

“Closer to the Light, Smaller the Shadow Became” ---a Critical Autoethnography of a Novice EFL Teacher’s Professional Identity Construction at Private Universities in China

Xiangchen Zhang¹, Esther Fitzpatrick²

¹School of Curriculum and Pedagogy, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand;

²School of Learning, Development and Professional Practice, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

***Corresponding Author:** Xiangchen Zhang, School of Curriculum and Pedagogy, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

Abstract: The professional identity construction of novice English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers is a dynamic and complex psychological process which plays a crucial role in their professional development. Novice EFL teachers are prone to encounter professional identity crisis (PIC) that impedes their professional identity construction. By applying critical autoethnography, the author reflected on her teaching experience as a novice EFL teacher at two private universities in China to probe into what led to her PIC, how she overcame it while constructing her professional identity. Results showed that the PIC was caused by discrepancies between different self-states. A novice EFL teacher could navigate PIC by situated learning from model teachers and making professional achievements. An effective construction of professional identity was the result of the teacher’s initiative and institutional support. This study contributes to the knowledge of the trajectory of novice EFL teachers’ professional identity construction. It also suggests that a productive community of practice can facilitate that process.

Keywords: critical autoethnography; novice EFL teacher; professional identity construction; professional identity crisis; private university.

Abbreviations: EFL --- English as a foreign language; PIC --- professional identity crisis

1. INTRODUCTION

Shadow and Light

(Written by the author in 2022)

In that large lecture theatre,
I taught lessons, while haunted by a shadow,
Shapeless, but too powerful to cast off,
That made me stressful.

Students, as audience,
All sitting high,
Reticent and poker-faced, looking down at me,
I knew, my destiny was in their hands.

I felt like an imposter,
Playing monologues, which no one cared,
In the dark, I must take the initiative,
Searching for something bright.

There was light in distance,
Closer I walked towards it, stronger the light shined,
Then, the shadow became smaller,
And my confidence was back.

On the path to my future profession,
Trials and tribulations still exist,
But I learnt to live with the ‘shadow’,
Regarding it as a motivator for my career.

From 2016 to 2019, I worked as an EFL teacher at two private universities---the Seaside University (for one year) and the Riverside University (for two years) (pseudonyms). That indelible three-year teaching experience was at the first stage of my academic career (Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981). I wrote the prior ethnographic poem to summarise critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954) in that period. There are two metaphors that are pivotal in this poem. The first ‘shadow’ implicates PIC and accompanying negative emotions. The second ‘light’ refers to factors conducive to my professional identity construction.

In three years, my professional identity underwent a series of transformations. At Seaside University, I was uncertain about my professional identity and suffered from imposter phenomenon (IP) (Clance & Imes, 1978) because of problems in teaching. Later, at Riverside University, my previous IP was alleviated since I took the initiative to improve my teaching. Multiple aspects of my professional identity were profoundly affected through interactions with significant others including my colleagues, leaders, and students (Beijaard *et al.*, 2004). With institutional support and constructive guidance from my colleagues, gradually I received students’ positive feedbacks, experienced the sense of achievement, and increased my job satisfaction. After three years, I grew up to be a confident teacher possessing clear career goals. Although PIC may reoccur in my future career life, I will consider it as an impetus for my professional development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Traits and Social Status of Private University in China

In China, there are 774 private universities (Ministry of Education, 2022). Most are vocationally oriented and privately funded educational institutions or colleges (Liu, 2020; National People’s Congress, 2015, 2017; Education Commission of State, 1993). The incomes of private universities come mainly from students’ tuition fees (Yan & Lin, 2012; Zhou & Zhang, 2015). Because of insufficient funds, the focus of many private universities is the expansion of student enrolment. Consequently, their overall quality of education is sub-standard (Lu & Wu, 2007).

Private universities offer higher education to students from lower academic achievement levels (Liu, 2020, Lin, 2015). The qualifications of teachers at private universities are limited (Cao & Li, 2014). Most have only bachelor’s or master’s degrees and are principally young teachers with weak professional ability (Huang, 2021). Many of them are part-time and there is a serious shortage of full-time teachers (Sun, 2011). Administrative management of private universities is rather poor (Zhong, 2011; Zhou, 2014). Teachers frequently resign due to the unstable salary and a lack of social security (Liang, 2010, Yao, 2013, Lin, 2015). A high mobility of teachers results in an overall instability of the teaching staff, further leading to low levels of professional quality and academic development (Chen & Zhao, 2017). Due to these shortcomings, private universities in China have a poor social reputation and a low social status in the field of higher education. (Lu & Wu, 2007; Lin, 2015).

2.2. Teacher Professional Identity

Teacher professional identity is about how teachers interpret and understand themselves as teachers in different social contexts (Swain & Steinman; 2011, Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Prior studies indicated several components of teacher professional identity: self-image (Kelchtermans, 1993, 2009), self-efficacy (Berger & Lê Van, 2019), task perception (Richter *et al.*, 2021), teaching beliefs and values (Xunet *et al.*, 2014), job motivation (Carrinus *et al.*, 2012), commitment (Hong, 2010), job satisfaction (Richter *et al.*, 2021), etc.

The construction of professional identity is a dynamic and multifaceted process that evolves through interactions with colleagues and students in a particular context and is affected by certain conditions (Monereo, 2022; Zhu & Zhu, 2018). Many scholars improved that it was through learning to teach that a novice teacher constructed the professional identity (Shulman, 1987; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Beijaard, 2019). Such a learning process is difficult for novice teachers facing reality shock (Gaede,

1978). Professional identity construction is also an equilibrium between personal self-image and teacher role/social identity (Volkmann & Anderson, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner *et al.*, 1987; Berlak & Berlak, 1981). Novice teachers are susceptible to PIC which is like a bifurcation or critical turning point (Sadovnikova *et al.*, 2016) where they are “confronted by tensions between the different aspects of their identities” (Hodgen & Askew 2007, p. 169).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I applied self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), community of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) and situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as the theoretical framework to elaborate the challenges in my professional identity construction and solutions to them.

3.1. Self-discrepancy Theory

Within the self-discrepancy theory, there are three dimensions of a teacher’s identification of self: ideal self, ought self, and actual self (Higgins, 1987). Self-discrepancy occurs when there is a difference between two dimensions, such as the ought self from others’ perspectives against the ideal self from a person’s own perspective (i.e., what others believe I should be vs what I aspire to be). Inconsistency between two beliefs produces emotional issues (Allport, 1955; Mead, 1934; Freud, 1989; Lecky, 1961). In interactions with significant others at workplaces, teachers’ self-images can conflict with social expectations, which can cause self-discrepancies and emotional exhaustion. In my study I applied this theory to analyse how I reconciled my actual performance (actual self) with institutional standard (ought self) and personal expectation (ideal self).

3.2. Situated Learning Theory and Community of Practice

In the field of social learning theory, situated learning theory and CoP advocate that professional identity construction is a dynamic learning process of socialisation. Wenger (1998) explicated from a sociocultural perspective that learning occurred “in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world” (p.3).

Communities of practice contained four components:

- (1) meaning- learning by experiencing life and the world as meaningful;
- (2) practice- learning by talking about shared historical and social resources with others mutually;
- (3) community- learning as belong to a valued enterprise where participation is recognisable as competence;
- (4) identity- learning as becoming (Wenger, 1998, pp. 5-6)

Based on a social theory of learning, these four components are integrated to characterise social participation as a process of learning and knowing. The process of my professional identity construction was a typical learning-to-teach process in interaction with significant others at private universities, which reflected attributes of “learning as social participation” (Wenger, 1998, p.4). My adaption to the working context and engagement in daily work were examples of actively participating in “practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities” (Wenger, 1998, p.4). Through the legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), I learnt how to teach English effectively and interpreted my professional image and behaviour where by my professional identity transformed and evolved. This situated learning is also “an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of communities” (Wenger, 1998, p. 7). In that process I reflected on my teaching while learning to become a member of a community for better future self-development.

4. METHODOLOGY

Critical autoethnography was applied as the methodology in this research. It is a “process of becoming self-aware” (Rappel, 2014, p.15) through individual endeavour which combines “characteristics of autobiography and ethnography” (Ellis *et al.*, 2011, p.275). ‘Critical’ means “to discern, reflect, and judge” (Kellner, 2003, p.53). Auto-ethnographers acknowledge and advocate the subjectivity of autoethnographic works and interrogate socio-cultural phenomena from an authentic perspective (Jones *et al.*, 2016).

I am the author, participant, and observer of my autoethnographic research. My critical autoethnography was a systematic “self-observation and reflexive investigation” (Maréchal, 2010,

p.43) and a detailed examination of my lived experiences (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2008; Punch & Oancea, 2014). The sociocultural characteristics of teacher professional identity led to my adoption of critical autoethnography to investigate my cultural behaviour and convention formed in interactions with significant others for a period at private universities (Vine *et al.*, 2017; Tilley-Lubbs & Calva, 2016; Clarke, 2008; Cheng & Starks, 2002). This study was a manifestation of the relationship between me and the private university as a “transformative and authentic educational setting” (Rappel, 2014, p.15).

Critical autoethnography “allows for both personal and cultural critique” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016, p.17) to contribute wider sociocultural meanings and understandings of narratives (Ellis, 2004). Narrative with metaphors was applied in this study to achieve an aesthetically fascinating effect (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). I aimed to commence with “observation and imagination” and then enable my readers to resonate with my stories which are “ethically reflexive” and acquire a “deep emotional understanding” (Denzin, 1994, p. 506). My “memory narratives” include “prior experiences” (Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014, p. 34) of working at two private universities. Since reconstruction of stories in the past run parallel to expectations of possible life trajectories in the future (Giddens, 1991, p.72), my reconstructed narratives enlightened my future professional development.

I drew on several critical incidents (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017) or “particular events” (Neisser & Fivush, 1994, p. 136) to “reveal a change of understanding” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p.73) of my professional identity. Critical incidents were important for teacher development because they explored relationships and interactions between pairs (e.g., teacher and student) in a particular academic context (Woods, 1993; Holloway & Schwartz, 2014).

This research aimed to answer these following questions:

Question 1: What were challenges in the process of my professional identity construction?

Question 2: How did I overcome PIC while reconstructing my professional identity?

5. FINDINGS

5.1. In that Large Lecture Theatre---a Teaching Plight in Academic Writing Class

My stories started from a steadfast motivation of becoming a teacher since childhood. Driven by that, I studied for seven years for a bachelor’s degree of English and a master’s degree of applied linguistics. The university where I graduated was renowned for its teacher education. My academic achievements in English were excellent. These were my “positive reasons” for entering the teaching field which led to a high expectation of my professionalism (Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014, p. 34). My career goal was becoming a competent EFL teacher and a prolific academic at a university. However, a master’s degree did not qualify me for a lecturer position at a public university, which required a doctorate. In contrast, private universities such as Seaside University accepted master graduates as teachers. Therefore, I found a teaching position there after graduation.

At Seaside University I taught two courses- academic writing and linguistics. The teaching aim of academic writing was guiding students to complete their graduation theses with academic language in accordance with the format standard. The teaching aim of linguistics was making students understand and master some key concepts and theories in linguistics. Those advanced courses set high requirements for both the teacher’s teaching ability and the students’ academic level. But I had no teaching experience of English writing before, and my students were typical private university students described as “having poor study habits, lacking self-discipline, having low interest in study”(Lin, 2015, pp.16-17). For teaching method, I adopted a teacher-centred approach (Scheurs & Dumbraveanu, 2014) characterised by the teacher’s unidirectional lecturing to students (Kember & Kwan, 2000).

Then, I encountered a teaching plight in academic writing class which I named ‘an embarrassing one-man show’. The classroom was a lecture theatre, I was like an actress standing in the low position while students were like audience sitting in the high position. From the first lesson, students appeared uninterested in my teaching contents and were reluctant to answer questions I proposed. That terrible teaching result was a serious blow to my confidence. The main reason for that result was my questionable teaching method. I audited a lesson of a senior teacher but never consulted her about my

problem. Because I was afraid that she and other colleagues would find out that I was incompetent. Haunted by the feeling that I might be an ‘imposter’, my teaching efficacy decreased and finally floods of negative emotions followed. I doubted my professional ability and felt anxiety, distress, and burnout at work (McGregor *et al.*, 2008).

5.2. The Shapeless but Powerful Shadow---PIC Caused by Negative Evaluations

Another critical incident that exacerbated my PIC was about the negative evaluation from a senior colleague. One day, a teaching supervisor (named Ms. X thereafter) entered my classroom to audit my linguistics lesson. She didn't inform me in advance of her inspection, so I was surprised and nervous when she showed up. The teaching content for that lesson was about pragmatics in which many abstract concepts were difficult for me to explain to students and hard for students to understand. When the class started, I played a video as a warming-up to attract students' attention. The rest of the lesson was principally my lecturing of linguistic concepts. My students did not interact with me or actively answer questions. Uneasily, I glimpsed Ms. X from time to time, worrying about how she would evaluate my performance.

After class, as she approached me with a blank expression, I had a feeling that my judgment was coming. As expected, she criticised my teaching method and referred to that lesson as ‘a failed one with poor teaching skills and null learning outcome’. She pointed out that the warming-up activity did not well connect with the teaching content and students should be shown several key questions prior to the video. Then I could play the video and ask students to answer those questions. In this way that warming-up activity would be effective. Although her advice was beneficial to my teaching, I felt embarrassed and dejected for her blunt criticism. I was worried that some students had overheard Ms. X admonishing me and they might question my professional competence. I believed that I could complete the teaching task of academic courses independently but received a heavy blow in practice for the lack of teaching skills.

In that incident, I experienced reality shock. My self-confidence of professionalism clashed with the failure in teaching advanced courses. The discrepancy between an overly high personal expectation and my poor performance led to PIC. My prior identity ‘a proud graduate from a well-known public university’ was eclipsed by the new professional identity ‘an inexperienced EFL teacher from an unpopular private university’. At the social level, the negative evaluation of private universities and their teachers by the public, as noted previously, was also a principal cause of my PIC. Working at private universities made me feel inferior and uncertain about my professional identity. That PIC was like a ‘shapeless but powerful shadow’ connected to my body underfoot in a symbiotic relationship. I felt haunted by it when I encountered difficulties in teaching. Consequently, I suffered from self-doubt, frustration, and depression.

After one year, I decided to resign from Seaside University because of emotional burnout. Emotional burnout is a determining contributing factor of my dropout of profession (Hong, 2010). My experience coincided with prior research that emotion was a pivotal aspect of professional identity construction (Agudo, 2018; Day *et al.*, 2013; Hargreaves, 2001; Zembylas, 2003). That resignation signalled a turning point in my career. If I wanted to continue teaching English and achieve my career goals, I must navigate PIC and reconstruct my professional identity.

5.3. Searching for Light---Exploring Strategies to Navigate PIC

After I resigned from the Seaside University, I tried to establish what had led to my PIC and gradually recovered from the emotional burnout. On one hand, my lack of teaching skills resulted in a low level of teaching efficacy. On the other hand, I had not internalised my organisational identity, which referred to my identification with the private university and social categories to which I belonged (Crocetti *et al.*, 2014). The best way to dispel the shadow was searching for light and approaching it. The light represented my agency (Beijaard *et al.*, 2004) and institutional support. In the second year after my resignation, I acquired a teaching position at another private university--- the Riverside University, where I searched for strategies to overcome PIC and reconstructed my professional identity.

The first strategy was improving my teaching competence. This time I was assigned to teach two basic courses for first-year students--- integrated English and English listening. Since the difficulties

of preparing lessons and lecturing were reduced, I felt more confident of restoring my teaching efficacy. To achieve that, I followed the apprenticeship learning mode (Lave & Wenger, 1991) by imitating model teachers in my department. First, I collected the names of model teachers and then audited their lessons to learn how they carried out classroom activities and what teaching methods were suitable for students at private universities. After observing several lessons, I revised my preconceived notions and mastered many effective skills. I learnt that teaching instructions should be clear and easy for students to understand. Students should be encouraged to express creative thoughts in English. Group activities were necessary to maximise the communication among students.

That learning process promoted me to transfer my teaching concern from my own survival to students’ need (Fuller & Bown, 1975). In the first lesson of a new semester, I asked students to write down their difficulties in learning English and what they most wished to learn. After I applied learnt skills in my class, the teaching outcomes improved considerably. Students enjoyed the learning contents and had frequent interactions with me. One time they had so much fun playing an undercover game to hone English speaking skills that they even ignored the bell for the end of the class. Many students made significant progress in tests, and some asked me questions after class and requested me to recommend books. Students’ enthusiasm for learning was stimulated and I acquired a strong sense of achievement. My teaching efficacy was greatly increased, and that motivated me to participate in a teaching competition. I prepared a lesson thoroughly by designing handouts for students and making interactive courseware. Then, I stood out in the preliminary competition and participated the semi-final one. The university arranged instructors to guide us contestants and recorded videos for us. I asked my students to cooperate with me in recording and they surprised me by their outstanding performance. After that competition, my teaching competence was greatly improved. Furthermore, I found that my students had great potential, which encouraged me to help them make more progress in English learning. Because of my achievements in that competition, the dean appointed me as the leader of the first-year teacher group of English listening and included me as a member of the research group. My participation in the CoP was expanded and upgraded. I felt more committed to my department and was willing to contribute more to the community.

The second strategy to navigate PIC was internalising the institutional requirements for EFL teachers and intensifying my sense of belonging. To achieve that, I participated in teaching workshops at my department. In those workshops, outstanding teachers who had won prizes in teaching competitions, or those who had received the best evaluations from students, shared their teaching experiences. A model teacher introduced her teaching design by simulating a real lesson with some colleagues including me playing the role of student. It opened my mind to think about the effectiveness of class activities from the student’s viewpoint and what teaching methods were suitable for students at private universities.

The second year marked a positive reconstruction of my professional identity. At Seaside University, I applied a teacher-centred approach in teaching and ignored the students’ need, then the teaching result was ineffective. At Riverside University, I converted to a student-centred approach (Jones, 2007) and acquired effective skills for teaching English at a private university. Thus, my teaching efficacy and competence were improved. Correspondingly, as positive emotions replaced the negative emotions, the shadow decreased, and my confidence was back.

5.4. Learn to Live with the Shadow--- Reconciliation between Personal Expectation and Institutional Requirement

In the third year at Riverside University, I accumulated more experience in teaching and established a good rapport with colleagues. By proactively participating in community practices, I adapted well to my professional roles and strengthened the sense of belonging. Although there were still challenges in teaching and the PIC occurred occasionally, I learnt to live with the shadow by reconciling my personal expectation with the institutional requirement.

First, I tried to make my actual performance at work meet the institutional requirement. From Seaside University to Riverside University, I experienced a shift from partial fulfilment of multiple roles to full embracement of different duties. My multiple roles were the same at two private universities: students’ theses advisor, head teacher, and lecturer. At Seaside University, I committed mainly to the role ‘lecturer’ but neglected other two roles because I recognised teaching as my priority. That

resulted in my weak sense of belonging to the working context. At Riverside University, since I made progress in teaching, my job satisfaction was enhanced. That facilitated me to fulfil more administrative tasks besides teaching with increased confidence. That full engagement of multiple tasks intensified my sense of membership.

Next, I discovered that my actual performance did not reach my expectation of an excellent EFL teacher. My personal expectation was becoming an excellent teacher and a productive scholar. I was more adept in teaching but still deficient in academic ability, and the institutional support was inadequate. Although I participated in a research training programme and was allotted a senior teacher as my tutor, the training content was very general and not targeted for my specific research interest. My tutor and I were busy with our teaching and had little time left for academic communication. I could hardly meet the institutional requirements of publishing articles and applying for research funds.

In terms of teaching, my personal expectation fit the institutional requirement. But those two clashed in terms of academic research. Since institutional support was not enough to facilitate my academic research, I decided to exert my agency to pursue a higher degree in academia. Therefore, at the end of the third year, I applied for an overseas PhD programme in education. Once again, I resigned from a private university because my academic development was restricted in the working context. This time I gave priority to the role of an academic researcher when making sense of my professional identity as an EFL teacher.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. From Periphery Participation to Full Participation

Drawing on the theory of CoP (Wenger, 1998) and situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the three-year experience of my professional identity construction included a process of learning-to-teach at private university. I transferred from periphery participation at Seaside University to full participation at Riverside University. At Seaside University, there was a conflict between my high personal expectation and incompetence in teaching, which resulted in a teaching plight. I followed a peripheral trajectory of identity construction (Wenger, 1998, p.154) and did not fully recognise my organisational identity. At Riverside University, I followed an “inbound identity trajectory” (Wenger, 1998, p.154) and reconstructed my professional identity by adapting to the institutional requirements and fully performing my multiple duties. I strived to become a member of the CoP through full participation. Agency and reflection played critical roles in the improvement of my teaching competence (Zhang, 2014). By learning from model teachers and revising my teaching beliefs, I made achievements in teaching, alleviated my negative emotions and increased efficacy.

My professional identity construction occurred mainly in the classroom, a critical context for novice teachers to improve practical teaching competence (Zhang, 2014). I experienced setbacks in my classroom at first. Later I learnt effective teaching skills in model teachers’ classrooms and workshops at my department. Finally, I reflected on my prior mistakes and improved my teaching outcomes back in my classroom. From a novice teacher plagued by self-doubt, I gradually grew into a responsible and enthusiastic teacher. With the increased work commitment, I made remarkable achievement in a teaching competition, which enhanced my sense of accomplishment and gave me the impetus for my professional development.

Many aspects of my professional identity had transformed in the shift from peripheral participation to full participation (as shown in table 1):

Table1. *The transformation of my professional identity*

	Aspects of professional identity					
	Attitude	Emotion	Teaching aim	Teaching method	Efficacy	Job commitment
1 st year	Passive	Dejected; self-doubted	Teaching for survival	Teacher-centred	Weak	Low
2 nd and 3 rd year	Active	Passionate; confident	Teaching for students’ needs	Student-centred	Strong	High

In the first year, my participation in daily work was limited to the extent that it supported my basic identity as a private university EFL teacher (Zhang, 2014, p.148). I recognised my professional identity as an English teacher but had little sense of belonging to the private university, my teaching aim was mainly personal survival. I applied a teacher-centred teaching method but received unsatisfying teaching results. Due to this setback, I suffered from IP and negative emotions. Because of a weak self-efficacy, I was in the “moratorium” status (Crocetti *et al.*, 2014, p.283) characterised by a low level of job commitment and high burnout. I felt like an outsider of my CoP.

In the second and third year, I employed agency and strived to overcome negative emotions. Having realised that my efficacy was greatly influenced by students’ feedbacks, my teaching aim shifted to students’ needs. I initiatively learnt teaching skills from model teachers and applied student-centred methods. Later, the teaching outcomes were improved. Through a reflective practice of teaching skills and achievement in a teaching competition, I improved my teaching competence and became passionate in my daily work. At that time, I was in the “achievement” identity status (Crocetti *et al.*, 2014, p.283) characterised by a stable job commitment, a high level of job satisfaction, and low burnout. I felt like an active member of my CoP.

Overall, in the three-year process of my professional identity construction, I experienced self-doubt of my teaching competence and rejection of the organisational identity at first, then, through situated learning I improved teaching efficacy. The critical factor leading to this change was my exercise of agency to find solutions to PIC. Transforming from peripheral participation to full participation meant that I acquired a strong sense of membership and a high level of work commitment.

Another important factor contributing to the reconstruction of my professional identity was the influence of an excellent community. As Yuan (2016) argued, the research community was a critical contributor to a teacher’s identity development, including overcoming identity crisis and achieving the ideal self. At Riverside University I recognised the achievements of my colleagues and felt closely affiliated with that professional group. Auditing lessons of model teachers and communicating with colleagues in teaching workshops intensified my organisational identity because those model teachers conformed to the images of ideal self in my cognition.

6.2. From Significant Self-discrepancy to a Merging Status of Three Selves

My perception of professional identity included the interpretations of three self-states related to the behaviour and image of an EFL teacher (Smith, 2006). The actual self referred to my actual performance at my workplaces; The ought self represented a context relevant teacher image according to institutional requirements (Dillabough, 1999). The ideal self indicated my personal standards of the image of an excellent EFL teacher. My professional identity construction went through a merging process of three selves. I proposed a merging process model of three selves (as shown in figure 1) based on the self-discrepancy theory by Higgins (1987):

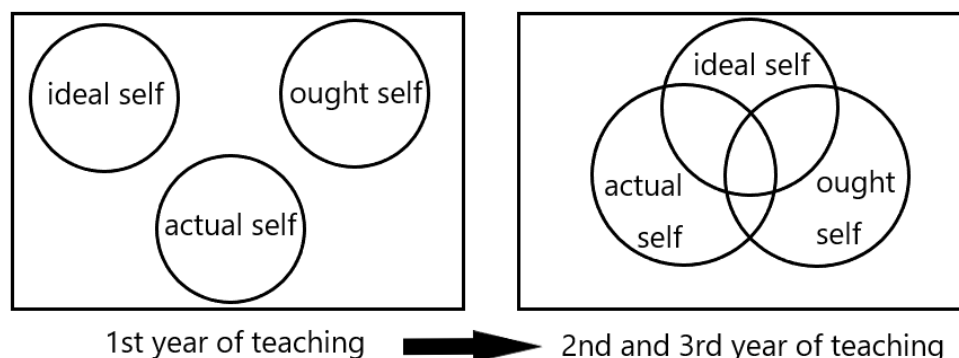


Figure1. The merging process model of three selves

In the first year of teaching, my perception of three selves was that they existed as three independent aspects of my professional identity. The initial construction of my professional identity was in disorder. I was confident in my teaching competence but received negative evaluation from students and colleagues. My actual performance did not meet the institutional requirements nor live up to my expectation of an ideal EFL teacher. My actual self could not connect to the ought self and was far from the ideal self. The discrepancy between my actual self-state and ideal self-state resulted in my feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction (Higgins, 1987). The discrepancy between actual self-

state and ought self-state resulted in my feelings of fear and threat (Higgins, 1987). I had little “emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in” (Allen & Meyer, 1990, p. 1) Seaside University.

In the second and third year of teaching, I narrowed self-discrepancies to alleviate negative emotions, then modify the self-concept to achieve a “coherent and unified self” (Higgins, 1987, p.334). I took three steps to merge three selves. First, I connected the actual self with the ought self by learning from model teachers to make my actual performance consistent with institutional requirements; second, I connected the ought self with the ideal self through professional achievement. I won a prize in a teaching competition, which proved that I could realise my personal value when I attained a strong sense of accomplishment at work; third, the actual self was naturally connected with the ideal self. Because my self-evaluation of actual performance reached the standard of my ideal image. The merging of three self-states signified that my sense-making of professional identity became integrated. I reconstructed a stable professional identity which provided me with a sense of direction, self-certainty, and well-being (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Berzonsky, 2003). The increased job satisfaction led to a higher work commitment so that my organisational identity was reinforced. I achieved the socialisation of individual cognition by reconciling institutional requirements with personal expectations.

7. LIMITATION AND IMPLICATION

This study explored one novice teacher’s professional identity construction, future research could investigate more teachers at different career stages from various disciplines at different levels and types of universities. More interactions between teachers and pertinent others could be analysed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the identity construction process.

The implication of this study lies in approaches to support the professional identity development of novice EFL teachers at private universities. The private university should provide customised trainings for novice teachers’ teaching and academic research to promote their adaption to the working context. A productive CoP could be established to improve members’ professional abilities and enhance their work commitment. Novice teachers with a high level of work commitment will contribute to the development of the private universities.

8. CONCLUSION

This critical autoethnographic study investigated how a novice EFL teacher constructed her professional identity in the early career period. It draws on self-discrepancy theory, situated learning theory and CoP as the theoretical framework. Through critical incidents of teaching English at two private universities in China, this study corroborated that a novice teacher was vulnerable to the PIC influenced by a reality shock. Since novice teachers were still learning to teach, and there was a conflict between their personal expectations and institutional requirements, it was hard for them to integrate into the work environment and master practical teaching skills to reach effective teaching outcomes.

This study indicated that the construction of a novice teacher’s professional identity was a recurrent, ongoing, and ever-changing process in teaching practice. The process of me learning to become an EFL teacher was influenced by my past experiences as a student and linked to my future career development. I constructed a pre-service teaching belief based on the knowledge learnt at university. After employment, my professional behaviours were guided by that belief. Later, in face of setbacks in teaching, my original belief and behaviours were adjusted to achieve the most effective teaching results. By reconciling my personal expectation with institutional requirement, I fulfilled multiple duties and reconstructed my professional identity. In the future, such an identity would be further adjusted in line with the evolvement of my profession.

This study emphasised the pivotal role of situated learning from model teachers in facilitating a novice teacher’s professional development at an early career stage. It was through that situated learning that I improved my English teaching competence and became a “deeply socialised professional” (Huang & Peng, 2015, p. 47). Through narrowing the discrepancies among three self-states I recognised my organisational identity and strengthened my sense of membership at private universities. For a novice teacher, the most important solution to the PIC was improving teaching efficacy and work commitment by actively engaging in activities of CoP and being a contributor to that community.

9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express sincere appreciations to my supervisors Dr Naashia Mohamed and Dr Esther Fitzpatrick for their guidance of methodology and wording in this research, and Dr Libby Limbrick for her proofreading of this article.

REFERENCES

- [1] Baldwin, R. G. and Blackburn, R. T., The academic career as a developmental process: Implications for higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 52, 598-614 (1981).
- [2] Flanagan, J. C.,. The critical incident technique. *Psychological bulletin*, 51, 327 (1954).
- [3] Clance, P. R. and Imes, S. A., The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 15, 241 (1978).
- [4] Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C., and Verloop, N., Reconsidering research on teachers’ professional identity. *Teaching and teacher education*, 20, 107-128 (2004).
- [5] Ministry of Education., List of National Institutions of Higher Education [up to May 31, 2022], retrieved 3 July 2022 from http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-07/03/content_5699066.htm. In Chinese (2022).
- [6] Liu, X., The development of private universities in socialist China. *Higher Education Policy*, 33, 1-19 (2020).
- [7] National People’s Congress., The Promotion Law of Private Education, Beijing: National People’s Congress. In Chinese (2015).
- [8] National People’s Congress., The Law of Higher Education, Beijing: People’s Publishing House. In Chinese (2017).
- [9] Education Commission of State., The interim provision on the setting up of private universities. Retrieved 9 December 2014 from http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_621/201001/xxgk_81912.html. In Chinese (1993).
- [10] Yan, F.Q. and Lin, J., Commercial civil society-a perspective of private higher education in China, *Educational Research*, 4, 57–63. In Chinese (2012).
- [11] Zhou, H.T. and Zhang, M.H., How to break the difficulties in fundraising of private universities, *Journal of National Institute of Education Administration*, 2, 3–8. In Chinese (2015).
- [12] Lu, Caichen. and Wu, Daguang., Review and Outlook of Non-government Higher Education in China. *Research in Educational Development*, 2. In Chinese (2007).
- [13] Lin, Jing., Employment and China's Private Universities: Key Concerns. *International Higher Education*, 42 (2015).
- [14] Cao, Y. and Li, X., Quality and quality assurance in Chinese private higher education: A multi-dimensional analysis and a proposed framework. *Quality Assurance in Education* (2014).
- [15] Huang, Wenmin., A study on the dilemma and resolution of private university teachers' identity. *China Adult Education*, 20, 20-23. In Chinese (2021).
- [16] Sun, Cunchang., Research on the Developing Predicaments and Outlets of Independent Colleges. *Higher education of sciences*, 5, 37-41 (2011).
- [17] Zhong, B.L., Several problems in the development of private education in China, *Chinese Higher Education Research*, 7, 8–10. In Chinese (2011).
- [18] Zhou, H.T., Enhancing the vitality of non-governmental education by deepening comprehensive reform, *Educational Research*, 12, 109–114. In Chinese (2014).
- [19] Liang, Yanling., ‘Rootless community: A survey of teacher mobility in private universities -- A case study of some private universities in Shaanxi Province’. *University Academic*, 11, 62-75. In Chinese (2010).
- [20] Yao, Yuhua., Explore the Development Strategy of China's Private Colleges from the Development of Western Private Colleges—Take the Development of American and Japanese Private Colleges as an example. *The Guide of Science and Education* (2013).
- [21] Chen, Tao. and Zhao, Mingxian., Problems and Countermeasures of Professional Development of Teachers in Private Colleges. *Journal of Hubei Correspondence University*, 30, 38-40. In Chinese (2017).
- [22] Swain, M., Kinnear, P. and Steinman, L., Sociocultural theory in second language education: An introduction through narratives. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters (2011).
- [23] Skorikov, V. B. and Vondracek, F. W., Occupational identity. In: *Handbook of identity theory and research*, Springer, New York, NY, 693-714 (2011).
- [24] Kelchtermans, G., Getting the story, understanding the lives: From career stories to teachers' professional development. *Teaching and teacher education*, 9, 443-456 (1993).

- [25] Kelchtermans, G., Who I am in how I teach is the message: self- understanding, vulnerability and reflection. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice*, 15, 257-272 (2009).
- [26] Berger, J. L. and Lê Van, K., Teacher professional identity as multidimensional: mapping its components and examining their associations with general pedagogical beliefs. *Educational Studies*, 45, 163-181 (2019).
- [27] Richter, E., Brunner, M., and Richter, D., Teacher educators’ task perception and its relationship to professional identity and teaching practice. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Teaching and Teacher Education, 101, 103303, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate> (2021).
- [28] Xun, Y., Sun, L., and Peng, F., Formulation and Validation of a Teacher Identity Inventory for EFL Teachers. *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching Journal*, 162, 61-67 (2014).
- [29] Canrinus, E. T., Helms-Lorenz, M., Beijaard, D., Buitink, J., and Hofman, A., Self-efficacy, job satisfaction, motivation and commitment: Exploring the relationships between indicators of teachers’ professional identity. *European journal of psychology of education*, 27, 115-132 (2012).
- [30] Hong, Ji Y., Pre-service and beginning teachers’ professional identity and its relation to dropping out of the profession. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26, 1530-1543 (2010).
- [31] Monereo, Carles., Professional identity in education from the perspective of dialogical self theory. In: Carles Monereo., eds. *The Identity of Education Professionals: Positioning, Training, and Innovation*, Information Age Publishing, 3-25 (2022).
- [32] Zhu, J. and Zhu, G., Understanding student teachers’ professional identity transformation through metaphor: An international perspective. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 44, 500-504 (2018).
- [33] Shulman, L., Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard educational review*, 57, 1-23 (1987).
- [34] Marsh, H. W. and Shavelson, R., Self-concept: Its multifaceted, hierarchical structure. *Educational psychologist*, 20, 107-123 (1985).
- [35] Beijaard, D., Teacher learning as identity learning: models, practices, and topics. *Teachers and Teaching*, 25, 1-6 (2019).
- [36] Gaede, O. F., Reality shock: A problem among first-year teachers. *The clearing house*, 51, 405-409 (1978).
- [37] Volkman, M. J. and Anderson, M. A., Creating professional identity: Dilemmas and metaphors of a first-year chemistry teacher. *Science Education*, 82, 293–310 (1998).
- [38] Tajfel, H. and Turner, J. C., An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In: W. G. Austin. and S. Worchel., eds. *The social psychology of intergroup relations*, Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole. 33-37 (1979).
- [39] Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., and Wetherell, M. S., *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. basil Blackwell (1987).
- [40] Berlak, A. and Berlak, H., *Dilemmas of schooling: Teaching and social change*. London: Methuen (1981).
- [41] Sadovnikova, N. O., Sergeeva, T. B., and Suraeva, M. O., Phenomenological Analysis of Professional Identity Crisis Experience by Teachers. *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education*, 11, 6898-6912 (2016).
- [42] Hodgen, J. and Askew, M., Emotion, identity and teacher learning: Becoming a primary mathematics teacher. *Oxford Review of Education*, 33, 469-487 (2007).
- [43] Higgins, E. T., Self-discrepancy: a theory relating self and affect. *Psychological review*, 94, 319 (1987).
- [44] Wenger, E., *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge university press (1998).
- [45] Lave, J. and Wenger, E., *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press (1991).
- [46] Allport, G. W., *Becoming*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press (1955).
- [47] Mead, G. H., *Mind, self, and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1934).
- [48] Freud, S., The ego and the id [1923]. *TACD Journal*, 17, 5-22 (1989).
- [49] Lecky, P., *Self-consistency: A theory of personality*. New York: Shoe String Press (1961).
- [50] Rappel, L., Narrative approaches to language education: Re-storying lives of educators and learners. *WAESOL World Quarterly*, 2014, 14-17 (2014).
- [51] Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., and Bochner, A. P., Autoethnography: an overview. *Historical social research/Historischesozialforschung*, 273-290 (2011).
- [52] Kellner, D., Toward a critical theory of education. *Democracy and Nature*, 9, 51-64 (2003).
- [53] Jones, S. H., Adams, T., and Ellis, C., Introduction: Coming to know autoethnography as more than a method. In: *Handbook of autoethnography*, Routledge. 17-48 (2016).
- [54] Maréchal, G., Autoethnography. *Encyclopedia of case study research*, 2, 43-45 (2010).

- [55] Allen-Collinson, J. and Hockey, J. C., Autoethnography as ‘valid’ methodology? A study of disrupted identity narratives. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*, 3, 209-217 (2008).
- [56] Punch. and Oancea, A., Introduction to research methods in education [2nd edition]. SAGE Publications Ltd (2014).
- [57] Vine, T., Clark, J., Richards, S., and Weir, D., *Ethnographic research and analysis: Anxiety, identity and self*. Springer (2017).
- [58] Tilley-Lubbs, G. A. and Calva, S. B., *Re-telling our stories: Critical autoethnographic narratives*. Springer (2016).
- [59] Clarke, M., *Language teacher identities*. *Language Teacher Identities*. *Multilingual Matters* (2008).
- [60] Cheng, S. and Starks, B., Racial differences in the effects of significant others on students' educational expectations. *Sociology of Education*, 306-327 (2002).
- [61] Boylorn, R. M. and Orbe, M. P., Introduction critical autoethnography as method of choice. *Critical autoethnography*, 13-26 (2016).
- [62] Ellis, C., *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Rowman Altamira, Vol. 13 (2004).
- [63] Bochner, A. and Ellis, C., *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling stories*. Routledge (2016).
- [64] Denzin, N. K., 1994. The art and politics of interpretation. In: N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, eds. *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 500-515 (1994).
- [65] Chang-Kredl, S. and Kingsley, S., Identity expectations in early childhood teacher education: Pre-service teachers' memories of prior experiences and reasons for entry into the profession. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 43, 27-36 (2014).
- [66] Giddens, A., *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford university press (1991).
- [67] Hutchins, H. M. and Rainbolt, H., What triggers imposter phenomenon among academic faculty? A critical incident study exploring antecedents, coping, and development opportunities. *Human Resource Development International*, 20, 194-214 (2017).
- [68] Neisser, U. and Fivush, R., *The remembering self: Construction and accuracy in the self-narrative*, 6. Cambridge University Press (1994).
- [69] Webster, L. and Mertova, P., *Using narrative inquiry as a research method: An introduction to using critical event narrative analysis in research on learning and teaching*. Routledge (2007).
- [70] Woods, P., Critical events in education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 14, 355-371 (1993).
- [71] Schwartz, H. L., & Holloway, E. L., “I Become a Part of the Learning Process”: Mentoring Episodes and Individualized Attention in Graduate Education. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 22(1), 38-55(2014).
- [72] Scheurs, J. and Dumbraveanu, R., A shift from teacher centered to learner centered approach. *Learning*, 1 (2014).
- [73] Kember, D. and Kwan, K. P., Lecturers’ approaches to teaching and their relationship to conceptions of good teaching. *Instructional Science*, 28, 469–490 (2000).
- [74] McGregor, L. N., Gee, D. E., and Posey, K. E., 2008. I feel like a fraud and it depresses me: The relation between the imposter phenomenon and depression. *Social Behaviour and Personality: an international journal*, 36, 43-48 (2008).
- [75] Agudo, Juan de Dios Martinez., *Emotions in Second Language Teaching*. Cham: Springer International Publishing AG (2018).
- [76] Day, C., Kington, A., Stobart, G., and Sammons, P., The personal and professional selves of teachers: stable and unstable identities. *British Educational Research Journal*, 32, 601-616 (2013).
- [77] Hargreaves, Andy., *Emotional Geographies of Teaching*. *Teachers College Record* [1970], 103, 1056-1080 (2001).
- [78] Zembylas, Michalinos., *Emotions and Teacher Identity: A poststructural perspective*. *Teachers and Teaching, Theory and Practice*, 9, 213-238 (2003).
- [79] Crocetti, E., Avanzi, L., Hawk, S. T., Fraccaroli, F., and Meeus, W., Personal and social facets of job identity: A person-centered approach. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 29, 281-300 (2014).
- [80] Fuller, F. F. and Bown, O. H., *Becoming a teacher*. *Teachers College Record*, 76, 25-52 (1975).
- [81] Jones, Leo., *The Student-Centered Classroom*. Cambridge University Press (2007).
- [82] Zhang, Yinxia., *The teaching developments and innovations of junior faculties: A case study of two universities in mainland China*. *Renmin University of China Education Journal*, 3, 127-138. In Chinese (2014).

- [83] Yuan, Eric Rui.,The dark side of mentoring on pre-service language teachers' identity formation. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 55, 188-197 (2016).
- [84] Smith, T.,Becoming a teacher of mathematics: Wenger’s social theory of learning perspective. *Identities, cultures and learning spaces*, 2, 619-622 (2006).
- [85] Dillabough, J. A.,Gender politics and conceptions of the modern teacher: Women, identity and professionalism. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20, 373–394 (1999).
- [86] Allen, N. J. and Meyer, J. P.,Organizational socialization tactics: A longitudinal analysis of links to newcomers' commitment and role orientation. *Academy of management journal*, 33, 847-858 (1990).
- [87] Adams, G. R. and Marshall, S. K.,A developmental social psychology of identity: Understanding the person- in- context. *Journal of adolescence*, 19, 429-442 (1996).
- [88] Berzonsky, M. D.,Identity style and well-being: Does commitment matter? *Identity*, 3, 131-142 (2003).
- [89] Huang, Y. T. and Peng, X. Q.,A Study on the Changes and the Persistence of the Western Academic Profession under the Process of New Managerialism Reform. *Comparative Education Review*, 2 (2015).

AUTHORS’ BIOGRAPHY



Xiangchen Zhang, was an English teacher at two private universities in China. She acquired her master’s degree in applied linguistics. Currently she is a PhD candidate in education at the University of Auckland. Her research interests lie in the tensions and construction of EFL teachers’ multiple identities and their professional development at tertiary level.



Esther Fitzpatrick, is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Learning, Development and Professional Practice and Director of the Graduate Diploma in Teaching Primary. She is also Director of the Narrative and Metaphor Special Interest Network. Esther uses various critical innovative pedagogies including writing as a method of inquiry. She has published on issues of racial-ethnic identity, Pākehā (white) identity, neoliberal impacts on academic identity, critical family history, critical autoethnography and arts-based

methodologies.

Citation: Xiangchen Zhang & Esther Fitzpatrick. "Closer to the Light, Smaller the Shadow Became" ---a Critical Autoethnography of a Novice EFL Teacher’s Professional Identity Construction at Private Universities in China” *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, vol 10, no. 3, 2023, pp. 65-77. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.1003006>.

Copyright: © 2023 Authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.