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TEACHER IDENTITY FORMATION IN INDIA: A SOCIO-CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Teacher identity formation constitutes a fluid and socially situated process, influenced by cultural norms, policy discourses, and occupational expectations. In the context of India, this process is experiencing major transformation under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST). These frameworks endeavour to align local practices according to global standards, particularly those established by organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO. This study adopts a socio-constructivist perspective, primarily utilizing Vygotsky's theories of mediated learning and the zone of proximal development, to investigate how both pre-service and in-service teachers construct their professional identities in the midst of the tensions that arise from traditional Indian perceptions of the teacher—which are firmly rooted in guru-shishya hierarchies—and the emergent global competencies that emphasize learner-centred, inclusive, and technology-integrated pedagogical approaches. The analysis reveals that teacher identity is constructed through social interactions, policy mediations, and cultural settings, therefore offering consequences for teacher education reform. Such reforms should intend to cultivate agency, reflexivity, and hybrid identities that are responsive to both local realities and global imperatives. Through integrating socio-constructivist epistemology with policy analysis, theoretical inquiry contributes to the comprehension of identity as a site of negotiation within postcolonial and rapidly globalising educational landscapes.

Keywords: teacher identity, socio-constructivism, Vygotsky, India, NEP 2020, NPST, global professional standards, guru-shishya tradition, professional development

Introduction

The development of teacher identity has emerged as a significant focus within pedagogical research, indicating the intricate interplay among individual agency, social interactions, and institutional structures. Teachers do not simply transition into professionals; rather, they actively construct their sense of self through continuous negotiation with cultural expectations, policy directives, and classroom realities. In the Indian context, this process is especially evident in light of the extensive reforms introduced by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which aims to reorient teachers as empowered facilitators of holistic and inclusive learning, as opposed to merely acting as transmitters of knowledge.

Historically, the identity of Indian teachers has been profoundly influenced by cultural traditions that prioritise authority, ethical direction, and hierarchical respect. The guru-shishya relationship, based in ancient Vedic and Upanishadic traditions, positions the teacher as a venerated figure responsible for the comprehensive development of students—spiritual, intellectual, and ethical. However, contemporary global discourses, formed by organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO, advocate the development of competencies focused on critical thinking, digital literacy, inclusivity, and lifelong learning. These international standards, disseminated through publications such as UNESCO's "No Teacher, No Class" (2021) and the OECD's TALIS surveys, place pressure on national educational systems to conform to global criteria for quality and equity.

This paper adopts a socio-constructivist perspective to reconceptualise the formation of teacher identity in India. Drawing upon Lev Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on social mediation and the zone of proximal development (ZPD), this conceptualisation of identity is perceived as co-constructed through interactions with more knowledgeable individuals, such as mentors, peers, and regulatory systems, within specific cultural-historical contexts. The analysis studies the tensions that exist between traditional and global conceptions of identity, showing how policies such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) mediate identity development in both pre-service



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and in-service contexts. Ultimately, the paper endorses a hybrid model of teacher identity that integrates local cultural strengths with global competencies, thereby fostering agency and adaptability amid diverse classrooms in India.

Conceptualising Teacher Identity

Teacher identity is a complex construct that encompasses beliefs, values, emotions, and practices determining how educators view and fulfil their roles. Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) conceptualise teacher identity as a dynamic, context-dependent entity that encompasses sub-identities related to subject expertise, pedagogical competence, and interpersonal relationships within the learning setting. This identity is not fixed; rather, it evolves through narrative processes in which educators reflect on and share their experiences through social interaction.

From a socio-constructivist perspective, identity is determined by social customs rather instead of inherent characteristics. Educators forge their sense of self within communities of practice, engaging in a continuous negotiation of meanings with students, colleagues, and decision-makers (Wenger, 1998). This relational perspective critiques individualistic models of identity formation, drawing attention to the role of cultural tools—such as language, policies, and traditions—in mediating the development of identity. In postcolonial contexts, such as India, the construction of teacher identity is further complicated by the historical impacts of colonial education, which imposed Western paradigms on indigenous systems, thereby fostering hybrid subjectivities.

Socio-Constructivist Perspectives on Teacher Development

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the development of teacher identity. He posited that higher psychological functions, such as self-regulation and professional judgment, emerge from social interactions before being internalised (Vygotsky, 1978). The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) illustrates how learners, including teachers, progress with the support of more experienced individuals, while cultural tools promote mediated action.

When applied to teacher education, this perspective views both pre-service and in-service development as fundamentally social processes. Mechanisms such as mentorship, collaborative inquiry, and reflective dialogue function as scaffolding that enables novices to construct their professional identities. In the Indian context, socio-constructivist approaches have attained prominence in response to policy transitions favouring learner-centred pedagogies, experiential learning, and coordinated practices (National Council for Teacher Education, 2021). Consequently, teacher education programs are steadily integrating practicum experiences, peer mentoring, and community participation, thereby aligning with Vygotsky's focus on situated learning. However, implementation varies. In many institutions, traditional transmission models persist, curtailing opportunities for genuine co-construction. Socio-constructivist ideals therefore function as aspirational tools for reform, encouraging teachers to see themselves as facilitators rather than authorities.

Traditional Teacher Roles in the Indian Context

Indian conceptions of the teacher are firmly embedded in cultural reverence. The role of the guru goes beyond that of a mere instructor to that of a moral exemplar, guiding disciples toward self-realisation. This stratified framework fosters profound respect for educators, although it may simultaneously constrain critical inquiry and student agency.

Contemporary classrooms embody this legacy while integrating postcolonial influences. Educators frequently contend with large class sizes, examination-focused curricula, and limited resources, which is able to reinforce authoritative roles. However, diverse contexts—whether rural, urban, or multilingual—require a degree concerning adaptability. Teachers from lower-caste backgrounds and female educators, in particular, navigate marginalised identities within patriarchal and caste-based frameworks.



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Policy documents such as the National Education Policy 2020 acknowledge these traditional aspects while promoting transformation. This policy positions teachers as mentors who embody Indian values while also incorporating global best practices, with the objective of restoring dignity using enhanced autonomy and chances for professional development.

Global Professional Standards and Their Influence

Global frameworks increasingly influence national teacher policies. The OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) and UNESCO's teacher reports emphasize essential competencies, including inclusive pedagogy, digital competence, and global citizenship. The EI/UNESCO Global Framework of Professional Teaching Standards (2019) delineates shared principles that contribute to quality teaching.

In India, these international influences are evident in the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST), as outlined by the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) in 2023. The NPST establishes progressive standards across four levels of expertise, ranging from beginner to expert, and encompasses domains such as learner-centred practices, assessment, and professional engagement. This system aligns with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which advocates for continuous professional development comprising 50 hours annually, as well as merit-based progression.

These standards introduce universal narratives surrounding "professionalism," encompassing accountability, evidence-based practice, and lifelong learning, into local discussions. This system has the capacity to transform teacher identities, promoting more reflexive and adaptive professional selves.

Tensions and Opportunities for Reconceptualisation

The interaction between traditional and global instructional paradigms generates productive tensions. Traditional authority often conflicts with global prioritisation of student agency and collaboration, while hierarchical respect is juxtaposed with peer mentoring. Nevertheless, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 presents means for synthesis: its attention to multidisciplinary integration, inclusive education, and experiential learning encourages teachers to develop hybrid identities that are informed by cultural heritage while addressing global imperatives.

Socio-constructivist theory gives knowledge of how these tensions may be effectively mediated. Through the establishment of collaborative professional learning communities, educators can negotiate their interpretations and applications of educational policy tools, such as the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) rubrics and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) modules, which serve as cultural mediators. Additionally, pre-service programs that incorporate extended practicums and mentoring opportunities create zones of proximal development (ZPDs) that facilitate experimentation with identity.

Nonetheless, challenges persist, including inequitable access to CPD, disparities between urban and rural contexts, and resistance to change. A genuine reconceptualisation of educational practices necessitates the dealing with existing power dynamics while ensuring that the voices of marginalised groups are vital to the formulation of educational standards.

Consequences for Teacher Education

Reforming teacher education to facilitate socio-constructivist identity formation necessitates the following actions:

- Incorporating reflective practices and collaborative inquiry into the curriculum.
- Enhancing mentorship and fostering professional communities.
- Aligning National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) with culturally responsive pedagogical approaches.
- Encouraging policy discussions that recognise indigenous knowledge alongside global competencies.



These strategies can authorise educators to navigate hybrid identities effectively, thereby contributing to a more equitable educational landscape.

Conclusion

The identity of teachers in India currently stands at a key juncture, influenced by socio-constructivist processes as well as global and local dynamics. Integrating Vygotsky's insights, policymakers and educators can cultivate teacher identities that are dynamic, relational, and culturally informed while remaining responsive to international standards. This reconceptualisation provides considerable opportunity to advance a teaching profession that is both respected and autonomous, ultimately contributing to transformative educational practices.

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