

Practices of Promoting Professional Identities of Female English Teachers through Professional Organizations

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to explore the existing practices in promoting the professional identities of female English teachers through professional organizations. Nine female English teachers were selected as a sample using a purposive non-random sampling procedure from Kathmandu district. This is a narrative inquiry research design in which I used in-depth interview as a tool to collect the required data to address the research objectives of this study. Using interpretive research paradigm, I analyzed and interpreted the data of the study. This study was conducted to find out the actual practices of female English teachers in promoting their professional identities through professional organizations. The findings of this study show that participation in ELT conference for professional identity, conducting action research for professional identities, use of resources for promoting professional identities, use of ICT embedded ELT skills for professional identities, and use of reflective practices in classroom for professional identities were the main practices in developing the professional identities of female English teachers. More importantly, professional organizations became remarkable platforms to promote the professional identities of female English teachers. This study would be a blueprint for all female English teachers to develop their professional identities.

Keywords: Professional Identities, Professional Organizations, ICT Embedded ELT, Reflective Practice, Remarkable Platform

1. Introduction

Gender disparity and inequality are still rampant in our society. The government of Nepal has provisioned of a minimum of 33% representation of females in all sectors, including education. To be specific, in the Nepalese education context, we can see the gender gap between female English teachers and male English teachers in community schools. According to the flash 1 report, 2019-2020 of DOE (2020), out of the total numbers of teachers in community schools, the shares for female teachers are 18.7%, 19.3%, and 18.9% at the secondary level (G9-10), secondary level (G11-12), and secondary level (G9-12) respectively in community schools whereas the population of female in Nepal is 51.04% as per 2021 census. The report of the Ministry of Education (MOE, 2014) showed only 17% of women teachers in the secondary level in community schools in which the ratio of female English teachers is more miserable. Male dominated society has given them limited access, freedom and opportunity in every domain of life. Khadka (2020, p. 110) states, “socially constructed gender role hinders their professional lives. Existing gender discrimination affects one’s development, ultimately influencing the social and professional identity of female English teachers”. Female English teachers in Nepal are facing various challenges in the

course of constructing their professional careers. Teachers' professional identities can be constructed through proactive participations in conferences, seminars and re-teaching (Downie, 1990; Hargreaves, 2000 as cited in Chandran, 2018).

Professional organizations have been rehearsing several strategies for the professional development of teachers, but development is resulted not only through taking part in conferences, seminars, webinars and workshops; but also by acting out and reflecting on experiences. Teachers' identities constructions are essential to recognize them as professionals in society. It can be attained through engagement and arrangement (Wenger, 1998, as cited in Grier & Johnston, 2009).

I have been participating in the annual conferences of Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA) since 1998 onward. I have observed a negligible percentage of female English teachers' participation in the conferences, workshops, seminars and professional refreshment programs organized by teachers' associations and local, provincial and federal government authorities. There is poor participation of the number of female English teachers' in conferences, seminars, workshops, symposium, and panel discussions in every NELTA conference. There is no significant participation of female English teachers in different conferences of English language teachers' professional organizations. Female English language teachers can construct their professional identities through several agencies and networks, including government and non-government professional organizations. My query is that if female English teachers proactively engage in professional organizations' nexus, they can develop their professional identities. Participation in the professional networks is expected for their professional identities to contribute to the ELT scenario at secondary level English language education as their male counterparts.

This study will be a great contribution in the field of female English teachers' professional identities because it gives due attention on how female English teachers are getting advantages from the professional organizations, such as NELTA, BELTA, IATEFL etc. for their professional identities. This study will be a cornerstone in the domain of female English teachers' professional identities. There is not much research in the domain of female English teachers' professional identities through the professional organizations. The study will bring vibration in the culture of female English teachers' professionalism. It will be very significant for the woman English teachers in constructing their professional identities through professional organizations. This study helps to establish literature in the domain of female English teachers' professional identities. Therefore, this study also can motivate the cream female English teachers to involve in constructing the teacher professional identity for their successful careers and reverences. The objectives of this study are as follows:

- To explore the existing practices of female English teachers in promoting their professional identities through the professional organizations;
- To identify whether the professional organizations help the female English teachers to promote their professional identities.

2. Literature Review

The concept of teacher identity is unanimously agreed to be center stage to teacher professional development (Rodger & Scott, 2008; Stenberg, et al. 2014 as cited in Mifsud, 2018). It is the nucleus of teacher development which is not a stable and strict. In fact, teaching is not only a cognitive or technical process; but also multifaceted, personal, social often abstract, set of embedded procedure and practices that concern the whole person (Britzman, 2003; Cochran-Smith, 2005; Hamachek, 1999; Oakes & Lipton, 2003; Olsen, 2008 as cited in Olsen, 2008). Teacher identity is determined and articulated by level of academia and collection of experiences. Professional identities are closely associated with the teachers' perceptions of educational reform, self-image, job motivation, core responsibilities and self-esteem (Kang, Shen & Zheng, 2022). Self-image is a perspective of a teacher towards present and future. In craft model, teacher identity has been enhanced through the apprenticeship model of learning to teach; however, in reflective model, teacher identity is different from craft model (Wallace, 2010). Identity of any individual is dynamic and changeable construct which is based on the efforts of the person himself or herself. Aneja (2016) argued that "individual identities are dynamic and encompass individual agency and the local and community context as well as connection to global discourses and ways of making sense of the world" (p. 574). The identity of the teacher is connected with the local and global social contexts. In this regard, Kang, Shen and Zeng (2022) argue that job motivation consists of motives or drives that cause the teachers to select their job, stay in the profession or leave it. Teachers are responsible to construct their professional identities for their professional development. It is not easy to construct their identities within a short span of time to identify themselves as professionally successful and sound teachers in the society. The teachers should have a supportive environment for their professional identities and collaborative and convergent efforts of policy makers, mentors, and administration of schools are essential for the professional identities (Nickel & Crosby, 2021). The social context is very paramount factor to construct their identities. The construction of teachers' identities is influenced by the context in which it is perceived and performed, being discontinued, fragmented and subject to turbulence change in counting struggle to construct and sustain a stable identity (Day et al. 2006). Responses of teachers towards society and reflection of society to the teachers mark the identities that the teachers have in the society. The reflection of teacher, link between society and agency, and contextual factors play a vital role in shaping teachers' identities.

Professional identities can be demonstrated in practice through professional skills and responsibilities (VanMaaren & Barley, 1984). In this regard, Bukor (2015) argues that

teacher identity is an intricate and tangled web of influences and imprints rooted in personal and professional life experiences....it reflects not only the professional, educational and pedagogical aspects of being a teacher; but more

importantly the imprints of the complex interconnectedness of one's cumulative life experiences as a human being (p. 4).

In order to understand identity of teachers, psychological and social perspectives are essential. Wenger (1996, as cited in Tornberg, 2014), states identity is lived; it is not a personality trait; it is based on experiences of the participants; and it is negotiation, ongoing and pervasive. It is social and developed through membership in a community. In order to be successful in the classroom, a teacher must develop a sense of professional identity that incorporates his/her personal subjectivities with the professional/cultural expectations of what it means to be a teacher (Alsup, 2006). The teacher should take part in conference, workshop, webinar, and symposium to be updated in the pedagogical content knowledge and ELT embedded information and communication technology (ICT).

According to Bullough, Knowles, and Crow (1992, as cited in Merseth, et al. 2008), teacher identity is a vital concern to teacher education; it is the foundation for meaning making and decision making which are the building blocks of the teacher professional development. Teacher identity is shaped by knowledge and skills which are attained through TPD. Sachs (2005) argues that teacher identity provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of how to be, how to act and how to understand their work and their places in the society. Teachers are responsible persons to create conducive opportunities for the exploration and developing their' identities. Professional identities result from the tight equilibrium between personal self-image and teachers' roles that one's feed is obliged to play (Volkman & Anderson, 1998, as cited in Mifsud, 2018). Teachers' personalities in their professions are essential to establish their professional identities. In this regard, Mockler argues that " the articulation of one's identity is a first step towards theorizing professional practice through the explicit linking of 'what I do' with why I am here" (2011, p. 522).

Teacher identity is a dynamic and multifaceted entity (Sachs, 2005; Rodger & Scott, 2008; Lasky, 2005) which is not stable; but ongoing changing one. Professional identity is established through the unending professional journey." Teacher identity is based upon the core beliefs that one has about teaching and being a teacher that are constantly changing and evolving based upon personal and professional experiences" (Grier & Johnston, 2009, p. 59). It is changeable, unstable and ultimately indefinable. "The way the pre-service teachers perceive their mentor affect the development of their skills and shaping their professional identities" (Delgado et al., 2020, p. 144). Teachers' professional identity is presented as a fluctuating process through which different teachers' identities exchange and positions possess their own voices and rationale within a dialogic relationship (Mifsud, 2018). Teachers' identities are to result from dynamic products of knowledge, goals, and self-understandings enacted in everyday practice (Olsen & Buchanan, 2017). In this regard, Britzman (1991) argued "in the teacher identity, I could be as a pedagogue, as a didactical professional, as a subject expert, as a member of school, as a member of a society and so on" (p.8). In order to establish teachers' professional identities, they should become all-rounders in their professions. They are to be acknowledged by society as qualified teachers, subject experts, pedagogues, ideologues, and members of the school and society.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopted a narrative inquiry research design under a qualitative research approach. The interpretive research paradigm was followed to analyze and interpret the data.

3.1. Participants

The participants were secondary level female English teachers whose teaching experiences were from 5 to 15 years. Nine female English teachers were selected using a purposive non-random sampling procedure from Kathmandu district. In order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, respondents were entitled as T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8 and T9. I assured them that their confidentiality and privacy would be maintained ethically.

3.2. Instrument

I employed in-depth interview as a tool to collect the required data to address the research objectives of this study. The live life stories of the participants were collected in a relaxed atmosphere.

4. Results

I have analyzed and interpreted the data based on the verbatim of the respondents as follows:

4.1. Participation in ELT Conferences for Professional Identity

There are various strategies for developing professional identities in the teaching profession. A few of the female English teachers have participated in the national level conference of ELT to improve their professionalism. ELT conferences are the authentic platform to promote their professional identities. In this regard, one of the respondents, T2 asserted that "I have not presented any research paper in any conference, but I have also taken part in ELT conferences two times organized by NELTA". On the one hand, paper presentation helps them acquire content knowledge in the particular areas of ELT; on the other hand, they can develop their delivery skills and soft skills, which are inevitable for being a professional teacher. In this juncture, T1 argued that

Professional organizations and their programs function as dual platforms. We can give and take ideas there. I presented my paper there and it developed my performance and other participants learned something from me and visa-versa. In my case, I have learnt more than I delivered.

Participating in ELT conferences provides recent ELT exposures to the participants. Due to being busy caring and raising children, most of the female English teachers cannot manage time to prepare ELT papers for the conference. In this regard, one of the respondents, T4 stated that "I have not done any presentation in any conference of ELT. Nevertheless, it is one of the greatest platforms for teacher professional development (TPD) and development of other skills which are associated with my overall competencies". In order to be familiar with the latest ELT innovation and research, participation as delegates and presenters is also essential for the learners.

4.2. *Conducting Action Research for Professional Identities*

Female ELT teachers should have good knowledge regarding the research to collect research and theoretical knowledge in the current issues of ELT. Action research is one of the teachers' learning strategies for teacher professional development (Shrestha, 2019). They should keep conducting action research to solve the classroom problem since professional teachers are teachers and ELT researchers. In this regard, T9 asserted, "I have conducted action research in secondary level to fulfill the internal assessment system; but it wasn't published in any journals. I have not tried to publish the action research report in the recognized journal". However, female English teachers have hardly conducted any action research due to being busy in caring and raising their children. The main cause of not conducting action by female English teachers is owing to paucity of time, resources, and lack of knowledge in research methodology. However, a few of them carried out action research to fulfill the provision of the educational office of local government. In fact, accomplishing any action research at school without budget is daunting and demotivating. In the similar vein, T4 stated that "I have not done any research formally. I have participated action research workshop organized by NELTA. After having family and children, almost all female teachers experience the same problems". English teachers would conduct action research to fulfill the requirement for a promotion.

4.3. *Use of Resources for Improving Professional Identities*

It is essential to browse ELT resources, such as ELT professional books E-journals of NELTA, BELTA, and SELTA to develop the professional identity of female English teachers. According to Yuan and Lee (2014, p. 2), professional identity is a "continuous process of teachers negotiating and modifying their roles, self-knowledge, values and behaviors through various discourses and discourses and practices". ELT resources are the philosophical foundations for female English teachers without which they cannot be up-to-date with the ELT practices in the world. In this regard, T9 argued "I use the textbook and guidebook to teach in the class. I am not familiar regarding the ELT resources and e-books." Specifically, ELT latest books, either e-books or hard copies are required to collect ideas in specific areas of ELT. More importantly, educational technology, self-reflective resources, and social media are to be required for female English teachers to collect knowledge to promote their professional identities. Similarly, T1 argued, "Amm...research articles of Google scholars, ELT books, journals, you tube, and goggle meet, pair and share etc. are the resources; however, I hardly ever download the ELT materials from them".

In order to promote professional identities, every type of resource is equally important to collect content and pedagogical knowledge regarding ELT materials that enrich their both knowledge and skills for female English teachers. Some of the resources are easily available whereas some of them are beyond their reach. In a similar vein, T8 stated that "The internet is no accessible at school and home so I do not use E resources". In fact, online ELT e-learning materials are low cost and easily available ELT resources for female English teachers for their professional identities.

The newspaper articles on ELT are very useful and contextual to widen the insight on ELT by the female English teachers. In this regard, T2 asserted "There are several authentic as well as non-authentic resource materials available in the market. To be specific, I am keeping myself busy in reading ELT books in both hard and soft copy. Apart from this television, newspaper, discussion with friends, Google etc. are most used". Every ELT female English teacher should be familiar with the authentic resources for their conveniences in the ELT classroom. E-books, e- journals and e-research papers are the main resources for the professional identities for female English teachers.

4.4. *Use of ICT Embedded ELT Skills for Professional Identities*

ELT would be more effective if female ELT teachers used ICT as an integral part of ELT to develop their professional identity. In this regards, T6 claimed that "if we don't have knowledge of ICT, we have nothing because everything is there in internet and we can access it from our home and expand our horizon of knowledge. It is a pivotal for effective classroom teaching and our professional development. The ICT embedded content knowledge and skills are required to develop professional identities for female English teachers to compete with male counterparts in the workplace. ICT embedded ELT helps them to make an innovative teacher. In this juncture, T4 said "we are attending online training program through zoom app organized by professional organizations like NELTA". An appropriate use of ICT is essential for professional identity of female ELT teachers.

In fact, teachers' competence and performance in teaching is reflected in the students' successes and results. In this regard, T2 argued that "the ICT embedded ELT supports the ELT teachers in getting updated ideas and collect effective, catchy and motivating teaching learning materials". Particularly, ICT embedded reflective practice model plays a vital role in the language class. In this regard, T9 argued that "ICT assists me to improve my ELT in the class and make my class more interactive and more ICT friendly in ELT class". In this digital era, ICT embedded ELT has become the parts of the professional identity for female English teachers.

From the aforementioned responses of the informants that during the Pre-Covid 19, While Covid 19 and Post-Covid 19, most of female ELT teachers have been facing problems in delivering online classes and online assessments due to the lack of ICT embedded ELT knowledge.

4.5. Reflective Practices in Classroom for Professional Identities

Female English teachers should adopt a reflective practice model in the class to develop their professional identities. The craft model should be replaced by a reflective one. In this regard, T8 argued that "Of course, I often follow it. I learn from others and from myself as well. I improve and adopt new ideas, techniques reflecting my previous practices". Reflective practice in the language classroom is a must in order to develop the professional identities of female English teachers. Likewise, one of the respondents T7 asserted that "there is a great role of professional organizations for professional development and professional identities. Reflective practices make us experienced and intelligent professional teacher". TPD is impossible without adopting the reflective practice in the language classroom. Following the reflective model helps both ELT teachers and students develop their content knowledge and soft skills. ELT teachers should apply in the language class the previously learnt theoretical knowledge.

4.6. Ways of Promoting Professional Identities

Female English teachers can have different ways of promoting their professional identities. Particularly, they can improve their professional careers by participating in conferences, seminars and workshops, locally, provincially, nationally, and internationally. In this issue, one of the participants, T1, argued, "I have a plan of being a model teacher for my own professional identity. I want to establish professional identity through participating in the local, provincial, and federal levels workshops, seminars, and conferences. "Professional commitment is essential to be a professionally sound teacher in the field of teaching profession. Self-commitment and motivation towards promoting professional identity are the main philosophy.

In this regard, one of the respondents T2 stated that "I have developed professional identities by participating in online and offline conferences, workshops, seminars, organized by local, provincial, and federal levels government agencies and non-governmental organizations." The female ELT teachers can learn different professional strategies, such as classroom management, seating management, using ICT solving students' problem, making and using teaching learning materials through the participation of professional organizations. One of the respondents T5 admitted that "I personally argue that the role of NELTA and Other ELT organizations' conferences and programs are really infinite for me. I can both offer and collect the skills and knowledge through professional organizations."

The female ELT teachers can share the problems, solutions, experiences and teaching materials with the authentic ELT practitioners in the scholarly panel discussions and keynote speech. In this regard, T6 argued "There are national and international scholars with varieties of experiences which provide us a unique experience of the varieties of English and global issues on ELT." In fact, the ways of developing professional identities are through publishing articles, journal writing, conducting action research, sharing the report of action research through local, provincial and nation peer reviewed journals, attending seminars and workshops, and presenting papers in the ELT conferences.

5. Discussions

There is very negligible participation of female English teachers in professional organizations. Female English teachers' professional identities can be constructed through the proactive participation in conferences, workshops, symposiums, seminars, and webinars etc. (Chandran, 2018). Socially constructed gender role hinders to promote the professional identities for female English teachers (Khadka, 2020). Due to the serious responsibilities of caring, rearing of elders and children at home, the female English teachers are not as successful as male counterparts in constructing their professional identities. Teacher professional identity is shaped through interactions within professional communities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). There should be trends of sharing the experiences of conference by the presenters and delegates among ELT fraternities to promote professional identities. NELTA conference is a great platform for promoting professional identities for female English teachers.

Conducting action research by female English teachers is necessary for their professional development since action research is one of TPD's strategies (Shrestha, 2019); however, female English teachers have not conducted action research due to the lack of knowledge in research methodology. Due to the lack of internet access at home and schools and poor ICT skills, female English teachers are unsuccessful in collecting ELT resources. It is concluded participating in the conferences, workshops, seminar and webinars organized by professional organization, local government, and different teacher's associations like NELTA help them in solving classroom issues, managing teaching and learning materials, and dealing with adverse ELT circumstances, which help them, promote their professional identities.

Technical advancement and innovation has changed the scenario of teaching and learning (Shrestha, 2019). To become professionally sound English teachers, they must do rigorous and continuous practice to implement ICT embedded pedagogy in English class. Bhandari (2020) explored some English teachers engaging their students in meaningful activities for their language development using limited ICT resources. ELT should be modified using ICT as per the demand of the time. The female English teachers are still unfriendly with ICT embedded pedagogy to collect content knowledge. Technology is seen as a golden key in facilitating technology-enhanced, student-centered teaching environments (Hannafin & Land, 1997). There should be the marriage between ICT embedded ELT and content knowledge to improve professional identity for female English teachers. Brownell and Tanner (2012, p. 341) argue that "while a professional identity is by definition an internalized identity, it guides our external actions and decisions in our profession, including the decisions we make about how we teach". Professional identity develops from individual self-concepts based on beliefs, values, motives attributes and experiences (Ibarra, 1999; Slay & Smith, 2011, as cited in Tornsen & Murakami, 2017). The use of reflective practices in the language classroom can be learnt from the professional organizations.

6. Conclusions

I have drawn conclusions from the results and discussions of the study. The answer of existing practices in promoting professional identities of female English teachers through professional organizations are: participation in ELT conferences, conducting action research, use of resources, use of ICT embedded ELT skills, and reflective practices in classroom. ELT conferences are authentic platforms to promote their professional identities. E-books, e- journals and e-research papers are the main resources for the professional identities of female English teachers. Besides, conference proceedings, seminars reports, the online of staff meetings, online based teachers groups, ELT research articles and students' lived experiences are the major resources necessary for promoting teachers' professional identities. There are different ways of promoting professional identities, such as participating in conferences, seminars, workshops, locally, provincially, nationally, and internationally. It is concluded that involving in the network of professional organizations is the best way to promote the professional identities of female English teachers who teach at the secondary level.

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