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UNEARTHING THE VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCE OF NOVICE EFL TEACHERS IN SHAPING THEIR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of novice English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in both formal education (FE) and non-formal education (NFE) settings, with a focus on professional identity development. It examined how these experiences contribute to forming their professional identity with the research question: What is the impact of vulnerability and resilience on the professional identity development of novice EFL teachers in both FE and NFE settings? This qualitative research adopted a descriptive narrative approach. Data collection was done through interviews and a literature review. The data collected was analyzed through the use of coding and triangulation techniques. Four novice EFL teachers; two FE teachers and two NFE teachers were selected to participate in this research. The findings identified four impacts of vulnerability and resilience on the professional identity development of novice EFL teachers; 1) self-awareness, 2) adaptability to challenges, 3) institutional support, and 4) professional commitment.

Keywords: novice teacher, teacher identity, teacher resilience, teacher vulnerability.

INTRODUCTION

The journeys of novice EFL teachers are characterized by a complex interplay of vulnerability and resilience as they navigate the challenges and opportunities of the FE and NFE settings. Teachers' life stories require describing, clarifying, justifying, challenging, and critiquing their behaviors that have triggered strong emotional responses regarding perceived self-image and self-esteem. In other words, vulnerability is revealed (Bacova & Turner, 2023). For novice EFL teachers, particularly as they navigate the complexities of teaching in both FE and NFE settings, becoming a confident teacher is a process of self-discovery and identity construction (González, 2024). In this case, schools and institutions may not provide teachers with sufficient support and resources for the development of their skills and knowledge (Barkhuizen, 2021; Ganjali et al., 2019). The need for continuous professional development and support is highlighted by the problems faced by new EFL teachers including limited

teaching experience, pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge of the education sector (Syam et al., 2023). Teng (2020) emphasized that teachers can recognize and reflect on their vulnerability: It is a multifaceted emotional experience that can be experienced in a variety of situations (Avillanova & Kuswando, 2019).

The grand theory suggests that it arises from the experience of teaching. According to Laski, as cited in Ireland (2021), internal and external factors make them vulnerable. Internal factors include the feelings, self-efficacy, and competence of the teacher. External factors include the school system and the academic environment. Vulnerabilities such as teachers' feelings, self-efficacy, and competence can be caused by teachers' internal conflicts (Mbato & Triprihatmini, 2022). Teachers' competence can also be a source of vulnerability. Bandura, as cited by Ireland (2021), concerning competence, teachers' perceptions of their abilities can be a source of low self-efficacy. Teachers managed their vulnerability through increased communication and individual learning. They also shared that they had to be patient and understanding. They coped by adapting to changing circumstances, enjoying the work, working collaboratively, and being clear about their roles (Andriani & Mbato, 2022; Molloy & Bearman, 2019).

In FE settings, novice EFL teachers are often confronted with structured curricula, standardized assessments, and institutional expectations. These can support and constrain their professional development (Abdalrahim, 2019). These environments can provide a framework within which a teacher can develop their pedagogical skills, but also present challenges. In the classroom management, student engagement, and maintaining rigorous academic standards. The structure of FE creates pressures that can expose a teacher's vulnerabilities. At the same time, it provides stability and clear guidelines. In contrast, the NFE setting offers a more flexible and dynamic educational environment. It is often characterized by community programs, language schools, and individual teachers (Pruitt, 2019; Smith & Duckworth, 2020). These contexts foster a sense of autonomy and creativity among novice EFL teachers and allow for the use of innovative and adaptive teaching practices (Liu & Chang, 2024; Teng, 2019). However, lacking standardized structures and support systems can leave teachers insecure and ambiguous. Navigating the less predictable aspects of their professional roles requires a high degree of resilience (Asaoka, 2019; Diasti & Kuswando, 2020). In brief, based on the above background and literature, the aim of this research is encapsulated in the

research question: what is the impact of vulnerability and resilience on the professional identity development of novice EFL teachers in both FE and NFE settings?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Formal and Non-Formal Education

An important element of the formal curriculum is that it is organized and governed by clearly defined rules or features (Alnajjar, 2021). The main limitation of the formal concept is that it is not a description of what is on offer. The formal curriculum is not a representation of everything that teachers do, teach, or create. Nor does it show what learners experience in those classrooms. This is typically found in schools where the curriculum is one that the institution has set. Classes tend to be larger, with standardized assessments and an emphasis on adherence to particular approaches to teaching. Bamkin (2020) highlights that FE focuses on teachers' perspectives and planning for the core areas of moral education, ignoring the details of everyday teaching practice and efforts outside the curriculum hotspots. This means that analyzing the formal and written curriculum cannot be representative of how each teacher interprets and delivers it, or what pupils think and learn from interacting with it. The curriculum is more flexible in NFE settings. The size of the class may vary, but it is often smaller than in a formal setting. In settings such as language institutes or private tuition, teachers may be able to tailor their teaching to the needs and interests of the students.

Each school and teacher is different. The formal curriculum may not tell us much about how the curriculum is delivered in the classroom. NFE learning is more difficult to define clearly than FE learning, partly because they overlap (Johnson & Majewska, 2022). The main difference between FE and NFE learning is the structure of the two forms of learning. However, there are challenges for novice EFL teachers in FE and NFE settings. In these settings, novice teachers may feel vulnerable. This may be due to pressure to adhere to specific ways of teaching or to fear standardized testing.

Vulnerability and Resilience in Identity Development

Teachers are faced with a situation that can be physically and emotionally draining. They react differently. Every teacher can endure a difficult situation. They dare to face any obstacle they experience. Both novice and experienced EFL teachers can gain

valuable understanding and guidance from an EFL teacher's story. Social pressures, family expectations, and societal norms can make people vulnerable (Beutel et al., 2019). It can be contradictory and confusing to try to fit in or live up to expectations. Diasti (2021) concluded that the stressors experienced by EFL novice teachers were personal, interpersonal, and organizational. A personal factor was that novice EFL teachers could not control the classroom because they did not have enough teaching experience. As a result, there was a tendency for students to have poor classroom behavior. Vulnerability is not a sign of weakness, but a natural response to the complex realities of teaching. However, the professional identity of new teachers is shaped by how they respond to these challenges. What is often seen as a weakness can surprisingly be a crucial part of how we identify. It is about teachers being emotionally open and having the courage to be authentic, even when it means risking offending someone.

Vulnerability is where connecting, creating, loving, and enjoying come from (Brown, 2012). Teachers can gain valuable insights into how novice EFL teachers develop their professional identity and cope with the challenges of teaching by understanding the relationship between experiences of vulnerability and resilience. The buffer against the effects of vulnerability can be provided by strong relationships with supportive family, friends, and mentors. Self-awareness is helpful in the management of vulnerability and the making of informed choices. During the identity development process, the development of healthy coping mechanisms helps individuals to deal with challenges and setbacks.

Unearthing Vulnerability Through Collaboration

The path of a novice EFL teacher is paved vulnerability as well as immense potential for growth and development. In managing these vulnerabilities and fostering resilience, collaboration emerges as a powerful tool. When simple mechanisms of control are unavailable, it is about bringing collective intelligence to bear to achieve desired outcomes across organizational boundaries. It is rooted in the belief that in addressing the novel, complex, and diverse challenges facing organizations today, we can all be more competent, creative, and intelligent than any one of us alone. It requires leaders to use influence, rather than positional authority, to engage and align people, focus teams, sustain momentum, and deliver results (Tende & Lawson, 2021). The sharing of

experiences and the exploration of identity through collaboration with peers can be a source of acceptance and validation, which in turn foster a stronger sense of self. A new way of setting priorities is how people work together. The way they organize and manage the organization is needed to activate change that will make the complex interactions between members of the organization more resilient. It requires several different strands of activity, but there is a structure to it. 'Building blocks for resilience' exist (Suryaningtyas et al., 2019). There is diversity in value chains, infrastructure, and nature. For guidance and support in identity building, working with mentors is important. Mentors can share their own experiences and be a sounding board for issues of vulnerability. By exposing each person to different vulnerabilities, it can reveal hidden blind spots and weaknesses in individual approaches. It is also about being able to communicate openly. When challenges are discussed openly, weaknesses that might otherwise be hidden or overlooked are brought to light. Despite these challenges, collaborating is an effective approach to identifying vulnerabilities and building resilience. Through collaboration, individuals and groups will be able to overcome challenges and create a more secure future.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study used a descriptive narrative approach to explore the vulnerabilities faced by novice EFL teachers in both FE and NFE settings. This approach enabled an in-depth understanding of the teachers' experiences and coping strategies within their unique contexts. The research design was characterized by semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to share their narratives of their first year of teaching. This design aimed to capture the complexity of their experiences and the relationships they developed with colleagues, institutions, and students. It highlighted their cognitive, emotional, and evaluative responses. This study involved four novice EFL teachers from Nguter, Sukoharjo, Central Java (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Data

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Years in Teaching
Pangestu	23	Male	1
Sriyanto	42	Male	2
Vanny	22	Female	1

They were selected using convenience sampling, including gender and length of teaching experience. Their teaching experience ranged from one to two years. The participants were graduates of the English Language Education study program at UIN Surakarta, aged between 22 and 42 years. Two participants were employed at SMPS Muhammadiyah 1 Sukoharjo, while the other two taught English for Specific Purposes at Marine Cruise Yogyakarta, Sukoharjo Branch. Their different backgrounds provided a broad perspective on the challenges faced in both FE and NFE contexts.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. This allowed for open-ended discussion and allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences. This method encouraged the participants to reflect on their teaching journeys, the challenges they faced and the coping mechanisms they used in a supportive environment. Interviews were conducted in July 2024. The interviews were conducted conversationally. Participants were encouraged to share their stories freely. The researcher then did a transcription of the interviews for analysis. To ensure the reliability of the findings, initial codes were generated from the transcripts, followed by a process of triangulation. The codes were systematically organized into potential themes. These were reviewed and refined to create a thematic map of the analysis. Final themes were defined and labeled, culminating in a comprehensive study report (Andriana & Mbato, 2022; Creswell, 2012).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The impact of vulnerability and resilience on novice EFL teachers' professional identity development is multifaceted. This research indicated four impacts of vulnerability and resilience on professional identity; 1) self-awareness, 2) adaptability to challenges, 3) institutional support, and 4) professional commitment.

Self-Awareness

The first finding of this study was that vulnerability and resilience to professional identity influence self-awareness in both FE and NFE settings. Vulnerability promotes

self-awareness and critical reflection, while resilience supports the ability to overcome challenges and persevere, as agreed by all participants.

Rena explained:

“I learned a lot at the beginning of my career as a new teacher. I realized that I was speaking too fast during the lesson and this was affecting the students' understanding, after receiving feedback from the students. On reflection, I decided to slow down my speech by using clearer pronunciation and some pauses”.”

Pangestu, Sriyanto, and Rena also shared that they learned a lot early in their teaching careers. They learn how to control their emotions, how to deal with classroom dynamics and how to get to know a new environment. It is also about the ability of new teachers to reflect critically on their teaching practices, their strengths, and areas for improvement.

Adaptability to Challenges

The second finding was adaptability to challenges. This is the effective ability of novice EFL teachers to respond to unexpected difficulties and changes in circumstances in their teaching environment. Adapting to a new culture and language can be overwhelming, according to all participants. It involves learning to understand the educational practices of the locality and dealing with cultural differences that affect pupil engagement and learning.

Sriyanto stated:

“I often see teachers who initially plan lessons based on a set curriculum, but then find that their students struggle with these concepts. Instead of sticking to the original concepts, I decided to adapt by incorporating interactive activities and more personalized explanations to better meet the students' needs.”.

Institutional Support

All participants explained that vulnerability can be a source of self-doubt about their teaching skills and effectiveness. The novice EFL teachers in both FE and NFE settings

may have doubts about their competence and anxieties about their performance in front of students, colleagues, and the environment.

Pangestu explained:

“Teaching for the first time was a stressful experience for me. There were a lot of worries such as confidence issues, class control, socializing with seniors and new friends, the environment, and also worries about my relationships with the students. This experience has taught me a lot to become more confident every day.”

Sriyanto, Vanny, and Rena agreed that the first experience as a teacher is very offensive, but this is where they learn self-control so that they are more confident in the dynamics of the journey as a new teacher. To reduce stress, a good infrastructure and emotional support go a long way.

Professional Commitment

Professional commitment was the next finding. All participants said that the commitment and involvement of new teachers, both FE and NFE, in their teaching roles and responsibilities should always be enhanced. This includes enthusiasm for teaching, adherence to professional standards, and motivation for continuous improvement, as this has an impact on their commitment to teaching.

Vanny concluded:

“As a novice EFL teacher, I keep consistently attending additional training sessions, always participate in school committees, and invest extra time in preparing engaging lessons and in supporting students outside of the classroom. This commitment is evident in my proactive approach to improving my teaching practice. I seek feedback and contribute positively to the school community. It enhances my professional development and has a positive impact on the learning experience of my students as well”

DISCUSSION

Significant challenges and growth experiences often play a crucial role in shaping the professional identity of novice EFL teachers. The novice EFL teachers' professional identities are shaped by what they experience, how they interact, and the institutional

contexts in which they work (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). The experience of being a new teacher is a complex and nuanced one. It's driven by the need to shape a new professional identity in order to balance the difficulties of academic pressures and to navigate this transition through learning by doing. Forging a new professional identity is challenging given the competing demands of being a teacher (McAnulty & Cuenca, 2014). Their professional identity will become more defined and more robust as they work through the challenges and build their resilience (Li et al., 2021).

The successful integration of the teacher role into their broader sense of self is a key aspect of professional identity development. This integration is facilitated by positive experiences in the classroom, a supportive environment, and personal reflection (Anselma & Mbato, 2020). It is shaped by their ability to cope with the demands of the institution and, at the same time, to develop their own unique style of teaching. Regular feedback and structured reflection support the refinement of their teaching philosophy and practice. Although the experiences of novice EFL teachers in FE and NFE are different, they feel similar and have found what they are meant to achieve (Florida & Mbato, 2020). They felt guided, fed back, and given emotional support. They were aware of the demands of their work and their position in this work environment. They shared similar qualities such as patience, English language skills, self-confidence, communication skills and teaching skills. Some teachers added emotion management and adaptability (Andriani & Mbato, 2022). This is for the maintenance of teachers' commitment to students, the profession, and the institution (Ganjali et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

The process of navigating a complex interplay of vulnerability and resilience in formation of the professional identity of novice EFL teachers. The significant impact of these experiences on their professional commitment and their sense of self is highlighted in the key findings. Both challenges and triumphs are a feature of the journey to becoming an effective EFL teacher. Teachers can better support novice EFL teachers in both FE and NFE settings on professional development by understanding and addressing vulnerabilities and fostering resilience (Li, 2023). It also contributes to the development of competent, confident, and reflective teachers. On the other hand, experienced EFL teachers had richer pedagogical and pedagogical content knowledge a lower level of

technical knowledge and different bodies of knowledge compared of novice EFL teachers (Gao & Yang, 2022; Nazari et al., 2019).

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