

Research Article

**REFLECTIVE METHODS IN EXPLORING VIETNAMESE STUDENT
TEACHERS' IDENTITY DURING A PRACTICUM PLACEMENT***Le Thuy Linh*^{1*}, *Nguyen Thi Thu Huyen*², *Nguyen Van Hien*³, *To Thi Hoang Lan*³¹ *Van Lang University, Vietnam*² *Ton Duc Thang University, Vietnam*³ *Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam**Corresponding author: *Le Thuy Linh* – Email: thuylinh.teaching@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The article presents the findings of a qualitative research project to explore the emergence of teacher identity of Vietnamese student teachers during a pre-service teacher training practicum placement. There were 9 pre-service teachers employing journal writing as a means to reflect their thoughts based on their observations within the period of 8 week practicum. In-depth interviews were also conducted in week 4 and at the end of the practicum to deeply understand their views of the formation of professional identity. Based on their reflective interviews and reflective journals, the process of forming their teaching confidence, sense of agency and critical consciousness was identified. By reflecting upon their teaching practicum and classroom observations, the student teachers expressed comprehensive aspects of their formation of teacher identity such as their beliefs and perceptions of the responsibilities as teachers, their teaching competencies and their active roles in professional development. Moreover, they also appreciated the experience of writing reflective journals about what they observed and what they did at school in the interaction with experienced teachers, colleagues and school students. The findings suggest recommendations for using qualitative research methods to examine teacher identity in the Vietnamese context and using reflective journals as an important and effective tool for student teachers' professional development in pre-service training.

Keywords: teacher identity; journal; qualitative research; reflective methods

1. Introduction

Teacher identity, which is often defined as how a teacher sees himself as a teacher in interaction with other people in his environment, recognized as an influential factor on teachers' decisions about their teaching practice (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). There was evidence showing that teacher identity was formed gradually over time with the exposure of professional practice (Trent, 2010). Teacher identity can be emerged from pre-

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service teacher education, especially during practicum (Cattley, 2007). Practicum during pre-service teacher education is crucial as it gives the practitioners abundant opportunities to enhance their professional knowledge and skills as well as develop their understanding of the complex dynamics of teaching and various factors affecting their teaching environments (Cattley, 2007).

In the process of forming teacher identity, based on findings of the empirical research, a reflective journal is viewed as a powerful tool for pre-service teachers to reflect on their teaching experiences (Farrell, 2004). The reflection upon their teaching and beliefs has been proven to support pre-service teachers to form their professional identity (Izadinia, 2013). In this research, reflective journals were employed as a means to support Vietnamese pre-service teachers to achieve professional growth along with facilitating their own cognitive and social development.

In the context of Vietnam, studies showed that pre-service teachers form their professional identity in their practicum, including teaching practice, connection and communication with others, and their adaptability with new contexts (Dang, 2013). Although the change in identity occurs at a very high speed during the practicum (Le, & Ngoc Tai, 2017), the literature of teacher identity in pre-service teacher education in Vietnam is still limited. According to the Regulation found by the Ministry of Education and Training (2003), reflective writing was mentioned; however, a large number of schools haven't employed this method. Some schools only require observation, note-taking and self-assessment (HCMUE, 2014; Vinh University, 2020).

Therefore, this research contributed to the literature relating to the emergence of teacher identity via reflective journals at the initial phase of their teaching profession in Vietnam context.

To enumerate, Vietnamese pre-service teachers' identity was discovered by reflecting upon their observation of various aspects in their practice, such as supervisor' activities and responses, their own teaching practice, and other events that occurred during this time. This article aims to answer two questions on teacher identity:

1. How do pre-service teachers in Vietnam perceive themselves as teachers during the practicum?
2. Are reflective journals considered a useful tool for the formation of teacher identity?

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining Teacher Identity

Teacher identity has been widely and diversely defined by a large body of literature. Identity, which is considered as being perceived as a certain type of person by the self and other people in a certain context (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004)). Then, teacher identity emerges through the interconnection between individual teaching theories, perception of the self and social and professional contexts (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop,

2004). However, teacher identity is recognised as a dynamic and complex process (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004), especially, in the practicum, the change of identity happens daily and in real-time (Cattley, 2007).

In the review of literature on teacher identity, Izadinia (2013) defined student teacher identity 'as student teachers' perceptions of their cognitive knowledge, sense of agency, self-awareness, voice, confidence and relationship with colleagues, pupils and parents, as shaped by their educational contexts, prior experiences and learning communities' (p.708). In other words, there were seven components of student teacher identity. In this research, Izadinia (2013)'s framework was adopted, with a focus on three following elements: confidence, sense of agency and sense of consciousness. These three elements are essential to teacher identity but they were considered the drawbacks of Vietnamese student teachers (Huynh, 2012). Student teachers' confidence is expressed in their sense of certainty in lesson planning making decisions on their content and teaching strategies; their positive emotion during teaching demonstration. In terms of agency, student teachers showed their ability to control in two main areas: teaching methodologies and methods, facilities and classroom management. Critical consciousness is demonstrated in student teachers' thinking of the differences between what they thought about teaching practice, what they learned in educational theories, and the reality they face during teaching practicum. Critical consciousness results in the way student teachers handle such conflict and differences.

2.2. Reflective Writing as a Powerful Tool

Based on an intensive review of the studies on teacher identity, Izadinia (2013) indicated that being reflective was one of the most popular strategies to explore the formation of teacher identity in different cultural contexts. Reflection in the pre-service teacher education has to be fostered as it is the springboard for their continuous professional reflection (Lupinski et.al. 2012). Through the lens of self-evaluating practitioners' effort to bring values into actions, professional knowledge is formed and taken to the next level (Elliot, 1989). Reflection could be conducted in different ways such as student teachers' reflection on their portfolios, reflective journals, reflective writing logs, reflective videos, reflective meetings (Izadinia, 2013). Among these types, reflective journals seemed to be popular. Many teacher training programs utilized journals as a powerful tool for systematic reflection and retrospective self-evaluation (Bolin, 1988).

3. Methods

The current study adopted a qualitative research design to answer the aforementioned research questions because this design is considered as an appropriate choice to explore people's thoughts, perspectives and emotions over time (Maxwell, 2005). There were 9 pre-service teachers at a Vietnamese university of education voluntarily joining the research. Journals were chosen as a tool for systematic and critical reflection. During 10 weeks of the full-time practicum (from February to May, 2019), these 9 participants

observed all the activities, behaviors, responses, including their own practices, and reflected their thoughts and evaluations in the journals. Every week, they read through the journals and revealed their thoughts, evaluation and feelings during that week. Particularly, practitioners reflected their thinking based on 3 main elements of identity: (1) The confidence which is identified in their teaching preparation, performance, and communication with supervisors, colleagues and students; (2) The sense of agency which indicated their self-control of methodologies and facilities; (3) The critical consciousness which is examined based on their self-judgment of practice contexts and arguments with their supervisors. These elements were shown in all types of reflective journals in the research. The first type was the self- reflection of a teaching session with the role of teacher, the second one was the reflection after the preparation of a lesson, the last one was written after each week of the practicum. Each type of the journals were introduced from the second week of the practicum until the tenth week. totally, there were 141 pieces of journals.

Besides, semi-structured interviews were conducted at two different times (week 4 and week 8) to dive deeper into practitioners' reflection on professional identity. Totally, 18 interviews were recorded and analyzed.

The questions in the two interviews which focused on the feelings of the student teachers in writing their journals remained unchanged,. The questions also aimed to dive into the way the image of teachers changed after the completion of journals. Students shared the experience, their confidence, their flexibility in diverse teaching conditions or different requests form their supervisors. Moreover, they also expressed their viewpoints of teaching before and after the practicum. While journals helped student teachers to rethink and write down all their feelings, events, experiences, the interviews encouraged them to look back and realize the changes in their thoughts on the image of a teacher. Additionally, they had the chance to share the reasons which led to those changes.

In the final stage, qualitative data from journals and interviews were coded and analyzed into three chosen major themes. Regarding confidence, the gain or decrease in confidence were examined. With agency, the level of control to certain circumstances was found out. Finally, in terms of critical consciousness, the change of consciousness compared to their old beliefs was highlighted.

4. Findings

The data analysis indicated that different aspects of teacher identity were formed evidently in Vietnamese student teachers during the practicum.

4.1. Confidence

teachers' confidence was formed through three activities: observing practitioners, preparing lesson plans and reflecting on self-image in teaching. When observing other pre-

service teachers or supervisors, student teacher realized the importance of confidence in their professional identity:

When I observed other teachers, they were very confident, mastering their knowledge and organizing class impressively. (Teacher 1)

During teaching planning, the confidence was mainly related to the teachers' lack of teaching experience in organizing classroom and choosing teaching methods to achieve learning goals in given classroom contexts. In the first performances, pre-service teachers were often nervous and lacked confidence because they faced the confusion in choosing the appropriate methods.

I am a bit worried because I don't clearly understand the lessons and don't know how to bring it into reality. Long and challenging lesson. (Teacher 5)

In line with this notion, in the interviews, pre-service teachers strongly expressed this anxiety.

Preparing lesson plans worries me a lot. After completing, I still wonder if it works well in class or if I have enough time or students are willing to participate, what if they get bored, ... a lot of issues. (Teacher 7)

When encountering problems, pre-service teachers often found advice in books, the Internet or friends. They rarely discussed these problems with their supervisors since they were afraid to be judged as incompetent teachers. Moreover, some teaching sessions were evaluated by not only school supervisors but also lecturers from the university or the head teachers. therefore, pre-service teachers felt extremely anxious: "With time constraints and the observation of the head teacher, I feel extremely stressed." (Teacher 3). In this point, it can be seen that the hierarchy between teachers and students (in this context, between school supervisors/ university lecturers and pre-service teachers) is a barrier of teacher-student communication in Vietnam context.

in addition, this practicum gave pre-service teachers more chances to perform in class, they were very excited to apply new methods learned from the University of Education. The vision of creating exciting and vivid lessons fostered the gain in confidence. Pre-service teachers reported the pride with their lesson plans:

I have prepared with all my heart and enthusiasm; I feel excited in and after the preparation. This lesson represented what I hope to bring to my students. (Teacher 6)

During the process of reflection on self-image in teaching performance, "Self-Confidence" was mentioned a large number of times in the interviews, with 23 times in the first interviews and 9 times in the second. the lack of confidence was mentioned quite frequent in the first interview. However, in the final interview, a large number of participants showed the gain in confidence. The shift in confidence was described as follows:

In the first two weeks, I was nervous. The first performance, I was worried and anxious, wondering if my students could understand most of the lessons. That time, there was a

supervisor's observation so I was nervous. But when I started teaching, that feeling disappeared, and the more I teach, the more I enjoy it. (Teacher 3)

The responses of students fostered the confidence of pre-service teachers. If the previous sessions had created a positive effect, student teachers felt comfortable and confidently innovated: "I am quite confident because other "Language Focus" sessions were effective." (Teacher 9)

Finally, with time and more understanding of classroom contexts, pre-service teachers gained more confidence:

After 4 weeks, I become familiar with the lesson plans, don't too much input, my supervisors give less feedback and I feel more comfortable. (Teacher 4)

Again, these statements reinforced the importance of teaching experience on student teachers' sense of confidence in teaching works.

In terms of relationships with school students, in the interviews, the pre-service teachers rarely mentioned the confidence towards their students. In the initial phrase of practicum, they expressed their shyness and nervousness when communicating with school students. The reasons for this issue are the inadequate understanding of school students and the lack of confidence in competence

This time I am teaching students Specialized English. there were 4 students who have been awarded National Gifted Student. I am not sure that I am as good as them in National Contest. (Teacher 1)

Gradually, the level of confidence was enhanced when there was more interaction and more progress.

I have a student who shows little interest in studying... I was worried at first but my supervisor asked me to connect. After day 3, he said hello when I came into class. (Teacher 4)

4.2. Sense of agency

In terms of agency, student teachers showed their ability to control in two main areas: teaching methodologies and methods, facilities and classroom management.

Self-control of methods/methodologies are one of the biggest concerns during the practicum. With the first interview, pre-service teachers mentioned 24 times about sense of agency, with 8 times of control and 16 times of little control. The statistic has changed completely after 4 weeks, with the 13/20 of great control and 7/20 of failure to control.

In the first weeks, pre-service teachers were concerned about the application of active learning into the classroom "I don't know how to create an exciting atmosphere in class, how to motivate students." (Teacher 9)

At times, after instructions, if students were unable to perform the tasks, the pre-service teachers didn't know how to deal with it. On the other hand, a large number of them conduct various activities to cultivate learners' interest such as games, experimental activities or warm-up activities.

I choose to conduct the experiment because through my observation, learners would find it easier to remember. (Teacher 7)

My goal is to change the traditional methods, instead learners have to participate more in the tasks. (Teacher 6)

In regards to facilities, pre-service teachers showed great concern as most of the classroom were not equipped with projectors or multimedia devices. They wanted to make use of facilities to benefit learners better: “I want to teach in class with a projector...students could observe 3D paradigm instead of looking at the board” (Teacher 7). However, the pre-service teachers still had some struggling with connection, adaptation and fixed tables even if they were provided projectors and television.

In the last sessions, the pre-service teachers shared their improvement in mastering facilities, methodologies and methods. They showed a strong sense of control in their performance: “I couldn’t manage time well in some sessions but in the two last performances, it was fine, just 2 or 3 minutes late.” (Teacher 6). At the same time, student teachers also actively chose to innovate their teaching:

I often turn my lessons into games and via those games, learners could gain their knowledge. That is completely different from my supervisor, she just teaches what is in the book. (Teacher 1)

Regarding classroom management, the pre-service teachers was confused, especially at the beginning of the practicum: “I am unable to manage the classroom, depending too much on the homeroom teacher.” (Teacher 4) “Because of playing a game, the class is quite noisy and I couldn’t control the noise.” (Teacher 7)

Similar to confidence, over time, management skills were enhanced clearly:

Activities in class flow better. The problem of inadequate time has reduced significantly, more cooperation from class members. (Teacher 4)

4.3. Critical consciousness

Among three components of teacher identity, critical consciousness was not mentioned as often as others. Some pre-service teachers realized the difference between them and their supervisors in organizing the lessons, choosing methods, dealing with students’ problems. The most common solution is to stay quiet and accept the supervisors’ decision, as stated by a pre-service teacher:

The example of Chinese economy is omitted by my teacher. That confuses me a lot. But I couldn’t speak my words, so I followed her decision. (Teacher 6).

The reason for this choice is explained by the power of supervisor:

When we are in the practicum, we must follow our supervisors as the assessment is extremely important. (Teacher 6).

Also, the pre-service teachers also showed a greater trust in their supervisors than themselves: “...she has a great deal of experience and she is also well-known for her performance, so I trust her and her decisions.” (Teacher 6)

Besides academic sessions, the pre-service teachers had to join extracurricular activities. The role of outside classroom activities was questioned.

Extracurricular activities are not less important than curriculum activities; moreover, is it true that it could build up the rapport between teacher and learners? (Teacher 4).

Self-reflection on teaching raised questions on pre-service teachers' competency and flexibility: "Are the methodologies that I have learned not very suitable for a private school?" (Teacher 4), "Teaching is not an easy job." (Teacher 5)

Finally, the pre-service teachers realized that they were not well-equipped to communicate, educate and make changes:

Learners don't understand and couldn't do the exercise. They lacked concentration or cooperation... Are all these things considered completely learners' fault. (Teacher 4)

How to reunite the members in class? Why the Grade 12 students couldn't love and empathize with others more? (Teacher 5)

In short, critical consciousness was raised mainly on their performance and competency as well as the contrasts between theories and realities. Student teachers doubted the practical application of what they have learned and believed in pedagogy school and found a way to fill the gap.

4.4. Reflective journal considered a useful tool for the formation of teacher identity

As most of schools only requires the report on observation and self-assessment (HCMUE, 2014; Vinh University, 2020), student teachers only submitted their lesson plans and observation forms. Therefore, reflective journals are just an optional choice for student teachers.

From the beginning, reflective journals were recognized an effective tool for student teachers to form the teacher identity. Before the journaling, the image of a teacher was not examined and justified. All 9 student teachers agreed that reflective journals helped them to visualize better their future image or the image of the teacher they wanted to become.

I didn't care much about the image of a teacher before I wrote the journal. When I participated, I started to think about the qualities of a teacher, so I asked if a teacher got that qualities or not. Do I have those qualities? When I teach or talk to my students, I pay more attention to that point." (Teacher 2- Interview 1)

As the reflective journal required the recall and analysis of their experiences, all 9 student teachers realized that they needed more skills and qualities to become a teacher.

Before this practicum, I believe that teachers have to be extremely knowledgeable. Like they know everything and they are very strict. After the journal, I know that not all the teachers are the same. So I start to look inside myself and reflect my observation on the expressions of my teacher." (Teacher 7- Interview 1)

I used to think that teachers only need to teach and manage class. After my observation in 4 weeks, I think that teachers not only need a profound knowledge but also have a serious attitude and some artistic skills to create a good atmosphere in the class. (Teacher 1- Interview 1)

Finally, the journal writing became a motivation for student teachers to change themselves. Both 9 student teachers revealed that reflective writing helped them to change in the first interviews. In the final interview, they confirmed that journals continued to help them transform significantly.

Due to reflective journal, I felt the urge to change myself...I couldn't write in the journal that I am still the same every day, so I have to change and I could complete that desire. (Teacher 3 – Interview 2)

I feel like I am the story teller to reflect what I have achieved and what I haven't so that I could adjust my teaching the next session. Also, I find that journal writing motivating to change myself and become more flexible. I don't repeat the same mistakes. (Teacher 4- Interview 2)

Therefore, in this study, reflective journal was confirmed a useful means to the formation of teacher identity, which helped student teachers adjust themselves in a more efficient way.

5. Discussion and Limitations

Through reflective journal, pre-service teachers realized their identity in three categories: confidence, sense of agency, and critical thinking. A majority of the pre-service teachers admitted their shortage of confidence at the beginning of the practicum and the reasons leading to this sense of insufficiency. They struggled with new lesson plans, communications with students and supervisors. However, this struggling did not continue for a long time as participants got involved in the teaching contexts. Referring to sense of agency, the pre-service teachers confirmed that they had the ability to apply modern teaching methods and made use of the facilities. In contrast, the pre-service teachers showed a weak sense of control in managing learners' behaviors due to the barriers of "contemporary teachers" and limited practical experience. Critical consciousness took place, but actions were still restricted. This trend is in line with research in Vietnamese culture (Vo, Pang, & Lee, 2018).

Through journals, critical reflection was proven to benefit the process of forming teacher identity. All participants showed their consensus on the effectiveness of journal writing to see themselves as "teachers" with their own strengths and limitations. One participant also mentioned her appreciation to be given the chance to write as she realized her transformation from doubting herself into loving her profession.

I realized that a teacher needs to be himself. If he could make it, he could do everything. I began to realize that recently. I don't know how to explain it, thanks to this research, I write my thoughts into words then I would state that I need to be myself. This research has changed me a lot. I was confused in the first practicum and it became better this time. (Teacher 7)

This finding was in line with similar studies on teacher identity when pre-service teachers confirmed the significance of journal writing in their practicum in shaping their robust identity (Cattley, 2007).

this research contributes to the literature by confirming the role of reflective journal on the formation of professional identity. The pre-service teachers may be suggested to have reflective writing besides their lesson plans or typical reports. Three main elements of teacher identity explored in this research could become a recommendation for pedagogy schools to equip students with more skills and knowledge to promote confidence, sense of agency and critical thinking. Furthermore, filling the gap between theories and practice should be considered to benefit all participants in the practicum.

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**CÁC PHƯƠNG PHÁP PHẢN TƯ TRONG VIỆC TÌM HIỂU BẢN SẮC GIÁO VIÊN
CỦA SINH VIÊN VIỆT NAM ĐƯỢC THỂ HIỆN
TRONG KÌ THỰC TẬP SƯ PHẠM**

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TÓM TẮT

Bài viết trình bày kết quả của một dự án nghiên cứu định tính nhỏ nhằm khám phá sự hình thành bản sắc nhà giáo của các giáo sinh thực tập Việt Nam trong kì thực tập. Trong vòng 8 tuần, 9 giáo sinh tham gia nghiên cứu đã sử dụng nhật kí phản ánh các suy nghĩ của mình sau khi quan sát các hoạt động ở nơi thực tập. Phỏng vấn sâu được thực hiện vào tuần thứ tư và tuần cuối kì thực tập để khám phá sâu sắc hơn các quan điểm của các giáo sinh về việc hình thành bản sắc nhà giáo. Kết quả phỏng vấn và nhật kí đã thể hiện quá trình hình thành sự tự tin, tính tự chủ và ý thức phản biện. Qua quá trình nhìn nhận lại kì thực tập ở trường phổ thông và quan sát ở trường học, các giáo sinh đã chia sẻ quan điểm, nhận định của mình về các trách nhiệm của nhà giáo, khả năng sư phạm và vai trò chủ động của mình trong quá trình phát triển nghề nghiệp. Thêm vào đó, các giáo sinh còn đánh giá cao trải nghiệm của mình khi viết nhật kí về những điều quan sát được, những hoạt động diễn ra trong trường học hay các tương tác với các giáo viên có kinh nghiệm, đồng nghiệp và học sinh. Các kết quả thu nhận được cho thấy nghiên cứu định tính được đánh giá cao trong việc nghiên cứu bản sắc nhà giáo ở Việt Nam và nhật kí được xem là một công cụ hữu ích trong việc phát triển chuyên môn nghề nghiệp trong quá trình thực tập sư phạm.

Keywords: bản sắc nhà giáo; nhật kí; nghiên cứu định tính; thực tập sư phạm