

Professional Identity and Struggles of Basic Level English Teacher: A Critical Narrative Inquiry

Debraj karki¹
karkidr2016@gmail.com

Abstract

Professional development is a continuous process of learning to empower professional competency and enable teachers to be strong and competent in their professional career. The study critically explores the struggles and professional activities of basic level English teachers in professional development. Critical narrative inquiry has been used in relation to long lived experiences of a participant with a semi – structured telephonic interview. The participant narrates three distinct phases of experiences in teaching profession. The result revealed that participant was innately interested in teaching profession before involvement. But the situated school system discouraged his ideology of teaching profession even he determined to continue his profession involving in different seminars, workshop and study. However, the study further suggests that there is lack of innovating teaching profession from critical perspectives focusing the interactive and transformative environment in classroom. Therefore, the basic level teachers need to re- examine and re – construct the professional activities to address the need, interest and level of learners. Similarly, the study contributes to apply language teaching activities in terms of transformative mood rather than structured model of teaching empowering teachers as an agency

Keywords: professional development, critical narrative inquiry, transformative intellectuals, semi-structured interview, inherited ideology and professional agency

Introduction

Professional development refers to the way of continuous learning either formally and informally to develop deep knowledge and relevant skills. In other words, getting update to the latest skills and methods in profession is known as professional development. Fullen (1995) defines professional development as

¹ Mr. Karki is currently working at Bright Future College, Satdobato, Tribhuvan University, Nepal

“continuous learning focused upon the sum total of formal and informal learning pursued and experienced by the teacher in a compelling learning environment under conditions of complexity and dynamic change” (p.265). It develops observational and peer – review skills such as accessing mentoring, engaging in reflection, professional dialogue and builds strong working relationship among colleagues. It is not necessary to have formal setting for professional development. Teachers' professional development starts from “teachers’ learning: how they learn to learn and how they apply their knowledge in practice to support pupils’ learning” (Avalos cited in Postholm, 2012, p: 406). Therefore, teacher learning in general sense is the initial phase of professional development.

One of the nation wise plan of Ministry of education, School Sector Development Plan (SSDP, 2016) opines “professional development of teachers needs to be given top priority if teaching practices are to improve” (p: 26). This concept clarifies the significant of professional development for the quality of education. For the professional development, one-year professional development course has also been prescribed in that plan. Similarly, in - service teachers’ professional development training and management training program have been going on at present time. “Teachers Professional Development (TPD) has been instrumented in Nepal from 1971B.S. by addressing professional qualification and academic qualification in teaching” (Pokhrel & Behera, 2016). It aims to stand teachers as greater competency and efficiency in professional obligations. “NCED has provided 98.2 % public school teachers as trained till 2009” (Pokhrel & Behera). Most of the teachers said that they need professional judgment, thinking opportunity and experiential opportunity. Similarly, observation and feedback system, innovative and ICT base plan is essential for the active manipulation of teachers (ibids). Then only, professional development teachers bring change in their classroom. However, this policy and research-based statements refers to the need of professional development for the quality of education. It is believed that when teachers are professionally strong, quality education is ensured. In this base, NCED is preparing professional development modalities to aid teachers’ professional development. Such modalities focus on subject knowledge, child – centered and active leaning, inclusive education, formative assessment, differentiation to meet the learning needs of every student. This policy level document is really popular and standardized in from. However, these plans and policies are not found in practical field. The learner's achievement has not been improved as the policy and program targeted. Therefore, this article aims to critically examine the narrative stories of basic level English teachers’ professional development from Freirean critical pedagogy to Henry Giroux ideology.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Critical Theory in Professional Development

Education should be inclusive. It must address all the components of society and particularly the marginalized community. “The oppression of the individual, the group, and the society by self – imposed or extremely imposed influences”

(Peca, 2000, p: 2) are focused in critical theory. People should be emancipated from those kinds of oppressions. They should, therefore, be critique and use their own insights to liberate from oppression. Critical theory practices deep democracy and transforms unjust social structures, policies and beliefs. It does not accept what is truth and knowledge from superficial way. It questions to detect the underlying truth and aims to develop self-awareness, critical understanding and complexity of social life. In this regard, critical theories in professional development are shortly discussed.

Freirean Critical Pedagogy on Professional Development

Critical Professional development (CPD) “frames teachers as politically aware individuals who have a stake in teaching and transforming society” (kohli, picower, Martinez & Ortiz, 2015). It means that critical teachers should be conscious in pedagogy and content which he/ she delivers in the classroom. His intention is not to impart what has been predetermined in curriculum, and proscribed as the content of curriculum. It always dominates the oppressed individuals in the classroom. It assumes students as blank sheet of paper, and their mind should be filled by designed content of capitalist community. Teachers’ role should be to liberate individuals participating in ‘dialogical action’ and provide social justices in the classroom. Dialogical action provokes cooperative learning, builds unity, provide shared leadership and address the needs of teachers. (Freire’s as cited in Kohli, et,al 2015) mentions four aspects of dialogical action: “cooperation, unity, organization and cultural synthesis”(p.11).

Teachers who enter in the classroom and want to teach other children should have been given ample opportunities to scrutinize processes, practices and purpose of schooling and education by empowering the powerless and transforming existing social inequalities and injustices (Shudak & Avoseh, 2015). The existing education system is based on domesticating or banking model in which structured content is imparted to learners ignoring their socio – cultural realities. Instead of such banking model of education Freire focuses on ‘liberating or problem – posing education’ (ibid). Such kind of education provides the power to think critically and leads to the process of becoming and in freirean term as striving to conscientization. (Freire as cited in Shudak & Avoseh 2015) have mentioned four dimensions of critical pedagogy where teachers mean:

- i. Critical understanding of reality
- ii. Making a commitment to utopia and changing reality
- iii. Training those who will make this change
- iv. Dialogue. (p.465)

If our education is guided by those assumptions, students are able to confront and dismantle the structures of inequality and dehumanization. They raise their voice towards banking notion of education. Douglas (2003) focuses on emancipatory education in which oppressed individuals raise their voice against dominant concept of education. Teachers should implement dialogical pedagogy in the classroom.

Teachers as Transformative Intellectuals

Giroux’s notion of teachers as transformative intellectuals claims that teachers should “understand the nature of their own self-formation, and have a

future, see the importance of education as a public discourse, and have some sense of mission in providing students which they need to become critical citizens” (Giroux, 1992, p. 15). Teachers should respect the multicultural scene in the classroom and they should produce socially responsible and critical citizens. In this regard, Hudson (1999) starts his writing as the hard times for teachers in America during 1929s to 1930s. There was pressure for teachers to serve in public school. There was work overload, school violence and professional isolation and deskilling and devaluing of teachers. Students of color discrimination was prevailing every school and community. Corporate controlled media used to call for school reform with voucher plans and tax credits to force public schools to compete private schools in the free market economy, raising standards and mandating competencies through national standardized testing. In such mechanical framework of school reform, it was really hard and challenging to work in public school. Gradually public school became diminishing and crises of economy. Then different leftist theorists emerged to change the schooling scenario of public school. Among them, Henry Giroux came with a book “Ideology, culture and the process of schooling in (1981).

Hudson (1999) adds that teachers should play the role of transformative intellectual. They should transform the injustices, inequalities and discrimination in different parameters of social structures. In order to transform such social stratification, they should use ‘critical dialogue’ (Polychroniou, 2008) which brings social experiences in the classroom. Teachers’ classroom activities should separate an authority from an emancipatory community. Socially deviated students do not participate in classroom interaction. They do not raise any queries to teachers. Present schooling education in Nepal is dominated by this culture. There is the domination of power and authority by teachers. They only focus on certain group of learners who are socially and politically secured. This is the main attack of Giroux. He opines that teacher should create interactive environment in the classroom. Privileged students should participate and raise their cultural social and family matters in the classroom. If students are able to share their socio-cultural activities in the classroom, their learning goes open and creative. Therefore, teacher agency is the main component of transformation in education. Radical educators must begin by asking questions about the forms and resistance already employed by students in order to develop effective pedagogical strategies. Symbolic power ends up reinforcing dominant social relationships. Teachers should prepare critical learners who resist any kinds of injustice occur in classroom and society. In this regard, Frankfurt school theorists, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse published a book ‘in theory and resistance in education (1983) as referred in Hudson (1999).

Critical Narrative Perspectives on Professional Development

Narrative design studies the lived experiences of participants in study. The researchers listen to the stories and relate them with particular theme or concept. Connelly & Clandinin (1990) views narrative inquiry is a studying issue through ‘human experience or lived experience’. It brings “theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived” (p. 3). Critical narrative explores the stories of participants and these stories are constructed and

positioned. Critical reflection provides a framework for deconstructing the stories and exploring assumptions about knowledge, power and reflectivity (Hickson, 2016). It involves the researchers' and participants' capacities to reflect. Deconstructing and reconstructing are the main assumptions of critical narrative. (Fook and Gardner as cited in Hickson, 2016,) suggest that researchers using critical reflection need to be reflexive – that is, appreciating the influences of the researcher's own background, assumptions and expectations on the research process and outcomes (p. 382). It illuminates the researchers' actual reflection in the study. He deconstructs the stories of participants in question and reconstructs these stories in relation to knowledge, power and reality.

In the context of Nepal, teaching learning activities is controlled by banking model. One of the basic level teachers shared his teaching experience that i teach to the students what has been prescribed in the curriculum. The curriculum does not provide interactive opportunities among learners. There are very few literatures which deal teaching profession from critical point of view. Therefore, in this study, I try to reconstruct the stories of my participants from critical point of view. Whatever situated pattern of knowledge is experienced, that is restructured in critical narrative theory.

Method and Materials

The researcher aims to explore “how did the participant develop professional identity in relation to the struggles he experienced in the teaching?”

Context and Participant

The study took place in a public secondary level English school at Lalpur District and the experience of teachers. The participant teacher had strong positive attitude towards teaching profession before he entered. He had a mental framework to implement in his classroom. However, his feelings and experiences have been modified in profession and their professional development due to the situated system and cultures of school. The participant opined that such kind of varied experiences happen due to internal, within school environment, and external, outside school environment. Myself as a staff of the participants right now, is very comfortable to get information regarding his professional attitude and experience from the very beginning of his life. Such collection of experience really supports to insight the internal thoughts of teachers and further supports to bring change in the profession as well.

Changba (pseudonym) was born in Sindhupalanchowak district of Nepal. There was not academic environment in his village. However, he studied up to class two in his village and immediately he got brain tumor. Then he came to Kathmandu for treatment and it took one and half year to be recovered. Although he was healthy, he lost his eyesight forever from his life. But he did not leave his study. He started his education at Namuna Machidra School Lalitpur from class three. He lived in hostel with other friends. He was helpful and talent in study and always taught friends in different topics which was the beginning inspiration to teaching profession. He took SLC in 2056 and joined Pashupati multiple campus, Chabhil

for higher education. After his graduation in major English, joined in a private job of printing brail book for blind students even he had great thirst in teaching profession. He was appointed as a basic level English teacher from the open teacher service commission exam in 2071. He was a disable person; he was always helped by students to go to classroom from the office. Due to his different circumstances, I thought that kind of new story of professional development would be emerged. So I carried this research.

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted semi-structured in depth interview to collect storied experiences from Changba in relation to his professional experience. The interview was taken two times focusing on the three stages of his experiences. The first part of interview focuses on Changba's personal history, feelings and attitudes about his teaching profession before he entered in teaching. The second interview mostly focuses on the professional experiences with his activities of professional development inside and outside school. Similarly, it focuses on the challenges he faced in school from school, staff and administration as well. The last section of second interview is concerned to the reflection of teaching experience and future beliefs on profession. The interview was conducted in Nepali language which was easy for Changba to share his experiences. I did some Short informal discussion when I met him at school.

After the collection of data from interview, i transcribed the corpus data in database systematically. Then I did open coding line by line what the participants has said. I categorized the list of open coding in basic theme based on their common features. That categorical theme was again constrained in global them in terms of different phases of his life and professional experiences in teaching. I took a theme from pre- service interview, then two themes from in service-based interview and one final theme which is related to the reflexive ideas of participant. In such a way, four themes were generated from the in-depth interview.

Result and Discussion

Feeling inherited ideology in teaching profession

Changba described himself as a person who was born for teaching profession. When he helped his friends at hostel they remarked that he taught better than teachers in the classroom. He also felt so happy and enjoyed in helping friends. He planned:

“To join education faculty after SLC, then complete my education till master degree and join teaching profession, it is my inner interest and skills as well. I need to be a good professional teacher in future”.

Changba's these remarks really motivates in teaching profession even he had some physical disabilities. He never thought about physical difficulties, even he was always thinking to enhance professional career. Changba, however had such strong devotion in teaching profession, he could not join for ten years. He was appointed in private job for publishing brail books for blind students. Many teachers

and students used to come to the office and talked about their school activities, such discussion used to poke him and go to school. Once he said:

“If teacher commission announced the vacancy of free teachers’ competition, I will fight and join in the profession. As he thought, the first teacher vacancy was opened in 2069 B.S. and as he filled the form, took exam passed it and ultimately appointed as a primary English teacher in Godawari municipality Lalitpur. It was the fulfillment of big dream.”

These statements assert that he was really interested in teaching profession. Not only was that he be born for teaching. How will his profession continue? But Changba was energetic and enthusiastic in profession before enrolment.

To sum up, even Changba had professionally affirmative vibes and he was inherited in teaching profession ideologically, he does not have new perspective towards teaching profession. Similarly, he did not introduce new self – reflective strategies in teaching. It indicates that he wants to continue the teaching profession from the same traditional ways of teaching.

Hatred and frustration to the profession

Hatred and frustration are the negative factors of profession. People are frustrated when they are demotivated in their work. The thought of Changba has been changed due to the situated system and culture of school. He had thought to do some new and innovative tasks in his profession. He had planned to teach students based on their real-life experiences. But traditional ideology of school and criticizing from physical disabilities were the main factors of professional hatred of him. He remembered the moment

I was tagged as blind teacher by students and I cannot do anything for them was the discouraging factor to my profession. Students did not follow what I said and administration did not care even I told the bad deeds of students. Similarly, I used to enter the class with planning but students never paid attention to the lesson. Such types of negative attitudes changed my thought of profession.

Changba, sometimes thought that he was unfit in this profession. There is quite difference between ideology and reality. He never forgets the event that he did to assistant headmaster of school when he talked her about the attendance in school. She directly told him that you are blind and our students are so clever, how do you control them? Similarly, there are many planning activities then how do you adjust there. So it is very difficult to accept you as our school teacher. Such kind of remarks brought negative thought to school and administration. Changba still remembers that why academic people do not understand the social diversity and distinctiveness of people. Why are they still unknown about the different ability of people? Such questions always emerged in his mind, he told those things in course of my interview. It was the negative climax of Changba towards teaching profession.

The negative feelings towards profession indicate that Changba is bound to the situated norms, values and beliefs. He never dared to raise his voice against such suppressive remarks on him. He did not dare to do counter- argument on it. It is understood that even he has negative feelings, he tolerates all the time which is the regressive mentality of him.

Do best what you have

In the midst of negative surroundings, Changba, convinced himself that all people do not have same kinds of attitude. People perceive others from different ways. However, my major concern is to do best that I have. This metaphor gives positives vibes to him. So, he planned to develop his professional identity:

I planned to study different reference books, participating in workshops or seminars. There are different online sources for professional development such as Google search, you tube and many others. By observing the new insights, I try to implement them in my classroom.

Such kind of positive thought really energized him and does better in the days to go. He has still thought that even he had physical disabilities; he would do his best in the days to go. Such commitment motivated him to accept teaching profession as the main motto oh him. He realized that he was by heart devoted in teaching profession. So, nobody would stop him from his inherited journey of teaching profession.

The fluctuation in teaching profession ended in progressive point to Changba. He finally realized to enhance his professional development. I still think that along with professional development he has to equally think to develop creative and critical thinking in students. He has to create interactive environment in the classroom and support to the indigenous identity of students. Such kind of feelings brings change in his profession and creates new vision in entire teaching profession as well.

The study demonstrates the struggles of a physically disabled teacher in his professional development. Struggles, professional development and socio – cultural complexities are interrelated term each other. His predetermined ideology of professional development has been shaped and reshaped by different factors of within school activities. Changba, school administration and student's relationship has tried to sway the concept of professional development. The situated school system, norms and beliefs have really triggered him to implement his prior thoughts of teaching. Ultimately, own emerging sense of professional agency has positioned him as one of the determined teachers.

Changba, prior notion of professional development is guided by the banking education system. He plans to teach what has been mentioned in curriculum and textbook which does not allow students to share their culture and values. There should be ‘dialogical action’ (cited in Kohli, 2015) which encourages to participate in teaching learning activities. Henry Giroux (1992) claims the role of teachers as transformative intellectual who aims to change the learning scenario of classroom. Such kind of transformative attitude is lacking in Changba, classroom. His intention in classroom is to gain what has been prescribed in curriculum. Students should listen being as a passive listener. There is no doubt that school administration and students' activities in classroom has reached him in transitional moment. Whatever the challenges he had faced in school, he had to raise his voice in front of administration and staff. Once I had a moment when Changba entered school, then

principal asked me to observe the class whether he was fit or not, but I did not observe the class. Why is it necessary to observe the class after he was permanently appointed as basic level teacher? Then principal observed the class herself. Such small moment indicates the power hierarchy from principal and teacher. There are several such moments which have swayed the mental concept of Changba.

They are teacher who empowers and transforms social inequalities and injustices (Shudak & Avoseh,2015) through his pedagogical activities. It is the fact that Changba has been treated as outsider from school administration and to some extent from teachers as well. It does not mean that he has to always be outsider from the school environment. Instead, he has to raise his voice against such inequalities and injustices. He has to tell them the real stories that he has faced in classroom. Such kind of discussion empowers him to do better in his profession. Changba, however seems traditional in nature. He fears to put his dis -satisfied words to the administration. It indicates the exercise of power between school administration and teacher. Such kind of professional inequalities should be seriously examined by concerned agencies.

While situated school system and culture has a significant role for the professional development of Changba, his professional agency as a language teacher plays equally important role for professional development. He was innately guided by better professional career. However, he could not reveal his innate intuition for professional growth. I believe that he should be reflective in his ideology. If power suppresses his inner potentialities, he has to stand against it. When vice principal criticized on his professional activities, he has to immediately come against it. If he did not stand on it, he would be slave on the profession. Therefore, critical professional reflection should be found in his professional behavior.

Conclusion

To sum up, Professional development is the continuous process of enlightening our professional identity. There can be, no doubt, many more obscurities to reach the destination. However, we should critically examine our challenges and if we feel hurt in our destination; we should stand against it and raise our voice as well. Changba story suggests us even he had professional hunger innately, he was unable to expose and revolt towards his attack. It is the negative aspect of him. Due to his silence nature, he was compelled to tolerate the situated system of school which is against professional development of teachers. Therefore, the study comes up with the message of examining our profession in terms of transformation, change and evolution. While taking profession from this lens, several challenges may come and we have to tackle them with our dynamic and critical outlook.

Due to the covid – 19 pandemic and its terrifying impacts on human life, the study was constrained in telephonic semi – structured interview. There might be many more lacunas in the process of data collection. Therefore, it suggests carrying further research on professional development by including other data collection

tools such as participatory observation writing diary and so on. Similarly, the result derived from narrative inquiry of a single person cannot be generalized in other contexts. Therefore, further study can also be conducted by including many participants as well. Nevertheless, a number of practical implications can be drawn from the study. Academic program planner and school supervising team need to pay critical attention on the political and cultural hegemony in academic institutions. Similarly, professional development literature has already emphasized on collaborative cooperative and unite (cited in Kohil et,al, .2015) relationship among school family (administration, staff and students), it is essential to reconsider and reconstruct the harmonious and fresh academic environment in school. In order to transform and facilitate the learning from one context to other, more importance should be given to all the staff and students who are the key partner and stakeholder for sharing open and democratic relationship. “Strong professional culture with a view to improving teaching and learning” (as cited in Yuan & Lee, p. 20) should be established in academic institution. . Similarly, exploration can also be carried out on professional difficulties of physically disabled person in teaching profession.

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