

**Teachers' Professional Identity  
in Educational Innovation**

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**Ph.D. Thesis**

**Submitted to the Senate of  
Bar-Ilan University**

**Ramat-Gan, Israel, January 2018**

## **Abstract**

Educational reforms constitute an inseparable part of the educational scene in the western world as well as in Israel.

Adaptation to the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has called for a change in the image of education in Israel. Teachers are one of the central (albeit not the exclusive) axes for the success or failure of every educational process, including the assimilation of school-based educational reforms. Hence, we have to explore the way they deal with this change.

This study aims to examine the experiences of teachers who take part in the educational reform on a municipal level in two junior high schools in the Sharon district in Israel. These teachers experience an 'innovative dialogical pedagogy' through a project-based learning. Moreover, we have to comprehend the teachers' interrelations with this approach. This study does not aim to discuss the success of this or that reform. Rather, it is designed to investigate teachers' training and consolidation of their professional identity. This is done from the unique, reflective and subjective point of view of teachers who, within the framework of an educational reform, are shifting between the familiar and the new, understand this viewpoint and facilitate its improvement.

The empirical literature that discusses educational reform, pedagogical innovation and professional identity is extensive and fruitful. The review of the collected literary items endeavors to clarify and map the fundamental concepts of this study. aim

Reform is a change implemented in a system or an organization with the purpose of enhancing it. The call for reform in the education system was designed to generate compliance between the internal school system and the external system which is changing. This reform stems from the need for rationalization, improvement and professional development, both in the organizational area and in the pedagogical and didactic fields. This is a complex process whose success or failure depend on the change characteristics and the educational environment which we wish to change.

While the reform defines the layout of the systemic change, educational innovation defines the goals of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In recent year, project-based learning has been revived and it serves as an educational instrument for the accomplishment of these goals. This method advocates that the learning process is

driven by stimulation of the learners' inquisitiveness and interest. This is done by presenting complex problems that are valuable to the learners, coping with them and striving to produce a tangible or creative outcome.

Project-based learning embodies constructivist principles which challenge the professional identity of the teachers involved in it. Teachers' professional identity integrates their knowledge, practice and performance with the work culture, autonomy, accountability and trust. Components of teachers' professional identity define the meaning of 'being a teacher' and 'what should a teacher be'. Teachers create their professional identity by means of their interactions with themselves and with others and through professional training. Their professional identity affects their degree of job satisfaction and determines to great extent their attitude towards educational changes and reforms. Thus, it impacts the promotion or rejection of those reforms.

The research questions of this study focused on the interaction which structures professional identity. Furthermore, they explored within the framework of the process of educational reform, what can be learnt about the challenges and difficulties on the one hand and about the development and growth opportunities offered to the teachers on the other. What can we learn about the interrelations between educational reforms and the professional identity of the teachers taking part in them? To what extent this process involves changing teachers' professional identity and the effect of this change on the assimilation of these changes?

The data collection was done by a constructivist-qualitative research method. It consisted of 29 interviewees (24 teachers, three formative figures, two pedagogical tutors), 49 interviews (semi-structured interviews and interviews), 20 observations and analysis of documents from the field. The data analysis was performed according to the principles of the grounded theory.

The research findings illustrate that the experience of teachers involved in educational innovation exposes tensions and gaps which transpire as a result of the encounter between the practices, rhetoric and attitudes prevalent among teachers and those offered by the educational reform. The findings indicate gaps between positivist and constructivist attitudes and practices; a gap between the educational reform which is oriented at professional development and progress and the sense of regression

following the challenges; tension between autonomy and experience of a dictated change; gaps between the management team, teachers who underwent professional development and novice teachers; tension between teachers who are partners to the educational reform and those who do not take part in it; gaps between an involved principal and an absentee principal; gaps between the training process, its perception and actualization.

These tensions and gaps manifest an internal negotiation process offered to the teachers by the educational reform. This is a negotiation between professional identities and sub-identities, which underlies the process of structuring a professional identity. The major negotiation identified in this study is between the familiar positivist educational perception, which some of the teachers find difficult to abandon, and the constructivist perception represented by the educational reform.

This negotiation process encompasses opportunities and challenges that might determine the nature of the interrelations established in the encounter between the teachers among themselves and between the teachers and the educational reform. The findings show that the encounter between the familiar and the new has implications for teachers' personal, inter-personal and professional fields. Moreover, they indicate that experiences of growth have led to the adoption of the educational reform components and their involvement in the teachers' professional identity, whether fully or partially and selectively. Conversely, challenging and unsolved experiences resulted in the rejection of the educational reform and the teachers' safeguarding of the components of their professional identity before the reform. Moreover, these opportunities and challenges indicated teachers' perception of the scope and implications of the educational reform. This perception ranges between lack of a sense of change, change of the first degree, change of the second degree and up to change of the third degree.

These tensions and gaps were demonstrated by three central spiral change dimensions: the organizational dimension that defines the need for the educational change ('why') and nature of the change ('what'); the professional dimension, defining the way for actualizing the ideological aspect of project-based teaching by providing instruments for its implementation ('how'); and the operational dimension that focuses on the teaching itself, implementing the educational innovation – PBL. These dimensions were described through an analogy to personal relationships between two

people: matchmaking, first meeting, expanding the relationship and the institutionalization thereof.

Parallel to the identification of the three dimensions, the challenges and opportunities reported by the teachers, five typologies of teachers were also identified: teachers believing in the change, misguiding teachers, irresolute teachers, objecting teachers and teachers who come to terms with the change. Each typology expresses another intensity of a struggle between identities and sub-identities stemming from the educational reform and affecting the formation of the professional identity.

Many studies discuss the success or failure of the educational reform and engage generally in teachers' training and professional identity. On the other hand, this study explored teachers' training and formation of their professional identity in a specific, limited context, in relation to unique aspects from the teachers' experiences. This retrospective from the viewpoint of the teachers who find themselves in an educational reform which comes into being, enabled presentation of insights, challenges and dilemmas about the educational practice, some of which have not been cited in previous studies.

Understanding and learning from the perspective of teachers, their needs, ways of coping and interrelations between them and the educational reform oriented at structuring their professional identity might serve as an instrument for improving the responses provided in the change process. From the organizational aspect, finding of this study might improve processes of assimilating educational innovation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while comprehending the unique needs of teachers engaged in the reform from theory to practice. From the teachers' training aspect, findings of this study might focus and enhance the processes of teachers' professional training, while responding effectively to their needs. It might also affect the focus and contents delivered to pre-service teachers in colleges and universities. Finally, taking into consideration and understanding the challenges that an educational reform sets for the teachers and coping with such challenges, findings of this study could serve as a learning instrument for teachers who implement the reform from theory to practice.