

The influence of beliefs upon pre-service teachers' professional identity

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ABSTRACT

Bearing in mind the interplay between beliefs and professional identities, constantly re-examining teachers' beliefs is deemed to be significant in teachers' identity formation. However, not much attention has been given to pre-service teachers' beliefs. Through a case study, this research sought to reveal some beliefs held by four pre-service teachers doing their teaching practicum at a state junior high school in Yogyakarta. In addition, this study also attempts to describe the interplay between beliefs and the professional identity of those pre-service teachers'. Participants' reflections, observations, and a focus group discussion were employed in order to figure out the answers to the research questions. The findings show that each of the participants processed the experiences they had in their teaching practicum differently. They started their teaching with pre-existing beliefs that were either confirmed or confronted when they did their practicum. The findings of this study also suggest that the interplay between beliefs and professional identity is complex. Not all beliefs were clearly reflected in the participants' teaching performances. Some may seem contradictory to their beliefs. It implies that although the participants had sets of beliefs in their minds, teaching itself does not only represent their beliefs, but also serves as a stage where many intertwined factors occur.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Studying pre-service teachers has been the heart of many educational researchers. Commonly, teacher education programs offer practicum programs where student teachers start to apply what they have learned during the program to 'real' classroom teaching. The period may vary, ranging from several months to several semesters. The period is critical for many pre-service teachers since there might be some difficulties and challenges for them to tackle. Yet, aiming at preparing student teachers to teach, the practicum period is also deemed crucial as it may set the foundation of their professionalism.

The new world that pre-service teachers plunge in is certainly challenging and rewarding at the same time. Considered as novices, pre-service teachers seem to have limited experiences which might make them anxious [1, 2]. The gap between theory and practice may also serve as a challenge for the teachers. The mixture and interplay among different competencies (pedagogical, professional, personal and social) might make the process even more complex. However, as the beginning of professional world, teaching practicum provides opportunities for pre-service teachers to shape their professional identity as future teachers. The opportunities also help them become more aware of their personal beliefs about teaching in the real classroom.

Closely related to identity are teachers' beliefs. Beliefs and identities are intertwined as what teachers believe also shapes how they see themselves and underlie what they do. In light of this, Walkington asserts that "teacher identity is based on the core beliefs one has about teaching and being a teacher; beliefs that are continuously formed and reformed through experience" [3]. Hong also maintains that "the way we perceive ourselves influences our choice of action and judgment" [4]. When dealing with professional identity, one kind of beliefs that might be relevant is beliefs about teaching and learning. Within the context of English language teaching (ELT), exploring pre-service teachers' beliefs may serve as an interesting study considering that English is not the first language of the majority of the people in Indonesia. Understanding how beliefs of pre-service teachers are evolving will assist teacher educators in guiding pre-service teachers' learning [5]. However, not much attention has been given to pre-service teachers' beliefs.

Bearing in mind the interplay between beliefs and professional identities, constantly re-examining teachers' beliefs is deemed to be significant in teachers' identity formation. It is teacher educators' responsibility to provide pre-service teachers' with activities that give them space to "explicitly build upon and challenge their experiences and beliefs" [3]. In addition, as institutions that prepare students to become teachers, pre-service teacher programs are responsible for producing "quality teachers who have strong professional identities" [6]. Turbill and Kerbin argue further that "supporting the development of professional identities of student teachers must become an integral part of any teacher preparation program" [6]. The understanding of pre-service teachers' belief provides opportunities for teacher educators to help them develop a range of teaching approaches and learning effectiveness.

As future teachers, pre-service teachers should embark on their professional pursuits as early as possible during their preparation program. Literature has explored how teacher beliefs are formed long before they start teaching profession [7, 8]. Clark-Goff [9] contends that "studying pre-service teachers' beliefs is also important because it has received insufficient attention in empirical educational research." Therefore, considering the noteworthy nature of pre-service teachers as well as the importance of beliefs in shaping professional identities, it is important to conduct a study on that particular topic.

Defining the word 'belief' seems to be complex as Pajares, states that belief is a "messy construct" [9]. As a result, the term belief is often used interchangeably with attitudes, values, perceptions, theories, and world view. Similarly, Borg also maintains that "a widely accepted explanation of "beliefs" is still rather indefinite [9]. Beliefs are typically defined in relation to knowledge and behavior and are recognized as value-laden". Some other definitions of beliefs include "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions felt to be true" [10]. Beliefs may "govern people's behaviours" [11]. Thus, teachers' belief may affect the way they teach and react in certain circumstances. For teachers, beliefs are influential "because they are "the heart of teaching" [9].

Teachers are hoped to be agents of change as they play an important role in helping educate students. In this vein, Pajares (1992) and Richardson (1996) argue that in order prepare teachers as change agents, teacher educators need to start with an understanding of the beliefs that become the grounds of their decision making [12].

Much research has been conducted to explore pre-service teachers' beliefs'. Johnson argues that there are three assumptions that have underlain research on teachers' beliefs [11]. First of all, teachers' beliefs have an impact on their perception and judgment. Therefore, they will affect their actions as well as what they say in the classroom. Second, beliefs influence how teachers teach in the classroom. Third, it is essential to understand teachers' beliefs' in order to enhance teaching practices and teacher education programs.

However, Stuart and Thurlow argue that pre-service teachers' beliefs about what it takes to be successful teachers seem erroneous and simplistic. They state further that pre-service teachers "frequently do not understand the importance of challenging their beliefs". For them, "liking children is sufficient". Also, teaching is seen as a merely a process of knowledge transmission [12].

Thus, pre-service teachers should question their beliefs critically. Failure in doing so will result in the maintenance of the status quo. It has to be noted also that student population and condition have altered, and thus existing beliefs regarding teaching and learning may not fit well any longer [12]. Hence, pre-service teachers need to revisit their beliefs and keep reflecting on their beliefs.

Some researchers have classified beliefs into different categories. A study done by Incecay on teachers' beliefs reveals some findings related to ideal language learner, ideal language teacher and ideal English classrooms [11]. With regards to ideal language learner, the participants emphasize on social characteristics of language learner. For the participants, an ideal language teacher plays its role as supporter, facilitator, and moderator. When asked about ideal language classrooms, the participants put emphasis on the need for authentic materials. Another categorization has been set by Calderhead [10]. The categories include beliefs about learners and learning, beliefs about teaching, beliefs about subject, beliefs about learning to teach, and beliefs about self and about teaching role.

Although Cabaroglu and Roberts contend that “beliefs are inflexible”, beliefs connect to experience in two ways [9]. Clark-Goff maintains that “while experiences are fundamental to initial belief development, they are also critical to belief change” [9]. Past experience might have certain impact on people’s beliefs. As a consequence, their beliefs may govern people’s subsequent behaviours. The beliefs may be maintained until ones experience fundamental occurrence that results in belief change. Thus, experience becomes a crucial part in belief formation.

In this vein, pre-service teaching practice gives an opportunity to student teachers to experience what ‘real’ classroom teaching is like. Prior to the teaching program, they have had a set of beliefs which will be reflected from the way they teach. In this regards, Fullan state that “the relationship between prior beliefs and program experience is crucial, complex, and not straightforward” [12]. Thus, during the teaching practicum, the interplay between pre-service teachers’ beliefs and professional identity seems to be apparent. Walkington asserts that “pre-service teacher core beliefs and perceptions affect the dynamics of learning to teach and the establishment of a teacher identity” [3].

A number of research has been conducted on the investigation of teachers’ professional identity. Although “professional identity” is a notion that is not easily scrutinized, some researchers have attempted to define teachers’ professional identity. According to Canrinus for teachers, “professional identity is often interpreted in terms of individuals’ perceptions of themselves as a teacher and as the teacher they wish to become” [13]. Wang and Lin maintain that “teachers’ professional identity influences the ways teachers think and teach” [14]. Furthermore, Wang and Lin use identity as “a framing concept “which is “a useful analytic tool for studying teachers’ personal and professional lives, the formation of teachers’ emotions and teachers’ praxis” [14].

Researchers have underlined the fluid nature of professional identity. Beijaard et al. define professional identity as “something established and maintained through the interaction in social situations and negotiation of roles within the particular context” [4]. Thus, rather than being seen a fixed and single entity, Cattley highlights the notion of fluidity in professional identity which she refers to as “uncertainty about self” that unleashes the potential of someone to change [15]. Thus, fluidity also results in negotiation with a number of socio-cultural contexts. In this regard, Hooley argues that professional identity is “a constant process of negotiating the many socio-cultural forces, trends and structures within which they work and the relationship they seek to develop with knowledge, with students and their families and with other professional colleagues” [16]. Similarly, Winslade (2002) ,states that “professional identity may be described, by borrowing from the narrative literature, as the fostering of “self-descriptions” which are confirmed by the social and cultural norms within their context [15]. Furthermore, Hong also states “identity is continually being formed and reformed through the way we internalize the external environment, negotiate interactions, and externalise ourselves to others” [4]. Professional identity is therefore fluid, relational as well as open for negotiation.

Research on the development of pre-service teachers’ professional identity has also received the spotlight. In their early teaching stage, the development of professional identity of pre-service teachers is considered significant. Flores & Day define the development of professional identity as “as “an ongoing and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one’s own values and experiences [17]. Thomas and Beauchamp further argue that “developing a strong sense of a professional identity as a teacher may be crucial to the well-being of new members of the profession” [17].

2. RESEARCH METHOD

Looking into some pre-service teachers’ beliefs and professional identity, we employed qualitative method in this study. In particular, a case study was employed to seek the answers to the research questions. According to O’Toole & Beckett, it starts with examining a certain phenomenon, followed by observing and documenting a typical case of the phenomenon [18]. In addition, case studies “may be defined by the characteristics of the group” [19]. In this research, the participants shared some things in common: all of them were pre-service teachers who taught English language and they were in their teaching practicum at the same school.

The research was conducted in March-May 2016 when the participants were doing their teaching practicum at SMPN 2 Yogyakarta. The participants had started the practicum since February 2016. The participants of this research were four students of the English language education study program at Sanata Dharma University. In their 8th semester, they were taking a subject called PPL (Program Pengalaman Lapangan) which required them to do teaching practices at schools. All of them were assigned by the Study Program to teach at a public junior high school in Yogyakarta. As pre-service teachers, they were required to teach English language to the students with the guidance of the school teachers. They were also

supposed to do some administrative work. Those four participants were under our supervision during their teaching practicum.

The participants were asked to reflect on their teaching practices. There were three reflections used in this research: the reflection of their first teaching practice, the reflection of the last teaching practice, and the reflection they wrote in the middle of their teaching practicum period. There were no guiding questions provided. Therefore, besides depicting what they had done in the class, the participants could reflect on anything that interested them. The participants may write their reflections in either *Bahasa Indonesia* or English, depending on their preference.

As part of the assessment, we observed each of the student teachers once. We used the result of the observation to gather data for this study. However, due to the time limitation, there were two teaching performances that we could not fully observe because two of them had exactly the same schedule.

After all the participants finished their practicum, we invited them to join a focus group discussion. However, one of them could not make it because he had to work at that time. Therefore, there were only three people joining the focus group and the other one was interviewed individually. The focus group took place on 13 May 2016, while the interview took place on 24 May 2016. Through the focus group, we could get some information about their experiences and ask for some clarification or further explanation on what they had written on the reflections as well as what we had seen during the observation. The focus group was held in *Bahasa Indonesia* to make the participants feel more comfortable in sharing their perspectives. The list of guiding questions for the focus group is attached in the Appendices.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

Each of the participants enunciated different beliefs on teaching and learning, as well as on being an English language teacher. The experiences that the participants had were perceived differently too by each of them. Therefore, in presenting the findings, we will firstly focus on each of them, and give some narration about them. Then, in the discussion we will present the interplay of their beliefs and their professional identities. The names used are pseudonyms. They are Paul, Yuni, Emi, and Helmi.

Paul was the only participant who said “Yes” without hesitation when asked whether he wanted to be a teacher after he experienced the teaching practicum. He found that teaching itself was enjoyable. However, he also admitted that doing the administration and preparation to some extent was not fun as they tend to be too formal. However, in his opinion, real teaching offered a ray of flexibility because he could improvise what had been written in the Lesson Plan.

“Frankly, I don’t like teaching because it tends to be formal. I have to prepare the lesson plan and other stuff. So we count on our knowledge and teach it to the students. (But) the teaching itself (in the classroom) is the fun part. I can have chit-chat with the students.”

(Paul)

Paul also believed that teachers should be able to diagnose the students’ level of competence and thus to prepare materials that are suitable for them. Yet, Paul still found it challenging. In addition, being able to adapt to different situations was also one aspect that makes a good teacher.

“(A good teacher) should be able to know when to joke and when to be serious .. and he should be able to connect the materials with the current trends (among the students).”

(Paul)

Furthermore, a good class should include group work. In addition, because he taught English, he believed that the students should be encouraged to dare to speak the language first, without fearing about the grammar.

Different from Paul, Yuni firmly said that she did not want to be a teacher. Her reluctance to be a teacher was even confirmed after she finished her teaching practicum. She did not find enjoyment in teaching and preferred the administration work instead. In her opinion, to be a good teacher, one has to be broad-minded and able to accommodate students’ different expressions without any judgment. Labelling students as “smart” or “stupid” should also be avoided. She heavily emphasized the efforts more than the final grades.

“(A good teacher) should be able to accommodate the students’ expressions and do not think that they are wrong... I never say “Wrong” to the students. I never compare one student to another, (for example saying) ‘You are stupid’”.

(Yuni)

She also highlighted the prominence of creativity. The use of varied media may make a class more alive and therefore the learning can take place better. It can be shown when she did her teaching. When she taught, I observed that she was very enthusiastic and tried to make the learning fun by using a song as an ice breaking activity. The class atmosphere was cheerful, although it somehow turned out to be out of her control.

“I prefer the “art” elements in teaching. I am more interested in literature, poem, drama, and play, (since) there is no limit to express something”

(Yuni)

Emi was not sure if she wanted to be a teacher after she graduated. Yet, she was still considering the possibility. She liked being around the students and listened to their stories more than she liked the teaching itself. In teaching, she was quite assertive towards the students. She also got the initiative to change the students’ seat arrangements so that they could concentrate well on the materials. A good teacher should also be good at hiding her emotions and control her mood.

“What was challenging was how to be able to teach with a cheerful face, despite the pressure we had during the teaching practicum. During the practicum, I mostly wore ‘masks’”

(Emi)

In line with Yuni’s opinion, a good class should encompass attractive media. Therefore, being a good teacher meant being able to seek for sources that were interesting and motivating. A good teacher should also understand students’ difficulties, know why the difficulties existed, and help the students.

“Last time I tried (to help the students) with their Pronunciation. When they said ‘to go’ the pronunciation was /tu: gə/ instead of /tu: gəv/. (Then I thought) How to make them say the right pronunciation. So I searched for some videos that contained English pronunciation”

(Emi)

Quite similar to Emi, Helmi was also uncertain about being a teacher. Yet, the calling was getting stronger after he finished the teaching practicum. He enjoyed being with the students and socializing with the teachers and other staff at school. The difficulty that he faced was that he found it hard to match the theory he learned at the university with what he found in the class. Ensuring that the materials suited the students’ needs was one of the things that a good teacher should do so that the materials can be comprehended well. From his teaching, the emphasis on materials could be seen. He admitted that he did not like football, but he chose the topic to be included in his materials as the topic was something that was close to the students’ life.

The relationship between a teacher and the students should also be maintained. As a pre-service teacher, he realized that some students did not really respect him. Therefore, sometimes it was hard for him to get the students’ attention. Nonetheless, he had a strategy to overcome the situation.

“I had been strict to them, it would have been harder for them to listen to me.... So it would be better to act as their friend. ... Before I did the practicum, I thought a teacher should maintain the distance between him and the students.”

(Helmi)

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study echo what Turbill and Kervin state that “the process of ‘becoming a teacher’ is complex” [6]. Some ‘erroneous’ beliefs such as “liking children is sufficient” (Lasley, 1980 as cited in [12]) and teaching is simply a process of knowledge transmission (Pajares, 1992, as cited in [12]) were deconstructed when the participants did the teaching practicum. Emi with her assertiveness tended to highlight that a good teacher should manage the class well and make the students behave well. Yuni, however, seemed to not put class management as the most important thing that a teacher should master. Instead, freedom of expression was the ultimate value that a good teacher should accommodate in her class. Paul asserted the importance of flexibility, which meant that a good teacher should not only stick to the lesson plan but also adjust the teaching based on the class situation. In addition, Helmi underlined the sensitivity towards the students’ condition which may need different treatment.

Yet, they also came to at least one agreement which resonates what Inceca (2011) categorizes as an ideal teacher. From the reflections, observations, and focus group discussions, the participants agreed that a professional teacher should have deep understanding on the students. What it means by “understanding the students” is multifaceted. It may include the ability to know the students’ level of competence, characteristics, what they like, their family background, and other aspects. Then, the repercussion of being

aware of who teachers teach is adjustment of materials as well as teaching style. For example, Hari enunciated his sense of awareness by taking football as one of the materials that he taught. Although he himself was not really into football, he utilized the topic as confirmation that he was aware of the students' world and he valued what the students liked. With that kind of materials, the students were expected to be more encouraged to learn. Paul realized that teaching entails situational context of both the subject matters and the students.

According to Brott and Kajs (n.d., as cited in [6]), professional identity development will involve "individual maturation processes". One of the processes might occur when the participants underwent the teaching practicum. The process tended to be individual and thus each of them may face it distinctively. From the reflections and focus group discussion, Emi was the one who noticeably showed her struggle and strategies during the practicum. While she made some significant improvement, she admitted that she was not sure if she wanted to be a teacher. On the other hand, based on the observation, Paul seemed to be the least eager one to be a teacher; he surprisingly disclosed that he wanted to be one. Paul had experienced a chain of changes in his beliefs as he encountered real classrooms as similarly revealed by Yuan and Lee in their study [20]. Like two sides of a coin, Yuni and Helmi perceived the teaching practicum differently. Yuni said that the calling was getting weaker, while Helmi stated that the calling was getting stronger after the teaching practicum.

The teaching practicum was a stage where experiences shaped the development of their professional identities. It is in line with what Walshaw (2009) has argued. She states that "self-conscious identifications and self-identity are not simple, given presumed essences that naturally unfold but, rather, are produced in an ongoing process, through a range of influences, practices, experiences and relations that include social, schooling and psychodynamic factors". The fact that each of them showed their particularity when teaching also means that teaching involves a lot of personality elements. Their strengths and weaknesses had added different colours in their classroom. For instance, while Emi's being assertive and strict contributed a lot to the class management, Yuni's cheerfulness and enthusiasm made the class enjoyable for the students.

Moreover, teaching practicum, may lay a foundation for each of them to deconstruct what they previously believed. A teaching profession which was assumed as a simple job turned out to be complex after they plunged into the real teaching. Emi said that she had to be able to know the students' difficulties and why they faced them. Yuni also revealed that doing the practicum had made to be a more tolerant person. When she was a student, she complained a lot why certain teachers taught boringly. However, after the teaching practicum, she became to realize that those teachers might have tried their best and prepared well for the class. Teaching practicum had motivated them to seek new understanding. Thus, being pre-service teachers had shifted their perspectives on the profession.

Although the participants uncovered their beliefs, not all were reflected when they did their teaching. For example, Paul believed that a teacher should have a good sense of humour. Yet, during the observation, he seemed to be very serious. The implication is that beliefs are not the only factor that teachers consider when making decisions. Sometimes a teacher should do a certain thing which may contradict with their beliefs. In this way, it seems that the influences of beliefs towards how those pre-service teachers constructed their professional identities do not reflect a direct relationship. In fact, the links are complex and tangled.

4. CONCLUSION

Teaching is complex and involves a lot of intertwined elements. One of the elements is teacher's identity. Teachers' professional identity development should be seen as a journey. Teaching practicum can certainly give a room for pre-service teachers to craft their identity as a teacher. Beliefs that the students had should also be uncovered as they contribute to their professional identity as a teacher.

Each of the participants processed the experiences they had in their teaching practicum differently. They started their teaching with pre-existing beliefs that were either confirmed or confronted when they did their practicum. The findings of this study also suggest that the interplay between beliefs and professional identity is complex. Not all beliefs were clearly reflected in the participants' teaching performances. Some may seem contradictive to their beliefs. It implies that although the participants had sets of beliefs in their minds, teaching itself does not only represent their beliefs, but also serves as a stage where many factors occur. However, each of the participants showed their efforts in realizing what they believed to be good teachers.

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