupils' needs in order to become good teacher. These findings contributed considerably to the literature on how teacher education students are influenced by pupils in negotiating their professional identity during teaching practice, however, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, the extent which student actively engaged and communicate with pupils in social communities and construct their teacher identity has not highlighted. On behalf of the previous studies, I argue that pupils also constitute as a contributor in the community as teacher education students deals with them every day. The pupils also important actors at school as they help student share and develop set of cases and stories that can become shared repertoire for their practice (Davis, 2006). Thus, this study aimed to fulfil this gap.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study aims to explore the type of CoP teacher education students' engaged during their teaching practice at school and identify the participants of such community. Moreover, the teacher's professional identity developed from this involvement will be identified. The result of the study will give an input to teacher education programme administrator on how students negotiate their professional identity during their teaching practise. The inputs are valuable for this party as they are able to plan, administer and evaluate current practices and suggest for improvements.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative research paradigm, as the author's aim to discover the meaning and experiences of student teachers during their teaching practice. This paradigm does not involve the experiment and statistical significant relationships between variable (Barbour, 2014; Denzin& Lincoln, 2011; Miles &Huberman, 1994).. This study is looking at the explanation provided by subject involved in the research (Barbour, 2014).

Research Participants

A purposive sample of 25 student teachers was selected to participate in this study. The author used her social network as a teacher educator to approach the participants undergoing their teaching practice at three different secondary schools in the state of Perak. Participants aged between 22 - 25 and were in their final week of their teaching practice. The number of participants in each school was as follows:

Table 1: Research participants

School	Number of participants
SK	5
AB	6
BJ	5
BK	4
SP	5

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected using narrative method. Narratives method concerns personal narratives or stories (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1998) and allows 'participants to recall what happened during, put the experience into sequence and find possible explanations' (Jovchelovitch& Martin, 2000: 58). The experience of engagement that individual convey through the story is able to determine their meaning towards certain phenomena (Crotty, 1998). In addition to the participants' stories, data also collected through observations. The observations include participants nonverbal signals such as body language, facial expression and intonation of voices when convey a story. The observations captured the emotions and importance points of participants' stories.

Participants were divided into groups of 4 – 6 members, depends on the number of students undergoing teaching practise at that school. The advantages of conducting group interviews were participants had the opportunity to learn from each other and develop ideas together (Jackson, 2003). Sarantakos (2005) further explain that a group environment encourage discussion and increase the motivation to address critical issues. Self representation of the participants are minimised by creating permissive environment in the group that encourage participants to share perception, and their point of view without pressuring them to vote or reach consensus. Focus group discussions also encourage group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without interaction found in a group because every participant has a different experience and background (Morgan, 1997). The focus group sessions were non directive, allowing the participants to give voice of their experiences, which in turns foster the emergence of themes from them.

The discussion commence with, firstly, participants were asked to introduced themselves and narrate the personal and social factors that influence their application to teacher education programme. Afterwards, participants were asked about their experiences in interaction with practising teachers and pupils during teaching practice. Discussions were also recorded through a digital recorder and then transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo. When coding, the author informed (but the constraint) by a conceptual framework derived from the literature, rather inductively build an emergent framework from the data (Attriride-Stirling, 2001). Iterative processes were employed, identified the category and level of participation within the communities of practise. As the data were coded according to participants' narrative, each participant was given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality and protect their anonymity.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings presented in two aspects; firstly, different type of CoP teacher education students' engaged during teaching practice and the levels of participation in such community. Secondly, identify teachers' professional identities as shaped by such participation. Thematic analysis employed to facilitate data analysis gave an insight that participants have access to a

specific community during their teaching practice, and this engagement influenced the meaning on how they see themselves as a teacher.

Type of CoP

The main findings of this study suggest that the students engaged in the community of practise more in informal rather than formal and planned situations. However, students revealed that they are not actively involve and participate with group discussion consists of practising teachers at school. Out of 25 participants, only two of them stated that they always engaged in a two way discussion between them and practising teachers. One of the participants expressed:

> *My mentor and other teachers are very helpful. We always discussed in a small group the improvement that I need particularly related to my class management [AB3]*

Similar to AB3, another participant from different school stated:

> *I discussed with senior teachers what I should do with pupils that left behind academically. , Eventually, I concluded under the light of their suggestion, I should be more creative during teaching. [SP5]*

AB3 and SP5 eagerly narrated their experience of learning by participating in a community consisted of senior and mentor teachers during their teaching practice. This participation gives an input on how students can improve their professional skills. However, majority of the participants narrated that they have a large gap between them and senior teachers. Participants mentioned that *they were force to do something without assistance* [BJ3], and also complaint that they *were given loads of clerical job without guidance* [BJ5]. They continue and mentioned the *dispute between trainee and senior teacher regarding co curricular activities in terms of pupil's development* [SK2]. These scenarios demotivated them in order to construct their image as a teacher.

Another participant, BK3 who never involved in any learning community with practising teachers at school suggests that there should be a specific subject offered by teacher education institution in order to bridging the gap between students and practising teacher. She expressed:

> *I think there should be a special subject that should teach students on how to socialise with practising teacher at school [BK3]*

This suggestion gives an insight that some student has hope to involve in learning by participation with practising teachers, however they were lack of confidence to make a first move.

On the other hand, majority of the participants narrated their good experiences when engaging with group of pupils. Data reveals that students actively involved in informal activities with pupils such as co-curricular activities, accompanying pupils for a school trip, and become a warden at school hostel. Students take the opportunity to negotiate for their professional identity while engaging with this group of pupils. One of the participants brings

the pupils to watch the football tournament, during their journey, pupils talk about their aspirations and their study preferences. He emotionally narrated:

> *We discussed their (pupils) assumed professions inside the bus, during the field trip. They want to be a successful person, but some of them have low literacy skills. They are a normal person, but may not have an opportunity to learn in a proper way. That's a challenge for them. I give suggestions on how to improve themselves particularly in subject that I teach. This group of pupils always come and see me, and I will listen to their problems and give recommendation where appropriate. They inspire me to become a teacher [AB2]*

His colleague added:

> *Yes, many pupils stayed at hostel come from unfortunate families. They always come to me and asked how they can combat with their poverty, and become successful. I realise that they have the motivation to succeed. I start surf internet what can be used to facilitate the teaching and learning process particularly related to my subject. I have to work hard because I know that pupils also depends to their teachers in order to succeed [AB4]*

AB2 and AB4 realised that their engagement with a group of pupils provides an overview on what pupils need, and it reflected on what a teacher must do. From the narrative, these participants aware that it is essential for them in promoting pupils' studying and learning process.

Besides teaching the subject matter, participants expressed that they were very happy to motivate their pupils. This motivation comes from students' own experience whereby most of them experienced the same situation with their current pupils when previously at school. They sincerely motivate pupils and give them moral support, whether academically or in their social life.

> *I stayed at hostel and during meals time, I always have an informal chat with group of pupils. Some of them have difficulties in learning. For me, if they don't have a capability in academic achievement, or are experiencing learning difficulties, that is not the end of the world. There are a lot of opportunities for this group of pupils. I like the proverb – don't give a fish to our pupils. Teach them how to fish, and they can use the skill forever. Motivate them, give them appropriate skills. [SP4]*

This student uses her designation as warden to engage in small group of pupils whereby they learn from each other about life. The group discussions become a medium for students to think and learn about teachers' responsibility. Similarly, other participants from different school happily expressed:

> *I am quite happy if I can motivate the pupils to be a better person spiritually. Be a good person. At least if they are not performing well academically, they can still be a good person. That's what I always mentioned to them (pupils) whenever we met after the co-curricular activity at school [BJ3]*

One female student also shared her experiences engaging with pupils during a school trip:

> *They were naughty pupils I ever had! They mentioned that teachers always get angry on them and sometimes even ignore their existence in the classroom. I can*

feel them as I also got a class full of 'undesired students' in school. They are not academically capable or in respect to teachers. Speechless! But I have to do something because I am in my teaching training! I don't want to fail my internship off course. I try very hard to be their friend, not a teacher. Later, I found that this group of students are very creative. They left out because they did not get any 'A's in their subject. Schools really focus on academically aspect now a day's. We try to do something that will make school proud on us. We did it! We make a mural and won the competition in recycling campaign. Aha!, I realise that the students only need attention and motivation.

These findings reveal that participants learn about the professional skills, knowledge and attitude by participate in the pupils' community particularly in the informal session. Participants' narrative shows that the interaction within pupils' community has developed positive attitude towards teaching profession. These findings give positive insight on the development of teachers' professional identity among student teachers as the analysis showed that majority of them initially embark in teacher education programme not because they inclined to be a teacher, but other factors such as influenced by members of family and peers, and to get a job after graduated. Among others, one participants expressed that '*my mission is to get a place in undergraduate programme and graduated, and enjoys a privilege of graduate job*' [BJ3] and '*become a teacher is just to satisfy family's inspiration*' [BK1. Only a few participants mentioned their aspiration in a more positive voice such as '*I have wanted to be a teacher since I can remember*' [BK3]. However, at the time the study conducted, 24 out of 25 participants narrated a positive attitude towards the profession and intend to choose teaching after graduation. The most influential factors for their decision were their experience to engage in the social community with pupils, which give them an inspiration in negotiating their professional identity.

While this study intends to identify CoP students engaged within school compound, the thematic analysis also suggests that students actively involved in online discussion particularly via blog and Facebook as medium for professional development. Among others, students stated that they have their own online groups consisting of student teachers within the same higher education institution as well as general group from other institutions offered teacher preparation programme in Malaysia. In addition, some of the students actively involved in discussion posted by independent blog owners. Students stated that; '*the discussion on how to motivate pupils to learn are awesome*' [BK3], '*I learn a lot from online discussion about how to write lesson plan*' [AB6], '*I always asked something about teaching technique via closed group on Facebook, and many of the group members were enthusiastic to continue online discussion once in post*' [SP3]. Students' narrative on online discussions suggests that virtual group providing a venue for reflective practices among student teachers particularly during their teaching practice.

Thus far, the findings of this study reveal that the communication between the senior teacher and the students to be on a significant lower level compared to the engagement with group of pupils. The communication between them mostly consists on questions and answers to ensure that students have basic necessary knowledge to success in future undertakings as teacher as well as to be able to pass the teaching practice. Thus, it can be concluded that the participation in the social community with practising teacher is in the form of formal discussion, and most of the students become passive participants in that community. One explanation of this current situation is the higher power distances that exists in the Eastern society. According to Hofstede (1983), the higher power distances means that there is inequality existing between the powerful (practising teacher) and less powerful (students)

authority at organisation level. Students assumed that they have to accept the power of those practising teachers, since they are trainee teacher and vice versa.

Nevertheless, students' become more active to negotiate their professional identity as teacher while engage in CoP consists of pupils rather than practising teacher. Further examination of categories on thematic analysis found that students are keen to help pupils because they can identify and understand pupils' situation, feeling and motives. As narrated by one participant:

> *I was punished by my former teacher because I did not finish my homework. Yes, it was my fault. But I had a reason. My father was sick and I helped my mother to look after him. My teacher never asked about it. Just punished! [BJ1]*

The other participant also added:

> *In secondary school, I was among the low academic achievers. Teachers ignored mostly low academic achievers and only pay attention to high academic achievers. Very sad! Low academic achievers do not mean that you are worthless s.[BK1]*

These narratives suggest that teacher education students perceived that school pupils as a member of community of practise to work with, not as an object to work for.

Professional Identity Shaped by Engaging with CoP

The findings also reveal the professional identity participants assumed as they participated in the social community during teaching practise. In the first place, participants assumed that they feel psychologically connected to the teaching profession as they acquire more professional skills during their internship. The thematic analysis suggests that students appreciated the opportunity offered by the internship to enhance their skill particularly in managing children's behaviour. The narratives presented in the previous subsection suggest that students are very optimist that there will be positive possible outcome from their teaching towards pupil's life, and they are very committed to stay engaged with the pupils and think how to solve their academic and life difficulties. Equally important, students also believe that they now have developed good interpersonal skills as they socialise with the pupils. Additionally, the analysis also reveals that students have develop their self-efficacy as their narrative and facial expression showed that they are very confident they will overcome challenges during teaching practice.

CONCLUSION

Teacher education students' engagement in social community during their teaching practice gives an opportunity to them to negotiate their professional identity as a future teacher. I conclude that, students were inclined to engage in with pupils rather than practising teachers at school in order to develop their image as a teacher. Hence the relevance of school pupils as socialisation agent is clearly supported by the current findings. This finding provides an indicator that teacher education students rarely involve in group discussion with practising teachers, thus the administrators from both higher education institutions and schools have make proactive action to increase students' engagement with group of teachers.

This study has some limitation in terms of research paradigm and approach. A qualitative research study, the small sample size of teacher education students (25

participants), undergoing teaching practice in five secondary schools may imply that the results cannot be readily generalised, however they are likely to have wider relevance and applicability to other group of teacher education students.

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