

# **The Implementation of an English Teacher's Identity: Teacher-Student Relation, Professionalism, and Religious Beliefs**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In recent years, identity has become a critical factor in teacher training as this affects the teaching practice in the classroom. However, many teachers remain confused about their identity as teachers, as persons, and as professionals who may lead to an identity crisis. This narrative study aims to discover how teachers implement their identity as a teacher in a classroom. It is employed in one of the Islamic schools in Indonesia. Interview data revealed that the teacher constructed three facets of the teacher's identity: teacher-student relation, professionalism, and religious beliefs based on Johnston's framework. It showed that a teacher's identity is undoubtedly influenced by teachers' religious beliefs and social values, which affects the way the teacher teaches. Due to the teaching experience, there is no identity crisis and difficulties in implementing the identity. The teacher can distinguish his role as a teacher and as an individual. Findings also showed that recognizing teachers' identity allows them to empower and expand and challenge their experiences and beliefs. Thus, this study suggests teacher educators continually promote teacher identity development. Finally, future research can explore the teacher identity in a broader range with students' variety backgrounds.

**Keywords:** *Johnston's framework, language teacher identity, teacher beliefs and values, teacher professionalism*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the last few decades, educational research has gone beyond the cognitive aspect and has covered the social element (Greenier & Whitehead, 2015). One of the topics in the social part is the teacher identity. Identity as a teacher plays a more important role compared to other professions because a teacher's identity also deals with their teaching practice in the classroom (Singh & Richards, 2006). Norton (2013) defined identity as the way an individual understands his or her relationship with the world, understands the structure of connections across time and space, and understands the future possibilities. Miller (2009) added that identity is negotiated, constructed, enacted, transformed, and transitioned through language, race, education, class, etcetera. Therefore, it can be said that the identity as an individual influence the identity as a teacher who might have different life values, beliefs, and principles. It also means that teacher's actions are guided by their concept of principled, proper, and appropriate based on their faith which will affect their performance in the classroom (Pennington & Richards, 2015).

As identity is something fluid, by the time people widen their social networks, they will keep continuing to construct and modify their identity in order to be accepted

in the communities (Wenger, 1998). This fact can lead to an identity crisis for the teachers as a part of an institution and individual. Pennington and Richards (2015) mentioned one example where teachers have to follow a syllabus or coursebook that might result in an identity crisis because of the conflict to negotiate their own beliefs, values, knowledge, attitude, and others. Teachers' professional identity is created by connecting their personal characteristics to their characteristics as teachers (Pennington, 1999). Thus, as a part of an institution, teachers are also demanded to be leaders and professionals, and this demand often requires teachers to alter their individual characteristics and beliefs. The teachers' identity crisis also worsens because teachers' professional development still only focuses on linguistic knowledge, content knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge (Day & Conklin, 1992).

Preceding research in English teacher identity, English teachers develop their knowledge and skills by participating in social activities and relations, taking a positivist approach to social culture (Johnston, 2003). Sang (2020) concluded that language teacher identity development is a socialization process that includes professional socialization and language socialization. As a socialization process, Johnston (2003) divided teacher identity into three facets: teacher-students relation,

professionalism, and religious beliefs. This division will be used as a theoretical foundation in this study.

### **1.1. Teacher-Student Relation**

Johnston (2003) divided teacher-student relations into two aspects: teachers' involvement in students' lives and the balance of teacher's authority and solidarity. Research by Greenier and Whitehead (2015) shows that the teachers are aware they are the role model in the classroom who needs to be tolerant, patient and thinking of the students to maintain a positive relationship with the students. Another research by Poulou (2020) discovered that teachers' satisfaction of autonomy needs brings a positive teacher-student relationship, affecting students' emotions and behaviour.

### **1.2. Professionalism**

According to Johnston (2003), the discussion about teacher professionalism will give us insight into an ongoing contradiction between teacher identity and values. Teacher professionalism is not only evolved through teacher's individual work, but teacher's surroundings also unfold it. Research by Tschannen-Moran (2009) found that school has an essential role in fostering teacher professionalism. In her study, she discovered that the school with less bureaucratic and less authoritarian leaders has teachers with more remarkable professionalism in their behaviour with the colleagues and their teaching in the classroom.

### **1.3. Religious Beliefs**

A study by Mansour (2008) disclosed the evidence that a teacher's religious experience and belief are influential on a teacher's pedagogical beliefs and practices in science class. There might not be much literature and references discussing English teachers' beliefs in their English class teaching practice. Therefore, this research explores the relation between Islamic schoolteachers' beliefs in religion and their English class teaching practice.

From the literature, it can be seen that teacher identity is closely related and influenced by teachers' interaction with society, such as colleagues, school administrators, and students. This study will focus on the teacher's perspectives on his identity as a teacher and individual and explore how teachers employ the identity during the teaching process. It will cover teacher-student relations, teacher professionalism, and teacher's religious belief. In accordance with the research framework, this study aims to address the three research questions: *How is teacher-student relation like in English class? How does the teacher implement professionalism as an English teacher? How does the teacher instil religious values in English class?*

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1. Research design**

This study employed narrative inquiry as the researchers would like to explore the teacher experience, not measurable outcomes. Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 20) defined narrative inquiry as "a way of understanding and inquiring into the experience through collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and social interaction with milieu." This approach typically focuses on the lives of individuals as told through their own stories.

### **2.2. Participant**

A male EFL teacher in an Islamic senior high school (*Madrasah Aliyah*) participated in this study. He was chosen because of his experience in teaching practice. At the time of collecting the data, he has been teaching for 23 years and experience in teaching not only in school but also in university and tuition classes. The teacher also has a certificate as a professional teacher since he has attended many professional programs.

### **2.3. Data Collection and Analysis**

The purpose of this study was to explore the teacher's implementation of three facets of his identity. A semi-structured interview through Zoom was conducted to get the information. Galetta (2012) stated that the semi-structured interview leaves a space through which researchers might explore the participant's contextual influences evident in the narratives but not always narrative. To obtain the data, the researchers prepare interview questions that consisted of 20 questions in three parts. Questions number 1-6 were about the relationship between the teacher and student in the school. Questions number 7-14 were about teacher professionalism in teaching, and questions number 15-20 were about the teacher's religious belief. However, the researchers used these schedules as a guide during the interview. As Murray (2009) stated, a list of questions is helpful because participants are uncertain about their information.

After collecting the interview data, it is customary to transcribe the interviews (Leavy, 2017). The interview lasted for about 60 min and was conducted in a relaxed and conversational way. It was conveyed in Bahasa to allow the teacher to describe his experience more comfortably, and then it was translated into English. After each transcription, an analytical structure was first developed, and an initial analysis was carried out. The researchers highlighted and coded the transcriptions based on the research questions then interpreted the findings.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data analysis, the findings of this study are structured in the following way: (1) participating teacher's relationship with the students; (2) participating teacher's implementation of professionalism; (3) participating teacher's implementation of religious beliefs.

#### 3.1. Teacher-Student Relation

When talking about a teacher-student relationship, the participating teacher viewed that the relationship between a teacher and a student should be harmonious. He said, *"The teacher must have harmonious relationships with the student, which is relevant with its role as a teacher and its role as a student."* This statement is supported by Hattie and Yates (2014), who stated that a positive relationship between teachers and students brings benefits in trust and affection. In keeping with this view, he also said that teachers should prepare to provide solutions and be ready to help students whenever they have problems. He further said, *"As an English teacher, I have opened my heart to assist students in and out of school. For example, when students joined tuition class and found an issue... They may ask me."*

Not only in an academic context, but the teacher also built the relation out of the classroom. Moreover, he always established direct communication with the students. He opened up both face-to-face and mobile phone communication outside of the class as well, especially in this pandemic situation. In a classroom, mainly when doing tasks, the teacher approaches the student often. While in this emergency remote learning, he opened a private communication for consultation. The teacher tries his best to maintain his students' communication to boost students' motivation in learning. Hamre and Pianta (2005) pointed out that such a practice can affect students' achievement, engagement, and classroom involvement.

The participating teacher's availability and willingness to help the students strengthen the teacher-student relationship, as Hattie & Yates (2014) stated that teachers' responses to students' problems are critical. Research by Butler and Shibaz (2008) revealed two facts; the students rated their teacher's approachability, fairness, and trust; and the ways the teachers help and treat the students bring effects to the students' lives. It could be seen that many students are sending private chats to the teacher, conveying problems such as difficulty in access, uploading tasks, and web blocks. He believed that an issue had to be solved immediately to make it less humiliating for students. However, if the teacher found an issue related to parents, he stated that it would be better to report it to the homeroom teacher.

Concerning teacher authority, it is unavoidable for teachers to come across circumstances in which student

personal life enters into educational ties between teachers and students (Johnston, 2003). To balance teachers' authority and students' proximity, the participating teacher created negotiating discipline methods and made commitments together with his students. The teacher explained that he would be firm if it comes to regular rules, but how he delivered the rules did not make students depressed, and students keep feeling at ease. He further added that a teacher needs to control his identity as an individual and a teacher. *"There is information that can be consumed by a student and protected. There is a barrier between a teacher's life and personal life."*

As role models, teachers inevitably need to show a positive attitude and behaviour. Therefore, some information, especially private matters, is better off and inaccessible by students. Overall, the findings reveal that the interview participant is more concerned about students' quality. The quality of everyday classroom interactions in instructional and emotional support moderates the risk of early school failure (Hamre & Pianta, 2005) and engages in peer interactions and learning activities (Pakarinen, Lerkkanen & von Suchodoletz, 2020).

#### 3.2. Professionalism

It is a specific dimension of English teachers' identity; namely how English teachers define who they are in professionalism. That is not merely a particular job of a teacher. However, most importantly, it makes us aware of how teacher relations and roles can improve teaching development.

The data show that the teacher views professionalism as the teacher's role and duty, teaching and guiding students. Hence, as a teacher, he always attempted to become a professional teacher by providing service, education, and instruction without any students' exception. It is in line with Tatto (2021), who said it becomes a responsibility for teachers to fulfil their students' learning needs. Moreover, the teacher sought to maintain good contact with other people in a school environment. The teacher said in the interview, *"I frequently consulted with my colleagues on student matters and asked the school principal for feedback."* This finding indicated that professional development is well developed by the knowledge transfer and the interaction between teachers and their colleagues, principles, students, and relevant stakeholders. Considering the involvement and support of teachers around them may be the reasons for good cooperation (Little, 1993, as cited in Wardoyo, Herdiyani, & Sulikah, 2017).

Gastelaars (2009, as cited in Kusmaryani, Siregar, Widjaja, & Jatnika, 2018), stated that service is more customer oriented. This statement was reflected by the participating teacher when asked about allowing students to vent on teachers. He saw professionalism as a way for

teachers to embrace students who want to communicate in and out of school. As professionals, teachers play a significant role in the development of students' learning. They should ensure the class is well managed. The interview participant's comment below described his role as a professional teacher:

*"I provide time online from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. and from 8 to 9 p.m. to students for the asking... It is expected to make them feel better and served... I also said to the students who are in a group to encourage their friends to ask questions. Alhamdulillah, the students and I feel comfortable and unbothered..."*

Practically, teachers' services cannot be separated from social interaction by educating, teaching, directing, guiding, training, assessing, and evaluating students (Kusmaryani et al., 2018). Therefore, he assumed that escorting students is one of the teacher's roles. Besides, he holds a professional belief that it is right and good to provide students with learning assistance, especially during the pandemic situation. He further expressed that two values prompted him to become a professional teacher: sincerity and willingness to be useful. It implies that to be a professional teacher; someone must have values in order to make the teaching process more enjoyable, meaningful, and at ease.

The participating teacher did not claim himself as a professional teacher. Nevertheless, he always tried to become a professional teacher by reading the book on teaching methods and attending courses or training to increase the teaching capacity. It contrasts with Johnston (2003), who stated that although several teachers seek to be professionals, the way they work does not reflect their desires. Instead, this result indicated that teachers must keep learning and sharpening their skills to achieve good student learning outcomes (Tanang, 2014). Being a teacher means understanding the subject and the willingness to continually improve oneself, as often as updating one's teaching resources and materials. It needs to continuously reflect and analyse the best way to learn and enhance students' learning.

### **3.3. Religious Beliefs**

Wilson (2006, as cited in Costandius & Alexander, 2020) stated that religion is the primary identity for some people and validates their personal and social actions. The comments below showed how the participating teacher is instilling his religious beliefs during the learning process.

*"As a madrasah teacher, I oblige to save students in the world and the hereafter. English is world science, but I associate it with religious sciences. For example, when explaining the environment. I explain in terms of religion, how Islam views the environment, and cleanliness.....I convey the*

*value of English socially and religiously. Thus, I instilled a vision of English learning, but filled with good religious values."*

In *Madrasah*, it is ubiquitous to teach students by delivering religious values. Since the participating teacher teaches in an Islamic school, he has no other choice to invest Islamic values in his learning. Therefore, he sometimes explained English culture by adjusting it as allowed in Islam. If the teaching were not appropriate in Islam, it would be substituted according to Islam's teachings. When teaching about Greetings, he taught his students first by saying *Assalamu'alaikum* before saying Hello. In addition, he required students to have a prayer before starting and after ending lessons. It is essential to instill religious values in English learning to build the excellent character of the students. In particular, the interviewee considered that his Islamic faith leads him to be the right person, and thus, he implemented it in his professional life as a teacher.

It aligned with Baurain (2012), who stated that morality and spirituality in education need to be reflected upon and included in teacher education programs. Moreover, Johnston (2003) said that teachers' beliefs would influence what they do in their classrooms and schools. Religious belief can affect how students think about their social life (Costandius & Alexander, 2020). It has influenced the ways English language teachers shape their pedagogy (Mambu, 2017). Hence, the participating teacher assumed that he took responsibility for introducing religious values into the English classroom to make competent and responsible students.

Although the students did not come from different cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, the interviewee participant believed that teachers should have morality, such as by giving equal rights for all students to experience the learning process, paying equal attention to all learners, and avoiding favouritism towards students (Soleimani & Lovat, 2019). To practice moral teaching, ELT teachers should come with religious values and social values that affect their lives. It was applied by the participating teacher who inculcates the value of tolerance during his teaching process:

*"When doing an assignment, and the form is different, it does not matter. The important thing is that the content is relevant... I also tell my students that they will live in a multicultural and multi-character society. Hence, we must respect each other and not discriminate against others."*

As Indonesia encourages religious values to be integrated into (character) education (Qoyyimah, 2016, in Mambu, 2017), teachers are considered as role models in the classroom. Thus, they are responsible for transmitting good values such as respect, tolerance, honesty, and other values to adhere to professional behavioral ethics. Moral values intend to influence and

give meaning to thinking and action (Everington, 2019). By showing positive values, teachers play a vital role in promoting students' moral processes and assisting their learning (Tanang, 2014). These moral and religious values could prepare an individual for better performance and higher responsibility fulfilment.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study has focused on the issue of teachers' identity through exploring the implementation of English teacher identity in the teaching practice. Teacher identity might be a sensitive issue as it questions "who we are" and what it is to be a person and moral agent. It represents a social structure because it reveals the perception that all teachers have of themselves and society's influences in building and developing them. Hence this study is reflected in different aspects of the identity of English teachers. Based on the findings and discussion above, it can be seen that the teacher has implemented three facets of teacher identity proposed by Johnston (2003).

In teacher-student relations, the teacher always prioritizes himself to assist students, especially for academic matters. Maintaining good communication could affect students' engagement. While in the aspect of professionalism, he sees professionalism as served-oriented. Thus, he always tries to improve his capacity to be a great teacher for his students. Also, the teacher consistently instils religious values in his English teaching. By virtue of teaching in an Islamic School, most of the values are related to Islam. He believes that inculcating positive values could bring accountable individuals into their social life. Moreover, the teacher does not have difficulties implementing three facets of teacher identity because of his teaching experience. He also does not have any identity crisis since he knows his roles well.

Generally speaking, recognizing teachers' identity allows them to empower and expand and challenge their experiences and beliefs. Thus, teacher educators must seek to promote teacher identity development continually. Finally, teachers' religious beliefs and social values unquestionably influence teachers' identity, which affects the way the teacher teaches. However, since this study's scope was limited in an Islamic school, the teacher always instils Islamic values in his English teaching, while English teaching in public schools might be different. Therefore, future research can explore the teacher's identity on a broader range with students' multicultural backgrounds and religious beliefs.

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