# Conceptualization of "Teacher Identity": How Do Teachers at Different Career Phases Define It?

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## Abstract

Teacher identity is a concept that can be defined via negotiation (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004) and extraction of patterns from everyday teacher experiences (Day, Kington, Stobart & Sammons, 2006). Therefore, this study assumes that pre-service (PST), novice, and experienced teachers may define teacher identity from different points of view because their everyday experiences and teaching contexts are also different (Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Izadinia, 2015). Adopting the phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were used to elicit teachers' conceptualizations of teacher identity. The findings revealed that PST, novice, and experienced teachers defined teacher identity by drawing on different factors and positionings, which were mainly driven by their contextual peculiarities.

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**Introduction**

The concept of teacher identity (TI) may be labelled as elusive, intangible, and highly idiosyncratic because it is abstract and cannot be directly revealed or observed; however, it can be still defined in the form of beliefs, assumptions, values, actions, self-concepts, and other's concepts. (Bukor, 2015; Garner & Kaplan, 2018). Despite the complex nature of defining teacher identity, scholars agree that it is both fixed and fluid, unitary and multiple, continuous and discontinuous, and individual and social (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Ye & Zhao, 2018). Based on the conceptualization of identity as a 'relational phenomenon' (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004), this study aims to explore the differences among PSTs, novice, and experienced teachers' definitions of teacher identity.

The study envisages that PSTs, novice, and experienced teachers have different identity construction trajectories determined by contextual peculiarities, which is an assumption supported by research findings (Anspal, Eisenschmidt & Löfström, 2012; Izadinia, 2015; Nichols, Schutz, Rodgers & Bilica, 2017). For example, while PSTs' identity construction is influenced by university teachers and mentors in the practicum (Yuan & Lee, 2016), this may not be true for novice or experienced teachers who do not have any practicum experience. However, novice teachers must manage issues that are predominantly evident in the early years of their teaching career. These early career challenges include balancing personal and professional identity (Pillen, Beijaard & DenBrok, 2013); dealing with tensions and conflicts (Olsen, 2008), difficulties in creating a professional knowledge base, classroom management, and dealing with students (Kanno &Stuart, 2011) and higher rates of dropout from the profession (Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008).

On the other hand, comparative studies of novice and experienced teachers (Nunan, 1992; Johnson, 1992; Richards, Li & Tang, 1998; Tsui, 2003) revealed that experienced teachers are more skilled at making student learning a priority because they adopt a student-centered approach and present the content in a more meaningful way while novice teachers are mainly busy with classroom management and control, which leads to poorer performance in other aspects of teaching.

Scholarly emphasis on the differences in PSTs, novice, and experienced teachers' professional identity development trajectories is extant in the literature. However, there seems to be a dearth of studies on how they conceptualize teacher identity and possible differences in these conceptualizations that can be caused by the peculiarities in their professional identity

development trajectories. The need to explore these differences arises from the fact that understanding these differences may shed light on teachers' professional development paths and offer ways of empowering PST, novice, and experienced teachers. Similarly, recognition of the differences in what they think being a teacher is may facilitate customized solutions to the challenges PST, novice, and experienced teachers have in their careers. As such, this study assumes that there are differences in these three groups' conceptualizations of TI and aims to explore the answer to the following research question:

-In what ways are PSTs, novice, and experienced teachers' conceptualizations of TI different?

## Methodology

The qualitative approach to research is mainly favored to explore TI (Anspal et al., 2012; Bukor, 2015, Watson, 2006; Watson, 2009) as it allows for a vivid description (Creswell,2014) of this multi-faceted and complex concept by offering "flexibility, richness and authenticity" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Among the qualitative research approaches, this study adopted the phenomenological approach because it is best suited for qualitative studies exploring "the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p.57), which is the conceptualization of TI in this study.

Therefore, this study focuses on how teachers define TI based on their past and present experiences or future projections and interpretations of their conceptualizations. Accordingly, the phenomenological approach is concerned with not only the description but also the interpretation of the participants' meaning-making (Creswell, 2007). Thus, data analysis involves "reducing the information to significant statements and quotes" (Creswell, 2007, p.60) based on a combination of textual and structural description as required by the phenomenological approach in this study.

## Participants and Setting

Research sampling involved a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, which meant that participants were invited based on their voluntariness to reflect on their experiences and the researcher also asked already recruited participants if they could inform other colleagues who could be willing to be a participant. 15 participants, which is acceptable for studies that adopt the phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2007), were recruited for the

study via online announcements and personal communications, i.e., face-to-face or via online social and professional networking platforms, e.g. Instagram, and LinkedIn.

The research context was Türkiye, and data was collected between November 2021 and August 2023. Detailed information on demographics and contextual information of the participants are presented in Table 1, which contributes to offering a thick description of the research context. This is needed to ensure descriptive validity, which in turn leads to interpretative validity (Maxwell, 1992).

*Table 1. Participants' demographic and profile information*

| Pseudonym* | Gender | Undergraduate/ Graduate Degree | Career Phase | Current/ Practicum Institution | Current City& Region |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Burak | Male | BA in ELT**, Türkiye | Senior ELT student | Anatolian High School | Ankara, Central Anatolia |
| Banu | Female | BA in ELL***, Türkiye | Sophomore in ELL | Online tutoring | Ankara, Central Anatolia |
| Gizem | Female | BA in ELT, Türkiye | Senior ELT student | Elementary School | Isparta, South Anatolia |
| Harun | Male | BA in Mechanical Engineering, BA in ELT | Senior ELT student | Anatolian High School | Ankara, Central Anatolia |
| Yalım | Male | BA in ELT, Türkiye | Senior ELT student | Elementary& High School | Ankara, Central Anatolia |
| Ali | Male | BA in ELT, Türkiye | 2 years | Elementary boarding school | Diyarbakır, Southeast Anatolia |
| Aylin | Female | BA in ELT, Türkiye | 2 months | Private Elementary School | Ankara, Central Anatolia |
| Aycan | Female | BA & MA in ELT, Türkiye | 4 years | Higher Education | Ankara, Central Anatolia |
| Helin | Female | BA in ELT, Türkiye | 5 years | Higher Education | Ankara, Central Anatolia |
| Güneş | Female | BA in ELT, Türkiye | 4 years | Elementary School | Şanlıurfa, Souteast Anatolia |
| Aysu | Female | BA in ELT, Türkiye | 10 +years | Anatolian High School | Kahramanmaraş, Central Anatolia |
| Feride | Female | BA in American Literature and Culture, Türkiye | 18+ years | Elementary School | Ankara, Central Anatolia |
| Faik | Male | BA & MA in ELT, PhD Candidate in ELT | 13+ years | Ministry of National Education | İstanbul, Northwest Anatolia |
| Öykü | Female | BA in ELT | 17+ years | Anatolian High School | İstanbul, Northwest Anatolia |
| Suat | Male | BA in ELT | 12 +years | Elementary School | Aksaray, Central Anatolia |

*A pseudonym is used for each participant to facilitate anonymity and to preserve confidentiality.
**English Language Teaching
***English Language and Literature

Data presented in Table 1 shows that three male and two female PSTs were mainly senior ELT students having their practicum experience in high schools in Ankara. Only Gizem was studying in Isparta and having her practicum in an elementary school. Banu was the only sophomore studying ELL and tutoring online. However, one male and four female PSTs participated in the study whose years of teaching experience were two months (Aylin), four years (Aycan), five years (Helin), and four years (Güneş) respectively at the time of the interviews. They worked in different cities around Türkiye, i.e., Diyarbakır, Ankara, and Şanlıurfa, and at different levels; i.e., elementary schools and higher education. Among five experienced teachers who participated in the study, three were female and two were male. Their

years of teaching experience were 12 years (Aysu), 18 years (Feride), 13 years (Faik), 17 years (Öykü), and 12 years (Suat) at the time of the interviews. While Aysu and Öykü worked at Anatolian High Schools in Kahramanmaraş and İstanbul respectively, Feride (Ankara) and Suat (Aksaray) worked at elementary schools.

## Research Instruments and Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit teachers' conceptualizations of TI. In truth, the interview included 14 questions focusing on various aspects of teacher identity. However, this study is to discuss merely the differences among PST, novice, and experienced teachers' definitions of TI because it presents the preliminary findings from a larger study as previously stated. The question each participant asked was "How would you define teacher identity in your own words?". The interviews were conducted online via Zoom, and they were video, or audio recorded depending on the participants' choice. Each participant's oral consent was taken and recorded before the interview began. Research instruments and procedures were approved by the Gazi University Social Sciences Ethics Committee upon careful examination. Semi-structured interview questions were validated via expert opinion which involved revision by three experts in language teacher education. Similarly, the researchers conducted piloting interviews before data collection and revised the questions based on participants' feedback.

Data analysis involved a cycle of open and axial coding (Creswell, 2007), which means that data was first read to reveal emergent codes, which involved inductive coding. Next, the emergent codes were compared among different categories, i.e., PSTs, novice, and experienced teachers. Reliability of data analysis was facilitated by member-checking (Creswell, 2014) which involved participants crosschecking the researchers' interpretation of data to ensure that their meanings were accurately represented in the interpretation.

## Results and Discussion

Analysis of data revealed that PSTs consider students a core part of their definitions of TI as it is evident in the definitions provided by all of them. In addition, the methods and techniques they use, facilitating changes in students' attitudes, motivating students into learning, passing down knowledge to them, shaping Ss' personality following the curriculum, and helping students achieve the targeted outcomes were phrases commonly cited by PSTs when defining their teacher identity. PSTs defined teacher identity from a fixed rather than fluid, discontinuous rather than continuous, unitary rather than fragmented (Akkerman &

Meijer, 2011) perspective. PST's definitions were mainly based on educational terminology, e.g., changing attitudes, good communication with students, achieving outcomes, sticking to a curriculum, and motivating students. For example, Yalım offered the following definition when asked how he would define teacher identity:

> A teacher follows the curriculum based on their responsibilities and duties. Within the framework of this curriculum, they facilitate both students' inspiration, and changes in their attitudes and learning.

In a similar vein, Gizem defined teacher identity mainly in terms of teacher roles; i.e., knowledge-giver, guide, motivator, and the applier of teaching methods and techniques. It is possible to argue that she offered this definition based on her scholarly reading on teacher roles rather than her unique experiences as a teacher because she was a PST without extensive teaching experience. Gülce also defined teacher identity based on educational terminology:

> First of all, a teacher should be good at their subject, and classroom management. They should have good communication with students and should be kind but firm. I would define being a teacher like that.

However, Banu, who was the only PST majoring in not ELT but in English Language and Literature, defined teacher identity not in terms of educational terminology but as a "journey":

> "It is not just that you have a degree in English Language Teaching, and you become a teacher- the end. It is also your character that comes from within. Yes, you certainly need training but you should also have the enthusiasm and motivation to teach. Teaching practise is more important than just training. I am majoring in English Language and Literature and I am not taking any courses on language teaching but I teach online English courses and they make my teacher identity. I understand whether my teaching is clear for my students or not from their feedback and the way they look at me and I design materials accordingly. I think being a teacher is a journey, it is something you learn by doing. It is not enough just to be trained on it and think it is done.

Banu justifies her definition by arguing that despite that her training is not on teaching, she could still tutor students online based on her teaching experiences. The reason why she was the only one to define teacher identity as a process rather than a unitary concept might be that despite not having any preconceived ideas about teaching that come from her major, she has managed to teach via hands-on experience. Another reason why Banu's definition of TI diverges from other PSTs who mainly base their definitions on educational terminology might be that she was not receiving any courses in language education. This may have led to creating her unique conceptualization of TI based on her experiences of online tutoring without being confined to educational terminology. The fact that PSTs majoring in ELT mainly base their definitions on education jargon and barely mention the dynamic nature of TI is understandable because they do scholarly reading on ELT as part of their training. However, Banu's definition

was only based on her hands-on experience that comes from teaching courses via an online platform.

In contrast to PSTs, novice teachers predominantly emphasized the fluid, continuous, and fragmented (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011) nature of TI as they state that they cannot define TI "fully or certainly" (Güneş and Aylin). Aycan explained that she had a lot in mind when it came to defining TI and Gaye emphasized that it changed depending on the person and context. Novice teachers used education jargon less compared to PSTs. Instead, they emphasized the situational, dynamic, and multi-faceted nature of teacher identity which made it hard to define for them. For example, Helin defined teacher identity as follows:

> I don't know how to define it but people have an identity in their personal lives and they also have an identity in their professional lives. It is a process of a bit more formal professional development in which we also display our personality. It is actually creating an identity that is close to what it should be like in professional life by drawing on our character.

Unlike PSTs, novice teachers were less certain about defining teacher identity and they rarely mentioned educational jargon, e.g., teaching goals, following the curriculum, or facilitating classroom management. As seen in Helin's definition, she focused on the interplay between personal and professional identity with an emphasis on the continuous nature of teacher identity while PSTs conceptualized teacher identity as a unitary and fixed entity that has clear-cut boundaries. However, for novice teachers, these boundaries were fuzzy as can be seen in Güneş's definition:

> Being a teacher is unique, and so is teacher identity. We are working on educating people. I can't offer a comprehensive definition. It is something that already keeps changing in its own respect. I can't define it fully.

While PSTs were more certain about what teacher identity is, novice teachers mainly agreed that teacher identity was not a fixed or unitary concept that could be clearly defined as Aylin also emphasized:

> I don't have a clear idea about what being a teacher is yet, but my goal as a teacher is to raise individuals who will serve future generations well.

However, experienced teachers mainly defined teacher identity in terms of values, virtues, and emotions, e.g., altruism, patience, effort, sense of responsibility, being a good and exemplary person, happiness, and fun. Similarly, they also considered being a guide, facilitator, and corrector a part of teacher identity. Experienced teachers also refer to socioeconomic factors, e.g., teachers' income, and the status of being a teacher in Türkiye as part of their teacher identities. For example, Öykü defined TI as follows:

> Teaching is one of the most important jobs in society because they are the ones who educate members of other professions. Therefore, it is the profession that should have the highest status but it is not the case in Türkiye conditions. You can't do this job if you don't love it. Having a teacher identity requires great altruism and responsibility. I can briefly summarize like this.

Similarly, Suat associated TI with values, i.e., effort and patience, and emphasized "loving the job" as the core part of TI. He stated that there would be few teachers who would be satisfied with the financial status of teaching and the greatest happiness comes from seeing students learn:

> Teaching is primarily a matter of patience and then we have effort. As I see the teachers around me, I see they do many things without reasoning. It should be more innovative, and bring innovation. I mean, kids should benefit from teaching. When it's typical or usual, I can't do it like that. In my teaching, I design something new for the next day nearly every day. I mean it is not just about following the coursebook, we need to put in effort and patience, we are working with students but in the end, you are happy. I mean when you see students are learning, making progress. I don't even mention the socioeconomic status of teachers, I don't think that there is anyone happy with that. But the greatest happiness is seeing students learn and when you do this with joy. You know when we were at university, we had groups of three and four and we did everything having fun. You can't keep doing this job unless you are having fun, I mean I define it like that.

Similar to Öykü and Suat, Feride also defined TI in terms of values such as altruism and caring:

> A teacher is an altruistic person who is also an exemplary person for their students, someone who cares for their development. A teacher is a person who shares everything they have within, I mean, their knowledge, manners, and faith.

While PSTs define teacher identity based on micro-level factors related to the classroom and teaching, i.e., methods and techniques, curriculum, objectives, and outcomes, novice teachers mainly think TI is multi-faceted and hard to define. However, experienced teachers' conceptualization of TI centers around values, virtues, and emotions in addition to the macro-level factors, e.g., the socioeconomic status of the profession in Türkiye. In this respect, it can be argued that PSTs have a more technical approach to defining TI while it is a fuzzy concept for novice teachers. However, experienced teachers have a more critical approach to defining TI by adopting a value-based and contextual approach. In Figure 1 below, the evolution of TI conceptualization in PSTs, novice, and experienced teachers is displayed.
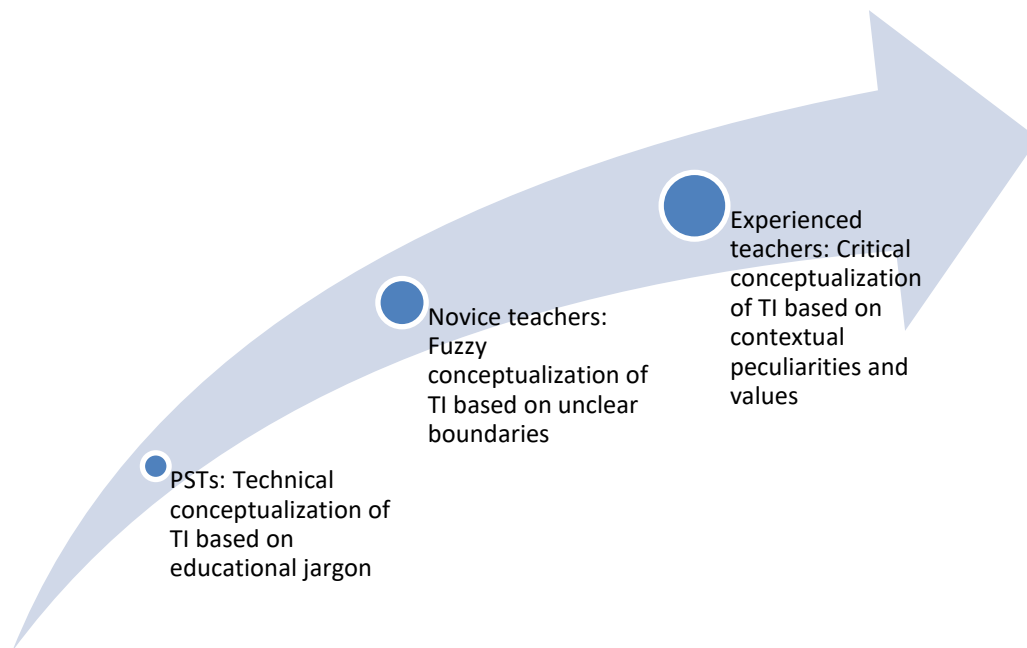
Novice teachers: Fuzzy conceptualization of TI based on unclear boundaries

Experienced teachers: Critical conceptualization of TI based on contextual peculiarities and values

PSTs: Technical conceptualization of TI based on educational jargon

*Figure 1. Evolution of TI conceptualizations in PSTs, novice, and experienced teachers*

The underlying reason for this evolution from technical to fuzzy and then critical conceptualizations of TI might be that experienced teachers begin to associate the core of being a teacher with more than just achieving curricular goals, classroom management, or having pedagogical content knowledge after overcoming the tensions, conflicts, and challenges they face in the early years of their career; e.g., higher rates of attrition (Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008). These challenges may cause identity tensions making novice teaching career a "transitional" period (Olsen,2008). The fact that it is a transitional period for novice teachers explains why novice teachers have a fuzzy conceptualization of TI.

On the other hand, experienced teachers' accounts of defining TI reveal that TI means transforming students' lives in every aspect rather than only in academic aspects by being a role model for them. Studies (Richard, 1998, Borg, 2006) also reveal differences in cognitions, behaviors, and practices of experienced and less experienced teachers, e.g. experienced being more skilled in viewing the material from learners' perspective, being involved in more improvisational teaching without any pre-conceived ideas, and better knowledge of combining language learning with broader curricular goals. These differences align with experienced teachers' approach to conceptualizing TI as they emphasize macro-level factors that refer to the social, psychological, and socioeconomic transformation of the students rather than micro-level factors that involve only the classroom teaching and the school they teach in. In addition, experienced teachers also consider the enjoyment of this process a core part of TI so that this

enjoyment ensures a strong bond with the profession which helps them manage the displeasing aspects, e.g. lower socioeconomic status of the job.

## Conclusion and Suggestions

This qualitative study revealed that PSTs are more certain about their definitions of teacher identity while novice teachers did not offer such clear-cut definitions as some also stated they could not fully define it. This abrupt shift from certainty to fuzziness in defining teacher identity between PSTs and novice teachers may be due to that novice teachers experience a 'praxis shock' (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002) due to the unrealistic concepts of teaching (Lundeen, 2004) they enter the profession with. It may be argued that PSTs' fixed conceptions of who a teacher is or what being a teacher requires are shattered by the realities they experience in their peculiar contexts. This praxis shock may lead novice teachers to questioning and reconstructing conceptions, beliefs of ideas from their practicum experience, and teacher training about what being a teacher means, which results in a more skeptical approach to defining teacher identity. However, experienced teachers' definitions of teacher identity mainly revolve around values and contextual idiosyncrasies. This may indicate that novice teachers settle down the fuzziness about what being a teacher is as they experiment with a wider range of teaching contexts for a longer period.

This study adopts a cross-sectional approach to explore the problem; however, longitudinal studies with the same but fewer participants over a longer period could offer a clearer pathway on how PSTs, novice, and experienced teachers' conceptualizations of teacher identity evolve over time. Further studies could focus on conducting studies with the same teacher(s) over a long period of time starting from their PST years to being an experienced teacher so as to reveal the trajectory of the changes in their teacher identity definitions.

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