

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

An International Comparative Analysis of Teachers' Professional Identity in Malaysia and Vietnam: Implications for Reforms

Dr. Pham Thi Thanh Hai

Head, Research and International Relations Department, University of Education,
Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam

Dr. Nguyen Thi Ngoc Bich

Lecturer, Department of Education, University of Education, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam

Le Kim Long

Rector & Associate Professor, University of Education, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam

Dr. Mohd Ali Samsudin

Associate Professor & Chairman, Science Education Programme,
School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

Simeon, Moses Irekpita

PG Student, School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

Abdul Rashid Mohammed

Professor & Project Leader, Basic Educational Research Unit (BERU),
School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

Abstract:

Study focuses attention on a comparative analysis of teachers' professional identities in Malaysia and Vietnam. Study employed a qualitative approach in its investigation of novice teachers' professional identities for consequent comparison in the two countries of study. Novice teachers with teaching experiences from three (3) years and below were purposively selected from unique public, private and semi-private schools in both Malaysia and Vietnam for the study. Novice teachers from various cultural background in Malaysia and Vietnam were selected for the study. Analysis of interview data from structured interviews of novice teachers was done under the context of personal, school, training, challenge, and language and teachers status. Thus study was located within a subject centered social-cultural framework in a bid to garner resources for teachers' professional negotiation for consequent comparison in the two countries. Findings revealed that teachers' professional negotiations within the personal and school context in both countries of study were similar but differed on negotiations on equipment support by the school. Also, on the training context teachers' perspective on training support was completely similar in both countries as they all observed insufficient training opportunities. The challenge context was not different as teachers from the two Asia countries expressed their reflection of similar of enormous challenges ranging from those from students, school system and stakeholders among others as inhibitors to their productivity. The language context domain of analysis shows similar reflections in both countries as teachers expressed high proficiency in the use of language of instruction but slightly differ in Vietnamese because of diversity of ethnic minority groups. The perception of the teachers' status for which the teachers' status was rated high in Vietnam but the reverse was the case in Malaysia. Implications for reforms, conclusion and recommendations such as provision of enabling and favorable working conditions in both countries' socio-cultural environment capable of promoting teachers status especially in Malaysia where it was observed low was nevertheless made.

Keywords: *Professional teachers' identity, Novice teachers, Interviews, Teachers, Context*

1. Introduction

Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) observed that novice teachers must undergo a shift in identity as they go through teacher education programs and consequently assume teaching positions in the ever dynamic and challenging school context. Hooley (2007) defined a professional as an individual who having completed a training course of specialized knowledge and rigorous initial preparation as approved by the profession and certified a registered practitioner in the profession with the right to exercise professional judgement. Referring to identity, Beijgaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) defined it as a dynamic and ongoing (not stable) attributes that involves a person and a context. On this note, they went further to define teachers professional identity as how teachers view themselves based on the interpretation received from the regular interactions with their own professional context.

Day (2002) declared that the constructs of teachers sense of professional identity which an outcome of the teachers' continual interaction with the context and made manifest in the picture of teachers job, commitment, motivation or job satisfaction are referred to as indications that affects the teachers' sense of professional identity that the influence on teachers professional identity could either be due to personal or contextual factors.

Moreover, in the observation of Mockler (2011), professional identity is encapsulated within the three domains of personal experience, professional context and external political situations. The professional context according to him relates to all the experiences of the teacher acquired within the context of educational practices which may include the teachers beginning and continual training supports opportunities, accreditations and teachers registrations for professional competence. Namaghi (2009) in his view asserts that teaching and teachers identity are both constructed socially through experiences in and with other members of the profession. He therefore observed that professional teacher's identity is dialogic sense which seems to invoke an overlay of multiple roles, discourses or voices. To him the teachers' identity is constructed in activities structured and responsive to the needs of the pupils or students.

Beauchamp et al (2009) reiterates the indefatigable role of emotion, power of stories, role of reflection, link between identity and the educational agency, responsibility of the teacher education programs, contextual factor in creating congenial opportunities for the exploration of new teachers' professional identity. Teacher professional identity according to Tickle (2000) does not only relate to teachers' perception of what is crucial to their occupational practices and life but also an impact of expectations and conceptualization of other people coupled with the widely acceptable teachers' image in the society.

1.1. Importance of Teachers' Professional Identity

Beauchamp et al (2009) declared that it is of most necessity for student teachers to experience a shift in identity as they go through their usual teaching programs or on assumption of teaching appointments in the ever increasingly challenging school context. They observed that gaining additional and overall understanding of the teachers identity could go a long way in enhancing the how and ways in which teacher education programs are conceived.

Mockler (2011) asserts that the teacher professional identity is a practical tool for delivery to the teaching profession. He further observed that the teacher's professional identity not only can serve as a practical tool but also as a political tool for alleviating and fighting contemporary common sense understandings of all orthodoxies resident in the daily professional practices of teaching.

Besides, Saachs (2005) asserts that the core of the teaching profession is the teacher professional identity because it avail an understanding of the framework for the teachers to construct their own behaviors, beliefs, values, ideas about their own work and about their own social status. Nias (1989) in Zivkovic (2013) Professional identity of teachers is necessary for adequate and proper understanding of the functioning of teachers. Therefore with these observations it is crystal clear that teachers' professional identity is so crucial in a bid to enhancing the school educational system and meeting teachers personal development needs for professional deliveries

2. Methodology

Study utilized a qualitative approach in which structured interview was used to investigate teachers professional identity negotiation for consequent comparison in Malaysia and Vietnam under the context of personal, school, training, language, challenge and teachers status. This study was located in line with a subject centered socio-cultured framework of Mockler (2011) to provide resources for teachers' professional negotiation. Ten (10) novice teachers' work whose teaching experiences were three (3) years and below were purposively selected from unique public, private and semi-private schools in each of Malaysia and Vietnam. Teachers were selected from the different existing socio-cultural background in the two countries and were male and females. Novice teachers were exposed to structured interviews on the subjective experiences on their professional identity formations in each of the countries and the wealth of data on identity function of the novice teachers were procedurally analyzed under the emerging context of personal, school, training, language, (culture), challenge and teachers status within an interpretive paradigm.

2.1. Findings

Similarities and differences in the professional identity of teachers in Malaysia and Vietnam were duly analyzed using the data obtained from structured interviews of novice teachers under the following sub-identities in line with the view of Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) who opined that there is a complex interaction existing between teachers' professional identities and sub-identities:

2.2. Personal Context

In line with the assertion of Mockler (2011) that professional learning lays at the interaction of personal experiences and professional context which requires both professional and personal relevance. Also Agbeyegan and Doku (2011) assert that the teacher professional identity is shaped by the interaction between personal experience and professional knowledge within the teaching environment, school, the curriculum and the student. Interviews and question and the corresponding responses obtained from teachers under the context of personal experiences were highlighted below as follows:

- In your own opinion what are the reason people nowadays, decide to become teachers?

From Malaysia, responses obtained are:

- "People decide for the teaching profession just because it is a noble profession"
- "Some desire teaching because it gives them a sense of satisfaction from the profession".

- “They have fulfillment in the profession”.
- “It is a rewarding job”.
- In Vietnam, responses are as follows:
 - “People decides to become teachers because of the respect for teachers”
 - “Of course, because of the stable income”
 - “Some become teachers because of favour they can easily receive”
 - “Parental influence is what makes some to becoming teaches in Vietnam”.
 - “I love being a teacher”
 - “Becoming a teacher has been my dream for a long time”

➤ How do you feel about being a teacher?

In Malaysia context, responses to this are as follows:

- “Almost feeling nervous but am now so confident”
- “Very much challenged to be a teacher”
- “I am indeed deeply satisfied and I definitely feel honoured”

In Vietnam,

- “To me it is a meaningful career but with many difficulties and pressure”
- “I’m very proud of being a teacher because it is a respected career”
- “Good because of good reputation and moral status it accords”
- “It is a hard job being a teacher I and requires a lot of energy to remain more active. It also needs love and passion for the children and being distinguished communicators to deal with parents and students”.

➤ Where do you see yourself in ten years’ time? Still as a teacher?

In Malaysia, teachers responded as:

- “I still want to be a teacher”
- “Want to become a lecturer teaching a higher level”
- “Professional development is my goal in the next ten years”

In Vietnam, responses to this question is as follows:

- “I still want to be a teacher within the next ten years”.

Most of the novice teachers observed that the teaching job is not easy but maintained that they remained in the profession because it is a respected profession which gives a good reputation in the community. From responses obtained in the two countries, a good deal of similarities seems to exist on the context of personal experiences of respondents’ vis-à-vis how they feel about teaching, what makes people go in to the teaching profession as well as their ambition in the next ten (10) years being teachers now. In short, in Vietnam 90% of the novice teacher interviewed opined that they love to keep the job while in Malaysia about 95% opined staying on the teaching profession. Obviously, these conceptualization in the words of Day (2002) of the identities of teachers within the profession is hinged on the personal characteristics as they are the indicators and constructs for understanding the real sense of professional identity.

2.3. Context of the School

In the words of Mockler (2011) the domain of teachers’ professional context relates to those experiences which are framed within the context of the school. According to him, the identity of the teachers could be enacted within or on the school. Findings obtained from interviews under the context of the school are as follows:

➤ Do you feel equipped to teach learners from various cultures in one classroom?

In Malaysia responses are:

- “I feel fully equipped regarding my knowledge acquisition”
- “Well prepared of course to deliver the subject matter”

In Vietnam:

- “Not fully prepared as we expected though”
- “Teachers are only provided with basic knowledge by training departments which is not enough for nor adequate for subject matter delivery in schools”

➤ Tell me about the school where you are teaching.

In Malaysia, respondents opined that:

- “My School has comfortable environment for teaching and learning so that the school environment is impressive”
- “My school has obsolete equipment”
- “School has not enough instructional materials as you can see”
- “I have heavy workload in my daily school schedules”

- “To me there is good school management”
- “No ICT and adequate laboratory materials”

In Vietnam, respondents opined that:

- “It is interesting. The students are from the highlands, there is a good relationship among teachers-we are always united in work and life”.
- “The school is fully equipped with modern facilities”.
- “In general, school meets my expectation: though just established for 4 years now, but teachers work professionally and have a good relationship”.
- “Our schools have a lot of fun and interesting. The students are lovely; our colleagues are friendly and supportive in team work and in the daily life”.
- “Newly founded schools with good facilities”

➤ How would you describe the average learner in your class?

In Malaysia, responses are:

- “The average learner in my school is passive”
- “Average learner in my class is quite slow”
- “Average learner in my school is shy in the class”

In Vietnam respondents opined as:

- “An average learner in my class is quite passive”.
- “Slow, do not pay much attention to study”.
- “Good behavior, but slow in gaining academic knowledge in class.
- “In mountainous schools, they are quite shy in communicating, during teaching & learning time, they are also shy to share their ideas”.

➤ What type of support do you experience from school management, parents and your department of education?

In Malaysia, responses are:¹

- “We experience financial support”.
- “They give us infrastructural support”
- “No experience of parental support”

In Vietnam, responses are:

- “Create opportunity for novice teachers to participate in professional training programmes as well as to improve teaching skills”
- “Organize field trips and exchange programmes for teachers”
- “Parents provide support to enhance the conditions for teaching and learning”.

Findings revealed that teachers’ identity in Malaysia and Vietnam were mostly similar especially as regards teachers description of average learners in the class, support provided by schools and educational departments although not exactly the same. In term of equipping teachers for the job, teachers in Malaysia feel equipped but the reverse is the case in Vietnam as teachers opined they were not equipped in term of teaching for cultural diversity, especially for teachers in the disadvantaged areas. It should be noted that there are fifty-four(54)ethnic minority groups and all uses the same national curriculum. Thus, this poses some big challenges for the novice teachers who teach in the disadvantaged areas.

2.4. Training Context

Responses from teachers in the training context are highlighted in the following ways in a bid to analyze and compare the professional identities of teachers in Malaysia and Vietnam.

➤ Did your training as a teacher sufficiently prepare you for your teaching career?

In Malaysia, respondents opined as:

- “The training is not enough especially as we teachers have a lot to deliver much to our students with verse knowledge”
- “Definitely, require and need training workshops”
- In Vietnam, respondents observed that:
- “Lacking skills of necessary for teaching and learning activities”
- “Completely inadequate with the necessary skills in training programmes”
- “Nearly enough knowledge and skills to teach the required subjects, not enough in term of pedagogy and career development”.

Data obtained from these interviews as shown above on the training context perspective revealed that teachers in Malaysia and Vietnam do not have adequate training.

2.5. Challenge Context

Data obtained from interview responses under the challenge context as follows:

- What do you regard as your biggest challenge as a teacher and why?

In Malaysia, responses are:

- “The unstable educational system is my big challenge.”
- “The challenge of chaotic educational system is a challenge I observe.”
- “Low students grades is a challenge in my school”.
- “A challenge to me is the present vision of stakeholders”.

In Vietnam, responses are as follows:

- “Low income of teachers is a challenge”.
- “Level of students’ attention in school.”
- “Prejudices about the novice teachers is a challenge”
- “Insufficient time to learn professional skills”.
- “Lacking the appropriate training programmes. As you know a teacher cannot educate people with limited knowledge”.
- “How to make all the students understand what they are taught as their abilities to acquire knowledge are not the same level”.
- “Pressure of producing excellent students in school” .

The data collected from teachers from both countries depict that Malaysia teachers have challenges ranging from those pertaining to students, school system and blurred vision of stakeholders as slightly different from those of Vietnam with teachers who opined that inadequate teaching methods, low income amongst others are challenges. This of course is in line with the Kengan (1994) and Mockler (2011) that teachers in schools today are faced with complex bunch of social problems that limits the productivity.

2.6. Language Context

Findings obtained from responses of teachers and their perception on the context of language is presented in the following ways:

- Are you confident to teach in the language of instruction in your school?

In Malaysia, responses elicited are:

- “I am very confident in the use of the teaching language”
- “Somehow imperfect in the language proficiency”.

In Vietnam, elicited teachers’ responses are:

- “I am very proficiency in language usage”.
- “I do feel confident about my language used at school”.
- “I am not confident with using teaching language at school because I didn’t have time to cultivate and accumulate, and their vocabulary is poor”.

Findings from two countries shows that teachers feel confident in language use. In Vietnam, however, teachers from disadvantage areas as mentioned above are facing challenges to teach minorities students because they have to use national language (Vietnamese/Kinh language) for the national curriculum from primary to higher educational levels.

2.7. Teachers Status

Elicited responses on questions on teachers status as follows is highlighted as:

- How do you think your school and the community value the status of the teacher?

In Malaysia, teachers’ perception are as follows:

- “People look down on teachers as this reduces the value for the profession”
- “There is less respect for teachers”

In Vietnam, responses are as follows:

- “Teachers are rated high”
- “Teachers have low living conditions”
- “Teachers’ holds positive in the Vietnam society”
- “Teachers are treated with disparity.”

Findings shows that teachers’ status is perceived low in Malaysia as opposed to teachers’ status or image in Vietnam where teachers living condition are low and not treated equally but yet are rated high and made to hold positions in the Vietnam society. This is in line with the view of Mockler (2011) that professional teachers’ identity is not a stable entity. Besides it is also in agreement with the observation of Wilkins, Mohamed and Smith (2011) that identity formations are not fixed and are often contradictory.

2.8. International Comparison of Teachers’ status in Malaysia and Vietnam

In every culture and countries the status of teacher is a significant indicator which reflects the importance or value the people accord to the teaching profession and education in general. This is in line with the observation of Fwu and Wang (2002) that the social status of teachers is significant because it gives an understanding into the level of respect or prestige given to the teachers by citizens and indeed to education in the overall.

Comparing the status of teachers in Malaysia with the status of teachers in Vietnam, survey reports depicts that teachers in Malaysia on their personal context revealed a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment on their job especially as the citizens rates them very high. To them the teaching profession is a noble profession. In fact, they observed that they wish to remain being teachers although in form of lecturers after their professional development of acquisition of higher qualification in education.

They however perceived that despite their level of satisfaction, there exist the challenge of classroom or school leadership responsibilities and relevant school and education department supports that however affects their status in the job. This is in line with the Mockler (2011)'s observation that a teacher professional identity is dictated by his interaction and personal context.

In Vietnam, the status of the teachers was respected. There was high demands on professionalism and ethics in the face of inequality in meeting teachers demand, low living conditions, inappropriate educational program, poor social knowledge and limited or unreasonable training programs which nevertheless has consistently threatened teachers' status in the country. These challenge to their status however seems to reflect on the job commitment in line with the observation of Hammerness, Darling-Hammond and Brantford (2005) who observed that teachers' professional identity is sequel to securing teachers job commitment. This is because the teachers in Vietnam expressed their consequent behaviors of lack of confidence and courage in the job besides the positive social status accorded which has consequently affected students' dynamic achievements.

2.9. Implication for Reform and National Development

Many reforms in time past have been associated with excess workloads and unfamiliar responsibilities, disagreement over the interpretation of broadly defined reform goals, made teachers experience disappointments that has their professional delivery at stake and weaken their commitments to teaching and work, frustration, tensions, emotional and physical exhaustion (Little and Bartlett 2002). In fact, teachers in such reform goals were expected to approve the goals determined by the organization, enforce external decisions, participate in the implementation of reforms and to do the tasks that were demanded (Vahasantanen, K; Hokka, P; Etelapelto, A; Rasku-Puttonen, H and Littleton, K 2008).

In view of initiatives for global reform in education for sustainable educational development, which is an ambitious goal in which teacher development is central, no better time than now could be timely to engage in scholarly reforms, rigorous discussion, partnerships at national and international levels to give urgent attention to incongruities between reform goals and teachers' beliefs, knowledge and practices in a bid to enhance teachers' professional identities (Van den & Sleeper, 2009). Finding in the study revealed that teachers in Malaysia and Vietnam are generally been faced with school and classroom challenges and training needs besides their low status identity formations. Advocated reform could nevertheless accommodate initial teacher trainings as well as continual teacher training programs as fundamental change to support the reform process. Such reforms could also focus and address teachers' identity conflict and challenges that they encounter and negotiate for their professional development within the school context to enhance development in the educational sector. The advocated reforms could avail the governments of nations to make enriching consultations with teachers over viable educational programmes, policies, and associated pressures through mounting up of profitable mechanism for accountability of policy reform which in time past had badly demoralized teachers' status, confidence, morale and their overall self-identity.

Moreover, reform in the educational practices in line with the observation of Van veen & Slegers (2009) who posited that a capacity to affirm an alternative ideology, set of values and beliefs to those that shape our current policy environment is indisputable should cater for training novice teachers in the adopted language of the discourse community into which they found themselves so that they cautiously talk, feel, act, think, belief and value the ways of life of the community and consequently will be able to consciously use language to mediate their professional practice.

2.10. Conclusion and Recommendation

Findings obtained from the analysis of interview data under the different context of personal, school, training, language (culture), challenge and teachers' status clearly provides resources for teachers' professional negotiations in Malaysia and Vietnam. Study revealed that the perception and reflection of teachers under the context of the personal, school, language, and challenges were not too different even though the challenges faced by teachers were widely differing from one to the other. Findings revealed that also the teachers in Malaysia observed that the status attached to them was low the reverse was observed from the perspective of novice teachers in Vietnam. Suggestions for putting all hands on deck by supporting schools, educational departments and stakeholders for providing conducive working environment condition, eliminating existing challenges opposing teachers in their personal or school context as well as raising and retention of high teachers status is therefore not negotiable.

2.11. Acknowledgement

This research is funded by Universiti Sains Malaysia Research University (RU) Grant under the account number 1001 / PGURU / 816280

3. References

- i. Agbenyega, J. & Deku, P. (2011). Building New Identities in Teacher Preparation for Inclusive Education in Ghana. *Current Issues in Education*, 14(1)1-36. Retrieved from <http://cie.asu.edu/>. Access date: 22/1/16.
- ii. Beauchamp, C & Thomas, L (2009) Understanding teacher identity: an overview of issues in the literature and implications for teacher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 39:2, 175-189.

- iii. Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C., & Verloop, N. (2004). Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20, 107-128.
- iv. Day, C. (2002). School reform and transitions in teacher professionalism and identity. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 37, 677-692.
- v. Fwu, B & Wang, H (2002) The Social Status of Teachers in Taiwan, *Comparative Education*, 38(2) 211-224, DOI:10.1080/03050060220140584 Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03050060220140584>. Access date: 10/1/16 .
- vi. Hammerness, K., Darling-Hammond, L., & Bransford, J. (2005). How teachers learn and develop. In L. Darling-Hammond & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do* (pp. 358–389). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- vii. Hoyle, E (2001). Teaching Prestige and Esteem. *Educational Management and Administration* 29(2)139-152.
- viii. Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- ix. Little, J. W., & Bartlett, L. (2002). Career and commitment in the context of comprehensive school reform. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 8(3), 345–354.
- x. Namaghi, S.A. O. (2009). A Data - Driven Conceptualization of Language Teacher's Identity in the Context of Public High Schools in Iran. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Spring 111 - 124.
- xi. Mockler, N (2011). Beyond 'what works': understanding teacher identity as a practical and political tool, *Teachers and Teaching*, 17:5, 517-528, DOI: 10.1080/13540602.2011.602059 Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2011.602059>. Access date: 20/12/15.
- xii. Sachs, J. (2005). Teacher education and the development of professional identity: Learning to be a teacher. In P. Denicolo & M. Kompf (Eds.), *Connecting policy and practice: Challenges for teaching and learning in schools and universities* (pp. 5–21). Oxford: Routledge.
- xiii. V`ah`asantanen, K; H`okk`a, P; Etel`apelto, A; Rasku-Puttonen, H and Littleton, K(2008). Teachers' professional identity negotiations in two different work organizations. *Vocations and Learning: Studies in Vocational and Professional Education*, 1(2) 131–148.
- xiv. Van veen, K & Slegers, P (2009) Teachers' emotions in a context of reforms: to a deeper understanding of teachers and reforms in P. Schutz & M. Zembylas (eds.), *Advances in Teacher Emotion Research: The Impact on Teachers' Lives*. Springer: New York.
- xv. Wilkins, C; Mohamed, C & Smith, J (2011) .New teachers' co-constructing professional identity. University of Leicester European Conference on Educational Research, Berlin, Germany 13-17 September.