English Teacher Professional Identity Tensions across Language Schools and Public Universities

Jawad Golzar  
*English Department, Herat University, Herat, Afghanistan*

Mir Abdullah Miri  
*English Department, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran*

Mostafa Nazari  
*Department of Foreign Languages, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran*

Bioprofiles

**Jawad Golzar** is the head of English Department at Herat University, in Afghanistan. He holds a master’s degree in TESOL, obtained through Fulbright Scholarship from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He has participated in numerous academic and professional development programs within the past few years. His research interests include teacher identity, educational technology, and writing instruction. Email: jawad.golzar@yahoo.com

**Mir Abdullah Miri** is a PhD candidate in TEFL at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran. His research interests include teacher identity, teacher education, and emotioncy. Email: miri.abdullah@gmail.com

**Mostafa Nazari** is a PhD candidate of Applied Linguistics at Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran. His area of interest is second language teacher education and he has published in *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *RELC Journal*, *TESOL Journal*, *European Journal of Teacher Education*, etc. Email: std_Mostafanazari@khu.ac.ir

Abstract

While research on language teachers’ identity construction has grown exponentially, little is known about the comparative analysis of language-school and university teachers’ identity construction. This study investigated the identity construction tensions of Afghan English language teachers in two different contexts: language schools and universities. Data were collected from 16 language-school and university teachers through extensive semi-structured interviews. Data analyses indicated similar and different tensions across the two contexts in influencing the teachers’ professional identity construction. Language-school teachers mentioned tensions such as nepotism, low teacher autonomy, and low communication between teachers and policymakers, and university teachers referred to tensions such as large heterogeneous classes, heavy workload, and segregated education. Additionally, both groups lamented over various socio-educational tensions such as the negative impact of war on English
learning conceptions, biased perceptions about Afghan teachers, and lack of parental involvement in educational functioning. The study concludes with implications for addressing EFL teachers’ identity tensions.

**Keywords:** Identity construction, teacher identity, identity tensions, language schools, university

**Introduction**

Teacher identity development has gained considerable momentum around the world by supporting teachers to examine their professional identity through thoughtful and critical reflections on their beliefs and classroom practices (Nazari et al., 2021; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020; Barkhuizen & Mendieta, 2020; Kaya & Dikilitaş, 2019; Nagamine, 2012). Identity is a determining factor in teaching as it exerts tremendous and lasting impacts on the quality and outcomes of instruction (Yazan, 2018). It is often argued that understanding teachers’ identity and the contributing factors to identity development are cardinal to teachers’ professional development (Kaya & Dikilitaş, 2019). Teacher identity is a multifaceted and fluid concept tied to “the nature of the educational institution, teacher colleagues, school administrators, their own students, and the wider school community” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 186). The teachers’ beliefs are profoundly influenced by their practicum experience as well (Nagamine, 2012). Overall, these factors could function as significant factors contributing to teachers’ identity construction.

English language teachers may encounter a number of tensions when developing their identities. They may experience emotional conflicts concerning sociocultural, pedagogical, and institutional tensions. It has been argued that teachers’ educational background and competence in the local language and supportive discourses, either administrative or collegial support, could result in more emotional freedom and tensions (Kocabas-Gedik & Hart, 2019). Teachers may also experience institutional pressure when attempting to endorse innovations in teaching and reforming language programs (Yuan, 2018). Furthermore, some teachers may feel jaded along their career pathway and even may not be able to invest time for reflection (Loh & Hu, 2014). Teachers may also face difficulty developing a professional identity due to a lack of dialogue in their workplace. The appropriate response to the above tensions can be yielded through continuous reflection and a critical comparison between teachers’ identity development and their situated work contexts (Xu, 2013).

In the present study, we examine tensions that influence Afghan teachers’ identity
construction. The entrance of coalition forces and a plethora of international NGOs in Afghanistan since 2001 opened up a huge lucrative market for English education (Golzar, 2019). According to Miri (2016), English is typically taught as a foreign language at high schools in Afghanistan. However, students cannot develop a high mastery of English proficiency because of inappropriate teaching approaches and methods that do not hone communicative skills. Additionally, the lack of teaching resources has prevented the teachers from spurring teaching innovations and promoting students' learning performance. The aftermath of such an under-resourced context and less effective teaching methods is that students are confronted with a number of learning tensions in their immediate learning and English subjects at the collegial level.

English language teachers have also been confronted with some professional tensions in Afghanistan. First, they have difficulty teaching and managing large heterogeneous classes (Sarwari, 2018). Second, they have been professionally and emotionally challenged in an under-resourced context to integrate educational technology into their lessons while maintaining mixed perceptions (Golzar, 2019). Teachers’ heavy workload also negatively influences their investment to support the students and negatively affects their commitment to students’ growth (Golzar & Miri, 2020). However, most of the previous studies have referred to Afghan L2 teachers’ professional tensions intermittently and indirectly, and there is little systematic focus on the impacts of such tensions on their identity construction.

Yazan (2018) argues that context plays an important role to determine identity development and L2 teacher learning processes. Despite the widely-acknowledged understanding of teacher identity as a contextual concept, little research has studied how teacher identity is shaped in institutional contexts (Donaghue, 2020). More specifically, little research exists to examine English language teachers’ identity formation across different teaching settings. Therefore, this study aims to comparatively examine the tensions of identity construction of English language teachers in two distinct contexts (language schools and public universities) in Afghanistan. It addressed the following questions:

1. What tensions do language school-level and university-level Afghan L2 teachers experience?
2. How do these tensions influence the teachers’ professional identity construction?
Literature Review

Language Teacher Identity Construction

Teacher identity construction is a “complex ecology” that includes societal, political, institutional, and social practices in contexts of competing and power-relations discourses (De Costa & Norton, 2017). It has been argued that English language teachers construct distinct identities and perform a number of roles from passive technicians to transformative intellectuals inside the classrooms and beyond (Kaya & Dikilitaş, 2019). These identities and roles are directly connected to the teachers’ emotional labors (Zembylas, 2003; Song, 2016; Kocabaş-Gedik & Hart, 2019), agency (Day, 2002; Pease-Alvarez & Thompson, 2011; Buchanan, 2015), autonomy (Chuk, 2010; Teng, 2019; Xu, 2015), and the supportive contexts they operate in (Basamala & Machmud, 2018; Kaya & Dikilitaş, 2019).

The institutional context plays a pivotal role in (re)constructing teachers’ professional identities. Institutionally speaking, teachers may experience several tensions arising from the interaction between personal and institutional attributes. In this regard, Kaya and Dikilitaş (2019) held that identity development is more effective when teachers work in a supportive environment. Moreover, Xu (2013) argued that when teachers critically make comparisons between their past and present experiences in various contexts, these interactions help them shape a context-specific mentality in light of institutional peculiarities that lead to their active identity development.

Yazan (2018) conceptualized language teacher identity development through five lenses: (1) beliefs and perceptions of self; (2) institutional expectations and social positioning; (3) teacher’s identity as fluid; (4) (re)shaping identity through social interactions inside communities of practice and beyond; and (5) teachers’ emotions. Relatedly, Olsen (2008) stated that teachers’ life trajectories are mutually connected to how teachers perceive their self while interacting with the teaching context as affected by interactions with others in various environments. He referred to the critical role of contextual and work-related factors in teachers’ identity construction. Olsen (2008) also stated that teachers’ life trajectories are mutually connected to how they perceive themselves while interacting with the teaching context as affected by interactions with others in various environments.

Professional Identity Tensions

Most English language teachers experience identity tensions in their profession every day, which influence various aspects of their professional practice. Such socio-emotional labors are
the products of tensions and struggles in priorities, teaching goals, ideology, and the beliefs surrounding professional, institutional, and individual power (Benesch, 2017; Loh & Liew, 2016). For example, van der Wal et al. (2019) examined the impact of professional identity tensions on behavioral responses and affective appraisal. After analyzing 126 semi-structured reflective journals written by early-career teachers within a school year period, they found that the degree of affective appraisals varied from low to high and behavioral responses happened in forms of support seeking, reflection, and directive actions. The researchers concluded that this impact is multi-faceted and addressing the tensions is highly important for teacher training programs.

In another study, Pillen et al. (2013) investigated the reported professional identity tensions of 182 novice teachers in terms of experienced feeling and coping strategies. They claimed that these tensions are a result of “an unbalanced personal and professional side of (becoming) a teacher” (p. 240). The tensions involved the teachers’ struggles between ideal and reality. In their study, female teachers experienced more emotional labors compared to their male counterparts. However, the senior student teachers reported almost the same number of tensions compared to first-year students. Professional identity tensions invoked a range of emotions, anger, helplessness, and understanding of flaws. Calling for support, talking with the significant others, and looking for a solution, majority of the novice teachers mapped out and followed coping strategies to alleviate these emotional labors.

Identity Development across Teaching Contexts

The context of teaching has been considered as a significant factor shaping teacher identities (Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Yazan, 2018). For example, research indicates that top-down school policies limit teachers’ control over their teaching, autonomy, agency, and identities (e.g., Buchanan, 2015; Day, 2002). Barahona and Ibaceta-Quijanes (2019) posited that teachers might suffer from poor working conditions including lack of resources, large class size, heavy workload, short-term contracts that negatively influence their job satisfaction, school administrators’ and students’ misbehavior in the workplace, learners’ low degree of motivation, learning performance, socioeconomic background, negative perceptions toward English education, and lack of parental support. The teachers in their study believed that these factors negatively affect their job satisfaction and identity development and that the school community is a determining factor in reconstructing their ongoing identities. Johnson (2006) also argued that it would be quite a hurdle to get policymakers and administrators on board to consider
alternative types of professional identity development and allocate necessary financial support for teachers to maintain such development.

Two important contexts that largely constrain teachers’ identity development are school (i.e., private and state schools) and university (i.e., higher education institutions). According to Oolbekkink-Marchand et al. (2014), school and university contexts influence teachers’ beliefs, emotions, and identity in different ways. After investigating the differences and similarities of perspectives on teaching and learning of the two sites, Oolbekkink-Marchand et al. (2014) distinguished three perspectives: “(1) a development orientation with shared regulation, (2) a knowledge orientation with strong regulation, and (3) an opinion orientation with loose regulation. School teachers scored higher on the first perspective compared to university teachers who scored higher on the third perspective” (p. 799). Moreover, Hebert (2015) found that school teachers perceived teaching dual enrollment courses prestigious while college faculty did not.

Despite the curricular, infrastructural, and institutional differences between schools and universities, little research has examined how teacher identity is constructed in these comparative contexts. Examining this aspect of teacher identity construction is significant as many studies have attested to the influential role of institutional factors in teachers’ identity construction, more specifically the tensions they experience (e.g., Day, 2002; Donaghue, 2020; Buchanan, 2015). Additionally, Afghan L2 teachers are face with many contextual exigencies that complicate their work (Khawary & Ali, 2015) and are likely to influence their identity development. Moreover, the voices of Afghan English language teachers have not been heard due to the lack of compiled teacher identity research in this context. In this study, we examine the tensions of Afghan L2 teachers’ identity construction in the two language-school and university contexts, as guided by the framework indicated in Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework
The present research examines three types of identity-related tensions, including sociocultural, institutional, and pedagogical ones that influence teachers’ identity development across private language schools and public universities. As Yazan (2018) states, “it is imperative to critically examine the sociocultural contexts in which L2 learning to teach processes take place if we want to better document and understand how [teachers] develop professional knowledge and grow as teachers”. Additionally, research indicates that teachers experience tensions in the new teaching contexts with various institutional policies (Xu, 2013; Trent, 2017). Furthermore, pedagogical barriers, including ineffective teaching approaches and content as well as exam-
oriented system have been documented to negatively influence teachers’ identity (Trent, 2012). Therefore, this study moves along the above line of research and examines how the context of teaching (language school and university) influences the teachers’ identity construction tensions.

![Conceptual framework for identity formation across institutions](image)

**Figure 1.** The conceptual framework for identity formation across institutions.

## Method

### Context and participants

English language teachers work either in language schools or universities in Afghanistan. Many language schools exist across the country, and most are run by the private sector. Most English teachers are paid a low salary (Khawary & Ali, 2015), and even their job security has not been ensured, and it has been jeopardized by schools, students, and market demands. However, university teachers have secured a more high-paying job.

Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used to recruit the teachers considering preselected criteria, including teaching context and years of teaching. Depending on research objectives, time, and available resources, the researchers did not select a specific number of participants in the two distinct sites at first. Instead, they began interviewing a number of teachers that are needed to obtain “a reliable sense of thematic exhaustion and variability within data set” (Guest et al. 2006, p. 65), explored the interplay between each individual teacher, the context, and their values and beliefs as a teacher acted together (Cross...
& Hong, 2012).

Once transcripts were thematically analyzed, the researchers recognized that data saturation was achieved after interviewing two groups of participants. The first group included eight English teachers working in six different private language schools holding English for General Purposes (EGP) courses for thousands of students with different proficiency levels. The other group involved eight faculty members teaching English at two different public universities providing a variety of English programs, including Academic writing, Linguistics, American and British Literature, Novel, Research Writing courses and so forth over the four-year period. Among the school-level teachers, two were female, and six were male. These teachers' experiences ranged from one to eight years, and their ages ranged from 23 to 28. Additionally, they had an educational profile of BA and MA in TESOL, English Literature, Translation Studies, Political Science, and Engineering. Among the university-level teachers, one was female, and seven were male. Their experience and age ranges were 4-11 and 24-39 years, respectively. Moreover, seven teachers held an MA in TESOL (six), and English Literature (one), and one of them held a Ph.D. in Education (Table 1).

Table 1
Profiles of Afghan Teachers of English in private language schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Educational background</th>
<th>Types of schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8 Years</td>
<td>Undergrad in Political Sciences, AF</td>
<td>Private language school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>BA in English Literature, AF</td>
<td>Private language school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>MA graduate student in TESOL</td>
<td>Private language school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>BA in English Literature, AF</td>
<td>Private language school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>BA in English Literature, AF</td>
<td>Private language school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>BA in Engineering, AF</td>
<td>Private language school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>MA in English Translation, Iran</td>
<td>Private language school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Undergrad in English Literature, AF</td>
<td>Private language school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>MA in TESOL, Afghanistan</td>
<td>Public university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>PhD in Education, USA</td>
<td>Public university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>MA in TESOL, USA</td>
<td>Public university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>MA in TESL, Malaysia</td>
<td>Public university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>MA in TESOL, Iran</td>
<td>Public university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>MA in Teaching Methods, India</td>
<td>Public university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>MA in English Lit, USA</td>
<td>Public university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>MA in TESL, Malaysia</td>
<td>Public university</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through online semi-structured interviews. We asked the teachers to elaborate on the tensions they feel as influencing their identity, their instruction, and their interpersonal relationships. The teachers were asked the question: What tensions do you feel that influence you and your work. The follow-up questions focused on various sociocultural, pedagogical, and institutional tensions that influenced the teachers’ agency, emotions,
interpersonal relationships, and collegial identities. The interviews were run in Persian (L1) and lasted on average 50 minutes.

The transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a research tool that offers in-depth, multifaceted interpretations of data and that is “an accessible and theoretically-flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data” (p. 5). The process of data analysis involved several stages. First, the interview responses were transcribed, and the researchers attempted to become familiar with the raw data. Second, the reported tensions were coded to generate an initial understanding of the data across the separate groups of teachers. Third, the list of codes was further searched for meaningful relationship(s) among the items, and then the codes were grouped around specific themes. Then the themes were reviewed and refined by putting them against the primary data to support the emerging interpretations in a constant-comparison manner. Finally, the themes were defined, labeled, and tabulated. It must be mentioned that across the data analysis stages, the researchers discussed the data in several rounds to make a better sense of the thematization process.

**Results**

Data analyses indicated that the teachers mentioned various sociocultural, institutional, and pedagogical tensions (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Participants’ Reported Tensions</th>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University Teachers</td>
<td>Language School Teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lack of parental involvement</td>
<td>• Large heterogeneous classes</td>
<td>• Nepotism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The negative impact of war/ Ethnic perceptions about teachers</td>
<td>• Heavy workload</td>
<td>• Divergent textbooks and curriculums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Unclear goals of students for learning/ Students’ lack of interest in learning English</td>
<td>• The new academic socialization process</td>
<td>• Incongruent definition of proficiency level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lack of locally relevant materials</td>
<td>• Segregated education</td>
<td>• Low communication between policymakers and teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Little autonomy and low teacher agency</td>
<td>• Low-cooperative students</td>
<td>• Low teacher autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Financial problems/ Low payment &amp; job insecurity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Collegial identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Similar Tensions between the Two Groups

The analysis of the teachers’ responses indicated five significant tensions that both English language school and university teachers face.

Low parental involvement in students’ English learning was a barrier to providing quality education to the students and teacher-student relationships. For example, Ahmed, associate professor of English, claimed, "rarely will you see that parents come to university and inquire about their children's education." Ibrahim, a novice teacher, stated that sometimes parents visit the university when they realize that their children have failed some courses. According to this teacher, the university does not have any mechanism or program to collect parents’ feedback concerning their children’s education. Almost all the teachers asserted that parents are not involved in the decision-making at their language schools. The problem with this situation was that the low degree of parental involvement diminishes the effective communication between teachers and parents, which in turn negatively influences the quality of education students receive: “Most parents do not even know about their children’s proficiency level, let alone about the teachers or the curriculum", Ibrahim stated.

According to the teachers, Afghanistan has experienced a few decades of war, and students have experienced different literacy socialization processes, which has caused having multilevel classes. Most of the teachers argued that some of their students come from insecure parts of the country, where they have not studied English during their K-12 education, which results in difficulty learning the materials. According to a university teacher, this has caused having heterogeneous classes at universities, which makes teaching challenging in terms of utilizing multiple teaching methods. In the same vein, Obied, a novice language-school teacher, claimed that the country's civil wars had prevented some students from attending private language schools and learning English; as a result, some have started learning English very late. Salma, an associate professor of English, also claimed that war had restricted some students' mentalities about learning and teaching English because they think that those who teach English promote the culture and ideologies of people in English-speaking countries: “The value of learning English is not clear to many people in our context. There are a few people who show a negative reaction toward learning English. Some make fun of learning this language”.

Moreover, the teachers unanimously complained about some of their students’ unclear goals for English learning. They reported this issue as a barrier to humanizing their teaching and tailoring curriculum to their needs and interests. For example, Monir, an assistant professor, believed that because English is not tested in Kankor (the national university
matriculation), students who prepare for this test do not work on their English skills. Thus, when they enter university, some of them have difficulty with this subject. In the same vein, several language-school teachers argued that students are enrolled in English courses without knowing the value of learning English. For example, Farhan stated, "some parents force their children to learn English; it creates a tension for us because we need to deal with demotivated students."

Teachers in both contexts claimed that they deal with a lack of locally relevant instructional materials. They argued that instructional materials are not based on their students’ needs and interests. Nevertheless, in some cases, language-school teachers are not allowed to design their own teaching materials because all tasks are dictated in their lesson plans, and they are required to teach the lesson plan. Lida, a schoolteacher, stated that she does not have the knowledge and experience for developing materials: “We have to prepare our materials. We might be good at teaching, but we are not experienced at material development”. At the university level, teachers rarely use context-sensitive learning materials, as the teachers argued. Ishmael added that they assign topics or tasks relevant to their context, but the materials are not designed exclusively for Afghan L2 learners: “There is an urgent need to develop materials for some of the ESP courses we teach because some textbooks are complicated for our students—they are not designed for our context.”

Low agency and little autonomy were other common issues among the teachers. Many teachers at the university level argued that rules and policies mandated by the Ministry of Higher Education has hindered their agency and decision-making processes. For example, Milad claimed that he could not assign grades for different formative assessment strategies in his courses because the Ministry of Higher Education has already mandated fixed grades for the mid-term and the final exams. This issue was evident among language-school teachers as well. A number of them, for example, argued that school managers mainly decide on the instructional and assessment strategies teachers need to use in their courses; teachers have little voice in the decisions made. According to Nader, a novice schoolteacher, "usually language school owners are not experts. They don’t collect feedback from teachers. If feedback is shared, they are not used. Some language school heads/owners don’t have backgrounds in English, but they decide the curriculum and method of teaching for teachers”.

**University Teachers’ Tensions**

The university teachers stated that large, heterogeneous classes are a pedagogical barrier as they cannot gear their instruction to the needs of the learners, and this, in turn, influences their
socio-affective statuses. For example, one teacher argued that because she has around 50 multilevel students, she could not use different in-class activities or give adequate feedback to the students. Ahmad attributed heterogeneous classes to the lack of sound proficiency tests to screen the candidates and pointed to its associated emotional conflicts: “large class size is very challenging. I felt disappointed and demotivated at the end of the program because I did not achieve the planned learning outcomes”.

Moreover, some teachers emphasized that the heavy workload at university negatively affects their productivity. This has prevented the teachers from allocating time to their professional development as “[they] are sometimes assigned tasks beyond [their] responsibility despite the heavy workload, such as translating documents.” Such tensions were assumed to negatively influence the teachers’ productivity, their investment in their personal-professional development, and their sense of community membership. This issue was exacerbated by the fact that some students are not interested in their fields of study because they receive little or no support as to what major is connected to their background, interest, and future plans. These tensions were also assumed to intensify the complexities of teaching in addition to the workload the teachers are expected to fulfill. These sociocultural and pedagogical tensions were viewed as demotivating the teachers.

The academic socialization process at university was considered as totally new for students, especially co-educational classes. Co-education was considered as a new phenomenon for the students because boys and girls are segregated during their K-12 education, which roots in the sociocultural idiosyncrasies of Afghanistan. Salma connected this issue to culture and argued, “co-education happens, and it brings with some problems. Some students are very shy or religious, and they avoid working in a group with students of the opposite gender”.

**Language-School Teachers’ Tensions**

Nepotism was reported as one of the major problems in Afghanistan’s language schools that hinders the transparency in teacher recruitment and demoralizes the practicing teachers. Most of the teachers claimed that the absence of a sound teacher recruitment mechanism has negatively affected the recruitment procedures in language schools. For example, one teacher stated that ethnicity and religious ideology are at play in selecting the teachers. Lida argued that the unfair teacher recruitment mechanism, low-quality teacher evaluation, and inconsiderate teacher rewarding mechanism have demotivated many teachers in her context. She added, “some schools accept connections when it comes to hiring teachers. There are
teachers who are hired regardless of their qualifications—all because they know someone who has power or influence”. In the same line, one teacher suggested, “I think if there is appreciation, this should be for everyone. I believe appreciations and rewards should be based on a specific mechanism”.

Diversity of textbooks and syllabi was another tension for the teachers in enacting a coherent set of pedagogical practices. Moheb claimed that because language schools are not required to use coherent materials, educational centers often teach different materials, which are not based on CEFR levels. As a result, when these students transfer to other language schools, teachers have to deal with multilevel classes. Farid, a novice teacher, also stated:

*There is no mechanism or policy mandated by our government to check the program outcomes of the private language schools. Different schools use different curriculum and methods; as a result, the graduates learn different things. Some schools have prepared their own materials—they have their own definition of levels.*

Moreover, lack of communication between policymakers and teachers was considered as hindering teacher autonomy and agency, especially in relation to peer collaboration. This problem was connected to the low expertise of policymakers in that most of them do not hold a background in English education and do not believe in cogent standards of educational functioning. Karim, an experienced school teacher, claimed that in some schools there is no alignment between program learning outcomes and the annual action plans, which has created an undisciplined environment that disappoints teachers:

*Because private schools do business and have competitions among themselves, some prioritize students to their teachers, even if the act is not in compliance with their core values and mission. They ignore the value of communicating information with teachers regarding their programs and integrating the evidence-based data into their decision-making.*

Similarly, another teacher referred to the wrong positionality of such non-educationists and maintained: “Although language school owners are not o experts, they decide the curriculum and method of teaching for teachers. These school owners also do not collect feedback form teachers. If feedback is shared, they are not used in decision making”.

Another barrier to the teachers’ professional identity construction was low teacher payment, which may result in teacher attrition. The teachers stated that low teacher payments make their lives difficult and eventuates in switching and even abandoning their jobs. This
problem was also seen as influencing their collegial identity. For example, Saeed, a schoolteacher, pointed out, “teachers usually have problems with their payments. They don’t receive a high salary when they teach English. By the end of the month, they are already broke. This directly affects the quality of our teaching”.

The low payment was reported to affect the collaboration and collegiality among teachers negatively. According to one teacher, rarely will you find teachers to take the time to collegiate with each other and grow professionally because of their hectic schedules. Likewise, Mansour, a schoolteacher affirmed, “Some teachers have to teach several hours back to back in different language schools to make money. So, the quality hinders because teachers cannot allocate sufficient time to their courses”.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the tensions of professional identity development among Afghan school-level and university-level teachers. The similarities between the two groups of teachers seem quite ubiquitous in the two contexts.

Professional identity includes agency or “the active pursuit of professional development and learning in accordance with a teacher’s goals” (Beauchamp & Thomas, p. 177). The “construction of teacher identity is at bottom affective; dependent upon power and agency,” and as a result of discourses in the teaching context and beyond (Zembylas, 2003, p. 213). Low teacher agency is the tension that teachers encounter in both settings in this study. Similarly, top-down systems often negatively influence teacher identity development by constraining teacher agency (Day, 2002), as the teachers of this study pointed out. Pappa et al. (2019) found that “language, [in-class] tensions and temporal, material and developmental resources were perceived as tensions limiting teacher agency. In contrast, autonomy, openness to change, teacher versatility, and collegial community were found to support teacher agency” (p. 1). Thus, teachers’ agency is mutually connected to the professional identity and how teachers are influenced by and interact within different contexts (Buchanan, 2015). The teachers’ recognition of their identities in practice leads to a sense of agency and empowers teachers to achieve their intended goals and transform the teaching context (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). As the teachers mentioned, multiple institutional and pedagogical tensions impede exercising their agency effectively and prevent enacting their preferred practices, including designing context-sensitive tasks, lack of clear learning goals, and low communication between policymakers and teachers.
Afghan English Language teachers can use different strategies to exercise their agency and (re)construct their related teacher identity. Pushing back is a strategy to exhibit agency in which no connection or fit exists between teachers and their career contexts. It is a type of teacher's resistance by which they resolve the existing tension (Pease-Alvarez & Thompson, 2011). In contrast, stepping up is an agency-related strategy in which a teacher pursues "to go above and beyond the perceived expectations of her role in the professional context. When a teacher's identity fit with her local school culture and practices, her agency can be viewed as stepping up" (p. 710).

Another tension lies in students’ lack of interest in learning English, which can negatively influence teacher identity development. In opposite, once students enjoy doing the activities in the classroom, it will have a rewarding impact on the teacher (Salinas & Ayala, 2018).

Lynn and Smith-Maddox (2007) claim that teachers whole-heartedly maintain students' interest, and they realize the interest differently due to their distinct values and beliefs. The teachers in this study claimed that they have difficulty teaching and experience emotional labor when students do not participate in the learning process due to their disinterest in classroom activities, negative evaluation of their own practice, and emotional discomfort (Song, 2016).

Lack of locally relevant materials is also a pedagogical and institutional tension in Afghanistan context. This tension did not allow teachers to foster novelties in teaching (Yuan, 2018) and support learners’ academic performance (Miri, 2016). As suggested by the Ministry of Higher Education in Afghanistan, English education requires reform in adopting language materials. This reform should be aimed at removing the hurdles teachers encounter when shaping their professional identity. Such change begins with a bottom-up construction incorporating indigenous resources as well as local and outside experts’ collaboration (Canagarajah, 2006). Once this reform happens from the ground-up structure, it positively influences teacher identity development by removing emotional labor and existing tensions in the teaching profession. Students reciprocally interact with locally relevant materials; it, in turn, improves their academic performance and ultimately releases the tensions teachers feel when teaching the English language.

The lack of parental involvement is also common in both public universities and language schools. Similarly, one of the tensions teachers encounter in developing and accomplishing their roles is the lack of parents’ cooperation (Cardelle-Elawar & Sanz de Acedo Lizarraga, 2010). Teachers can justify their positionality in the career by interacting with parents and students in the social context (Pearce & Morrison, 2011). The teachers also
encourage parental involvement for particular intentions, such as creating a nurturing environment, discussing assignments, and holding parent-teacher meetings and school events (Rudney, 2005). Such involvement is crucial for learners’ success, and parents need to maintain a positive attitude toward their role for their children’s development. Parents can play different roles, including being a supporter, collaborator, communicator, advisor, and nurturer (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Active parental involvement as a contributing factor that can positively influence teachers’ identity development and minimize the degree of tensions and emotional labor. Afghan parents should become aware of their important role in their children’s education. However, such awareness requires infrastructural changes that cultivate in parents’ perceptions of sound educational standards generation by generation.

The differences between university and school English teachers’ tensions show that their most daunting tension is teaching large, heterogeneous classes in the university. Sarwari (2018) thoroughly reviews the issue in Afghanistan and suggests the following alternatives to tackle this tension: conducting learners’ need analysis, developing teaching materials based on the actual needs, integrating technology, and using peer-feedback. The heavy workload is another severe tension in public universities. Khawary and Ali (2015) identify heavy workload as one of the major contributing factors to teachers’ turnover in Afghanistan context. Barahona & Ibaceta-Quijanes (2019) argue that this factor hampers teachers’ identity development and job satisfaction, which is in line with what the teachers in this study said. It also results in a low degree of teachers’ investment and commitment to their students’ growth (Golzar, 2020).

However, the language schoolteachers encounter different tensions as compared to university teachers. They reported a low level of autonomy as one of the major professional identity development tensions. Autonomy and identity are reciprocally interrelated (Teng, 2019), and it has a positive influence on teacher development (Xu, 2015). Chuk (2010) argues that teacher autonomy takes in teachers’ attitudes, capabilities, enactment, and evaluation, and its development is multi-dimensional, ever-changing, non-linear, and sensitive to the environment. On this account, it could be argued that Afghan L2 teachers are under the duress of top-down policies that not only restrict teacher autonomy but also sanction the way the teachers perceive their own role, hence the teachers’ lack of belief in their potentials.

School teachers also reported financial problems, low payment, and job insecurity. Short-term contracts undesirably affect teachers’ job satisfaction (Barahona & Ibaceta-Quijanes, 2019). According to Johnson (2006), "equally important tension will be getting school administrators and educational policy-makers to recognize the legitimacy of alternative forms of professional development and provide the financial support that will enable teachers
to sustain them over time." These differences arise from language learners’ population, students’ demands, varied teachers’ autonomy, institutions’ customer-oriented approach, and the degree of financial support. However, such tensions root in the higher-order educational climate of Afghanistan and require amendments from top policymakers to reconsider their investment in education.

Conclusions and Implications

Teachers' professional histories, learning, experiences, school contexts, and the educational system influence their professional selves. Language school and university teachers in Afghanistan have experienced sociocultural, institutional, and pedagogical tensions over the past decades, yet there are few systematic studies on the professional tensions the teachers face in these two settings. The critical comparison between the two groups’ tensions provides a rich understanding of teacher identity construction, the way identity formation works within different contexts, and how teachers respond to these tensions (Xu, 2013). The similarities (low autonomy/teacher agency, lack of locally-relevant materials, lack of parental involvement, etc.) and differences (large heterogeneous classes, heavy workload, financial problems, collegial identity, etc.) between the two groups of teachers open up a venue for teacher educators, school administrators and policy-makers to act upon accordingly. More specifically, teacher educators could introduce topics and articles about possible identity tensions and support the pre-service teachers become familiar with idiosyncrasies of real context (Delgado, 2016); they could also give the teachers opportunities to muse over, discuss, and reflect upon such tensions, and then elucidate possible coping strategies. It will be also a great leverage if teacher educators make teacher education programs more emotionally and culturally responsive, as well as context-specific. They could encourage criticality and integrate field experiences in the programs (Park, 2012). Creating such an awareness and making pre-service teachers mindful support them to respond accurately to the same tensions in the workplace, yet continuous self-reflection plays a pivotal role in this identity development process (Kaya & Dikilitaş, 2019). The role of teachers themselves as change agents is also indispensable in improving English language education in this context and molding a dynamic, well-suit and strong professional identity.

In a similar vein, it will be highly effective to support teachers if school administrators could decrease teachers’ workload so that teachers have much freedom for their professional development. They can also create a conducive environment for teachers and promote colleagues’ support by holding informal regular plenary meetings at schools. Likewise, it will
be a great leverage if policymakers acknowledge teachers’ voices and invest more in teachers’ capability by providing professional development programs (Nazari et al., 2021). Yet, a synergic relationship and a cooperative partnership need to be developed between teacher educators, administrators, and policymakers to accommodate teachers’ concerns within the schools, educational systems, and generally the way English teaching/learning is conceptualized.

This study was a small step and suggested further research on teacher identity formation and the effects of tensions on teachers’ identity sense-making. An exigency exists to explore the correlations between teacher identities, agentive behaviors, and autonomy across language schools and universities and examine the impacts of contextual factors on Afghan teachers’ professional identity development. Moreover, the teachers’ behavioral patterns and responses to the tensions driven by sociocultural, institutional, and pedagogical challenges need to be examined through a vigorous critical lens and multiple data collection methods that allow them to understand multiple aspects of identity construction. Finally, it seems that a synergic model of identity construction may be a useful way ahead in studying identity tensions across and within teaching contexts. Such a model can involve components of professional trajectory, the tensions, teachers’ agency, emotional responses, and social interactions inside and outside the community of practice. This model can also propose practical and detailed guidelines for teachers to effectively respond to identity tensions and (re)construct their professional identity. Additionally, incorporating coping strategies and related studies into English teacher education programs support teachers to ease the tensions effectively and improve their mental wellbeing during the career.

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