Who am I? Improvement and Development of Teacher Identity

Within the education context curriculum, teacher, administration, school environment, parents and students are the main objects. However, the teacher is the most important one among all since teaching is shaped by the teacher. The purpose of this study was to explore and to improve understanding of teacher identity of in-service teachers. This study will use qualitative research method, within the qualitative research methods interviewing will be used to get a deeper understanding of teachers' opinions on teacher identity. The study group consists of 21 in-service teachers from different branches and cities in Turkey. The data were analyzed through the coding process until clear themes emerged. Seven significant themes were explored during this journey: the content of the teaching profession, occupational features of a teacher, standardization of occupational features, change of professional identity in time, meaning of teacher identity, the importance of teacher identity, and factors affecting teacher identity.

Keywords: in-service, teacher, teacher identity, professional identity, qualitative.

Introduction

Within the education context curriculum, teacher, administration, school environment, parents and students are the main objects. However, the teacher is the most important one among all since teaching is shaped by the teacher. John Dewey proposed that the teacher is at the core of the educational process, and the curriculum is enhanced and made accessible through the teacher. Thus, the teacher will always be an important subject in investigative research (Bullough, 1997; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Knowles, 1992; Kompf, Bond, Dworet, & Boak, 1996) because teachers are more effective when they become experts in their field (Hattie, 2012; Wong & Wong, 2015). Many teachers try to be skilled or expert during their teaching lives. What does being an expert or skilled in the field of teaching mean? Although no precise definition of a skilled or an expert teacher exists, many descriptors and attributes are generally accepted. Understanding teacher identity necessitates a standard for the designation of a skilled or an expert teacher.

Theoretical Framework

Ahn (2011) defines identity as an individual’s understanding of who she or he is. Another definition of identity is “wrapped around what we think of ourselves, in a social context, and what other people think of us” (Danielewicz, 2001, p. 10). Even though it is not easy to explain what teacher identity is, there are some definitions such as; “teacher identity or teacher self: who the teacher thinks he or she is or what other people think the teacher is” (Cochran, 1997;
According to Lasky, teacher identity can be described by the help of how teachers explain themselves (2005). Thus, teacher identity can be contemplated with both identity of self as well as the identity of self within a community.

Professional identity refers not only to the influence of the conceptions and expectations of other people, including broadly accepted images in society about what a teacher should know and do but also to what teachers themselves find important in their professional work and lives based on both their experiences in practice and their backgrounds (Tickle, 2000). Teacher identity is a total of who the teacher is, how the teacher forms an interaction with his/her inner circle, how the teacher uses her/his personality while planning and applying to teach (Zembylas, 2003). Teachers’ self-knowledge and belief in his/her sufficiency is a necessity for qualitative education and teaching (Uğurlu & Demir, 2016).

After teacher identity definition, the latter focused on identity formation in social contexts and on the stages people pass through: owing to biological and psychological maturation, each stage has its characteristics regarding the individual's interaction with his or her environment (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004). “Identity formation is a process of practical knowledge-building characterized by an ongoing integration of what is individually and collectively seen as relevant for teaching” (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 123).

Constituent elements of effective teacher identity are subject expertise, teaching methods, classroom management, effective communication with administrators and parents (Reio, 2005). All of these elements' divergent combination generates different perspectives and explanations of teachers' occupational improvement.

Many researchers stated that teacher identity continuously evolves and changes (Agee, 2004; Beijaard et al., 2004; Britzman, 2003; Carter & Doyle, 1996; Clandinin & Huber, 2005; Coldron & Smith, 1999; Fitzgerald, 1993; Gee, 2000; MacLure, 1993; Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004). Thus, one type of teacher identity is impossible (Samuel, 2008). Teacher identity is dynamic and shifts under the influence of various internal and external factors (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Also, teachers can experience identity alteration through their careers as a result of interactions with schools and broader communities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). They do not, however, act alone: They have conversations with countless students, parents, and staff members. Each of these interactions influences who the teacher is at every moment in time during her or his career.

One’s professional identity affects the “sense of purpose, self-efficacy, motivation, commitment, job satisfaction and effectiveness” (Day, Kington, Stobart & Sammons, 2006, p. 601). Teacher identity has been studied for many years, but during the latter half of the 20th century, a spotlight has focused on the importance of understanding teacher identity as continually under reconstruction throughout a teacher’s career, a concept commonly held in contemporary studies (Liu & Xu, 2011; Watson, 2006). Studies in recent years emphasized that the development of teacher identity is important in terms of
education and teaching quality (Avraamidou, 2014; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Teacher identity is a very important phenomenon in teacher’s motivation, performance in occupational necessities and responsibilities and perception of self-sufficiency (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

The importance of teacher identity or teacher self is an extension of the knowledge that creates a skilled teacher (Barone et al., 1996; Berliner, 2004; Hattie, 2012; Shulman, 1987). Investigating teacher identity is essential in the field of education, few studies of teacher identity among in-service teachers have shown that “a teacher’s identity not only comprises personal knowledge and action, but it is also influenced by the ideological, political, and cultural interest and circumstances surrounding teachers’ lives and work” (Castañeda, 2011, p. 1). To be able to design better teacher education programs, it is important to get more knowledge about teacher identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000) suggest three ways of doing teacher identity research: focusing on teachers’ professional identity formation, focusing on the identification of characteristics of teachers’ professional identity, and presenting teacher identity by using teachers’ stories (p. 750). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore and to improve understanding of teacher identity of in-service teachers. Along with this aim, the research questions of the study are as follows?

1- What are the elements of teacher identity?
2- Can teacher identity change throughout the career life?
3- Is there a standard for teacher identity?

Previous Studies

Teacher identity has been studied too much. Since the teacher is the main character in the field of education, it is normal to study teachers. A stated above, teacher identity affects a teacher's career; thus, there are many studies done on teacher identity. Below there are some of these studies.

Ünal (2004), in his study, called "Neoliberal Change within Teacher Image”, investigated changes of teacher occupation and teacher identity starting from Cumhuriyet to nowadays with a critical view. Dönmez's (2008) study was aimed at the identification of a teacher according to the nations of academics and teachers. In his Ph.D. thesis subjected to “Effects of Globalization on Education and Teacher Identity”, Kılınç (2009) examined the effects of globalization factor which is one of the factors affecting teacher identity on teacher identity.

Özdemir (2010)’s master thesis called "Teacher Identity: A Sociological Study on Primary School Teachers (An example of Malatya) focused on perceptions of teachers about Professional identity and occupational development. Chong, Low and Goh’s (2011) study examined pre-service teachers’ emerging sense of professional teacher identity at the exit point of their pre-service program. Another study was done by Rus, Tomşa, Rebega,
and Apostol (2013) investigated the perceptions of teachers about their professional identity.

There are many studies done with pre-service teachers in Turkey. In his master thesis, Karalı (2018)’s aim was to investigate the relationship between possible self-esteem levels and prevocational teacher identity levels of social studies teacher candidates. Similar to Karalı’s study, Ulubey, Yıldırım, and Alpaslan (2018) also studied with teacher candidates. They aimed to examine the effects of the pedagogical formation education certificate program on teacher candidates’ perception of teacher identity. As a result of this study, the program does not make a positive contribution to teacher identity perceptions of teacher candidates. Çelik and Kalkan, 2019)’s a study aimed to investigate the identity perceptions of the pre-service teachers in the faculty of education and the pre-service teachers enrolled in the pedagogical formation certificate program comparing them across several variables.

Method

Research Model

To explore and improve the understanding of the teacher identity of in-service teachers, this study will use the qualitative research method. The qualitative research method is the best method for this study because as qualitative researchers tend to provide detailed descriptions of individuals and events in their natural settings, interviewing has ‘usually’ been thought of as a key factor in research design (Weiss, 1994).

Within the qualitative research methods interviewing will be used to get a deeper understanding of teachers' opinions on teacher identity. Interviews - compared to questionnaires - are more powerful in eliciting narrative data that allows researchers to investigate people's views in greater depth (Kvale, 1996). In a similar vein, Cohen et al (2011, p. 29) add that interviewing is “a valuable method for exploring the construction and negotiation of meanings in a natural setting”.

Sampling

The study group consists of 21 in-service teachers from different branches and cities in Turkey. These participants were selected with a simple random sampling method. Simple random sampling is a sampling technique where every item in the population has an even chance and likelihood of being selected in the sample. Here the selection of items completely depends on chance or by probability and therefore this sampling technique is also sometimes known as a method of chances. At the beginning of the study, 30 teachers were asked to participate in the study. However; only 21 teachers were accepted to participate. 21 teacher participants’, composing study group of this study, subject distribution is as follows; psychological counseling and
guidance: 5 teachers, mathematics: 8 teachers, literature: 5 teachers, and philosophy: 3 teachers.

**Data Collection Tool and Process**

To gather data semi-structured interviews are used in this study. Semi-structured interview, which is a more flexible version of the structured interview as “it allows depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand the interviewee's responses” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 88) With this type of interviewing, the researcher aimed to get interviewees’ different point of views.

Interview questions were prepared by the researcher as draft questions and presented to two experts. Necessary corrections were made by considering experts’ opinions. Semi-structured interview questions as a tool of data gathering comprised of six questions. To determine the place and time of the interviews, interviewers’ expectations and requests were prioritized. Prefiguration of participants was provided before interviews. Interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes long.

**Data Analysis**

To begin the data analysis, the researcher started to transcribe audiotaped interviews. Two weeks lasted for transcription of the interviews. The researcher asked three interviewees to read what they said and tell if they meant what is written on transcripts. Creswell (2009) notes that the analysis process should also be reflexive, i.e. including the researcher's interactional experience with interviews. In sum, there is no fixed method of analyzing interview data in the literature, yet, researchers should cautiously deal with it as it affects not only the quality of an interview but the validity, reliability of the whole research.

After transcription of interviews and approval from the interviewees from the participants, the researcher read and reread the transcription to find out categories and themes. To begin with, analysis can be done through coding. Two steps of coding have widely been discussed in social science research: a) generating meaningful data units, and b) classifying and ordering these units. Accordingly, such a process is expected to deliberately reduce the amount of data collected. Thus, the researcher found out free codes at first and focused codes later on. At the end of the coding process, the researcher found out seven main themes on perceptions of teachers on teacher identity. Within these seven themes, findings were interpreted.

**Reliability**

Talmy (2010) stresses that interviewees should be given a chance at the end of the interview, to bring up comments or ask questions. Additionally, researchers should, at this point, re-express their gratitude to their interviewees and discuss ways of future contact. To achieve this, the researcher asked three...
interviewees to read their answers and state if they meant what is written on transcripts. Creswell (2003) claims that interviewing reliability is ‘elusive’ and he even adds that “no study reports actual reliability data”. Thus, the researcher never claimed to provide total reliability. However, the researcher tried to achieve some amount of reliability by following Creswell (2003)’s some of the techniques. In sum, researchers should follow techniques that would help to maintain the validity and reliability of interviewing. These can be:

- avoiding asking leading questions
- taking notes not just depending on tape recorders
- conducting a pilot interview; and
- giving the interviewee a chance, to sum up, and clarify the points they have made.

The researcher avoided to ask leading questions, took notes during interviews, and give a chance to interviewees to clarify or correct the points they stated during the interview.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore and to improve understanding of teacher identity of in-service teachers. Along with this aim, sub-questions were determined and those were as follows: What are the elements of teacher identity?, Can teacher identity change throughout the career life?, and Is there a standard for teacher identity?. Within this respect, seven main themes emerged from the data. These themes will be presented below:

1- The content of teacher profession

Teachers were asked what the teacher profession comprises. Regarding the content of teacher profession teachers stated different things and there are five contents that most of the teacher stated. Eight teachers stated that teacher profession content self-sacrifice. One teacher said that "Involves self-sacrifice and plenty of patience...since you train human". Four teachers stated that the teacher profession includes education and teaching. Three teachers said devotion and one of them said: "For me being a teacher includes devotion". And six teachers said, love. Lastly, three teachers said knowing students. One teacher expressed that the "Teacher profession necessitates knowing student and transferring knowledge according to students’ tendencies".

2- Professional Features of a Teacher

Professional features of a teacher should have, were asked to teachers. They gave five different features and those are; be good in his/her field (thirteen teachers), open to innovations (seven teachers), loving his/her job and
occupation (three teachers), pedagogical formation knowledge (three teachers), being patient and understanding (four teachers). Even though teachers gave different answers to this question, most repeated features of teacher occupation were being good at his/her field and open to innovations. One teacher stated that “a teacher should have enough basic educational sciences knowledge and be able to apply this knowledge”. Another teacher said that “a teacher should be open to improvements and changes...”.

3- Standardization of Occupational Features

While talking about occupational features of the teaching profession, a new theme was emerged by the participants. They expressed their opinions about the features of teacher occupation and later seventeen teachers stated that these features cannot be standardized. On the other hand, only three teachers said that “yes, of course, these can be standardized”. Teachers who think that these cannot be standardized stated that “I don’t think these can be standardized”, and “it is difficult to standardize totally”, and “cannot be straight standards”. One other teacher also stated that “No..Because some of the situations that you face during teaching seem similar but these are different and distinctive. But some standard behaviors are possible”.

4- Change of Professional Identity in Time

After talking about standardizing of professional identity, teacher participants were asked if their professional identity has been changed in time. Fifteen teachers expressed that their professional identity changed in time while three teachers said that their professional identity hasn’t been changed. “A little bit. In my first years of the profession I was more sensitive and an idealist; however, now I am more coherent and let things go”, and another teacher said “Always..how can I be more helpful to my students” and one another teacher expressed that “Throughout the years, student profile and flow of information has been changed, thus, I think I have been changed and years was gained experiences to me”. On the other hand, teachers who said there haven't been any changes said: "no, not much”.

5- Meaning of Teacher Identity

Participants gave many different answers to this question. The answers will be presented separately; however, there are some identical answers. For example, two teachers stated teacher identity is being beneficial for humans and society. They said that “always trying to be useful for the society and human and being a role model”. Four teachers expressed that teacher identity is respectability. Most of the teachers answered this question with a negative image. Four teachers said teacher identity is valuable however it values is incoherent. One teacher said, "it is a lot of things even everything for me, however, it doesn't mean anything for the society”. Another teacher said, "it
should be the most important job however it doesn’t get enough deserve”. Some other responses are as follows; “always learning and teaching person”, “it is the backbone of the society”, and “for students when appropriate a mother, when appropriate as a wise person, a doctor, and everything sometimes”.

6- The Importance of Teacher Identity

After the question of the meaning of teacher identity, teachers were asked if teacher identity is an important issue for the teaching profession or not. Almost all of the teachers said that yes it is important while only three teachers said no it is not. A teacher who stated that it is not important said that “For me, it is wrong to give an identity to a teacher since the teacher has a dynamic structure which can be shaped according to all possibilities from the worst situation to the best situation”. On the other hand, the teachers who stated that yes the teacher is identity said that “For me it is important. When people learn that you are a teacher, their point of view is being more positive”, and another teacher said, ”Identity is a mirror of a person within the society”.

7- Factors Affecting Teacher Identity

The last theme emerged from the interviews was the factors affecting the identities of teacher participants. The most repeated factor affecting teachers’ identity is society's and the environment's point of view. Seven teachers said that society's and the environment's point of view affects their teacher identity. One teacher said that "society’s point of view more of an attitude of society”. Three teachers stated that the school they work in affects their teacher identity. One teacher said “the school that I work with and the teachers that I work with…” And another teacher said that “I work at a supportive and good school. I have been affected positively”. Lastly, four teachers stated that students’ reactions affect their teacher identity. One teacher said “willing and determined students”, and another said "students’ clean hearts and shining eyes”.

Conclusion

The study focused on exploring and improving the understanding of teacher identity of in-service teachers. Conducting a qualitative research study using interviewing helped the researcher create a holistic image of the in-service teacher's professional identity. The research was conducted with the participant interviews. The data were analyzed through the coding process until clear themes emerged. Seven significant themes were explored during this journey: the content of the teaching profession, occupational features of a teacher, standardization of occupational features, change of professional
identity in time, meaning of teacher identity, the importance of teacher identity, and factors affecting teacher identity.

The study tried to conceptualize the teacher identity, and the results were presented to produce a deep understanding of teacher identity. Teachers will be an important part of the educational process. There are many studies done with teacher candidates; however, understanding the in-service teachers’ point of view was lacking. To study teacher identity can help grow the population of effective in-service teachers. “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer, 2007, p. 10). Recent research and literature highlights the importance of identity in teacher development (Day & Kington, 2008; Olsen 2008).

The results of the current study are similar to previous studies. Thus, the current study supports the literature. One of the main themes of the study was the professional features of teaching. Five different features and those are; be good in his/her field, open to innovations, loving his/her job and occupation, pedagogical formation knowledge, and being patient and understanding. The results of the study are similar to Rus, Tomșa, Rebega, and Apostol (2013). They stated that teachers identified their occupational identity as follows; characteristics of worker, occupational needs, worker needs, occupational knowledge, labor characteristics, and experience needs in order of priorities. Being good in the field and pedagogical formation knowledge results of this study are similar to their studies.

Another main theme of the study is the factors affecting teacher identity. Teachers stated that the school they work in affects their teacher identity which is similar to previous studies such as Goodson and Cole (1994) considered teachers as persons and professionals whose lives and work are influenced and made meaningful by factors and conditions inside and outside the classroom and school (p. 88). Teachers’ identity was affected by the school they work in and the peers they work with. Defining the concept of "teacher identity" has often been difficult for authors because it is dynamic and shifts under the influence of various internal and external factors (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). This study also supported this belief that teachers said that their professional identity changes in time. Based on their review of the literature on teachers' professional identity, Beijaard et al. (2004) stated that identity is an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences. Hence, they argued that identity can be seen as an answer to the recurrent question: “Who am I at this moment?” (p. 108). In a similar vein, Rodgers and Scott (2008) argued that identity is ‘shifting’ and ‘unstable’. In defining beginning teachers’ identity. Like these studies’ results, this study also showed that teacher identity cannot be standardized and changes in time with many factors. Teacher participants expressed that their Professional identity changed throughout the years of occupation.

Lastly, Reynolds (1996) emphasized that what surrounds a person, what others expect from the person, and what the person allows to impact on him or her greatly affects his or her identity as a teacher. In this study, teachers also mentioned that teacher identity can be affected by the environment and
society's point of view. It can be said that teachers improve a professional
identity according to society's and environments' point of view. Reynolds
(1996) also noted that the teachers' workplace is a 'landscape' which can be
very persuasive, very demanding, and, in most cases, very restrictive. One of
the teachers of this study also stated that s/he is working at a very supportive
school that affects his/her teacher identity positively. The working place of the
teachers affects their teacher identity positively or negatively.

In conclusion, this study aimed to determine the definition of teacher
identity and different aspects of teacher identity from in-service teachers. It can
be concluded that teacher identity has many different meanings and
understandings. Also, teacher identity can be changed in time and cannot be
standardized since teaching is a dynamic job. Students and the world is
changing; thus, teacher identity should be changed. Since identity is a mirror of
a person within the society, teacher identity is an important issue within the
educational process. Teacher identity changes in time by many factors such as;
environment, society, students, and changes. Teachers are affected by the
workplace and peers; thus the school teachers are working at is very important
for a good teacher identity. Since this study was done with in-service teachers
which were a lack within the previous literature, this study gained an
understanding of teacher identity forms the point of view of teachers who are at
the kitchen of the educational process. Thus, future studies on teacher identity
with in-service teachers should be done.

References

struggle to teach in test-driven contexts. Teacher College Record, 106, 747‒774.
Education, 2, 415‒417.
future for teacher education: Developing a strong sense of professionalism. In J.
Sikula (Ed.), Handbook of research on teacher education (2nd ed., pp.
of issues in the literature and implications for teacher education. Cambridge
Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C., & Verloop, N. (2004). Reconsidering research on
Beijaard, D., Verloop, N., Vermunt, J. D. (2000). Teachers’ perceptions of
professional identity: An exploratory study from a personal knowledge
Berliner, D. C. (2004). Expert teachers: Their characteristics, development, and


