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THE IMPORTANCE of identity in teacher education is, I think, best captured by Professor Maxine Greene’s insightful remark that “learning to teach is a process of identity development... It is about choosing yourself, making deeply personal choices about who you are and who you will become as a teacher.”

The projects featured in this issue of ReEd explore various facets of this identity development. They see teacher identity not simply as static or uniform, but multiple and changing.

Warren Liew and Loh Chin Ee, as well as Low Ee Ling, and her team see identity as key to understanding teachers and teaching as a profession, and want to engage teachers in dialogue. While Warren and Chin Ee are trying to get English teachers to talk about their “lived experiences” of being a teacher, Ee Ling and her team are focused on gathering an evidence base to examine possible teacher identities that can inform policy and practice.

In all of the projects we feature in this issue, teaching is viewed as a “thoughtful process”, to quote Chang Chew Hung, whose project examines the professional development of teachers. Teachers are not simply passive transmitters of knowledge, as Daphnee Lee rightly points out. And together with Professor Lee Wing On, her project on professional learning communities examines the ways in which teachers act as change agents, in initiating collaboration and initiatives in a bottom-up approach.

In highlighting the agency of the teacher, this project shares common ground with Sirene Lim and Lum Chee Hoo’s project. The learning gallery that resulted from their project comprises videos of 11 exemplary preschool teachers, giving us a rare and wonderful insight into the complex craft of teaching. Sirene says she hopes that the videos can serve as “mirrors” to help teachers critically reflect on their own practice.

Like Sirene and Chee Hoo, Rose Liang believes that how teachers see themselves, that is, teacher belief, is an important part of identity. Through their study, Rose and her co-investigator, Mary Dixon, found that there were many links between belief and practice. It is this very link that fuels researchers, Josh Wang Li-Yi and Li Jen-Yi, in wanting to examine teacher efficacy—the extent to which teachers believe that they have the capability to help students, especially those who lack motivation or are low-achievers. Josh wants to help low-achieving students level up, and he believes that this can only happen if teachers believe that they can make a difference in their students’ lives.

These seven projects offer a glimpse into the exciting vistas that research on teacher identity can open up. I hope they challenge you to new ways of thinking, seeing, believing and being!
The Lived Experiences of English Teachers

PROJECT TEAM
Principal Investigators Warren Mark Liew, Loh Chin Ee, National Institute of Education, Singapore
Collaborator Joel Gwynne, National Institute of Education, Singapore

TEACHER EDUCATORS Warren Liew and Loh Chin Ee want to hear the life stories of English teachers. They want to know about their teaching experiences—what they do and what they feel.

“We’re interested in stories told through their perspectives,” says Warren. They want to know what these “teacher-authored narratives” can reveal about teachers’ identities—their beliefs, values, attitudes—and how this identity influences their day-to-day practices.

Lived Experiences “There has been research on English teaching in Singapore, but most of it doesn’t come from teachers’ lived experiences,” notes Chin Ee. “So in a sense, we’re filling a gap.”

Believing that the “lived experience” may sometimes be somewhat different from the “official discourse”, Warren and Chin Ee are talking to a varied group of teachers to hear what they have to say.

“Teachers are the key to educational reform,” Warren points out. “They’re the ones at the frontlines, they’re the translators of curriculum and policy, they’re the ones who really make a difference.”

“So unless you understand how teachers translate theory into practice, or translate policy into the actual performance of pedagogy, you’ll never fully understand what it takes to reform the system.”

Honest Stories The duo, who were once teachers themselves, want to hear teachers’ self-reflections and self-analyses, “and hopefully a lot more honestly,” adds Warren.

“We’re hoping to elicit honest revelations of how teachers perceive themselves in relation to their jobs and responsibilities in the schools, their beliefs and motivations, and their emotional engagement with their students, colleagues, and the subject matter especially,” he explains.

“Ultimately, what you believe influences how you teach and why you teach particular things,” says Chin Ee. “We’re trying to see the connection as well in terms of values and beliefs, and how they link to the curriculum and their teaching practices.”

Personal Stories For Warren and Chin Ee, this isn’t just another research project. The stories they are hearing resonate with their own experiences.

Warren and Chin Ee are helping to give English teachers a voice.

“I’m a teacher who would have stayed,” says Chin Ee. “I think teaching is my calling, but just because it’s your calling doesn’t mean you don’t struggle with it.”

Warren’s story is quite different. Struggling to balance two loves—teaching and research—he left the service to pursue a PhD in education, with the encouragement of his school principal at that time.

“It was an impossible undertaking,” recalls Warren. “How do you be a full-time teacher and at the same time conduct systematic inquiry into your classrooms, and then produce research that is credible?”

Bridging the Gap The stories Warren and Chin Ee have gathered so far are full of emotion. They are real. They are inspirational. They also speak of the challenges of being an English teacher.

“For us as teacher educators, it’s shown us some of the areas that we ourselves need to address, at least at the NIE level,” says Chin Ee. “The project encourages us to be more attentive to our students’ voices, to what they have to say.”

They hope these stories will help other teachers who struggle to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Warren believes this project could also have political implications. “My crusade is to give back to the teachers what I felt was lacking in my own experience. We hope that these narratives will be the voice of conscience for policymakers, teacher educators and researchers.”
WE’VE HEARD it said that good teachers make a world of difference. This was certainly true for the 10-year-old daughter of team member Dr Phillip Towndrow after she recently changed schools.

She likes her new school better because the teachers are different, she says. When asked why, she said, "The teachers are not hurrying you. They go slowly, but they go deeply. They listen to what people say."

What could explain the difference? The way he sees it, these teachers in the new school have a strong sense of who they are and what they are doing. They would deliberately make time to listen, and this makes learning so more enjoyable for the students.

Possible Selves  Who am I as a teacher? What kind of a teacher do I want to be? These questions on teacher identity are not merely rhetorical. To Associate Professor Low Ee Ling and her research team, the answers have real consequences in the classroom.

Teachers with a strong sense of teacher identity are likely to stay longer in the profession, the literature tells us. They also possess a strong sense of teacher professionalism and tend to contribute back to the teaching community.

There is no widely accepted definition of teacher identity. Mr Hui Chenri, a doctoral student who has been working closely with the research data, suggests that all teachers have a “possible self”—an idealized notion of what they hope or expect to become.

This self is influenced by the kind of training teachers go through, and even their prior experiences as students.

It changes along the way, as teachers learn and grow in their job. “We do not see identity as being fixed or unitary,” notes Ee Ling. “In fact, it is always moving.”

Teacher Competencies  NIE has made teacher identity a core value in its teacher education model. The team is looking into how student teachers develop their professional identity and competencies as part of their training.

Their goal is simple. “At the end of the day, it’s actually to see how well prepared our beginning teachers are when they leave our portals,” says Ee Ling, who is the Principal Investigator of this research project.

Discussions about teacher identity can quickly get abstract. To address this, the team is measuring various competencies of the teachers they survey. “We broadly define it into skills (what they can do) and knowledge (what they know).” They have defined a list of competencies that an “idealized teaching professional” should have, such as being able to undertake purposeful reflections and to link theory to practice.

There is a “natural correlation” between teacher identity and competencies, says Ee Ling. “If you’re competent in what you do, your sense of identity is enhanced and you’ll be confident. When you’re confident, your sense of teacher identity is very positive.”

Identify Formation  The process of developing this identity is, however, not a straightforward or easy one. Professor A. Lin Goodwin, a visiting professor and consultant on this project, describes it as a “tension”—between what you want to be and what you are expected to be.

Phillip says this observation concurs with other research on teachers in Singapore. This tension is borne out in the data on what teachers say about the work they do as assessors.

“The teachers have very strong feelings about who they are and what they’d like to do, and what they have to do that’s part of their job. They’re constantly trying to reconcile these two points of view.”

But it is in this tension that professional identity is forged. Prof Goodwin commends the approach that is being taken in Singapore, where our teachers are being developed to become decision-makers and professionals.
This is the way to go, she says. Because if teachers function like technicians or “worker bees”, they will be overwhelmed by different messages from various stakeholders. “You’ll not be able to develop an identity, you simply adopt an identity,” she cautions.

A Real Difference Carving out a professional identity for themselves is, ultimately, a personal journey for teachers.

“It’s not so much whether it’s there or it’s not,” says Ee Ling. “It’s always there, but whether it’s a positive sense of teacher identity or a negative sense.”

She hopes our student teachers’ experiences in NIE will help them see themselves in a positive light and aspire to be great teachers.

“That’s my end goal and vision: If we can somehow, through our project findings, see how we can build the possible, idealized selves of teachers that can help them to eventually contribute to the teaching profession, then I think we’ve done a meaningful project.”

Chenri reminds us that how teachers think about themselves ultimately influences their practices. “This, in turn, influences their teaching and students’ learning,” he says.

If our teachers can see themselves as confident professionals despite the challenges of their work, it will make a real difference to their students’ lives.
To this end, PD can help teachers as professionals. Says Chew Hung: “One of the things that a professional needs to do is be continually updated with the knowledge, skills as well as the thinking behind the teaching process.”

**Realizing Full Potential** But response from some teachers to PD courses hasn’t always been positive. Chew Hung draws a parallel between the way teachers view PD and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. There are different levels, from the most basic to the highest level of actualization.

Many teachers are so busy that they want to “take back, cut and paste, and use in their classroom immediately” what they learn from PD courses. Chew Hung likens this to food as a basic need for survival. But “deep down, they know, they believe it’s important to be reflective,” he says of the teachers. “Innately, they all need PD. They know and they want it,” he says. “They’d like to reach a point of actualization.”

Teachers can be encouraged to aspire to a higher level of PD needs. “If you give them time, if you give them the resources, they’ll feel inspired.”

Chew Hung hopes that the findings will be useful for teacher educators and policymakers to help teachers realize their full potential as teaching professionals.

**ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR** Chang Chew Hung is concerned about what teachers’ professional development (PD) needs are and how NIE can respond to them. He is the Associate Dean of PD with NIE’s Office of Graduate Studies and Professional Learning. Although NIE runs many in-service courses to help teachers grow and excel in their job, Chew Hung describes them as being “supply-driven”.

“We never really ask our clients, the real clients who come to our class: What do they really need?”

**Meeting Development Needs** Chew Hung’s latest project will do just that. He wants to paint a big picture of the PD landscape of teachers in Singapore. “Essentially, my study is a baseline study of where teachers are at in terms of their needs in PD.” He also hopes to uncover the reasons why teachers do certain courses. While all teachers in Singapore are entitled to 100 hours of PD a year, very little is known about how they make use of their training hours, and why.

“There’re a lot of assumptions,” Chew Hung says. “Why do you do that? What makes you want to do that? Is it because you think it’s important? Is it because you’re truly interested in it? Or is it because your Head of Department nominated you for it?” His hunch is that some teachers go because they feel obliged to. But this is something we can change.

**Teacher Professionalism** For Chew Hung, PD is integral to being a professional. All teachers should identify themselves as professionals in their own right, and this professionalism is an important part of what it means to be a teacher.

“Teaching isn’t an enactment process. It isn’t a performance process. But teaching is a thoughtful process,” Chew Hung emphasizes. “Teachers are not just implementers; they need to be thinkers. That’s what the profession of teaching is about.”

We recognize true professionals by their skill set, aptitude and values, among other things. They don’t just take instructions and can even generate more ideas and knowledge.
Ed

A Community of Teaching Professionals

PROJECT TEAM

Principal Investigators Lee Wing On, Daphnee Lee, National Institute of Education, Singapore
Co-Principal Investigators Flora Ning, Helen Hong, Michelle Tan, Tay Wan Ying, Imelda Caleon, Cho Young Hoan, National Institute of Education, Singapore
Collaborators Tham Mun See, Christine Tambyah, Teo Chai Yaw, Yu Danquan, Elsa Chew, Ministry of Education, Singapore

“...they’re also forging an identity together. The professional learning community (PLC), such as those we see in many Singapore schools, offers one such platform. How does this learning shape the identity of a teacher? What really happens when teachers come together as a community of teaching professionals? The thought process behind these decisions often goes unexplained. Professor Lee Wing On believes the project can help to make explicit this process as the team observes the teachers engaging with each other to improve their practice.

“They are not tacit implementers of the curriculum by policymakers,” Prof Lee points out. “Instead, they make decisions to address the students’ needs.”

Reflective Dialogues The team observed that when the teachers meet, they focus on student learning and on improving student outcomes. “That is an important starting point,” says Prof Lee, who is Dean of Education Research.

Daphnee (2nd from right) and her team believe PLCs have much to offer.

HOW WE see ourselves very much depends on the people around us. The same goes for teachers. When they come together as a community to share and learn, they’re also forging an identity together.

The professional learning community (PLC), such as those we see in many Singapore schools, offers one such platform.

Learning Communities PLCs hinge on collaboration among the teachers in that community. Often meeting once a week, beliefs and experiences converge as teachers share their practices and engage in reflective dialogue.

However it is conducted, the “L”—or “learning”—in PLCs remains the common denominator. How does this learning shape the identity of a teacher? What really happens when teachers come together as a community of teaching professionals?

The thought process behind these decisions often goes unexplained. Professor Lee Wing On believes the project can help to make explicit this process as the team observes the teachers engaging with each other to improve their practice.

“They were actually reflecting on their teaching methods to critique them and coming up with professional points out of these reflective dialogues,” notes Research Scientist Daphnee Lee, who is the Principal Investigator of this project.

It is significant that what happens in classrooms feeds into PLC discussions, and the decisions that arise from the PLCs in turn affect classroom practices.

“We are glad to see that teachers have taken charge of their learning, and some have gone beyond that,” observes Daphnee.

Collaborative Communities Prof Lee adds that they are particularly interested in looking at these reflective dialogues among teachers. These conversations are a community-forming process that help teachers to identify themselves as professionals.

“Teachers play a role in defining their profession,” he emphasizes, and it’s always an ongoing process.

That teachers are actively defining their own professional identity has implications for our whole education system. Daphnee explains: “From a policy level, reform has to start with teachers as professionals taking charge of the direction on how they teach, rather than being mere transmitters of knowledge.”

The team is also interested in how teachers can use PLCs for “bottom-up” collaborations initiated by themselves instead of the school leaders or the Education Ministry. This will be a big step forward for the teaching profession.

“Bottom-up means that teachers are placing a higher demand on themselves,” says Prof Lee. “When we reach that stage, then we can say teachers are professionals, as it begins with how they see themselves first.”

He believes that PLCs can be a tool to not only keep teachers growing but excited about the profession. “When they feel that they can contribute and effect change, they will feel empowered, and teaching will be a dynamic profession that is emerging.”
Preschool Teaching at Its Best

TEACHER LEARNING ought to be continuous, says Dr Sirene Lim. “So what happens when you graduate from teacher education programmes? How do you sustain that learning?”

This is true for any teacher, and it isn’t any different for the preschool teacher.

Teaching Complexities Sirene and colleague Dr Lum Chee Hoo are strong advocates of the work of preschool educators. They believe that the work of preschool teachers is complex—and that the public needs to see this.

Preschool teachers aren’t just nannies or babysitters who simply teach the ABCs, as some may mistakenly believe. “The teaching complexities are the same kinds that you see in primary and secondary classrooms,” Sirene points out.

The class sizes may be smaller compared to those in primary and secondary schools, but like their counterparts, the work of preschool teachers involves equally high-level deliberations and planning. And both of them know what is involved.

While Chee Hoo had taught in primary schools, Sirene was teaching at the secondary and junior college levels before switching to early childhood. It is with these personal experiences in mind that their project was designed to provide preschool teachers with the tools for continual learning.

Teachers Learning Sirene and Chee Hoo are concerned about how to enhance and support the learning of preschool teachers after the initial teacher preparation years.

To Sirene, teaching is all about learning because if one stops learning, then what is there to teach? “The assumption behind this research is that teachers want to learn, and they have the capacity and the motivation to learn,” she explains.

So, combining their expertise in early childhood education and the arts, they created a website called Images of Teaching. The website shows preschool teachers in action, and opens up the preschool classroom for all to see. “We wanted to show the complexities of teaching,” says Chee Hoo.

They chose 11 exemplary—and “very brave”—teachers and video-recorded them in their classrooms. These teachers came on board with the desire to improve their craft.

A Learning Gallery While these 11 teachers were chosen because of their outstanding teaching records, their ways of teaching are not the be-all and end-all of “good teaching”, stress Sirene and Chee Hoo. They serve as a mirror that teachers can view and reflect upon.

“If we want teachers to reflect and learn, they need to see what’s in themselves,” Sirene comments. “This is to help them tease out all their knowledge and to improve on that, to make all that they know better in the classrooms.”

As teacher educators, Sirene and Chee Hoo see this as a way to learn from teachers as much as to train teachers.

“It’s not just about us going there to be their guru, and saying, this is what you could or could not do,” says Chee Hoo. “It’s about having the critical reflection on both ends, from our point of view and theirs.”

Reflective Learning But at the end of it all, looking at another person’s practice isn’t enough.

“It’s like looking in the mirror and not doing any improvements to yourself,” says Sirene. “The kind of critical reflection we are looking for requires hard work, but it also requires teachers to work together.”

Their hope is that Images of Teaching can help teachers at all levels. “I secretly hope primary school teachers will go and take a look,” discloses Sirene. “Because students don’t just turn into another creature at age 7!”

Learning may start young, but that doesn’t mean it has to stop.
A STRUGGLING class of low achievers needs a teacher who believes in them and who believes she can help them. Very often, however, the teacher’s self-belief drops when faced with the challenges of teaching low achievers.

To Research Scientist Josh Wang Li-Yi, this is a frustrating situation, where a desired outcome is almost impossible to attain because of contradictory conditions.

**Teacher Efficacy** “Teachers usually have high levels of efficacy when they are assigned to teach gifted or high-achieving students,” observes Josh, who was once a low achiever himself.

Teacher efficacy is an important dimension of a teacher’s beliefs. “We are basically talking about the extent to which teachers believe that they have the capabilities to help students, especially those who are not motivated or difficult.”

The difficulty arises when teachers who teach low achievers want to increase, or even just maintain, their level of efficacy. It requires more planning, patience and understanding.

Puzzled by this catch-22 situation, Josh set out to examine teacher efficacy in the context of teaching low-achieving students and identify the sources that contribute to the formation of teacher efficacy.

His reason: “If we want to help low-achieving students, we can do it by helping teachers to develop a high level of efficacy.”

**Efficacy and Teaching Effectiveness** Teachers’ beliefs about their ability to make a difference can have far-reaching effects. Efficacy levels translate into the teaching styles as well as the teachers’ attitudes and behaviour towards their students.

“Teacher efficacy affects teaching effectiveness, in terms of teachers’ instructional strategies, classroom management and student engagement,” Josh explains.

Teachers with high-efficacy levels do not easily give up on their students. In the context of teaching low-achieving students, these teachers will go the extra mile to develop new ideas and teaching methods that they think might be able to meet the needs of their students.

They have a greater sense of responsibility to their students and commitment to their job. They also show a higher level of job satisfaction.

On the other hand, teachers with low-efficacy levels tend to be discouraged easily when dealing with low-achieving students. This lack of belief in themselves may also further jeopardize their teaching effectiveness.

**Teacher Efficacy Formation** Josh is looking for practical answers that will hopefully help low-achieving students level up. By comparing the classroom practices of teachers with high and low efficacy, he hopes to uncover the sources that may contribute to the formation of teacher efficacy.

Recognizing the source is the first and most important step to helping teachers develop and maintain a high level of efficacy, especially when teaching low achievers. “If we can identify the sources, then we will know where to start if we want to build up a high level of teacher efficacy,” he explains.

For example, if the findings show that teachers’ interactions with school leaders affect their efficacy level, then this is the place to start. More praise from school principals and heads of department can boost teachers’ morale, making them believe that they are indeed capable of helping their students.

“Teachers need to believe that they have the ability to make a difference.” And for that to happen, they first need to believe in themselves.

Josh hopes to help low-achieving students to level up.
Teacher Beliefs in Changing Times

Principal Investigator  Mary Dixon, Deakin University, Australia
Co-Principal Investigator James Albright, University of Newcastle, Australia
Researcher Rose Liang, National Institute of Education, Singapore

BELIEFS DRIVE PRACTICE, says Dr Rose Liang, a Research Scientist with the Learning Sciences Laboratory at NIE. This is especially critical in times of change. Do particular beliefs help or hinder change from taking place?

So in 2007, Rose, together with Mary Dixon, who is now an Associate Professor at Deakin University, set out to study Singapore teachers’ espoused beliefs and their links to practice.

Beliefs and Identity  Why are teacher beliefs so important?

“In the literature, teacher beliefs are an important part of identity,” explains Rose. “The teacher has certain core beliefs, which are the lens that they see the world through, and they make decisions based on them.”

The research was designed to address the complexity of teacher beliefs and their links to practice. And they found that there were indeed many links between beliefs and practice.

“When they actually say that they believe this and they do it too, we know that there’s some alignment,” explains Rose.

Belief Talk  What were the significant beliefs that drive the practice of teachers?

Rose and Mary engaged 75 teachers who had at least 5 years of experience in “belief talk”. Through interviews and focus group discussions, they got these teachers to talk about their classroom practice.

The teachers were asked to use metaphors and examples of critical incidents to illustrate their viewpoints. They were also asked to describe their vision of the ideal classroom.

The findings revealed common themes about the purposes and roles of teachers’ work; their relationships with individual students; and beliefs about the nature of students, among other things.

“Care for students was a recurrent idea. Teachers would spend much effort reaching out to students because they saw themselves playing the role of parent or guardian. This was sometimes at the expense of the pedagogical role, but it was a strong driving force.

Beliefs about how teachers perceived students, especially those in the Normal stream, were also surfaced. While some teachers were found to have stereotypical views of particular groups of students, this did not quell their desire to care for them.

Rose believes it is important to identify teachers whose beliefs are aligned with those of the school or the system as a whole. This is especially important in situations of change, where such teachers can help to mentor and support other teachers in the school.”
CONGRATULATIONS TO our NIE colleagues whose research projects were approved for funding in the 8th Request for Proposals by the Office of Education Research.

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The full list of approved projects is available on the NIE website (www.nie.edu.sg) under Research@NIE.