# Teacher Identity and Hierarchy: Narrative Inquiry of Primary Teachers in Nepal's Public Schools

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**Abstract**

The article explores how Nepalese public schools' traditional hierarchy-dominated educational culture shapes teachers' professional growth and sense of identity. Through the narrative inquiry approach, I explored teachers ' professional identity development using Gee's (2000) identity framework. The data revealed that hierarchy and power relations between the teachers and the social context fundamentally shaped teacher identity development. However, the study further showed that professional hierarchy was not uni-layered, the power was not one-directional, and the domination was not permanent but rather dynamic. Factors like academic qualifications, job status, technological skills, and social status made the hierarchy complex. More interestingly, hierarchical relationships did not always undermine teacher empowerment but confidence in some cases. For example, when a teacher in a marginalized position due to some factors such as poor health condition was viewed as a role model or capable of success despite challenges, they achieved high value from their colleagues.

*Keywords:* Professional identity, hierarchy, community school, motivation, institutional identity

## Introduction

Teachers are generally viewed and treated according to educational level, professional position, the permanence of their job, and various social identity markers such as academic qualifications, teaching experiences, and technological

knowledge in Nepalese school systems. While hierarchical systems/orders of power shape any social organization, including education, the context of Nepal offers several fascinating dynamics that could be theorized in productive ways to contribute to discourses about teacher development globally. It is evident that from government policies and programmes in the operation of community schools at local levels, and from the remuneration and job security to professional development opportunities, a whole gamut of social forces in this newly democratized country situated primary school teachers in the lowest status daily. Being put on the lowest rung on the social ladder can impact the sense of professional identity and self-worth among teachers and their professional growth, effectiveness in teaching, and ability to bring about change in education and society. As such, research on the impact of the hierarchy can offer essential insights into teacher development and solutions for overcoming adverse effects.

This study used identity theory (Gee, 2000) as a theoretical lens. Gee (2000) conceived identity as being recognized as "a certain kind of person" (p.100). Gee described four sources of identity: nature identity, institutional identity, discourse identity, and affinity identity. My study focused on the institutional identity that considers teacher identities shaped within the institutional setting. While it is argued, institutions and institutional structures shape people (Narayanan, 2022, p. 130), school as a social institution shapes teacher identity. Similarly, like schools, the context of a higher educational setting shapes the identity (Subedi et al., 2022) of the students. Besides, the existing sociocultural context of and around the school (Lasky, 2005) also plays a role in identity formation.

Professional identity has personal and professional dimensions in teachers' careers (Beauchamp, 2019), and it is strongly related to teachers' intrinsic motivation for enhancing their student learning (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Martínez-de-la-Hidalga & Villardón-Gallego, 2019). So, undermining professional identity can undermine teachers' intrinsic motivation and, thereby, their performance. Because professional identity is also an essential component in teacher education (Pillen et al., 2013), it has emerged as a focus of research areas in teacher education and preparation (Karaolis & Philippou, 2019). Besides, power created in the institutional structure, i.e., with the school context, shapes the professional identity of teachers and creates their hierarchy. Thus, the effects of hierarchy also have important implications for teacher development and education programmes. It is argued that "teachers must develop a sense of professional identity that successfully incorporates their professional subjectiveness into the professional/cultural expectations of what it means to be a teacher"(Alsup, 2006, p. 127). This sense of professional identity is adversely shaped and affected by culture and the hierarchy system. Likewise, school

culture affects teachers to internalize their role (González-Calvo & Arias-Carballal, 2017) within the school context.

The power created by the hierarchy demoralizes teachers, undermines their confidence, and decreases intrinsic motivation. As a result, their identity becomes fragile and impedes their professional growth. Technological knowledge empowers and helps teachers to form their new identities. Moreover, gender differences and the personal health condition of teachers affect their professional development. Job security is the source of power and is the status quo in gaining respect from society. The study has indicated that hierarchy among teachers negatively impacts their professional identity. Another contribution of this study could be the ironically positive aspects of hierarchical power relationships. As shown by the analysis of interviews in this article, hierarchical relationships within a profession involve inherent complexities that influence professional development. While hierarchy harms professional growth in many ways, it also seems to create empathy and support in which the personal motivation of a teacher can counter the effects of order. And then, teachers' commitment to their profession becomes more respected than educational credentials. As a result, the progressive values of teachers create a new space for their recognition and respect. However, teacher identity researches exploring hierarchy are at the beginning of academic discourses in Nepal. This study attempted to add knowledge on the relationship between how the hierarchy creates the professional identity of primary teachers in public school spaces. Besides, the study explores the tensions in the professional identity formation of primary teachers, particularly inside the sociocultural context (Lasky, 2005; Martin, 2019) school setting.

## Methods and Procedures

This section describes the methodology adopted in this study in the following areas.

### Research Design

This study used a narrative inquiry approach to explore professional identity and teacher hierarchy in the semi-urban school setting. More specifically, this study focused on exploring the professional identity of primary teachers by capturing the teachers' stories (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Clandinin et al., 2007; Sfard & Prusak, 2005) concerning the prevailing condition of teacher identities and hierarchy in public schools in Nepal. Moreover, in narrative stories, teachers construct and reconstruct their identities (Beijaard et al., 2004), and these stories allow them to capture the linkage between teachers' life and their identity (Ostovar-Namaghi et al., 2015; Yazan, 2019).

## Research Participants

The participants in the study, selected purposively, were four community-funded primary teachers from public schools of Pokhara Metropolitan City, Kaski District, Gandaki Province, Nepal. Community-funded teachers do not receive a government salary. Instead, they are paid from local sources of the schools and are often compelled to work below the government pay scale.

The participants were Rita, Sushma, Diwas, and Sundar (pseudonyms) since the narrative inquiry allowed me to study with a small number of participants (Subedi, 2021). Rita had an undergraduate degree and worked for five years in a public secondary school. Before joining this school, she had worked for five years in a private boarding school. At the time of the study, even though her position was that of a primary teacher, Rita taught students from grade one to ten. Sushma taught students of grades one through seven in the English section of the same school as an education graduate and worked in another public school for ten years as a community-funded teacher. Additionally, Sushma has an exceptional health condition; she had a kidney transplant approximately ten years ago and needs to be very careful to maintain her health. Diwas, a graduate in science pursuing his master's degree dissertation in gender studies, has worked as a teacher for five years and taught up to grade eleven at the time of the study. Before joining his current school, Diwas worked in a private boarding school for three years. Interestingly, all four participants taught at the secondary level (i.e., grades 9-12) although they all are primary teachers.

## Instrument

The study employed the open-ended interview protocol as the research instrument. During protocol preparation, I framed the simple questions so the participants could easily understand them. As a result, participants felt comfortable "telling their stories''(Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Asking simple questions is the "beauty of qualitative inquiry"(Chenail, 1995). In addition, follow-up questions were asked to explore the problem in depth (Turner, 2010). Besides, I did the informal observation and maintained the field notes.

## Study Context

Currently, in Nepal, being a permanent teacher in a public school is commonly perceived as having a source of power. Job security with the facilities provided by the government is one of the significant factors contributing to building such perceptions. It is said that some permanent teachers eventually bully temporary and community-funded teachers from this kind of power. Remaining in

the temporary status, the professional identity of the community-funded primary teachers is not stable since they do not feel the security of their career as a teacher. They have to depend on the mercy of the school management committee to continue their job every year. Moreover, there is no stability in their salary payment. On the one hand, they are receiving low salaries, i.e., around one-third of the government scale. However, there exist variations in such salary payments of teachers among schools. There is variation in the payment system and the hierarchical order. For example, there is a common trend to stay all the teachers in a single room since there is no separate room for teachers in most Nepalese public schools. However, some schools (three out of seven) had different staff rooms for primary and secondary-level teachers. These all-systemic contextual factors indicate that the teacher's identity is fragile.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

I conducted an in-depth interview with four participants from the four different schools of Pokhara metropolitan city. Teachers gained access with the school headteacher's permission. In the first meeting with each participant, I 'built rapport' by clearly mentioning the focus and significance of my study (Hong & Cross Francis, 2020) to the professional development of the teachers. This type of rapport-building helps the interviewer and interviewee understand each other and gain trust (Chenail, 2011; Kim, 2016). Moreover, I assured them about their anonymity in the write-up and the confidentiality of the data. Besides, my previous working as a primary teacher for five years, some two decades ago, had rich experiences of 'complexities'(Tsui, 2007) that existed in the public school. This kind of 'positionality' (Berger, 2013; Tracy, 2020) helped me to capture stories and understand the lived experiences of the participants. I conducted an hour-long interview with each participant on different days in their leisure time during school hours. The interview was recorded on a voice recorder.

Drawing on Polkinghorne's (1995) 'analysis of narrative,' the interview data were transcribed in Nepali by listening to the audio recordings. The intent of using Nepali transcription was to convey the participants' meaning accurately (Yunus et al., 2022). Later on, transcription was translated into English. After transcribing translations, codes and categories were developed and finally synthesized into the themes (Clarke & Braun, 2021).

## Findings

Based on the data analysis, the following themes emerged.

### Power of Job Security: Negotiating with Sociocultural Context

Working as a permanent teacher is a power source, particularly in the Nepali school context. One of the temporary teachers' significant concerns is job security, creating uncertainty in their enhanced career path for further professional growth. When the existing profession or the position fails to assure teachers of their stability in the profession, the identity becomes fragile. In this context, my research participant Rita shared her experience:

> I liked the teaching profession very much. However, I am always worried about my status as a temporary teacher. In addition, I often wonder if I would not be a permanent teacher, I must search for other alternatives. Thinking about this, I went to the driving institute and learned to drive a car. I thought I would be a car owner and drive it for a fare. Later on, I thought I could not fit into this profession since there are no educated people like taxi drivers. They used to talk in a hostile tone, and I was uncomfortable with them.

The above narrative indicates how the teacher's belief plays a role in constructing their professional identity. Similar to this situation, Watson (2006) argued, "people construct narratives, and narratives construct people, and our identity emerges through these processes" (p.510). Likewise, my other participant, Sushma, felt that she is still uncertain about her teaching profession as a temporary teacher. She shared,

> I like the teaching profession very much and do not regret being a teacher. However, if I failed to become a permanent teacher, I would have to search for another profession. Probably, I will be involved in some business because there is no secure future as a temporary teacher.

While job security itself is a great source of power for teachers, it is like the teacher using the ability to oppress their students (Watson, 2006). Regarding the harassment from the permanent teacher, Rita told her story,

> I found a joyful and friendly environment on the first day of one of the teacher training programmes. Nevertheless, in the remaining training days after I disclosed my status as a 'community-funded teacher, the permanent teachers behaved strangely toward me and boasted about them. In addition, they did not behave friendly like on the first day. On the remaining days, they ignored my greeting and did not give me company. We were about two community-funded teachers in that large group of 20 teachers. That was an unpleasant experience for me.

There exists a deep-rooted mindset of power relations in society from ordinates to subordinates. For example, in the case of Rita, it is evident that the permanent teachers behaved normally at the beginning. However, they behave strangely when they know her actual status. Furthermore, the power relations between the permanent and temporary teachers (Cummins, 2009) played the dominant role there.

Rita further explained that permanent teachers have superiority complexes and think they have secured jobs. My husband said, "Rita, you must pass the teacher service exam to become a permanent teacher or quit the job." She added that her husband also realized the domination of permanent teachers over her. Likewise, in her husband's perception, there is a different status and identity of permanent teachers, which is constructed in the current socio-cultural context of Nepal.

Literature informs about the power relation in the identity formation of teachers. For example, language itself could be the power, and the power of language plays a role in acquiring cultural values and developing professional identity (Cummins, 2009; Martínez-de-la-Hidalga & Villardón-Gallego, 2019). This denotes the unequal power relation "this signals the often conflictual nature of identity negotiation in situations where unequal power relations are evident" (Barkhuizen, 2016, p. 26). For instance, Teng (2019) considers teacher autonomy as being interlinked with the power relation in the school context. Therefore, teacher autonomy and identity formation are interrelated with each other. More specifically, they feel an inferiority complex.

During the informal conversation, the principal of the same school also shared that some of the permanent teachers act in such a way that nobody can do anything with them because of their job security by the government. For instance, Diwas further narrates,

> Those permanent fellow teachers enter the classroom five to ten minutes late, but our headteacher cannot punish them. Likewise, there is no supervision and monitoring system in our schools from government officials. Therefore, I think there should be a regular and robust supervision system, and the principal must have the power to take against such teachers.

The above situations indicate the perception of power and its reflection on teachers' behaviours. Moreover, such a feeling of job security tends to result in some misbehaviour of permanent teachers due to the lack of a robust supervisory system. However, the power of security plays a supportive role in teachers' positive professional identity formation. Nevertheless, insecurity is the primary concern for starting/new teachers (Alsup, 2006; Pillen et al., 2013). This could be similar to the community-funded teachers since they must negotiate with the existing context.

The school management committee appoints community-funded teachers. These teachers have to negotiate with the school management committee, and most of them cannot receive regular government pay scales. Moreover, there is no stability in their salary payment. However, there exist variations in such salary payments of teachers among schools.

Sushma has experience working as a community-funded teacher in her school. She indicates,

> I work no less than any of the permanent teachers at my school. Nevertheless, they receive a full salary, whereas my salary is one-third of my colleagues at the same level. Even in this situation, I cannot do anything; I must work silently or quit.

School administration cannot quickly pressure permanent teachers for additional work without remuneration or willingness - Rita and Diwas have this kind of experience. Likewise, there is no principal/school administration authority to take action against them. In addition, even though permanent teachers receive pressure from the school administration, and it does not matter for their job security. Nonetheless, community-funded teachers cannot refuse the additional duty from the principal. Moreover, it ultimately leads to conflict between teachers and the administration/principal. This creates disagreement between personal values and expectations of the institution (Martínez-de-la-Hidalga & Villardón-Gallego, 2019). In such a situation, teachers negotiate with the social context of the school. As a result, teachers form a negotiated identity.

Teachers' stability and the teaching profession's dignity entangled with their professional identity drives them to continue the profession. More importantly, this instability tends teachers to think of alternative professions. Then teacher's professional identity becomes fragile (Watson, 2006) and hence loses its shape.

## Technology-Enhanced Professional Identity

All participants in this study have competency in handling the Internet technology for their classroom teaching purpose. Remarkably, they use a cell phone for their classroom teaching and use web searches to update themselves. They feel empowered in adopting technology in classroom teaching compared to their fellow teachers who lack such technology competency. For example, most of their fellow teachers, particularly permanent ones, do not have knowledge and skills in using technology except on Facebook, a social site. Diwas shared that,

> I know how to search for the materials of my needs on the Internet and use them in classroom teaching. For example, I use my cell phone during my classroom teaching. I used to download audio, videos, and documents from

the web and used them in classroom teaching. Nevertheless, most of my fellow teachers, specifically old-age permanent teachers, do not have such skills and need my help. I feel empowered and honoured while supporting them.

The above statement clearly shows that community-funded teachers feel their professional identity transformation by acquiring the knowledge and skills of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Bimrose & Brown, 2019). Hence, there is a gradual practice of technology-enhanced learning, i.e., blended learning in conventional classrooms. Moreover, participants felt that technology has contributed to their classroom teaching and helped their day-to-day activities. This finding is consistent with the study of Bimrose and Brown (2019), and regarding technology integration, Vokatis and Zhang (2016). Regarding the use of ICT in classroom teaching, Sundar told his experience as,

> Due to my ICT competency, I am gaining attention from my fellow teachers, particularly those less competent in handling technology. My colleagues want to be close to me, and they seek support in managing technology. I heartily support them. As a result, I sometimes forget my status as a community-funded teacher. I feel like an honored teacher with full dignity in such a situation. In addition, my ICT competency is now becoming an empowering agent for me.

The use of ICT is not limited to teaching-learning only. It is becoming a part of the daily life of teachers, and hence they are motivated to learn the Internet. There are online services for many official works; one can do that even with a single click from their computer. However, those not equipped with ICT skills must seek help from others, which makes them realize the benefit of using technology and emphasize gaining technological skills. Mobile apps for banking services, utility bill payments, and online form registration for government services have been developed recently. Technical knowledge of community-funded teachers is a robust tool for gaining respect and a unique identity from the hegemony of permanent teachers.

## Gender and Professional Identity

Gender clustering of teachers was a cross-cutting phenomenon, as I observed. During my school visit, I spent a few minutes with the teachers in their staff room to listen to their conversations. Meanwhile, I also observed the activities of teachers inside the school premises. During an observation, it was interesting that the female and the male teachers were sitting in their homogeneous group separately, even in the school canteen, so I could not see any mixed group of male and female teachers. As such, gender created a hierarchy between these schools' male and female teachers.

Likewise, during my school visit to decide on the research participants, I observed one exciting phenomenon: more female teachers working at the primary level than male teachers. Almost all community-funded primary teachers were female in the schools I visited. This could be an issue for further research as to why more female teachers are appointed at the primary level since few female teachers are working at the secondary level. In such a situation, one can see the more significant difference between male and female teachers by gender. Hence, gendered identity is constructed as female teachers should teach at the primary level.

Rita told her story:

> I have to be busy with all the household work and take care of my children, which makes me tired at home, due to which I am unable to pay attention and adequate preparation for my service commission exam to be a permanent teacher.

In the current socio-cultural context of Nepal, women are much more oppressed and heavily loaded with household work, such as cooking, clothing, feeding animals, caring for their kids, etc. Most women suffer from physical and mental pressure from such household work, which ultimately affects their performance. Likewise, in Rita's above story, most female primary teachers could be facing a similar situation. In a case, one can argue that the lives of the teachers are intertwined, and it meets in school landscapes, as Clandinin et al. (2006) states. From such a situation, it is evident that a teacher's professional identity and the stories of teachers' lives are interrelated.

**Social Status and Educational Hierarchy**

The social status of teachers is related to the community's perception of teachers, as the community plays an important role in constructing a teacher's professional identity. A teacher's professional identity depends on how the community and society perceive, respond, and behave towards teachers. Sushma said:

> I found both society and the community have minimal sympathy and positive attitudes toward teachers. Society thinks only low achievers are becoming teachers who cannot enter other professions. Hence, teaching is not perceived as more prestigious than society's other governmental services.

Society has little faith in teachers and the teaching profession compared to other professions, and there is a common belief that academically weaker people enter the profession. As a result, the hierarchy is constructed between teachers and other governmental service persons. However, it could not be the case everywhere in

society. Teaching is a prestigious and highly recognized job in some parts of society. Particularly in remote villages, there is a common perception that the teacher is considered the most intelligent person, and villagers depend on teachers. In such a society, teachers advise society members in making decisions for their daily life-related work. In addition, teachers play the role of developing leaders in various societal decision-making processes. However, in most Nepalese societies, the profession's worth depends on its earning capacity, i.e., more earning means more prestige. Regarding survival, Sushma shared her unpleasant experience with the behaviour of the parents with her and other teachers in her school,

> Parents do not have any respect for community-funded teachers. Parents might have thought that teachers survive and have secure jobs due to their children's fee payments. Parents usually become unsatisfied with the teachers. Additionally, they feel that teachers' incapability is a significant cause of their children's poor learning. In addition, parents consider teachers to be just like employees working for the salary. Parents and society do not realize the contribution of teachers in educating children. Such perception contributes to forming the educational hierarchy between teaching and other professions.

> Hierarchy existed from societal perception and has also been deep-rooted within the teachers themselves. For example, primary teachers with higher academic qualifications want to teach at the secondary level. Diwas shared his feeling,

> I have qualifications as a secondary-level teacher and want to teach at 11th and 12th grade. I often asked my principal to assign me secondary-level classes, but he refused. Finally, I became fortunate to get assigned to the secondary level classes as an additional duty except for my regular workload at the primary level. Now, I feel honoured to teach in such upper grades.

Other participants also shared similar views as they hardly get an opportunity to teach secondary-level students. They further added that they feel humiliated to teach in the primary grade despite having the academic qualification of a secondary-level teacher.

From the participants' views, the teacher's hierarchy can be seen. Interestingly, the primary teachers feel promoted and honoured when assigned to teach the secondary level classes, and the secondary teachers feel dominated when they are requested to teach in the primary level grades. Moreover, when primary teachers could get a chance to teach in the secondary level grades, they feel they are no different from the secondary level teachers even though they get the salary of the primary level. Primary teachers' temporary promotion to teaching the upper grades class, even without extra remuneration, is also a source of motivation. From

the provision of changing teaching roles in the upper grades, they are satisfied being teachers.

**Personal Health and Identity Formation**

One of the influencing factors for forming a teacher's professional identity is the physical and mental health of the teacher. In addition, the teachers' health and hygiene are also crucial in determining their hierarchy. Personal fitness is one of the significant components of teachers' success and productivity in their professional life. For instance, a study argued that "the lack of direct support in graduate students' day-to-day healthcare needs can cause a tremendous loss in their success and productivity" (Gaulee et al., 2015, p. 482). In this study, Sushma, among the participants, suffered from a critical health problem and needed critical care to maintain good health. Sushma had transplanted her kidneys some twelve years earlier. Still, she needs to be very careful in her daily activities, including eating, working, exercising, etc.

Sometimes, an individual's health condition enhances the formation of a positive professional identity. The same happened in the case of Sushma. Despite her severe health conditions, she gets prestige, love, and sympathy from society and feels empowered by society's perceptions of her. In this regard, she added,

> My community and neighbors know well about my kidney transplant and current health condition. They always appreciate and show sympathy because a woman with a transplanted kidney can do well in her job. In addition, they sometimes used to reference me as a role model to encourage other people with severe health conditions in the society

However, another participant Diwas had a different perception from Sushma. Diwas added that if a teacher is not fit and fine with good health conditions, how can s/he teach efficiently? This view focuses more on physical well-being, neglecting teachers' emotional and mental health conditions. Perceptions like Diwas can form a new hierarchical position due to poor health.

From the above statement, I argue that despite being in a poor health condition, sometimes, it can be an empowering agent for the health-related identity formation of the teacher. As a result, a positive hierarchy is formed concerning the health condition of a teacher.

## Discussion

The study aimed to explore the professional identity of primary teachers in structural hierarchical situations in the institutional setting of public schools. I have analyzed the conversation with the four primary teachers to gain insight into how

the hierarchy plays a role in forming the professional identity of primary teachers. Five key findings emerged from the data analysis done to understand the intertwined complexity of professional identity with the teachers' hierarchical position: 1) job security gave teachers power and ability to negotiate their place in society as community-funded teachers; 2) permanent jobs gave teachers a feeling of security; 3) technological skills enhanced professional confidence; 4) gender, social status, and educational hierarchy shaped professional identity; and 5) personal health and other conditions in life affect identity formation.

Hierarchy, as the participants perceived in this study, is commonly perceived as a negative factor in developing a teacher's professional identity. Indeed, this study found it detrimental to teachers' confidence, initiative, agency, relationship building, and job performance. Within particular social and cultural contexts, individuals within a hierarchical order also learn how to exploit it to their benefit. Hierarchy created by power based on job security creates uncertainty; hierarchy created by funding source, type of school, and institutional prestige demoralizes hardworking teachers; hierarchy created by educational degrees and their status undermines teacher confidence; hierarchy created by social factors (class, caste, political affiliation, gender, etc.) makes intrinsic motivation and professional growth difficult. In addition, Tian and Dumlao (2020) concluded that power relations are pervasive in human interactions. On the other hand, there are complexities in the teacher hierarchy. Lower professional status often creates conditions of empathy and support commitment to the profession and community, which is often more respected than educational credentials; progressive values create alternative narratives, contractional forces, and new space for recognition and respect.

Lived experience stories of teachers helped me to locate and understand the professional identity and hierarchy, particularly inside the sociocultural context of the school setting. Such a setting in a particular sociocultural school context is connected with teachers' practice and is "negotiated and changed over time"(Achirri, 2020, p. 1696). Regarding teacher professional identity, pioneer scholars on narrative inquiry Clandinin et al. (2006) argue that "teacher identity is understood as a unique embodiment of each teacher's stories to live by, stories shaped by knowledge composed on landscapes past and present in which a teacher lives and works" (p.9). Similarly, teaching can be considered an occupation, and occupational identity is fragile, as participants experienced. Occupational identity depends on the stories, attitudes, and behaviours between the individual self and others. Regarding fragile occupational identity, Bimrose and Brown (2019) argue, "identities at work are the meanings attached to an individual by the self and others that are displayed in attitudes and behaviour as well as in the stories I tell about ourselves to others and

ourselves" (p. 759). Likewise, different theorists had worked on the teacher identity. For example, the professional identity of a primary teacher can be considered as "a certain kind of person" (Gee, 2000, p. 100) in a particular context. Later on, various studies conceptualized professional identities in different terms, and it has no explicit meaning (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Palmér, 2016). For example, Clandinin et al. (2009) consider professional identity "stories to live by as they work in schools." Likewise, one of the most cited sources, Beijard et al. (2004), conceives professional identity as the "integration of 'personal' and 'professional' side of becoming and being a teacher" (p. 113). Palmér (2016) has a comprehensive argument that "know and/or believe but also who they are, how they view themselves as teachers, how they relate to students, how they deal with problems, how they reflect on issues, and how they have identified themselves within the profession" (p. 682).

While power and hierarchy are blatant in Nepalese society, they may be more subtle but still significant in other societies. In addition, every context and society could have its power and hierarchy factors that may affect teacher development and performance, even though those factors may be less visible in the local context. It seems important to learn how hierarchy and power affect teacher development and implementation in contexts and societies beyond our own.

Teacher professional identity is interlinked with the teachers' job security, particularly for temporary teachers. In addition, teachers are working under stress due to their temporary status and low salary payment. As a result, their identity is formed in the new stories, and hence the teachers' professional identity becomes fragile. This finding matched Canadian teachers' study (Clandinin et al., 2009). Likewise, Howard (2019) confirms that the teacher's identities are complex and conflicting, reinforcing the fluidity. Technology is not only supportive of performing digital activities, but instead, it helps to "reshape the process of identity formation" (Subedi et al., 2022, p. 296). Similarly, technological knowledge helps teachers to form their new identity as empowered and honoured with dignity in the Nepalese school context. Due to being technologically skilled, teachers are gaining respect from their fellow teachers, similar to the study findings by Vokatis and Zhang (2016). Moreover, such technological competence is a tool for reducing hegemonic domination between permanent and temporary teachers.

Gender is another influential factor in shaping teachers' professional identity in the current socio-cultural context of Nepal. A distinct gendered role is constructed through long tradition, it is perceived that such as women have to do the household work, whereas their husbands have no such responsibility. Instead, males are

responsible for generating income to run the family. As a result, there is an evident gendered role between male and female teachers. Such roles have also been reflected in their behaviour inside the school, such as male and female teachers staying in their homogeneous group in their school leisure time.

Likewise, personal health conditions sometimes could be a barrier to being proactive for an individual (Jones, 2020). However, even poor health conditions sometimes become the source of positive professional identity formation for teachers and have supported framing their unique identity. Jones (2020), in her autoethnographic study, has inspiringly presented how she recovered from an "incredibly inconvenient illness thing" and became a successful professor and scholar" (p.1714). Similarly, Parke (2018) is an excellent example of how a teacher forms an identity after recovering from severe illness and the role of a teacher's confidence in identity formation in the lives of teachers. Such as, one of the teachers with transplanted kidneys in this study can be an idle and inspirational individual for persons with some kind of poor health condition.

The study is based mainly on the narrative story of four community-funded primary teachers. The study did not yield generalizable findings everywhere. However, the study offers a unique contribution to exploring the professional identity of primary teachers shaped by the hierarchical position.

## Conclusion

The hierarchy of power and privilege is a harmful factor to teachers' self-respect, professional confidence, and motivation for intellectual growth and contribution to society. Nevertheless, the scholarship needs to understand the complexity of status and relationships, community and personal agency, support networks, and other positive factors within hierarchical social and professional conditions. When viewed from the lens of Gee (2000), primary teachers can be the kind of person struggling to form a professional identity in the prevailing condition of teacher hierarchical position in the public school sphere. In addition, such hierarchical positions may not always be visible, but community-funded primary teachers have experienced it. The analysis revealed an influential role of teacher hierarchy in their professional identity formation. Community-funded primary teachers live with great job insecurity and suffer from the hegemonic dominance of permanent teachers. In addition, they seem to feel their position is strong as a permanent teacher, which is the only way to gain security for professional growth and live with dignity in society's perception.

Moreover, a teacher's health condition, technological knowledge, gender, and social status contribute to forming a professional identity. Therefore, it is imperative to consider the relation of teacher hierarchy in developing their professional identity. More importantly, it is time to rethink and redesign professional development activities for primary teachers.

The findings of the study have immediate applications in many ways. The study informs us to understand the negative impact, positive consequences, and hierarchy complexities in developing professional identity. The findings encourage a rethink to improve the fragile stage of teachers' professional identity and take measures to address it during the planning and implementation of teacher development programmes. The study has sometimes identified the positive aspect of hierarchical position on teachers' professional development. Finally, the findings can help recognize professional identity in the teaching profession and rethink designing the teacher education programme in Nepal.

This study has focused only on the professional identity of primary teachers, and it is not adequate to understand the multiple faces of teacher professional identity. Therefore, future research is needed to carry out a large-scale comprehensive narrative inquiry by including all types of temporary primary teachers to gain a broader understanding of the role of teacher hierarchy in the identity formation of primary teachers.

Implications of these complexities within specific social and cultural school contexts of countries like Nepal are discussed to draw more general perspectives about teachers' identities.

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