

# The Impact of Personal Identities of Teachers on their Teaching Practice: An Exploratory Study

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## ABSTRACT

*This research paper explores the impact of personal identities of teachers on their teaching practice. The construct of personal identity plays a significant role in the professional life of a teacher. Research in teacher identity becomes more relevant as teachers encounter multicultural and multilingual students in diverse classrooms. Research has placed a special focus on the personal, social, economic, cultural, educational, and institutional factors, which shape teachers' personal identity. Personal identities of teachers are constructed by gender, sexuality, region, religion, nationality, ethnicity, and culture in a society. Teachers' current teaching is greatly affected by the background and the personal identities that the teachers carry with them to the classroom. Hence, the study also explores whether the teachers are aware of the impact of teacher personal identities on teaching practice. The participants were from government schools. The data were collected through questionnaire and classroom observation. The study hypothesized that language teachers possess multiple personal (gender, religion, region, class, etc.) identities and these affect teaching practice. The findings of the study reveal that teachers are aware of the personal identities that they possess. The study suggests that awareness of the formation of teacher's personal identity helps teachers understand who they are as individuals, teachers, and members of the teaching fraternity.*

**Keywords:** Teacher identity; personal identities; teaching practice.

## Introduction

Language teacher identity is an emerging area of interest in research in language teacher education and teacher development. There has been a significant contribution by applied linguistic research to this area (e.g., Duff & Uchida, 1997; Johnson, 1999, 2003; Morgan, 2004; Pavlenko, 2003; Varghese, 2000). Teachers play a role in classroom practices; hence, the teacher becomes the focus of research. Language teachers' identity is seen as a crucial component in determining how

language teaching is played out. There are many aspects of identity like gender, class, and caste. The teacher is not a neutral player in the classroom. A teacher's position in relation to his/her students and the context in which they are situated is vital. Current research on teacher personal identity highlights the fact that language teaching in classrooms cannot be separated from the teachers' background. Teacher personal identity includes teachers' personal lives, beliefs and values, teachers' networks, teachers' interactions, teachers being

teachers, and so on. Teachers are individuals with a multiplicity of selves inside a socio-cultural and institutional context. They interact with students and staff who come from multilingual and multicultural backgrounds. Therefore, teachers' own identity plays a vital role in the classroom. Teachers reflect on their own multiplicity of identity as they grow professionally.

### **Background to the study**

As teachers possess multiple identities and play different roles and as students also come from multilingual and multicultural backgrounds, there is always the problem of bridging these identities and roles. There is a constant interaction between teachers (with multiple identities) and students (with multiple socio-cultural backgrounds) in the multidimensional setting of the classroom. These interactions form teachers' identities. Teachers are not always consciously aware of the existence of multiple identities. These identities can affect the teaching-learning process consciously or unconsciously. For example, a teacher might carry over a disturbed moment from home to the classroom, which will negatively affect his/her classroom on a given day. A teacher's personal life becomes part of his/her personal identity. Thus, there is greater need for teachers to be conscious of such subtle influences in their professional life. Teachers as individuals and as social beings play their roles in institutional settings (the students, the curriculum, the textbooks, colleagues, management, parents, etc.). In the process, their identity as teachers gets shaped and reshaped. As the roles and responsibilities of teachers increase, their identities also become

multiple. These multiple identities affect classroom practices. The present research attempts to explore this issue.

### **Review of literature**

A number of researchers have examined how a teacher's experiences of identity – gender, race, class, culture, or sexual orientation, for example – both shape and are shaped by the process of instruction and interaction that evolves within specific sites of bilingual and second/foreign language education.

Norton (1997) illustrates the significant relationship among identity, language learning, and classroom teaching. Norton uses the term 'identity' to refer to how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand the possibilities for the future. Norton presents the story of Mai, a young woman from Vietnam, taking ESL courses at night in order to improve her spoken and written English. The study has found that the relationship between language and identity is not only abstract and theoretical but also has important consequences for positive and productive language learning and teaching. In the study of Norton, Mai's teacher attempted to incorporate the lived histories of the students into the classroom by inviting them to share their heritage with the rest of the class, but this approach did not have the desired pedagogical effect, at least on Mai.

Duff and Uchida (1997) report a six-month ethnographic study of four teachers of a class in an adult EFL program at the Kansai Cross-Cultural Institute (KCCI, a pseudonym), in a large Japanese coastal city. The lives of four

EFL teachers and their students were examined. The study was conducted in a large, well-established, private educational institution in a medium-sized Japanese coastal city. The four subjects studied were a male American teacher, a female American teacher, and two Japanese female teachers, all of them in their late 30s, with roughly 1.5 years of teaching experience at KCCI. The study showed that the teachers' perceptions of their socio-cultural identities were found to be deeply rooted in their personal histories, based on past educational, professional, and cultural experiences. They were also subject to constant negotiation due to changing contextual elements, such as the classroom/institutional culture, instructional materials, and reactions from students and colleagues. The biographical and professional basis of identity construction and negotiation relevant in this study included past learning experiences, past teaching experiences, and cross-cultural experiences.

The study also argued that, in addition to teachers' biographical and professional identities, the contextual basis of teaching includes the local classroom culture, the institutional culture, and the textbook, or the curriculum. Class observations of the four teachers revealed their particular seating arrangements, use of audio-visual equipment and materials, organization of lessons and activities, break-time behaviours, viewpoints on issues, and conflicts were impacted by the culture the teachers came from. All of the four teachers had been forced by their classes to create an entertaining, mind-broadening, nurturing, exciting classroom environment. The results indicated that in each teacher's class, contradictions sometimes arose

between what the teachers believed or proclaimed about their cultural practices and identities, on the one hand, and what actually transpired in class, on the other.

The four teachers in the study pursued various connections:

- a) between their lives and those of their students;
- b) between the classroom and the English speaking world beyond;
- c) between the textbook and the local culture;
- d) between institutional goals and their personal pedagogical aspirations;
- e) between their pedagogical beliefs and their actual teaching;
- f) between past-present and present-future; and
- g) between their role as national (i.e., local) versus expatriate teachers, and their membership in the wider Japanese community.

Thus, the study suggests that, in teacher education programmes, student teachers and practising teachers should reflect on their teaching foundations and experiences, cultural biases and understandings, and knowledge of what constitutes cultural knowledge.

Current research on teacher identity highlights the fact that teacher identity cannot be separated from classroom practice. Gee (1996) points out that in any teacher's communication to their students, the *what*, the *who*, the *to whom*, and the *why* all come into play. Moreover, "it's not just what you say or even how you say it; it's who you are and what you are doing while you say it." In

other words, the construct of teacher identity shapes and determines classroom learning.

### **Rationale for the Study**

A number of researchers have examined how a teacher's experience of identity – gender, race, class, culture, or sexual orientation – both shapes and is shaped by the process of instruction and interaction that evolves within specific sites of bilingual and second/foreign language education. However, research on teacher identity in the Indian context remains relatively undocumented and therefore deserves attention. A lot of research has already gone into teacher cognition as a part of teachers' professional development, but the personal identity of teachers in the Indian context remains unexplored.

India is a multicultural and multilingual country. The education system in India has to address the complexities of pluralism. Teacher education addresses the kind of problems that teachers face. As teachers come from different social, economic, cultural, and academic backgrounds, the way they teach affects the way the students learn. Teachers have both personal and professional identities. What teachers know and do is part of their identity, which is continuously performed and transformed through interaction in classrooms. Hence there is a need for the present study into the area of teacher personal identity in the Indian context.

### **Aim of the Study**

The study reported here aimed to explore the impact of teacher personal identity (e.g., class, caste, region, gender, and religion) on teaching practice (e. g., decision making,

classroom interaction, and classroom management).

### **Hypothesis**

The study hypothesized that teachers possess multiple personal identities, such as caste, gender, religion, region, and class, which affect their teaching practice.

### **Research questions**

The study attempted to answer these research questions:

- i) Are teachers aware of their personal identities?
- ii) How do the personal identities of teachers affect their teaching practices?

### **Research methodology**

The present study was an exploratory study. A questionnaire and classroom observation were the tools used to collect data.

The subjects for the study consisted of six teachers from different schools – five female teachers and one male teacher. They were intentionally chosen from different cultural, social, economic and linguistic backgrounds.

The research was carried out in six different schools, located in and around the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad. These schools differ socially, economically, culturally, religiously, and linguistically. The multidimensionality of the schools helped the researcher understand the impact of these on the formation of teacher identity. Teachers working in these institutions had developed a particular identity depending on the institution they were working in. Thus, the setting contributed to knowing and

understanding the teachers' identities better.

### Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data collected for this study were responses to the questionnaire and classroom observations designed to explore personal identity factors which affect teaching practice.

### Responses to the Questionnaire and the Analysis

The participants had responded to questions in the teacher identity questionnaire.

### Question:

*Are you aware (possess) of your gender, social, religious, family and professional identities?*

- Give one instance of your identity as male/female teacher that made you comfortable/ uncomfortable in the class.
- Give one instance of how your identity (e.g., as someone belonging to a particular community/caste) has affected your interaction with particular students.
- Give one instance of the religious identity that made you comfortable/uncomfortable in dealing with any text in the classroom.

**Table 1 - Awareness of Formation of Teacher Identity**

Teacher	Awareness of identity formation	Instances of gender identity impact
Teacher A	Aware	As a female teacher I am comfortable in the class. I can understand the girl student problems. Once one boy in the class X was not listening. By observing his face, I asked him what was the problem. He said that he was hungry and did not eat anything, so I let him go and have lunch.
Teacher B	Aware	As a female teacher the shades of a motherly concern and affection can be shown to the students.
Teacher C	Aware	I teach in a girl's school so I never felt uncomfortable handling them.
Teacher D	Aware	Teaching in co-ed institution girls feel more comfortable with a lady teacher; boys take some time to adjust.
Teacher E	Aware	When some of the X standard boys behaved in an arrogant manner, when I shouted at them and was about to slap them.
Teacher F	Aware	In spite of being a class-teacher, I could not have one-to-one response from the girl child for their uninformed absence.

From the responses (**Table 1**), it can be stated that teachers possess and are aware of personal identities – gender, social, religious, family – and professional identities. It was also observed that a teacher is a female, a Hindu, a

mother, a wife, a friend, and a colleague before entering the language classroom. A teacher is an educator, facilitator, tutor, discipline keeper, and culture educator after entering the language classroom. Thus, it can be claimed

that teachers possess different personal and professional identities. In responding to the question of gender identity, what Teacher A said clearly showed that the teacher was indeed aware of her identity and exploited an aspect of her identity (gender identity) with empathy to build an environment of care and trust, which is supportive of learning. Teacher B echoed Teacher A's views. From the responses, it can be noted that female teachers play the role of a mother in the classroom. The teacher as a mother loves her students, understands their learning problems, and cares for them.

This makes learning easier and stress-free for the learners. Being a female teacher, Teacher A feels comfortable with girl students in class and claims that she can probably understand them better. Empathy and the ability to understand the students are thus the strengths of Teacher A. In her view, some girl students feel more comfortable with female teachers than male teachers. Though this was the opinion or perception of this particular teacher, it may be concluded that a teacher's gender plays an influential role in the language classroom.

**Table 2 – Instances of Effects of Community/Caste and Religious Identity**

<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Instances of social identity impact</b>	<b>Instances of religious identity impact</b>
Teacher A	When I was teaching English for Urdu medium class made me uncomfortable because it was difficult for me to make the students understand the meaning of certain words in Urdu.	There was no instance of the religious identity that made me comfortable or uncomfortable in dealing with any text in the classroom.
Teacher B	---	---
Teacher C	It does not affect us. We treat all the students equally.	---
Teacher D	Did not affect in any way	Did not come across such situation.
Teacher E	---	When the children are asked to pray at the end of the day some children don't show any respect for the prayer and there I may lose my head.
Teacher F	Never experienced	Yes, since the students from religious minority groups are less in number in the class at certain situation though they are familiar with the contextual knowledge they do not volunteer to respond.

From the responses to the questions of social identity (i.e., as someone belonging to a particular community/caste) and religious identity, it was observed that their socio-religious background did not affect their teaching. Though the teachers were from various socio-religious backgrounds, they interacted with students who were also multicultural and multilingual. It can be noted that these multiplicities and complexities of selves and classrooms did not affect their teaching and that they were comfortable in their teaching and interactions with their students. Teacher A shared her experience of teaching English to Urdu medium students. As she did not know Urdu, she could not translate difficult words from English to

Urdu. It is at times difficult for teachers to teach a text which is out of their culture and language. However, this is not to be considered a debilitating factor since most teachers do put in the extra effort to make even unfamiliar texts accessible to both themselves and their students.

The participants also responded to these questions:

- *Is identity a key influencing factor on teachers' sense of purpose, motivation, commitment, job satisfaction, and effectiveness?*
- *Do multiple identities influence teaching positively or negatively, and how?*

**Table 3 – Impact of Personal Identity on Teaching Practice**

Teacher	Is personal identity an influencing factor on teaching practice?	Positive or negative impact of multiple identities
Teacher A	Yes	Multiple identities influence teaching positively. Collaboration between teachers with varying expertise might be successful.
Teacher B	Definitely	—
Teacher C	Yes	—
Teacher D	No	Teachers' identity influences teaching positively depending on various classroom situations.
Teacher E	To some extent	Both
Teacher F	Yes	Yes, impact of instruction works positively in some cases.

From the responses of the teachers (**Table 3**), it is evident that identity is a key influencing factor on teachers' sense of purpose, motivation, commitment, job satisfaction, and effectiveness. Personal

factors such as personal experience, attitude, knowledge, expectations, and values become part of beliefs and these beliefs in turn become part of identity. These personal factors give a sense of why they want to

become language teachers and motivate them to be committed to their profession, which gives them job satisfaction. Teachers believe that personal factors affect the way a teacher monitors classroom events, the degree of conscious effort involved in classroom performance, the degree to which performance is guided by personal experience, the degree to which the teacher can predict events accurately, and the decision about how to express oneself in the classroom activity etc.

From this study, it can be assumed that teachers' teaching context, experience, and biography are factors that might influence their perceptions of their professional identity. With reference to the question of whether multiple identities influence teaching positively or negatively, it can be noted from the responses of Teacher A and Teacher D that they do believe that their identity does affect their teaching practice. Indeed, their experiences of identity – gender, region, religion class, culture, as examples – both shape and are shaped by the process of instruction and interaction that evolve within specific multicultural and multilingual language classrooms.

### **Classroom observations**

The classes of the six teachers were observed. Teachers were quite comfortable in the class though the researcher was observing the class sitting at the back of the class and making note of what was happening in the classroom. It was observed that all the classrooms looked traditional in terms of seating arrangement, the place of the teacher, the use of black board, the absence of modern technologies, and so on. It was observed that the teachers

performed multiple roles and responsibilities in the classroom. The observations revealed that all the teachers have three different roles as part of their identity – educator, language teacher, and culture teacher. The various roles that teachers played during the classroom observations included: discipline keeper, supervisor of the pupils, motivator, role model, subject informant, leader of learning, culture educator, moral teacher, facilitator, advisor, counsellor, etc. From the different roles that the teachers play in the class, it can be claimed that all of these roles form teachers' personal and professional identities. It was also observed that teachers were flexible in the classroom and they were aware of the complex needs of the different learners. It was clear from the classroom observations that the teachers were conscious of multilingualism and multiculturalism of the students and the classrooms. The way the teachers presented their personality (attitude, behaviour, motive, etc.) gave the researcher the impression that they loved their teaching, had a lot of respect for their profession, and they were striving to be good role models to their students.

### **Discussion of Results**

An analysis of the data obtained shows that language teachers' personal identities are orchestrated as well as operationalised through the roles and responsibilities that are designated for them in any given socio-cultural and institutional context. The hypothesis of the present study that language teachers possess multiple personal (gender, religion, region, class, etc.) identities and that these identities affect teaching practice has been proved. For example, the roles they play – the transmission of knowledge, the



transaction of culture, and the instructional strategies and activities planned in class – all have personal, social, cultural and institutional significance. The results of the study show that a teacher is a subject expert (who imparts knowledge and guides students) and a pedagogic expert (a leader of learners, friend, motivator and role model, facilitator). Teachers even play the role of a loving parent. The results also indicate that personal factors such as personal experience, attitude, knowledge, expectations, and values become part of their beliefs and these beliefs in turn become part of their identity. These beliefs give teachers an insight into why they want to become language teachers. The study indicates that teachers' personal images affect the way they take decisions in the classroom and the way they organize student learning. The study also reveals that their prior experiences, such as education (e.g., seeing another teacher as a relevant model – the image of oneself as learner), or family life (e.g., being tolerant towards students – acting like a mother) influence/shape teachers' interaction with the students.

The results also reveal that teachers try to gear their personal and professional selves to suit the challenges inherent in multilingual and multicultural classrooms peopled by students of mixed abilities and needs. Thus, the classroom becomes a microcosm of a world where teachers' personal and professional identities are continuously constructed, co-constructed, and adjusted. The results of the study indicate that a teacher's experiences of personal identity (gender, region, class, culture, and educational background) and professional identity (teacher education programmes, apprentice of observation,

prior-experiences, as examples) both shape and are shaped by the process of instruction and interaction that evolve within specific sites of multilingual and multicultural language education in the Indian context.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident from the findings that the teachers are aware of the multiple identities they possess. Personal and professional factors become part of the teachers' personality and they in turn become part of the multiple identities of the teachers. The study proves that teachers play various roles such as educator, facilitator, prompter, participant, resource, tutor, language teacher, culture teacher, discipline keeper, supervisor of all the pupils, motivator, and leader of learning, etc. and responsibilities such as class teacher and staff co-ordinator. These personal factors and professional lives shape, reshape, negotiate, and transform teachers' personal and professional identities. Five out of six teachers, who were female, felt that they, apart from being language instructors, also acted as surrogate mothers at times. It can be concluded from their responses that teachers play the role of educator, language teacher, and culture teacher. The teachers' experiences show that their identities seem to be constantly and continuously constructed and reconstructed throughout their lives. All the teachers believe that personality factors such as attitude, motivation, and behaviour become part of their personal identity. They observed that awareness of the formation of teacher identity helped them to know where they were and how they related to the students and interacted with them. This awareness of personal and professional lives is a step

towards keeping themselves up-to-date and abreast with educational changes and advances.

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