

The Impact of Teaching Practice Experience in Shaping Pre-Service Teachers' Professional Identities

Fariza Khalid (PhD)

The National University of Malaysia
Email: fariza.khalid@ukm.edu.my

Doi:10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n20p1921

Abstract

Entering into the teaching profession does not require a teacher's interest alone. Instead, it involves the acquisition of skills and knowledge so as to become an effective teacher. In order to be well-prepared and to cope with the responsibilities at the school to which they will be posted after they graduate, pre-service teachers need to master all pertinent theories as well as how to put them into practice. This research aims to study those factors that impact upon the development of student teachers' professional identities. The research participants were three pre-service teachers who were undergoing teaching practice in three secondary schools. The data was generated through semi-structured interviews and the analysis was done using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that among the factors mentioned, the factor of students was the most significant. Other factors included assistance from mentors, supervisors and colleagues. This paper discusses the implications of these findings on the importance of surrounding factors in schools in shaping student teachers' identities.

Keywords: professional identity, professional development, pre-service teachers, mentoring

1. Introduction

In order to become effective, teachers have to be professionally prepared. Teachers therefore need to be trained and must experience continuing professional development so as to become more effective (Harris, 2002). One of the ways to maintain and enhance the quality of teaching and learning in schools is through professional development (Hargreaves, 1994; Harland and Kinder, 1997). For pre-service teachers, teaching practice is one of key elements in their training (Haigh and Tuck, 1999; Hill and Brodin, 2004), which aims to provide student teachers with experience in teaching and learning in and outside the classroom as well as to enhance the development of their character so as to become ethical and professional (Kennedy, 2006). Teaching practice is also aimed at providing social experience to student teachers within an actual school situation, and is considered a platform for determining whether the trainee is able to translate theory into practice (Abd Main, 1996).

Some past studies have proven that teaching practice helped pre-service teachers to have better discussions with lecturers and mentors, and thus managed to help pre-service teachers to determine the approaches to use and their implications in teaching (Botha and Reddy, 2011; Agbo, 2003). In addition, teaching practice was found to help pre-service teachers to enhance those skills related to problem identification, decision making and the selection of approaches to overcome problems in classroom situations, and that it was incredibly significant in developing pre-service teachers' confidence in themselves (Subahan et al., 1987). Apart from teaching in classrooms, pre-service teachers also gather experience related to the areas of management and administration of schools, as well as the management of extra-curricular activities. Taking these factors into account, teaching practice is a fundamental program for the improvement of teaching quality among pre-service teachers as it provides pre-service teachers with skills, attitudes and responsibilities that are different from what they experience as students (Zakaria and Abdul Rahman, 1995).

2. Teachers' Identities

A simple definition of identity is posited by Deschamps and Devos (1998) as 'what makes you similar to yourself and different from others' (p. 3). Meanwhile, Beijjaard et al. (1995) offer the concept of identity as 'who or what someone is, the various meanings someone can attach to oneself or the meaning attributed to oneself by others' (p. 282).

Day et al. (2007) classify identity into three categories: professional, situated and personal identities. Professional identity, according to Day et al. (2007), is 'open to the influence of long-term policy and social trends as to what

constitutes a good teacher, classroom practitioner etc.' (p. 107). Professional identity from this perspective covers a teacher's role, responsibilities, workload, continuing professional development (CPD) and policy which focuses more on a professional perspective in terms of an individual's self-image and how they relate themselves to their profession and surrounding factors:

Who and what they are, their self-image, the meanings they attach to themselves and their work, and the meanings that are attributed to them by others – are, then associated with both the subject they teach, their relationships with the pupils they teach, their roles and the connections between these and their lives outside school. (Day et al., 2007, p. 53)

Situated identity, according to Day et al. (2007), is located within a specific school, department or classroom and is 'affected by pupils, support and feedback loops from teacher's immediate working context which is connected to long-term identity' (p. 107). The third category is personal identity, which is based on life outside of school, and covers teachers' identities as fathers, mothers, sons and so on.

The literature shows that teachers' performance of their professional roles is closely related to the way they construct the nature of their work as well as their personal life experiences (Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996). Nias (1989) and Hargreaves (1994) also point out that teachers' identities are not only developed through their knowledge of classroom management, their subject knowledge or their pupils' test results, but also 'as the result of an interaction between the personal experiences of teachers and the social, cultural, and institutional environment in which they function on a daily basis' (Sleegers and Kelchtermans, 1999, p. 579). Day (2004) therefore stresses that in order to become effective, committed and passionate about teaching, teachers should develop a positive sense of identity which includes the way they value their subject, relationships and roles. Other researchers (Ahmad, 2007; Beijjaard et al., 1995; Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996; Hargreaves and Goodson, 1996; Nias, 1989) also highlight the significance of teachers' personal lives as one of the factors that greatly influences teachers' identity development. In addition, the subject they teach, their pupils' behavior (Beijjaard et al., 1995), feedback from family and friends, their professional life phase (Day et al., 2007), the influence of former teachers and relatives, and their initial training program (Flores and Day, 2006) can all become sources of a teacher's sense of identity.

In addition to the significance of teaching practice to enhance the effectiveness of trainee teachers, there has been other research that has been conducted to study other aspects related to teaching practice, particularly in the context of Malaysian teacher education. Ahmad Zanzali and Asri Atjeng (n.d.), for example, studied the factors that influenced trainee teachers' confidence in their teaching skills, while Ali et al. (2011) examined the extent to which student teachers could successfully implement pedagogical theories in their actual classrooms. Research into the role of supervisors in supporting student teachers to cultivate sound attitudes and skills regarding the teaching profession has been conducted by Salimon (1989), who focused on supervisors' attitude, knowledge, skills, communication skills and assessment. Despite these interesting pieces of research, however, there have been very few studies conducted on how the experiences that pre-service teachers gather through their practical teaching develop their professional identities. This research, therefore, aims to study the factors that, for these pre-service teachers, give meaning to the development of their professional identities.

3. Objective

The objective of this study is to explore the extent to which the experience gained during 14 weeks of teaching practice impacted upon the construction of the identities of student teachers.

4. Methodology

This is a small scale preliminary qualitative case study based on interviews of three female pre-service teachers who were undergoing teaching practice in three secondary schools in an urban area. Two of the schools are day schools, while the other is a fully residential school. All three pre-service teachers were interviewed for a total of two hours each using a prepared semi-structured interview protocol. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

5. Findings

5.1 Motivation to become a teacher

When asked to share what motivated them to choose the education program, the teachers all named more than one factor. All three participants explained that the reason why they chose the education program at university was due to their own interest in becoming a teacher. Some of the teachers had had the ambition to teach since they were small, and some of the teachers were motivated by their own past experiences teaching their friends during their years in secondary school. For example:

I chose to take this course [education] as I would love to become a teacher. I think teaching suits me and I loved to help my friends with their homework when I was in secondary school. (Myra)

Apart from their own interests, the teachers named their families as one of their influences, and two of the teachers were from teaching families, with fathers and other siblings who were teachers. Having been brought up in teaching families seemed to cultivate their interest in teaching. An example of parental influence on a participant's selection of profession follows:

One of the main reasons [why I choose the teaching profession] was definitely my father. My father is a teacher. He told me that teaching would suit me and as a woman, being a teacher means having more time with family [as school hours are normally from 7.30am to 2pm]. (Jenny)

In addition to these two factors, peers also seemed to be an important factor in the participants' selection of the education program at university. All three participants revealed that the decision to choose the education program was indirectly impacted by their friends or peers who were also taking the same program. Being in the same group of friends whom they had known for years made them feel more secure and motivated to keep up their studies (Myra). This finding indicates that these participants were influenced not only by their own decision to enter the teaching profession but were also impacted by others in their lives.

5.2 Useful experiences trainees gained from their teaching practice

The data analysis shows some emerging patterns in terms of how the participants' emotions, feelings and attitudes had grown throughout the period of their teaching practice. Two of the participants found their first day of teaching practice a 'challenging' moment, as one of them described:

It was my first day at school and I was asked to enter the class and teach one topic given by my mentor. I felt overwhelmed as I had not prepared for this. I was nervous, and even more when I found out that it was the best class ... The students were bright students and they might ask things that I might not know the answers to! (Myra)

Another student teacher said:

My first time teaching four students [16 years old] was a frightening experience. Although I knew that I had done some homework I hardly felt confident! I noticed myself keep referring to the textbook, which was so humiliating. I could not focus on what to do next. I forgot what I had planned. (Shira)

It was interesting to learn that the participants found that they slowly changed and their confidence levels gradually developed after teaching several times. One of the student teachers said:

After few weeks here, I think I am getting used to this situation. I have memorized all my students' names, and this has made it easier for me to pose questions, and I feel more connected to my students. I can now make some jokes and cover my nervousness. (Jenny)

Another student teacher answered:

My first few weeks ... I think I really depended on textbooks ... I kept looking at those books that I put on the table [laughs] and the students might have thought how boring I was! So I discussed it with a teacher from this school and she gave me some suggestions, I mean ideal ones ... She suggested that I do a forum, where a few students would come out in front of the class and talk over the topic. So I tried it, and it worked wonders! The students loved the session

and I could see that they were enthusiastic and enjoyed the class ... Well, yeah ... It was a really satisfying moment.
(Jenny)

Apart from teaching in classrooms, the student teachers were also exposed to other managerial tasks, such as conducting sports days, hosting talks with visitors from outside the school, training students who were participating in quizzes at a national level and learning how to mark exam papers by following marking schemes appropriately. All these experiences were considered fruitful. One of participants said:

It was unexpected, at least for me, that I would have so much experience while at this school. I have learned to be humble, friendly to all teachers and always willing to lend a hand. It was such a wonderful experience when I felt accepted. These teachers were so down to earth and very open to share their experiences with a newcomer like me. I felt blessed and positive. (Myra)

It is also important to note that the student teachers also learned about being more rational when approaching things. They claimed that they felt more confident in socializing with other people, both younger and older (Jenny), and also not to be selfish. It is important to be able to collaborate with other teachers, as the student teachers learned new things from that, especially about management and decision-making processes. Overall, the teaching practice period provided these pre-service teachers with valuable experiences, not only related to classroom skills but also to extra-curricular activities, as stated above.

5.3 Factors influencing the development of student teachers' professional identities

The overall findings reveal five main factors cited by these pre-service teachers as significantly shaping their professional identities: students, mentors, supervisors, school culture, and colleagues.

5.3.1 Students

The findings show that students could be a positive or a negative influence on these pre-service teachers. A negative influence could be students' attitudes, as Jenny complained about having students who did not pay attention to her explanations, which made her feel down and impatient. Shira also pointed out that she felt overwhelmed when seeing some students who acted disrespectfully, as she assumed that the students looked down on her because she was a trainee. However, more often, the participants agreed that students had a great influence in improving them professionally. For example, Jenny found herself driven to do more homework and to gather extra information on certain topics due to her students' questions. One of the classes she was assigned to teach was a high-achieving class, and students in that class would ask her 'unexpected' questions about the subject. Although she had to work harder in order to be prepared, it was a satisfying experience for her. For example:

There was one student in my class who always posed tricky questions which I usually could not answer instantly. But I saw him as a motivation for me to study extra reading materials so as to meet his expectations! I was afraid that I would not be able to answer his questions, (Jenny)

Another teacher, Shira, described how her relationships with her students had increased her passion towards teaching. She admitted feeling sad about leaving the school where she had had her teaching practice, as she felt a strong bond with her students. This feeling, according to her, had given her more motivation to become a good teacher in the future.

5.3.2 Mentors

For each trainee, one teacher who is currently teaching at the school where the trainee is doing their teaching practice is appointed as a mentor. The mentor's role is to give advice to the student teacher and coach them to become a better teacher in practice. The findings show that all the teachers in this study appreciated their mentors for sharing fruitful experiences and giving them meaningful advice so as to make their classroom activities more diverse and suited to the students' needs. One of them said:

Madam Nani was so great. She was an expert teacher, who was never reluctant to share her knowledge with me. The way she treated me was just like I was her daughter. In fact, I called her 'ibu' [Malay word for mother]. She taught

me things that are not written in textbooks. She made things easy to handle. (Jenny)

5.3.3 Supervisors

As well as a mentor, student teachers are also attached to a supervisor who is one of their lecturers from university, whose role is related to assessing the participants' teaching practice. Supervisors play an important role in helping the student teachers to improve their practice in the classroom. At least three observations should be done at three different times during the period of the teaching practice. A supervisor will provide feedback based on the observation. The participants felt that a good relationship with their supervisor had enhanced their opportunities to share their problems and to learn from their supervisor. One of the supervisors was said to give written reports to the students, and this helped them to work on their feedback, for example:

My supervisor was my motivator actually. Our close relationship made it feel easy for me to ask her anything that I was not sure of. She also supervised my dissertation and she did well in terms of giving support and constructive feedback. What was special about her supervision was the fact that she actually prepared a written report about her reflections on my teaching and posted it in our Facebook group. I could read the report many times and I shared it with colleagues too. The way she commented made me want to improve. She never belittled her students. (Myra)

My supervisor was an understanding person. She knew that we were busy with daily classes and at the same time we were required to finish writing our dissertations. She gave us space to interact online, so I did not have to travel from my school to campus to have consultations with my supervisor. She was pro-active too. Once in a while she would send me a message asking about my progress, which helped me to stay alert and prepared. (Jenny)

5.3.4 Colleagues

Colleagues in this context refers to the student teachers' classmates at university and also other pre-service teachers from other universities who were undertaking their teaching practice at the same school. It was indicated that colleagues played an important role in giving support to each other during their teaching practice period. Sharing the same goals and similar experiences made their presences significant in shaping their identities as teachers-to-be. All of the research participants experienced a positive impact from their colleagues. According to the participants, having colleagues with whom to share ideas and stories made them more confident and at the same time reduced their stress.

The participants were asked to rank the factors from most significant to least. Table 1 depicts the findings.

Table 1. Ranking of the factors influencing student teachers' development of professional identity

Ranking	Jenny	Myra	Shira
1 st	Students	Students	Students
2 nd	Mentor	Mentor	Colleagues
3 rd	Supervisor	Colleagues	Mentor
4 th	Colleagues	Supervisor	Supervisor

This finding shows four main factors mentioned by these student teachers: students, mentors, supervisors and colleagues. For example:

The first thing would be my students, whom I think gave me the motivation to improve and who made me satisfied with what I did. The second thing would be my mentor, thirdly my supervisor, and then my colleagues who are currently doing their teaching practice here. (Jenny)

I would stress the factor of students as I think students had the most valuable impact on my sense of being a teacher. Not forgotten is my mentor, who shared lots of fruitful advice with me. Other teachers too ... I like being at this school, as all of the teachers are friendly and show me good examples of being good teachers, and I must mention my supervisor too. (Myra)

All student teachers agreed that the factor of students was the most significant; however, they varied in terms of the ranking of other factors. Although two of them cited their mentor in second position, another student teacher named her colleagues. The difference in the positioning of these factors might be caused by the differences between the schools where the participants were doing their teaching practice and due to individual differences. However, this finding reveals

the importance of these four factors in shaping student teachers' professional identities during their teaching practice period.

6. Conclusion

It can be seen from the findings that teachers' professional identities can be affected not only by their own selves, but also by significant others like their family members. For the participants in this study, their decision to become teachers was partly influenced by their parents (see Section 5.1). This is in line with other researchers' findings (Ahmad, 2007; Beijaard et al., 1995; Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996; Hargreaves and Goodson, 1996; Nias, 1989), which highlight the significance of teachers' personal lives or families in the development of their identities.

Another finding reveals that the experiences the participants had and the people they met during the teaching practice period were vital in shaping the way they valued themselves, including their commitment, motivation and the satisfaction of becoming a trainee teacher. These findings confirm others' findings (Beijaard et al., 2005; Nias, 1989), which stress the importance of students in shaping the way teachers feel about themselves, including their confidence and job satisfaction. The presence of mentors and supervisors were also seen to be crucial for these pre-service teachers to improve and to vary their teaching techniques and the design of their teaching in the classroom. Overall, their experiences at school (the working climate, colleagues, pupils, the classroom climate and their involvement in school activities) all influenced the achievement of 'satisfaction', 'commitment' and 'motivation' among these pre-service teachers, which is again in line with Beijaard et al. (1995) and Nias (1989).

These findings also indicate the importance of teaching practice among pre-service teachers, through which the participants in this study developed their sense of becoming effective teachers. What pre-service teachers experience during their training period is vital and needs to be positive, as this 'first' experience will influence their commitment, motivation and determination to proceed with their plan to teach in schools after they graduate. It is also important to note that providing pleasant experiences and support to pre-service teachers is not the responsibility of university lecturers alone, but should be handled together by the schools where these teachers-to-be gain their very first teaching experience in a real setting.

References

- Agbo S. (2003). A Learning Community Model for Professional Development and Transformational Teacher Education: Linking Teacher Preparation with In-Service Teacher Learning and School Improvement. In: Preston, D. S. (ed.). *The Idea of Education*. Amsterdam, NY: Radopi.
- Ahmad Zanzali, N. A., and Asri Atjeng, H. (n.d.). Faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi keyakinan guru pelatih semasa menjalani latihan mengajar.
- Ahmad, A. (2007). Work-family conflict, life-cycle stage, social support, and coping strategies among women employees. *The Journal of Human Resource and Adult Learning*, 3 (1), 70-79.
- Beijaard, D., Beijaard, N., Verloop, T., and Vermunt, J.D. (1995). Teachers' perceptions of professional identity: an exploratory study from a personal knowledge perspective. *Teaching and Teacher Education* (16), 749-64.
- Botha, M., and Reddy, C. (2011). In-service teachers' perspectives of pre-service teachers' knowledge domains in science. *South African Journal of Education*, 31, 257-274.
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), 77-101.
- Day, C. (2004). *A passion for teaching*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Day, C., Sammons, P., Stobart, G., Kington, A., and Gu, Q. (2007). *Teachers Matter*. New York: Open University Press.
- Deschamps, J. C., and Devos, T. (1998). Regarding the relationship between social identity and personal identity. In Worchel, S., Francisco, M. J., Pa'ez, D., and Deschamps, J. C. (eds.). *Social Identity: International perspectives* (pp. 1-12). London: SAGE Publications.
- Etkina, E. (2010). Pedagogical content knowledge and preparation of high school physics teachers. *Physical Review Special Topics – Physics Education Research*, 6, 1-26.
- Flores, M. A., and Day, C. (2006). Contexts which shape and reshape new teachers' identities: A multi-perspective study. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 22 (2), 219-232.
- Goodson, I. F., and Hargreaves, A. (eds.) (1996). *Teachers' professional lives*. London: Falmer Press.
- Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers, changing time*. London: Falmer Press.
- Hargreaves, A., and Goodson, I. F. (1996). Teachers' professional lives: Aspirations and actualities. In Goodson, I. F., and Hargreaves, A. (eds.). *Teachers' professional lives*, 1-27. London: Falmer Press.
- Harland, J., and Kinder, K. (1997). Teachers' continuing professional development: Framing a model of outcomes. *British Journal of In-Service Education*, 23 (1), 71-84.
- Harris, A. (2002). *School improvement: What's in it for schools?* London: Routledge Falmer.

- Haigh, M., and Tuck, B. (1999). Assessing student teachers' performance in practicum. Paper presented at the Australian Association of Educational Research.
- Hill, G., and Brodin, K. L. (2004). Physical Education Teachers Perceptions of the Adequacy of University course work in preparation for teaching. *Physical Educator*, 61(2), 74-87.
- Katrina, M. (2004). Lessons learned: Reflecting back on student teaching. Unpublished Master's Thesis in Middle and Secondary Education, The Florida State University College of Education.
- Kennedy, J. (2006). A Study of Learning Environment in the Extended Practicum of a Pre-Service Teacher Education Course at a Catholic University. School of Graduate Study. Unpublished Dissertation. Australian Catholic University.
- Nias, J. (1989). *Primary Teachers Talking: A Study of Teaching as Work*. New York: Routledge.
- Salimon, A. M. (1989). Penyelidikan Latihan Mengajar: Implikasi dari Kajian Kes Penilaian Latihan Mengajar. *Pertanika* 12(3), 433-440.
- Zakaria Kasa and Abdul Rahman Aroff. (1995). Sikap dan masalah Guru Pelatih dalam Menjalani Latihan Mengajar. *Pertanika Journal of Social Science & Humanities*. 3(2): 125-133.

Appendix: Interview questions

1. What made you choose to become a teacher in the first place?
2. How would you describe your experience throughout the duration of this teaching practice?
3. What unforgettable learning experience have you experienced at this school? Why?
4. Tell me about your feelings – starting from your first day at this school until now (the final week of teaching practice). Are there any differences? If yes, what were the feelings, and why?
5. What do you think influences the way you see yourself now?
6. What is the factor that influenced you the most?