

# 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;

1 Danielewicz, 2001; Hattie, 2012; Shulman, 1987). According to Lasky teacher  
2 identity can be described by the help of how teachers explain themselves  
3 (2005). Thus, teacher identity can be contemplated with both identity of self as  
4 well as the identity of self within a community.

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

15 After teacher identity definition, the latter focused on identity formation in  
16 social contexts and on the stages people pass through: owing to biological and  
17 psychological maturation, each stage has its characteristics regarding the  
18 individual's interaction with his or her environment (Beijard, Meijer &  
19 Verloop, 2004). "Identity formation is a process of practical knowledge-  
20 building characterized by an ongoing integration of what is individually and  
21 collectively seen as relevant for teaching" (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 123).  
22 Constituent elements of effective teacher identity are subject expertise,  
23 teaching methods, classroom management, effective communication with  
24 administrators and parents (Reio, 2005). All of these elements' divergent  
25 combination generates different perspectives and explanations of teachers'  
26 occupational improvement.

27 Many researchers stated that teacher identity continuously evolves and  
28 changes (Agee, 2004; Beijaard et al., 2004; Britzman, 2003; Carter & Doyle,  
29 1996; Clandinin & Huber, 2005; Coldron & Smith, 1999; Fitzgerald, 1993;  
30 Gee, 2000; MacLure, 1993; Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry,  
31 2004). Thus, one type of teacher identity is impossible (Samuel, 2008). Teacher  
32 identity is dynamic and shifts under the influence of various internal and  
33 external factors (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Also, teachers can experience  
34 identity alteration through their careers as a result of interactions with schools  
35 and broader communities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). They do not,  
36 however, act alone: They have conversations with countless students, parents,  
37 and staff members. Each of these interactions influences who the teacher is at  
38 every moment in time during her or his career.

39 One's professional identity affects the "sense of purpose, self-efficacy,  
40 motivation, commitment, job satisfaction and effectiveness" (Day, Kington,  
41 Stobart & Sammons, 2006, p. 601). Teacher identity has been studied for many  
42 years, but during the latter half of the 20th century, a spotlight has focused on  
43 the importance of understanding teacher identity as continually under  
44 reconstruction throughout a teacher's career, a concept commonly held in  
45 contemporary studies (Liu & Xu, 2011; Watson, 2006). Studies in recent years  
46 emphasized that the development of teacher identity is important in terms of

1 education and teaching quality (Avraamidou, 2014; Beauchamp & Thomas,  
2 2009). Teacher identity is a very important phenomenon in teacher's  
3 motivation, performance in occupational necessities and responsibilities and  
4 perception of self-sufficiency (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

5 The importance of teacher identity or teacher self is an extension of the  
6 knowledge that creates a skilled teacher (Barone et al., 1996; Berliner, 2004;  
7 Hattie, 2012; Shulman, 1987). Investigating teacher identity is essential in the  
8 field of education, few studies of teacher identity among in-service teachers  
9 have shown that "a teacher's identity not only comprises personal knowledge  
10 and action, but it is also influenced by the ideological, political, and cultural  
11 interest and circumstances surrounding teachers' lives and work" (Castañeda,  
12 2011, p. 1). To be able to design better teacher education programs, it is  
13 important to get more knowledge about teacher identity (Beauchamp &  
14 Thomas, 2009). Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000) suggest three ways of  
15 doing teacher identity research: focusing on teachers' professional identity  
16 formation, focusing on the identification of characteristics of teachers'  
17 professional identity, and presenting teacher identity by using teachers' stories  
18 (p. 750). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore and to improve  
19 understanding of teacher identity of in-service teachers. Along with this aim,  
20 the research questions of the study are as follows?

- 21
- 22 1- What are the elements of teacher identity?
- 23 2- Can teacher identity change throughout the career life?
- 24 3- Is there a standard for teacher identity?
- 25

## 26 **Previous Studies**

27

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

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

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

1 and Apostol (2013) investigated the perceptions of teachers about their  
2 professional identity.

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

## 16 Method

### 18 Research Model

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

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

### 34 Sampling

35 The study group consists of 21 in-service teachers from different branches  
36 and cities in Turkey. These participants were selected with a simple random  
37 sampling method. Simple random sampling is a sampling technique where  
38 every item in the population has an even chance and likelihood of being  
39 selected in the sample. Here the selection of items completely depends on  
40 chance or by probability and therefore this sampling technique is also  
41 sometimes known as a method of chances. At the beginning of the study, 30  
42 teachers were asked to participate in the study. However; only 21 teachers were  
43 accepted to participate. 21 teacher participants', composing study group of this  
44 study, subject distribution is as follows; psychological counseling and  
45  
46

1 guidance: 5 teachers, mathematics: 8 teachers, literature: 5 teachers, and  
2 philosophy: 3 teachers.

### 3 4 **Data Collection Tool and Process**

5  
6 To gather data semi-structured interviews are used in this study. Semi-  
7 structured interview, which is a more flexible version of the structured  
8 interview as “it allows depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity on the  
9 part of the interviewer to probe and expand the interviewee's responses” (Rubin  
10 & Rubin, 2005, p. 88) With this type of interviewing, the researcher aimed to  
11 get interviewees’ different point of views.

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

### 19 20 **Data Analysis**

21  
22 To begin the data analysis, the researcher started to transcribe audiotaped  
23 interviews. Two weeks lasted for transcription of the interviews. The researcher  
24 asked three interviewees to read what they said and tell if they meant what is  
25 written on transcripts. Creswell (2009) notes that the analysis process should  
26 also be reflexive, i.e. including the researcher's interactional experience with  
27 interviews. In sum, there is no fixed method of analyzing interview data in the  
28 literature, yet, researchers should cautiously deal with it as it affects not only  
29 the quality of an interview but the validity, reliability of the whole research.

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

### 40 41 **Reliability**

42  
43 Talmy (2010) stresses that interviewees should be given a chance at the  
44 end of the interview, to bring up comments or ask questions. Additionally,  
45 researchers should, at this point, re-express their gratitude to their interviewees  
46 and discuss ways of future contact. To achieve this, the researcher asked three

1 interviewees to read their answers and state if they meant what is written on  
 2 transcripts. Creswell (2003) claims that interviewing reliability is ‘elusive’ and  
 3 he even adds that “no study reports actual reliability data”. Thus, the researcher  
 4 never claimed to provide total reliability. However, the researcher tried to  
 5 achieve some amount of reliability by following Creswell (2003)’s some of the  
 6 techniques. In sum, researchers should follow techniques that would help to  
 7 maintain the validity and reliability of interviewing. These can be:

- 8
- 9 • avoiding asking leading questions
- 10 • taking notes not just depending on tape recorders
- 11 • conducting a pilot interview; and
- 12 • giving the interviewee a chance, to sum up, and clarify the points they
- 13 have made.

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

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## 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

1 occupation (three teachers), pedagogical formation knowledge (three teachers),  
 2 being patient and understanding (four teachers). Even though teachers gave  
 3 different answers to this question, most repeated features of teacher occupation  
 4 were being good at his/her field and open to innovations. One teacher stated  
 5 that “*a teacher should have enough basic educational sciences knowledge and*  
 6 *be able to apply this knowledge*”. Another teacher said that “*a teacher should*  
 7 *be open to improvements and changes...*”.

### 9 3- Standardization of Occupational Features

10  
 11 While talking about occupational features of the teaching profession, a  
 12 new theme was emerged by the participants. They expressed their opinions  
 13 about the features of teacher occupation and later seventeen teachers stated that  
 14 these features cannot be standardized. On the other hand, only three teachers  
 15 said that "yes, of course, these can be standardized". Teachers who think that  
 16 these cannot be standardized stated that “*I don't think these can be*  
 17 *standardized*”, and “*it is difficult to standardize totally*”, and “*cannot be*  
 18 *straight standards*”. One other teacher also stated that “*No..Because some of*  
 19 *the situations that you face during teaching seem similar but these are different*  
 20 *and distinctive. But some standard behaviors are possible*”.

### 22 4- Change of Professional Identity in Time

23  
 24 After talking about standardizing of professional identity, teacher  
 25 participants were asked if their professional identity has been changed in time.  
 26 Fifteen teachers expressed that their professional identity changed in time while  
 27 three teachers said that their professional identity hasn't been changed. “*A little*  
 28 *bit. In my first years of the profession I was more sensitive and an idealist;*  
 29 *however, now I am more coherent and let things go*”, and another teacher said “*“*  
 30 *Always..how can I be more helpful to my students*” and one another teacher  
 31 expressed that “*Throughout the years, student profile and flow of information*  
 32 *has been changed, thus, I think I have been changed and years was gained*  
 33 *experiences to me*”. On the other hand, teachers who said there haven't been  
 34 any changes said: “*no, not much*”.

### 36 5- Meaning of Teacher Identity

37  
 38 Participants gave many different answers to this question. The answers will  
 39 be presented separately; however, there are some identical answers. For  
 40 example, two teachers stated teacher identity is being beneficial for humans  
 41 and society. They said that “*always trying to be useful for the society and*  
 42 *human and being a role model*”. Four teachers expressed that teacher identity is  
 43 respectability. Most of the teachers answered this question with a negative  
 44 image. Four teachers said teacher identity is valuable however it values is  
 45 incoherent. One teacher said, “*it is a lot of things even everything for me,*  
 46 *however, it doesn't mean anything for the society*”. Another teacher said, “*it*

1 *should be the most important job however it doesn't get enough deserve".*  
2 *Some other responses are as follows; "always learning and teaching person",*  
3 *"it is the backbone of the society", and "for students when appropriate a*  
4 *mother, when appropriate as a wise person, a doctor, and everything*  
5 *sometimes".*

## 6 7 6- The Importance of Teacher Identity

8  
9 After the question of the meaning of teacher identity, teachers were asked  
10 if teacher identity is an important issue for the teaching profession or not.  
11 Almost all of the teachers said that yes it is important while only three teachers  
12 said no it is not. A teacher who stated that it is not important said that "*For me,*  
13 *it is wrong to give an identity to a teacher since the teacher has a dynamic*  
14 *structure which can be shaped according to all possibilities from the worst*  
15 *situation to the best situation".* On the other hand, the teachers who stated that  
16 yes the teacher is identity said that "*For me it is important. When people learn*  
17 *that you are a teacher, their point of view is being more positive",* and another  
18 teacher said, "*Identity is a mirror of a person within the society".*

## 19 20 7- Factors Affecting Teacher Identity

21  
22 The last theme emerged from the interviews was the factors affecting the  
23 identities of teacher participants. The most repeated factor affecting teachers'  
24 identity is society's and the environment's point of view. Seven teachers said  
25 that society's and the environment's point of view affects their teacher identity.  
26 One teacher said that "*society's point of view more of an attitude of society".*  
27 Three teachers stated that the school they work in affects their teacher identity.  
28 One teacher said "*the school that I work with and the teachers that I work*  
29 *with..."* And another teacher said that "*I work at a supportive and good*  
30 *school. I have been affected positively".* Lastly, four teachers stated that  
31 students' reactions affect their teacher identity. One teacher said "*willing and*  
32 *determined students",* and another said "*students' clean hearts and shining*  
33 *eyes".*

## 34 35 36 **Conclusion**

37  
38 The study focused on exploring and improving the understanding of  
39 teacher identity of in-service teachers. Conducting a qualitative research study  
40 using interviewing helped the researcher create a holistic image of the in-  
41 service teacher's professional identity. The research was conducted with the  
42 participant interviews. The data were analyzed through the coding process until  
43 clear themes emerged. Seven significant themes were explored during this  
44 journey: the content of the teaching profession, occupational features of a  
45 teacher, standardization of occupational features, change of professional



1 identity in time, meaning of teacher identity, the importance of teacher identity,  
2 and factors affecting teacher identity.

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

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

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

43 Lastly, Reynolds (1996) emphasized that what surrounds a person, what  
44 others expect from the person, and what the person allows to impact on him or  
45 her greatly affects his or her identity as a teacher. In this study, teachers also  
46 mentioned that teacher identity can be affected by the environment and

1 society's point of view. It can be said that teachers improve a professional  
 2 identity according to society's and environments' point of view. Reynolds  
 3 (1996) also noted that the teachers' workplace is a 'landscape' which can be  
 4 very persuasive, very demanding, and, in most cases, very restrictive. One of  
 5 the teachers of this study also stated that s/he is working at a very supportive  
 6 school that affects his/her teacher identity positively. The working place of the  
 7 teachers affects their teacher identity positively or negatively.

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

## 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 References

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