



Teacher Agency in Different Teaching Communities: A Narrative Inquiry into Shifting Teaching Experiences

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Abstract. This research narratively explores an English teacher's professional knowledge development by reflecting on the teacher's experiences in different teaching communities. Based on the interviews and the conversational records, this research constructs how different teaching communities influence the teacher's professional knowledge and cultivate their agency. The various contexts of challenging teaching have shaped the teacher's experiences. The shifting experiences from rural to urban teaching communities have contributed to the teacher's life, personally and professionally. Experiences that were talked about in the study revealed and changed beliefs and assumptions that had already been made about school authority and how it affects a teacher's teaching ideology. This study gives us ideas about how we could change the way we think about the ideology of experienced and professional teachers.

Keywords: school authority · teacher agency · teaching community · teaching experience · teaching ideology

1 Introduction

“Working with an eight-year-old girl with special needs was how I gained my first teaching experience. When I first started my adventure as a teacher, I had just recently graduated from high school, and I had always believed that it was the best part of my overall experience in life up to that point. With no prior experience in teaching, I had to battle my emotions to teach this remarkable young girl how to read and write. And looking back, I realize that this was the most rewarding experience any teacher could hope to have. Until then, I had a conversation with a figure who told me about her thought-provoking experience in teaching” (First author).

This forty-three years old figure mentioned by the first author has experienced teaching in different teaching landscapes. Her teaching ideology has grown from her distinctive experiences in different teaching communities with different authorities. She has made her agency by struggling to maintain a balance as there is a shift between her

personal and professional life in different institutions. As the authors inquired into her teaching experiences, stories about the changes she had gone through during her teaching career stimulated the authors' inquiries.

In investigating her teaching experiences, the authors considered the shifts she had undergone over the years the compelling part of the inquiry. The authors began to see how her personal and professional landscape had changed over time and had formed her teaching philosophy and agency. The authors deem this extraordinarily intriguing and worthy of further investigation. A narrative inquiry into her shifting teaching experiences is eventually made because, as narrative inquiry is in the interpretive paradigm, it explores her experience and how the physical, social, and cultural environment impacts and shapes her experiences as an individual [1]. Narrative inquiry is also argued to help gain better comprehension and contribute to learning [2, 3]; therefore, examining her experiences is critical for gaining insight into how teachers' ideologies and agency are formed due to the evolving experiences in teaching.

Numerous studies have explored the narrative aspects of teachers' professional development. The literature on narrative inquiry revealed a teacher whose teaching experience affected his or her techniques and interactions with other teachers [4]. Another narrative study explored the attrition of two Chinese first-year teachers at two middle schools after they've been there for two years. To aid in the formation of positive teacher identities, the study investigated the factors that contribute to teacher turnover [5]. The narrative inquiry also examined teachers' lived experiences and ideologies. Participants' encounters with school authorities disclose their ideologies by exposing what astonished them, what made a memorable moment for them, and how these experiences also helped shape their ideas [6]. In the course of their narrative inquiry into the professional identities of foreign teachers, researchers discovered that teachers were inspired by their travels and adventures, were kind and compassionate, had difficulty adjusting to cultural differences, and were uncertain whether they wanted to remain in the profession after their experiences. [7]. This discovery adds another compelling argument to support the case for future research into the value of analyzing teachers' experiences in teaching.

Linking to personal, practical, and societal rationale, the narrative inquirers claim to regard change as a part of the narrative inquiry process, with the possibility of change occurring across various dimensions [8]. Therefore, it would be a significant project contributing more insights into qualitative research through narrative inquiries if it investigates how teachers experience the changes through their shifting teaching experiences and how they shape their personal and professional lives. This investigation would be prompted by the question, "How is teachers' agency shaped by the changing experiences in different teaching communities?". To explore an Indonesian English teacher's professional knowledge development reflected from the teacher's experiences, the answers to this inquiry would be significant for the ever-expanding field of narrative research. The current piece contributes to the expanding body of work utilizing narrative inquiry to comprehend how shifting instructing experiences form teacher agency and ideology in various teaching communities.

1.1 Narrative Inquiry

A life story by Clandinin [2] is a story a person narrates about his or her life, as clearly and honestly as possible, what is recalled of it, and what the teller wants others to know about it, usually because of a guided interview by another. A life story is a reasonably comprehensive account of an individual's full life experience, emphasizing the most significant events and experiences. In the social sciences, life stories are used to examine lives in their social surroundings or as texts reflecting individuals' personalities or identity formation [9]. From a hermeneutic standpoint, the meaning of human life is derived from stories that are only meaningful through interaction. In relating stories about past occurrences, people attempt to elucidate their significance [10]. People interpret their prior experiences via the lens of narratives, how they access the world, and interpret and provide personal significance to their experience [8].

The human experience is seen through the lens of narrative inquiry as a dynamic, ever-changing stream of human cognition and interaction with our personal, social, and material surroundings [11]. To begin, it is essential to engage in narrative inquiry since it provides a framework for reflecting on the experience [8]. According to Connely and Clandinin, to employ narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular perspective on experience as a phenomenon to be investigated, as the technique requires a perspective on the phenomenon [8]. Narrative inquiry is a powerful tool for understanding phenomena from those who encounter them because it focuses on how people use stories to explain their experiences [12]. Understanding how we make sense of our experiences and worlds is not a quest for objective truth, but rather a quest for meaning. Narrative inquiry assists both the researcher and the subject in comprehending how they make sense of their experiences and realities [6].

1.2 Teacher Agency

The concept of agency has been described in many different ways, with the primary emphasis being placed on the potential of individuals to bring about change in the external environment [13]. Agency can be defined as the potential to effect change in one's life in a way that "makes a difference" [14]. It refers to individual "actors' intrinsic control of their actions: how actors critically design their answers to challenging situations" [15], the ability to step back from events and ideas and assess what could be accomplished critically [16]. The agency is closely related to the professionalism of teachers. Teachers must be allowed to pursue their practice values to fulfil their professional responsibilities successfully [17]. Teachers' professional agency is their capacity to make decisions, behave with integrity, and effect change [18]. In this piece of research, the concept of "teacher agency" refers to the development of a teacher's professionalism due to the altering nature of the teacher's experience.

Agency is grounded in experience, looks to the future with an eye toward the present, and is placed in the here and now [19]. Numerous studies of language teaching agencies have centered on topics of professionalism [20], policy and implementation [21], educational transformation [22], and the relationship between policy adjustments or modifications [23]. The current study describes the development of a teacher's professionalism in different teaching communities through shifting teaching experiences. The

study participant describes different time, space, and relationship contexts of teaching involving restrictions, conflicts, and problems in pursuing the goals of teaching.

1.3 Teaching Community

Teaching is shaped and changed by individual, contextual, and systemic elements [24], including the school context. “School context” refers to a school’s social, cultural, historical, and geographical surroundings. Since schools are “complex organisms” that need a comprehensive inspection [25], this examination should take place within the school [26]. Consequently, teachers are the ones impacted by the school environment. The school environment constructs the values and beliefs of teachers and the teaching community with which they engage [26]. As a result, the teaching community influences the values and beliefs of teachers. The school context shapes teachers’ ideology.

Learning is situational and through practice groups [27, 28]. Because of this, schools must be learning organizations led by systems thinkers [29]. Schools are bureaucratic organizations and professional learning communities [30]. Research shows that these communities can positively affect instructors and their teaching practices, leading to higher student accomplishment. As bureaucratic organizations, schools are professional learning communities [31, 32]. From a teachers’ development perspective, teachers’ communities are also their knowledge communities. Teachers tell and recount their stories to members in reflective interactions [33]. Teachers gain new perspectives from their associates in different communities and refine their knowledge and practices.

1.4 School Authority and Teacher’s Ideology

Schools pose challenges to individuals in their roles as subjects of dominant ideologies [34]. The ideology includes the power that schools establish through their explicit and implicit teaching [35]. Foucault considered the schools to be a part of a larger historical shift from one type of power to another, labelled as sovereign power and disciplinary power, respectively [36]. The disciplinary power strives to shape its subordinates through rational, thorough, and precise procedures, instilling them with morality and authority [36]. Consequently, applying Foucault’s theory, schools may be understood as having to establish power as a requirement embedded in their structure to achieve their objective and engage students in learning.

Teacher-student interactions are the most direct encounter that many students have with government authority; teachers’ earlier experiences of authority in pedagogical relationships form their ideologies, which they then execute in the classrooms, creating an implicit curriculum for citizens [6]. Ideology can be considered as comprising the values, beliefs, and assumptions regarding how governments, citizens, and nations interact in modern society, as well as the responsibilities and options individuals and groups have for sustaining the status quo or initiating change [6], given the many changing and contested definitions of ideology [37]. Ideology is shaped by a person’s life experiences, which include interactions with Ideological State Apparatuses [6]. Consequently, a teacher’s personal experiences will influence the ideology that they espouse.

2 Method

This study employed a narrative inquiry, with temporality, sociality, and place serving as its conceptual framework [8]. We created a “research puzzle” by setting the first author’s teaching memories in the social, cultural, and educational framework of Lampung, Indonesia [38]. We investigated potential participants, found the factors triggering the stories, reasoned the participant’s stories, and finally developed the analysis.

2.1 Participant

Julia, the participant of this research, has got her bachelor’s and master’s degree in a public university. She was assigned as a government official teacher 19 years ago and now is an active teacher in a public school in the capital city of Lampung. She has been in workshops and pieces of training organized in different teaching communities. She has experience teaching English in private schools, public schools, and different universities. She is a certified teacher who is now awarded as a ‘*guru penggerak*,’ a teacher who plays the role of initiating and activating her associate teachers across the government education programs.

An informal invitation was sent out through a chat session on WhatsApp, which also included information about the study’s terms, procedures, and goals. It was given to Julia one week before the interview so that we could have a sense of the stage at which we were “coming into the lives” of Julia [8].

2.2 Data Collection

Since the goal of narrative research is to “learn about an experience in all of its complexity,” and since interviews permit the researcher to “follow the participants down their paths,” interviews are frequently used as the primary method for generating data in narrative research [39]. Researchers who study narratives investigate accounts they have solicited from others, including oral accounts gained through interviews and written accounts received through requests [40]. The primary data source for the current investigation was a semi-structured individual interview.

The researchers directed the discussions with the aid of interview guidelines. Typically, the questions were open-ended so that participants may elaborate and explore emergent topics [12]. Twenty items addressed the three narrative inquiry space dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place [8]. Questions regarding temporality focused on participant backgrounds, initial teaching experiences, and current teaching experiences. The social questions inquired about the participant’s interactions with the various teaching communities, while the geographical questions centered on Lampung and Indonesia in general. The interview lasted 120 min and was casually and conversationally carried out. Because of this, we were able to engage in the necessary periodic self-reflection that is expected of a narrative inquirer [38]. After the interview, we reviewed the notes recorded by Google Voice Note, transcribed them, and made minor modifications to the analysis.

3 The Stories of Julia

Julia's stories are transcribed into stories about her initial teaching, her experience in different teaching communities, her ideology about an experienced and professional teacher, and her ideology about school authority.

3.1 Her Initial Teaching

When she was in her third year of study at university. As an English education program student, Julia had to take her practice teaching for several weeks. It was her initial teaching in a real classroom. Julia learned lesson planning, learning assessment, and classroom management from a senior teacher. Julia narrated the story:

I came to the school as a junior teacher, learning how to teach students for the first time. It was a vocational school, and most of the students were males. As a very young teacher, dealing with those boys was very challenging. However, I was lucky that my advisor teacher guided me in everything. She told me how to design a lesson plan, assess the students, and, more importantly, deal with the boys in the class. I needed to learn lots of things about teaching. So, I made interactions with all teachers. It was my first knowledge of classroom management. I learned from my seniors that the most important thing about being accepted in the class is knowing your students' character and building the students' trust.

As Kenyon [6] claimed that authority relies on legitimacy and trust, Julia seemed to build an ideology about classroom authority in her initial teaching experience. She learned that teachers should gain students' confidence in the classroom. It gave her an understanding of how a teacher should take authority in the school. Julia's decision to connect with teachers of different subjects to learn about pedagogical knowledge was an initial process of understanding the value of trust in authority [41]. During her first year of teaching, Julia established her teaching ideology. Julia's motivations for learning from senior teachers caused professional identity issues [42] and subsequently contributed to her decision to define professionalism in terms of her experiences.

As a beginning educator, Julia collaborated with other teachers, supporting the notion that opportunities for beginning teachers to work cooperatively with other teachers are highly desired [43]. Johnson and Birkeland [44] discovered that beginning teachers with integrated professional cultures (that supported collegial and collaborative connections for all teachers) reported greater job satisfaction. Julia was successful in making her way into the professional community as a novice teacher.

3.2 Different Teaching Communities

Julia has experience teaching in different institutions. She has experience teaching students in different schools and also students at universities. Julia said:

I started teaching as a government official teacher in 2003 in a junior school in a remote area. I stayed with some of my associate teachers in a clapboard house with

no electricity. We could not get enough facilities in school, and the situation was even more challenging. Students learning motivations and academic competence were low. The culture was completely different. There were dominant and powerful parents and students. However, then, I realized that I had to deal with it. I tried to be adaptive and creative, for there were limitations in many things. So, my goal in teaching was more to make things enjoyable. My focus then was on stimulating the student's interest in learning English.

Shortly after beginning her new employment as a government official instructor, Julia encountered the conflicts she felt while crossing the boundaries between classroom and non-classroom spaces. She recognized that she was physically and psychologically exhausted. Then Julia began to recognize the tensions she had been so frantically trying to ignore; interpret tensions relationally, that is, tensions that exist between persons, events, or objects as a method of creating a between space, a place that can exist in instructional ways [45]. She recognized that she needed to identify her identity and responsibility as a government officer.

Julia experienced her new teaching community in a vocational high school. It was her second institution, which the government assigned her. Julia said:

In the vocational high school, I had to teach the students about tourism. So, English was more for conversational purposes. Students got their field practice in hotels in the city, so I had to mentor them. It was a new experience, so I tried to gain more knowledge about English for specific purposes.

Julia's experiences and the contexts in which she worked and lived continually shape "who she is and is becoming" [46]. Julia's narratives allow us to perceive the interconnected lives of starting teachers in the context of altering professional knowledge landscapes [47]. The shifting process can also be seen in the following story:

I experienced teaching in two different universities. The first university was located in the city, and the second was away from the city. As you can see, things are different in rural-urban institutions: the facilities, the students, the management, and the learning atmosphere. However, I found that university students were more independent and critical. So, I had to be broad-minded and academically insightful.

Julia could "honor lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding" [48] as she shifted her professional life. She organized her teaching by adjusting to the teaching community she worked. Julia's teaching continuously shapes and changes contextually [24] in the given circumstances. The school's landscape also nurtures Julia:

The school I am teaching at now is the best in the city. But I think I am entirely challenged in this school. There are lots of things to do here. Teachers should be able to manage their time and balance their personal and professional life. We are demanded to do our best and give our best. I develop a lot in this school and keep learning to create innovations. I believe a good teacher never stops learning.

In terms of social, ethnic, and cultural discourse, Julia's experience at her current workplace reveals how her self-development is perceived in the culture in which she

works. The pace and quality of her work, the relationships with co-workers, and the development of a professional community are all determined by her work. [49]. As she began to persuade herself to become a learner teacher, her social advancements, which brought about numerous changes and innovations in social life, influenced her life, caused a shift in her life, and necessitated a development process to keep up with the changes [50].

Julia's agency is developed from her experience interacting with her associate teachers in different schools. Julia said:

I like learning from others. In this school, I always tried to get myself connected with others. I collaborate with teachers and those in charge of the school's jobs.

Collaboration with others is essential for developing and enacting agency [51]. As an agentic teacher, Julia was consciously aware of the need for support from colleagues to implement change in her practice [52]. Julia is an inquisitively agentic teacher who actively seeks learning opportunities considering shifting conditions that influence her pedagogical practices and her outlook and hopes for the future [17].

3.3 The Ideology of Experienced and Professional Teachers

Many Indonesian teachers have difficulty obtaining professional development [53]. Workshops are typically held at a central place where teachers attend and are guided by a teacher educator who provides the session's topic [54]. Julia experienced this:

English teacher community meeting was held once a month. Due to the transportation problem, getting to the meeting spot was tricky. However, I enjoyed meeting my friends after being trapped in an isolated place. I considered the meeting my professional development program, so I always tried to follow every session.

Teacher professionalism is directly linked with the quality, autonomy, and status of teaching as a job, and agency is at the nucleus of teacher professionalism [17]. Julia's professional agency is her ability to make decisions, act with integrity, and personate change [18]. Julia could cope with the limitations she encountered during her initial teaching. Julia's agency is shaped by the belief she shared about the importance of the teacher professional program.

Julia is also committed to performing professional roles successfully; Julia can pursue what she values in her practices [17]. She said:

I am trying to fit myself into the community where I belong to. I am now teaching in a reputable school. I should do my best since my principal has been very supportive. He always encourages teachers to develop themselves through teacher professional development programs.

In the social dimension of agency, Julia's identity is inserted through the social status she holds, the social roles she plays, and the specific social values she embodies; she is confident as a person with a stable character and identity [55]. Julia's professional agency can be identified from her views about professionalism in teaching:

For me, a professional teacher should be broad-hearted, patient, tolerant of students' differences, and stimulate them to learn, collaborate, and contribute to learning.

Teachers' professional identities are grounded in their ever-evolving professional knowledge landscapes, which are determined by the teachers' various ways of knowing and doing the job [5]. Julia's shifting teaching experiences shaped her ideology about the experienced and professional teacher; she was able to define a professional teacher identity. Julia valued the students as individuals for what they were capable and incapable of and for who they were. She used her authority to appreciate students' talents and interests:

Lately, I have realized that a good teacher should appreciate classroom diversity in classrooms. It is a must.

Julia's shifting teaching experiences in different communities and landscapes is an insight into the ideology of experienced and professional teachers. Julia can stay committed to her ideology about professionalism in any situation. Her commitment and persistence to her self-development define the ideology.

3.4 School Authority in Julia's Ideology

Julia experienced working with different associate teachers and also leaders. Julia said:

From the experiences I have gathered from different schools and universities, I can say that the institution's quality is in the leader's hands. The principal is the one to hold the ultimate authority of the school.

Julia's theory about the role of the leader and the school authority characterized the principal's identity as the school leader. School leaders should function to shape a vision of academic success for all students, create a climate hospitable to education, cultivate leadership in others, improve instruction, and manage the people, data, and processes needed to foster school improvement [56]. In Julia's view, school leaders organize the school authority to attain the institution's goals. Julia's shifting teaching experiences with different principals denote an ideology about leadership:

A good principal will make his ultimate effort to facilitate teachers in carrying out self-development and provide learning facilities and valuable training for teachers.

Looking back at her early days struggling in the rural school, Julia also mentioned how the principal managed his authority to help her in teaching:

My principal did not support me financially regarding the English teacher community program. However, I was lucky that my principal was supportive in school. He helped me a lot.

Julia's experiences with her principals in different teaching communities and school landscapes shaped her ideology about school authority. Julia could reconcile the unexpected conditions with the ideology she had committed. She learned from her professional life in different teaching communities, developed her agency, and set up her ideology about teaching.

4 Concluding Remarks

Thinking about Julia's narrative in this study means using Julia's mind to imagine life spaces that flow in time, consist of personal and social interactions, and move from place to place [57]. Exploring stories as constructions that change our surroundings and "teach us what 'worthy' existence is, what we should aspire to and what we should avoid" [59] is a way to understand narratives as functional, occasioned, and formative of identity [58]. The insights provided by Julia's stories about her fluctuating teaching experiences allow us to reconsider the idea of the experienced and professional teacher. A narrative inquiry into Julia's experiences as an English teacher is relevant to research in the language teaching and learning field because it helps us to understand the inner mental worlds of language teachers and learners and the nature of language teaching and learning as a social and educational activity [12]. Julia's stories are treasured recitations for teachers struggling to shape personal and professional identities in language teaching communities.

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