

A Teacher-led Interpretation of the Teacher Growth Model

An Inquiry into the Professional Identity of Singapore Teachers

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

- Teacher identity is largely shaped by personal experiences and values, the social practice in relation to power, spheres of influence and school culture.
- The supporting conditions that influence decisional capital includes a school culture that encourages sharing, listening, trust, respect, and mutual acceptance; the barriers include time constraint for experimentation, sharing of goals and purposes, power distance and complex dynamics in relational networks.
- Teachers' decisional capital is inter-relational and woven in the complexities of sources of power within a context in which interactions take place.

BACKGROUND

Teachers' professional identity is a collective image that emerges as the outcome of teachers' interpretation while interacting in the school environment. It has intense influences on a teacher's sense of purpose, self-efficacy, motivation, commitment, as well as effectiveness (Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington, & Gu, 2007). In Singapore, the desired professional identity is officially articulated in the Teacher Growth Model (TGM) which takes into account the MOE Ethos of Teaching profession. Given the policy visions and the "tight-loose dilemma" (DuFour & Fullan, 2013) working culture, this study sought

an evidence-based inquiry to explore how facets of the TGM have contributed to the development of professional capital that supports teacher-led professionalism and professional standards for teacher identity among the teachers.

FOCUS OF STUDY

This study examined the Singapore Teacher's professional identity and the way teachers in Singapore exercised decisional capital in the sense-making and interpretation of selective aspects of the TGM, i.e. Ethical Educator (EE) and Transformational Leader (TL). The specific research questions are:

RQ1: How do Singapore teachers make sense of being transformational leaders and ethical educators?

RQ2: How do teacher responses in RQ1 reflect their level of decisional capital among teachers?

RQ3: How does the teacher-led social construction of professional identity compare with that articulated in the TGM?

KEY FINDINGS

Our analysis showed that where ethics is concerned, teachers use two frames in interpreting the situations—self-references and norm-references. Self-references are socially constructed boundaries to recognize

the appropriateness of the professional relationships. Such individual values and the intrinsic motivation of teachers create boundaries in regulating and forming ethics in the multiple layers of intertwined relationships within the profession. Norm-references work in four boundaries, namely institutional, positional, financial and expertise boundaries. To be an ethical educator, the Singapore Teacher placed the norm-references over self-references. Teachers view having the courage to do the right thing—even though it may not appeal to their colleagues, school leaders or students and even parents—as necessary.

Our analysis on transformational leadership showed that teachers shared both positional and agentic leadership. Teachers who hold positional leadership view have a socialized mind while teachers who hold an agentic leadership view have a self-authoring mind (Kegan, 2000). The socialised mind is constructed by the expectations and definitions of personal experiences within the organization. The self-authoring mind is able to evaluate the social environment and take it upon themselves to become agents of change and initiate change, problem solve and become a factor of influence regardless of hierarchical authority. The supporting conditions that influenced decisional capital include a culture in which there is sharing, listening, trust, respect and acceptance. In contrast, the barriers are (1) time constraint for experimentation and sharing of clear goals and purposes with others, (2) power distance, and (3) complex dynamics in relational networks.

Teachers' decisional capital for being an EE and TL is inter-relational and woven into the complexities of sources of power within a context in which interactions take place. The four key findings are: (1) drawing the code of conduct/ professional ethos as the collective agreement; (2) the interpersonal relationships; (3) the years of teaching experience as well as the positional leadership of the teachers; and (4) their commitment to care for their students and to help their students by being fair and ethical to them.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

This study contributes to research and policy. Our findings attend to Peterman's (2017) call for teacher identity research that places greater emphasis on unpacking the complexities of teacher identity within and across settings and time—particularly by illuminating the roles of power relationships in identity formation. By teasing out the nuances of teacher identity, our findings could inform TGM in practice, and also how TGM can be better communicated in the fraternity.

PARTICIPANTS

This study involved teachers from 101 primary and secondary schools and teacher leaders from the Academy of Singapore Teachers (AST).

RESEARCH DESIGN

This qualitative study was conducted in two phases:

1. Phase 1: semi-structured online discussions based on scenarios presented online
2. Phase 2: face-to-face focus group discussions In which we analyzed the data using the Grounded Theory.

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