

## RECONSTRUCTING TEACHER IDENTITY: EXPERIENCES OF A TURKISH TEACHER AIDE IN AN AMERICAN PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this study is to examine the thoughts, feelings, and dilemmas and to describe how a Turkish teacher aide created or reshaped her professional identity in the light of her experience in an American preschool educational setting. A descriptive case study method was employed in the study to gain in-depth understanding of the issue. Using purposive sampling a Turkish teacher aide was selected to participate in the study. The data was collected through a semi-structured interview. The results revealed that her teaching practice has been heavily influenced by a collectivistic society's points of view but her current identity has been shaped with the new perspectives she gained in the U.S.*

**Keywords:** Teacher Identity, Early Childhood Education, Turkish teachers, Teacher Aides

## ÖĞRETMEN KİMLİĞİNİN YENİDEN YAPILANMASI: BİR TÜRK YARDIMCI ÖĞRETMENİN BİR AMERİKAN OKUL ÖNCESİ SINIFINDA EDİNDİĞİ TECRÜBELER

### Özet

*Bu çalışmanın amacı bir Türk yardımcı öğretmenin bir Amerikan sınıfında edindiği tecrübelerin onda yarattığı duyguları düşünceleri, ve ikilemleri inceleyerek mesleki kimliğinde yaşadığı değişiklikleri ortaya koymaktır. Olay hakkında derinlemesine bilgi edinilmesini sağlamak için betimsel vaka incelemesi metodu kullanılmıştır. Çalışma için, amaca dayalı örneklem yöntemi kullanılarak bir Türk öğretmen yardımcısı seçilmiştir. Veriler yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme tekniği ile toplanmıştır. Ortaya çıkan sonuçlar yardımcı öğretmenin öğretmenlik uygulamalarının kolektif toplum görüşünden derinlemesine etkilendiğini fakat bu uygulamaları ve kimliğini Amerika'da elde ettiği kazanım ve deneyimlerle değiştirdiğini göstermiştir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Öğretmen Kimliği, Erken Çocukluk Eğitimi, Türk Öğretmenler, Öğretmen Yardımcıları

## 1. Introduction

Today's "Globalised World" lead people to more flexibility and mobility in their professional lives. Therefore, compared to the past, business world and job markets have more chance to hire professionals from different cultures and backgrounds. Teachers are among these migrating professional groups and plenty of research about these migrating teachers are found in the literature but there is little knowledge about how a teacher from a collectivist culture and different language background create or change his/her professional identity in an individualistic society experience. The purpose of this study was to examine the thoughts, feelings, and dilemmas and to describe how a Turkish teacher aide created or reshaped her professional identity in the light of her experience in an American educational setting.

### The Concept of Teacher Identity

Teachers' professional identity is an important element for understanding their professional lives and decision-making process (Hong, 2010). Researchers in the area of professional identity development are still trying to understand that how teachers develop their actions and judgements and under what circumstances (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000). In early studies, professional identity development was perceived as a static concept and thought that it is free from the context (Hong, 2010). In later years, however, researchers started to think that identity development is a dynamic and constantly changing process that develops over time through communicating and interacting with others (Cooper & Olson, 1996; Watson, 2006).

In Merriam-Webster (2010) identity is described as "the distinguishing character or personality of an individual" and according to Danielewicz (2001), "the ways we relate to and distinguish individuals in their social relations with other individuals or groups" (p. 10). From these descriptions we may conclude that identity construction is based on someone's personality and her/his social relations. In other words, if a individual interacts with people in a particular setting in a daily basis, she or he has a possibility that his or her interpretation is based on the framework of the shared wisdom in that setting. Yet, identities are not stable and continually under construction, that is, it is an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences. (Danielewicz, 2001, p.10). On that basis Beijaard et. al (2000) concluded that professional identity is established and maintained through social actions and interactions in a particular context. Therefore, teachers living in a particular culture or setting collect the wisdom of the particular setting and will shape their identities accordingly. Similarly, teacher identity is the result of the individual's personality, previous experience with others, and culture s/he lived in. Knowles (1992, cited in Franzak, 2002) states that four sources influence pre-service teachers' identity construction (1) "role models, especially positive ones; (2) previous teaching experiences; (3) significantly positive or negative education classes; and (4) remembered childhood experiences about learning and family activities".

In the literature, teacher identity issue has been studied mostly as pre-service teacher's identity construction (Danielewicz, 2001; Franzak, 2002; Mello, 2001; Timostuk & Ugaste, 2010; Travers, 2000), new teacher's identity construction (Hong, 2010; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011; Volkmann & Anderson, 1998), experienced teacher's perceptions about their identities (Beijaard, et al., 2000). Furthermore, there is a considerable amount of literature on language teachers' identity development in different cultures and settings. For example Duff & Uchida (1997) in their ethnographic study investigated the experiences of American and Japanese ESL teachers teaching in Japan. They concluded that teachers' perceptions of their identities were deeply rooted in their personal histories and based on their past educational, professional and cross cultural experiences. Mawhinney's study (1997) is another example. She analyzed foreign trained teachers' challenges to constructing a professional identity in Ontario, Canada. She focused on, however, these teacher's language problems rather than their reconstruction of new teaching identities in a different culture.

Due to increasing number of teachers who work in different cultures from where they were born, in recent studies, teachers' cross-cultural identity development processes are started to examined in increasing numbers (Gao & Trent, 2009; Li & Bray, 2009; Trent & DeCoursey, 2011). However, in the literature, there is a need to address the issue of identity reconstruction of early childhood teachers coming from different cultural backgrounds.

In this study, I will concentrate on a teacher aide coming from a collectivistic society who reconstructs of her professional identity in an individualistic society.

### **Collectivism vs. Individualism**

Collectivism and Individualism are two different world views or values systems that are intertwined in the U.S. society. In Los Angeles Unified School District, some 80 different languages are spoken (Trumbull, 2000). If not that many, the same pattern is common other parts of the U.S. That example tells us that the diversity among teachers as well as students is getting richer and richer and these teachers have different value systems like collectivism. In order to make plausible actions for further changes in the American education system, these teachers' actions or practices based on their beliefs and values systems should be investigated carefully.

According to Trumbull (2000) "while individualistic cultures stress self-reliance and personal achievement, collectivistic cultures focus more on developing and sustaining a stable mutually dependent group". Table 1.1 highlights the distinctive features of these two values systems affecting classroom communication and learning.

These two values also tend to have different learning patterns in classrooms. Collectivist cultures "tend to teach to the whole group and allow students to learn from each other" (McAlpine, & Taylor, 1993, cited in Trumbull, 2000). Individualistic cultures, whereas, tend to emphasize individual learning. In cases where teachers are

from the collectivist background, conflicts may arise in the classroom as a result of different expectations and value systems. For example, teachers can praise students in groups or as a whole class rather than individually or sharing classroom materials can be problem among students. In this study, investigating a teacher aide's dilemmas, problems, and feelings can help us to better understand the dynamics behind a teacher's decision making on classroom practice.

**Table 1.1 Distinctive Features of Two Value Systems**

Individualism (Representative of prevailing U.S. culture)	Collectivism (Representative of many immigrant cultures)
Fostering independence and individual achievement	Fostering interdependence and group success
Promoting self-expression, individual thinking, personal choice	Promoting adherence to norms, respect for authority/elders, group consensus
Associated with egalitarian relationships and flexibility in roles(e.g. upward mobility)	Associated with stable, hierarchical roles (dependent on gender, family background, age)
Understanding the physical world as knowable apart from its meaning for human life	Understanding the physical world in the context of its meaning for human life
Associated with private property, individual ownership	Associated with shared property, group ownership

(Trumbull, 2000)

### Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is the essence of a research. According to Schultz (1988, cited in Merriam, 2001) "the choice of a theoretical model/conceptual framework... will guide the research process in terms of the identification of relevant concepts/constructs, definition of key variables, specific questions to be investigated, selection of a research design, choice of a sample and sampling procedures, data collection strategies... data analysis techniques, and interpretation of findings" (p. 47). For this study, I will use Travers' (2000) theoretical framework that she developed for the study on pre-service teachers' identity construction and reconstruction. She examined pre-service teachers' identity development in terms of "affects of prior knowledge and experience", "teacher knowledge and social context", and "the ongoing process of constructing teacher identity". These three domains are applicable to my study where I will present the participant's previous knowledge and experience which is different from her current experience, lay out origin of her knowledge which is gained in a collectivist society and practiced in a individualistic classroom, and explain her reconstruction process of her identity which has been influenced by her new experiences. In the light of Travers' (2000) framework, my research question is:

How do the cultural and educational background and prior knowledge influence

the practices of a non-American teacher aide in an American early childhood setting?

## **2. Research Method**

To explore the impact of a teaching experience in an American educational setting on teaching identity of a Turkish teacher aide, I conducted a descriptive case study. According to Merriam (2001), “a case study design is employed to gain in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (p.19). Developing a descriptive case study, I aimed to present complexities of the situation, show the influence of the personality and cultural origin of the participant, and analyze the situation portraying the background of the circumstances, what happened and how (Merriam, 2001, p.30).

### **Participants**

Merriam (2001) states that “to solve qualitative problems, such as discovering what occurs, the implications of what occurs, and the relationships linking occurrences, the most appropriate sampling strategy is non-probabilistic-the most common form of which is called purposeful” (p. 61). Using purposive sampling I selected a Turkish teacher aide, working in a preschool, possessed the necessary characteristics important to the scope of this research. The participant, Pinar (all names are pseudonyms), is a 25 year old (at the time of the study) Turkish teacher aide pursuing a Ph.D. degree in the USA. She worked as a teacher in a kindergarten in Turkey, and is working as a teacher aide in a preschool in the USA.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In order to explore in depth view of the participant, semi-structured interview method was used. Merriam (2001, p. 74) suggests that a semi-structured interview is more flexible to let the researcher respond to the spontaneous situation, to the participants’ emerging worldview, and to new or unpredictable ideas on the topic.

The interview, which was held in an informal setting, was conducted with the participant lasted 40-45 minutes and was audio-taped then transcribed verbatim. The interview focused on Pinar’s life history as related to becoming a teacher, details of her past and present teaching experience, and her future expectations and goals about teaching job.

In analyzing the data, the transcriptions of the data collected through interview was extensively and repetitively read. I prepared a summary of the most important aspects to each interview question. Then, I generated basic themes and categories by constantly looking for similarities and parallels in the data. These categories helped me understand the participant’s identity construction and reconstruction process. In addition to this, I looked for logical groupings and links among the categories. The categories and themes emerging from the participant’s interview data were conceptuali-

zed as a whole. In the following part, I am going to present my findings.

### **3. Findings and Discussion**

My participant, Pinar, a teacher aide in a preschool, is pursuing a Ph.D. at a large Mid-Western University. She is a Turkish native and graduated from child development and education department in a large urban university in Turkey. After a short time after graduation, she started working as a leading teacher in a private kindergarten at the same year. She worked there several months and started to work as an assistant instructor in a university. Then, she earned a scholarship from the Ministry of Education of Turkey to pursue a Ph.D. degree in the USA. She has been staying in the USA for two years at the time of the study.

#### **Previous Background and Experience**

Although Pinar did not think about going to the child development and education department, because of the centralized university entrance exam, she ended up being placed in that department. She was not passionate about being a kindergarten teacher in her first two years but after getting some courses regarding pedagogy and teaching, she changed her mind and considered being a teacher educator because of its financial and high level job status. She basically took planning, assessment, administration and school management courses in her last two years in college. After graduation she worked in a private kindergarten as a leading teacher. Although she loved teaching with kids, because of her ideals she left the school for an assistant instructor position in a state university. She taught freshman classes which some of them are:

#### **Initial Teacher Identity**

Her teaching practice has been heavily influenced by a collectivistic society's points of view. For example, teachers have absolute power in classrooms. Conversely, one of the most distinguishing characters of her style was that she did not worry about being an authoritarian teacher to maintain the discipline.

...They (students) did not accept me as the authority... I did not worry about being the authority in the class but the previous teacher was such an authoritarian figure that I dealt with a lot of conflicts in my first 15 days of teaching. They did not listen to me.

Another strong belief she had was the need to prepare children for academic achievement in later school life. Because of the highly competitive educational system in Turkey, even in a preschool she feels the responsibility of doing some academic teaching that allows children to be more successful in the first grade.

The other strong belief that she carried on is the concept of fairness and equality in children's relationships among each other. She says that any conflict between children should be solved in a fair manner by the teacher, unless children can do it. She be-

believes that children should be ensured that each and every child is equal and treated accordingly.

### **U.S Experience**

During the second semester in her program, she applied for a position as a teacher aide at a preschool center. She initially worked as a nap teacher from 12 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. everyday but she also sometimes worked in other shifts in the morning or in the afternoon. She mainly worked with 5-6 year old school children. According to Pinar, one of the most challenging aspects of the U.S. experience was language barrier and different classroom culture. She had stayed in the U.S. for only three months when she started working at the preschool. Her language skills, especially her speaking, sometimes created serious problems for her. Miscommunication was very common. Since she was dealing with kids she had to make herself very clear to them. In case of misunderstandings, both Pinar and the children did not know how to respond. She indicates that communication with children is a great deal different than communication with adults. Some times she also felt that she was not taken seriously by the children because of her language skills. Another problem comes from the fact that in American culture there is a great emphasis on verbal communication and solving problems by talking rather than implying or warning. When she had to deal with children's problems among each other she felt that she was not able to fully articulate her ideas. Over time, she partly got over with these problems because she observed the other teachers' behavior and language.

### **Comparison of the U.S. and Turkish Experiences**

She reports that in Turkey, the children perceived the teacher as somebody to be respected just because s/he is a teacher, that is, the title comes before the person. However in here, the teacher's role is more like a facilitator.

Respect for authority and the importance of hierarchical roles also influence the relationship among lead teacher, assistant teacher, and teacher aides. She thinks that because of the powerful hierarchical roles fewer conflicts arise in Turkish setting because the assistant teachers accept the authority of the lead teacher and they do not tend to question the lead teacher or try to share her authority by intervening with her classroom practices. In her U.S. experience, Pinar thinks that there is no clear cut border between the duties and responsibilities of the lead teacher and the assistant teachers which causes an invisible competition between the lead teacher and the assistant teacher:

I feel as if the lead teachers have to prove themselves whereas assistant teachers constantly interfere with their operation zone. Since they have to at least appear to have a friendly relationship, the lead teacher is not able to use her power over the assistant teachers.

I think the quotation above is a reflection of a collectivist and hierarchical point of view which comes from her previous identity. Pinar reports that the different styles of the lead and assistant teachers cause confusion on children's behaviour. Since each teacher tries to establish their own style, children have to adapt to these different styles. However, in her previous experience, she mentions the existence of a standard practice that was created by the lead teachers and followed by the others.

Pinar perceives a huge difference in conflict resolution or the morals valued in a collectivist society compared to an individualistic society. In Turkey, Pinar states that group ownership or shared property is highly emphasized. The needs and wants of the group are always prior to individual needs and wants of the children. On the other hand, in the U.S. classrooms, personal space, privacy, and private property are highly emphasized. In conflict resolution, she thinks that the teachers take the full responsibility for solving the problems among the children in a fair manner and the resolution is never left to the children themselves. Therefore, kids turn to the teacher and expect her to solve the problems for them. However she perceives the situation much different in the U.S. setting:

...here children solve their problems themselves. In Turkey, they expect the teacher solve it, even sometimes the teacher volunteers to solve the problem "What is going on here, why are you arguing, who did this, who did that". Here, the teacher never interferes; she only watches it from a distance, to see how they proceed, unless physical or emotional harm is involved, she does not interfere, although the solution might not always be fair. "

She observed that, children, here, use conflict resolution strategies themselves and try to settle the problems without involving their teachers.

### **Current Teacher Identity**

Pinar's current professional identity has been shaped with the new perspectives she gained in the U.S. With regard to her concept of "respect" she points out that she perceives the notion of respect in a more flexible manner. For example, she does not consider "disrespectful" some of the behaviors of children that she would consider so before. In terms of collaboration in early childhood education, she believes in the benefit of working with teachers from different backgrounds such as, psychology, special education, or language. Earlier, she did not really value collaboration with people from different disciplines; she even thought that this was limiting the employment opportunities. Another very striking change in her identity is related to her professionalism. She believes that she needs to set her limits within the job description and do her best focusing on her responsibilities as a teacher aide instead of trying to help out with everything going on in the class. She has slightly different views on the emphasis on academic development of children in preschool. She thinks that learning and teaching can be done with more fun and that teaching and fun can go together.

She, however, keeps her ideas on equality and fairness in the classroom. She thinks that overlabeling children diminishes their opportunities to learn and to develop a sense of self-confidence.

#### **4. Conclusion**

There is an inevitable trend called “multiculturalism in education” growing day by day. Although it may seem to be challenging to address the diversity in classrooms and that it might be problematic for American educational system, the values brought by people from different cultures can be very valuable. By incorporating different perspectives and values of different cultures, everybody can benefit more. The aim of the study was to investigate a teacher’s identity reconstruction process who came from a collectivist society to an individualistic society. In the study, the researcher tried to describe what identity elements were significant on Pinar’s identity reconstruction. The importance of the participant’s past and current experiences in her surrounding area emerged very clearly from the study. This finding clearly supports the claims of Beijaard, et. al. (2000) who proposed professional identity develop and carried out social interactions in a particular context. Here, Pinar have two distinctive contexts where her specific experiences to the surrounding context guided her professional identity development.

This is a very small scale study therefore; in terms of many aspects (participants, settings, and different cultures) it does not give us full view of the issue. However, it brings up some important points and questions to be investigated thoroughly. The research has several limitations; one of them is participant’s limited experience in both countries. Also, she had different positions like she was a lead teacher in Turkey and she is a teacher aide in the U.S. This study was specific to Turkish culture and we might get different results people from other cultural backgrounds.

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