

Resilience through Crisis: Women Teachers' Autonomy and Professional Identity in the Post-Pandemic Era

Irina Aryal^{1,2}, Sagar Dahal¹, Indra Yamphu¹

¹Kathmandu University School of Education (KUSOED), Lalitpur, Nepal

²The Celebration Co-Ed School/College, Kageshwori Manohara-8, Kathmandu, Nepal

Corresponding author: irina@celebrationcoed.edu.np

Abstract

Teacher autonomy is considered essential for good-quality education, but Nepal's educational policies are almost completely dominated by students' needs, leaving teachers, especially female teachers, invisible. Female teachers are faced with constraints from the educational institutions, patriarchy that is deeply ingrained in our society, and unequal share of childcare responsibilities, which hinder their professional judgment in the classrooms. Narrative inquiry was chosen as the research method in this research, based on socio-cultural theory by Vygotsky and three-dimensional narrative framework by Clandinin and Connelly. Four experienced secondary-level women teachers of Kageshwori Manohara Municipality, Kathmandu were selected purposefully and data were collected using in-depth interview techniques. What was discovered was quite an interesting contradiction related to the pandemic situation. The rapid transition to online teaching imposed by the virus helped women teachers in developing digital competencies, forming new relationships with other teachers, and building up confidence. But it also had a hidden downside since the additional caregiving imposed by the pandemic restricted this development process. And, as schools are opened now, teachers are concerned about the loss of their newly developed roles and abilities.

Keywords: *Teacher autonomy, narrative inquiry, crisis autonomy, patriarchal structures, post-pandemic education*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a massive shake-up in the education system globally, something that had never been experienced before. As lockdowns began to take hold in the early 2020, millions of students were unable to attend school, leaving

teachers with the daunting task of continuing to educate without the benefit of a physical classroom. Such teachers had to adjust their teaching approaches dramatically and change the methods of instruction drastically into digital mode. The COVID-19 pandemic affected women teachers in Nepal greatly, specifically in the Kageshwori Manohara Municipality of Kathmandu. This research project also focus on the effect of the crisis on the independence of these women teachers as well as their sense of self in their professional activity.

Prior to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nepal's education system was experiencing numerous challenges, among which were electricity shortages at the rural schools and lack of familiarity of teachers with various means of digital communication. Pre-pandemic research in teacher autonomy in Nepal, albeit still in its infancy stage, documented the constraining effect of resource limitations on the activities of the teachers in their classes (Adhikari, 2021). In addition, good connectivity was mostly available only in urban areas. Even in Kathmandu, there was an uneven distribution of opportunities, which worsened greatly due to the abrupt transition to distance learning and affected women teachers' careers in a long-term perspective. In such conditions, Kageshwori Manohara Municipality of Kathmandu served as the location for the present research project. The pandemic exposed and amplified these existing inequalities, which had significant consequences for the professional autonomy and identity of women teachers in the area.

For female teachers in Kageshwori Manohara Municipality, the pandemic had a mixed effect. Women teachers got more independent and freedom to work on their own, as well as this situation allowed them to build new relationships with their colleagues – which can be referred as "autonomy during crisis". On the other hand, it increased workload at home and put their careers at risk. This article looked at both the positive and negative effects of the pandemic on women teachers, with the goal of helping to make informed decisions about policies that can support teachers like them in the future and make them more confident on their professionalism.

Literature Review

Professional Resilience in Adverse Conditions

Professional resilience among teachers, described as the ability to retain good quality practice and sustain professional commitment amid unfavorable situations (Day & Gu, 2014). Those teachers who are resilient not only manage to endure but also keep growing professionally despite the fact that external conditions bring turbulence in their growth. Several psychological characteristics are seen as key in fostering resilience and promoting professional growth amid adversity: professional identity

and sense of purpose, collegial support and relationships, effective coping strategies, and adaptability in problem solving. The studies conducted since 2020, all reveal the same: teachers who had developed strong collegial relations, felt themselves professionals and trusted school leadership managed to withstand the challenges of the pandemic much better than those lacking these qualities and the crisis further deepened the gap between successful and struggling teachers. Unfortunately, in Nepal, there is a limited amount of research dedicated to teachers' resilience amid adverse circumstances. However, the recent pandemic provided the unique opportunity to learn about teacher resilience from first-hand accounts and, consequently, to study their potential and capabilities, as well as the factors that promote or hinder them in schools. The narratives presented in this article are one more contribution to existing evidence.

Digital Technology and Teachers' Professional Identity

The pandemic brought great change for teachers throughout the world, which lead them to learn new technology really fast. This included meeting students through digital platform, new systems for managing lessons, and new and varied tools for making classroom and educational content. All of these steps were taken in order to allow them to continue giving lessons without being in the same physical space as their students. For teachers not accustomed to the use of technological devices, this required a lot of effort and work. The whole process was both extremely challenging and fascinating for teacher's professional lives.

Researches has shown that peer and group learning of new technologies is more efficient compared to individual training workshop which is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) learning theory which states, that education is a highly socially-mediated process. Moreover, it helps teachers to understand how it can be applied to their daily educational practice, not being just another skill. In such circumstances, the current pandemic has become a catalyst for teachers' development, as they had to master a new skill fast, share their knowledge and apply it to practice immediately.

Self-determination theory can help understand some aspects of motivation of teachers in better ways. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), there are three primary aspects of any motivation, which are the feeling of capability, autonomy and relatedness. During the pandemic, teachers found themselves in a completely new environment of technological-based learning, and, surprisingly, this new environment provided teachers with a perfect opportunity to fulfill all their motivational needs at once. While getting better at mastering new platforms, teachers became more confident in their skills, which allowed them to fulfill the aspect of competence. Moreover, teachers were offered an opportunity to choose their preferred tools and methods,

which provided them with autonomy. Finally, while cooperating and solving various problems, teachers developed new relationships with their colleagues, which provided them with relatedness. Thus, many teachers found themselves in an environment where all of their motivational needs were fulfilled, which allowed them to gain an incredible motivation.

Teacher Autonomy: Institutional and Contextual Dimensions

Teachers having control over their work is not something that happens on its own. It's connected to the schools they work in, the people around them, and the relationships they have. A study in Nepal looked at how this works for English teachers at a university. The researcher, Kadel, talked to ten teachers and observed their classes. He found that there are some big challenges that limit what teachers can do. For example, they don't have enough technology, they're told what to teach, and they're not included in decisions about education. They also don't get enough support to improve their skills. Another study by Adhikari found similar results in other schools in Nepal. Even though Kadel's study focused on the common experiences of teachers, it's similar to other research that tries to understand people's stories and experiences. These studies show that what teachers can and can't do is shaped by the people and places around them. This idea is consistent with the idea of relational being, which says that our experiences are connected to the people and world around us. By looking at these studies, we can get a better understanding of what's going on with teacher autonomy in Nepal's schools.

The challenges that teachers face are complex and multifaceted. They are not just limited to the classroom, but are also influenced by the broader school culture and education system. For instance, the lack of technology and resources can make it difficult for teachers to develop innovative lesson plans and engage their students. Similarly, the top-down approach to teaching can stifle teacher creativity and autonomy. Furthermore, the absence of support for professional development can make it challenging for teachers to improve their skills and stay updated with the latest teaching methods. Despite these challenges, it's essential to recognize the importance of teacher autonomy in improving education outcomes. When teachers have the freedom to make informed decisions about their practice, they are more likely to be motivated and invested in their work. This, in turn, can lead to better student outcomes and a more positive learning environment. Therefore, it's crucial to address the challenges that limit teacher autonomy and provide teachers with the support and resources they need to thrive. By doing so, we can create a more effective and sustainable education system that benefits both teachers and students. In conclusion, teacher autonomy is a

critical aspect of education that is shaped by the complex interplay of factors, including school culture, relationships, and education policy. By understanding these factors and addressing the challenges that limit teacher autonomy, we can work towards creating a more supportive and empowering environment for teachers. This, in turn, can lead to improved education outcomes and a more positive learning experience for students. Ultimately, the key to unlocking teacher autonomy lies in recognizing the importance of relational being and the interconnectedness of teachers, students, and the broader education system.

Teachers in many countries face similar challenges. For example, a study by Kong in 2020 found that English teachers in Chinese secondary schools had limited autonomy due to the schools' management practices and institutional structures. Similarly, Yi argued in 2017 that for students to have real autonomy, teachers and school management need to work together and support each other. In Nepal, Panta's 2019 study looked at English language teachers' views on student autonomy, but didn't explore how teachers themselves experience autonomy in difficult situations. This is an important gap, as Smith pointed out in 2000, teachers need to have autonomy themselves before they can help their students develop it. Vasquez developed this idea further in 2016, showing how teacher education can help teachers develop autonomy. More recently, Dikiltas and Mumford found that when teachers develop autonomy, it's linked to their professional motivation, agency, and identity - all of which are important for effective teaching. This study builds on these findings, looking at how women teachers in Nepal experience autonomy, especially in crisis situations.

Crisis, Gender, and Professional Vulnerability

In general, there is no shortage of evidence in the literature on how the pandemic has brought new opportunities teachers along with exacerbating preexisting challenges in a gender-specific way. The domestic duties of women have become increasingly challenging since the closures of schools, day cares, and other caregiving institutions during the lockdown have placed the primary responsibility of childrearing and caring for any dependent family members on them (United Nations, 2020). For female teachers, who are already handling the dual burden of their work and domestic lives, the pandemic has been particularly challenging. This paper focuses on how some female teachers in the Kageshwori Manohara Municipality coped with this dual challenge and yet managed to pursue their careers.

Methodology

This research used a qualitative approach, focusing on narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to understand the experiences of women teachers. The study was

based on the idea that people's realities are shaped by their individual social and cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Four women teachers from secondary schools in Kageshwori Manohara Municipality, Kathmandu, Nepal, were chosen for the study because they had a lot of experience and knowledge about the topic. Interviews and discussions were used to collect data, allowing the participants to share their stories in detail. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, which considers the personal and social aspects of the participants' stories alongside the time and place in which they occurred, was followed. Being aware of own position as a woman teacher and tried to be reflexive to avoid influencing the data with own biases; this reflexive stance builds on my own earlier auto-ethnographic exploration of teacher autonomy (Aryal, 2021), which first drew attention to how institutional context shapes a teacher's sense of professional self. The stories were analyzed using thematic analysis to capture the complexity of the women teachers' experiences in developing their professional autonomy after the pandemic. Listening to the participants' stories, interpreted them, and reflected on them to construct meaning. The goal was to understand how women teachers experienced and asserted their professional autonomy in a changing context. Using narrative inquiry was aimed at offering the reader an opportunity to get a vivid description of the participants' experiences. Findings of the study were summarized and presented taking into account the patterns found in the data analysis process. Overall, the present research was supposed to shed light on the issue under discussion and offer valuable information on the women teachers' experiences and the factors affecting their professional autonomy. Qualitative research design and the use of narrative inquiry helped understand the experience of the participants better and appreciate its complexity.

The reflexive approach along with an explicit consideration of my positionality as a woman researcher studying the experiences of women teachers provided the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings below. Ethical approval for the research was received from the required procedures and all four participants provided their informed consent before participating in the research; pseudonyms are used in order not to identify the participants.

Findings and Analysis

Technological Adaptation as an Episode of Crisis Autonomy

The sudden shutdown of schools in March 2020 left all four teachers in complete bewilderment. They had no previous experience of online teaching and using new technologies like Zoom, Google Meet, and Google Classroom proved difficult and confusing. As one of the teachers, Romi recalled her first experience with Zoom when

she could not figure out how to connect her screen to the screen of her students who were eager to begin the lesson. She was so desperate that she wanted to cry. This experience was extremely painful, demonstrating the challenges of adapting to a new reality.

However, cooperation with colleagues and mutual learning became the main factors helping teachers overcome difficulties. Romi's school organized weekly workshops on Saturdays where they discussed the use of technology and worked out various solutions. Teachers were not only offered to learn how to use basic functions of online platforms, but were also introduced to such tools as Padlet which allows students to exchange information, Classroom Screen which provides interaction with virtual whiteboards, and polls which allow monitoring students' performance in virtual classes. The best thing was that those workshops were initiated by the teachers rather than administrated from above. They emerged because of joint recognition of the need to collaborate and develop the skills in using technology for teaching purposes.

Previously, teachers like Romi never discussed their teaching methods; they just went to their lessons and left the classroom when the lesson was over. However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced them to rethink their approaches and to seek ways to improve them. It is quite interesting that in this way the pandemic, which deprived teachers of their traditional classroom, turned out to be one of the most productive periods for reflection and collaboration between teachers. For many of them, it was the period of the most intense professional development. They were compelled to rethink their teaching methods and collaborate in order to develop new ones.

The researcher's narrative adds to the confirmation of the above account. Being scheduled to travel to the United Kingdom for an international school partnership program, she experienced a significant disruption in both her private and professional lives due to the pandemic and the following period of staying at home. However, she also discovered the possibility of professional self-reflection provided by the lack of institutional control in the virtual environment, actually helped her develop her project in the virtual environment.

Digital Competence and the Transformation of Professional Identity

Indeed, pandemic brought about numerous changes in people's lives and many participants learned new skills throughout the process of adjustment. In this regard, developing competence in using technologies turned out not only to be a requirement for performing job-related duties properly, but also a factor in changing professional identity. There was Romi, whose expertise in technology made her the go-to person

for tech assistance at her school. Becoming the person whom colleagues ask for advice was extremely important to Romi: "It was the first time I was the one in charge," she said. "My colleagues were coming to me for help, instead of the other way around. It felt really different". This experience of being an expert was significant for Romi and allowed her to understand that she had more resources and skills than she believed before. At the same time, such a situation made her feel more comfortable in her professional identity and perceive herself differently. Thus, Dikiltas and Mumford (2018) of relation between teacher agency, motivation, and professional identity reflect the relation between newly developed competence and restructured professional identity in the description.

For a long time, the system that this teacher had worked at has been based on the notion that the person in charge is a male who possesses all the power. However, in the conditions of pandemic, the fact that technological expertise became a valuable skill regardless of one's position and gender changed the situation. Being perceived as competent and knowledgeable in this situation seemed to be refreshing for a teacher who has been raised in an environment of believing in expertise of certain people. Thus, the situation created by pandemic allowed breaking stereotypes and giving the chance to demonstrate competence to people who may not have such an opportunity in ordinary conditions.

In this regard, Monika described a change that was also connected to competence in using technologies; however, in comparison to the previous one, this change was not that drastic. In general, she was always quite unsure of her competence in using technologies, but working online and being forced to learn new tools became a factor in developing lasting self-confidence in learning new skills: "I know now that I can learn new things, which is a big deal for me. I used to be scared of technology, but now I think, if I could figure all that out during COVID, I can learn anything else that comes my way."

Amplified Role Conflict and the Gendered Burden of Crisis

The pandemic led to an array of problems for female teachers who had to adapt to the professional difficulties and take additional domestic responsibilities. Reeta, a teacher, said that she considered that period the toughest time in both her personal and professional life. The woman explained that it was very hard for her to give her attention to both teaching and learning processes since her kids were attending classes remotely. As she noted, "I was supposed to be in two places at once, but in reality, I was nowhere". The feeling of helplessness in relation to her inability to perform as required both in the workplace and at home made her stressed and overwhelmed.

All four individuals found the lockdown period challenging when trying to combine the work and family matters, but the case of Reeta turned out to be especially illustrative. The woman had to take care of her children, give attention to the educational process within the family, and attend the online classes with students while having no assistance from her school regarding her additional family obligations.

The lockdown period brought numerous complications in the life of teachers in relation to their family matters since the institutions did not pay attention to the extra household work they were involved in. One of such teachers, Reeta, felt herself extremely overwhelmed - she believed that she failed both in her professional and personal life. The woman admitted that she felt helpless when doing everything wrong, tired all the time, and was a bad teacher and mother. It was very difficult for Reeta to cope with the additional responsibility, and it had a serious negative impact on her psychological state.

Romi was lucky to find it easier to balance between her work and family life. In this case, the situation had two aspects since her kids were grown-ups who could look after themselves. Moreover, her cultural background taught her to fight for her rights and time for the work even at home. Thus, Romi established strict rules that were based on her cultural background: from nine until three, she was a teacher who attended to her students; after three, she was a mother. Therefore, the woman managed to keep work and family responsibilities apart in her mind. However, it was more difficult for Reeta and Rina due to the complicated family environment. Nevertheless, Romi managed to be confident enough to voice her needs in accordance with her cultural background, and thus, she was able to separate her household responsibilities and her work.

It is interesting to analyze the experience of the woman in relation to her cultural background, which played a crucial role in managing her responsibilities. It taught her how to voice her rights and needs, and, therefore, the woman managed to find an opportunity to be both a good mother and teacher. The case of Romi is quite useful in understanding how one can succeed if his/her priorities are clearly established.

Post-Pandemic Expectations and the Risk of Reverting

When schools started in-person classes again, all four participants shared a similar worry. Someone speculated that the positive changes for teachers that happened during the pandemic would be forgotten old good shape. They were most concerned about something else: the loss of spirit of cooperation among teachers that characterised the pandemic era. There was enough of that spirit for teachers to learn from one another share their knowledge base, and collaboratively problem solve. They did not want to

go back to a pre-pandemic reality with solitary teachers working individually in their own classrooms. All the participants wanted to preserve the “culture of community and collaboration in learning” that they had built under extreme conditions – and that they feared might be lost after the crisis. They felt that a collaborative model was a worthy legacy of the pandemic, and they were not about to lose it just as schools were returning to normal. Romi made an important point when she said, “We were in touch regularly through COVID, swapping ideas, troubleshooting-we all knew what was going on with each of us. Beginning of the end, when we are “returning to ourselves,” retreating into our classrooms and forgetting what we learned. It feels like COVID never happened, and that isn’t how it was supposed to be.” Romi raises the prospect that there is a real risk that the connections we made and the ways we worked together during the pandemic, will simply evaporate instead of becoming a permanent part of how our school functions.

Rina had a similar worry about technology. She thought that the digital skills she learned during the pandemic had really helped her become a better teacher. Now, she could use digital resources in her classes, give online tests to see how her students were doing, and talk to students and parents more easily through digital platforms. However, to keep doing these things, she had to keep learning new digital skills, which took a lot of time and effort. It was easier to do this when her school helped her, like with the Saturday workshops, rather than having to do it all on her own.

Discussion

The findings reported here have implications for the core thesis that crises can be catalysts for professional autonomy, albeit in a paradoxical manner, and that crisis-induced professionalism is highly precarious toward reversal in the absence of active institutional support. The unplanned natural experiment in professional self-direction that the pandemic offered to female teachers in this study-bereft of the usual comfort of institutional structures and thrown on their own professional resources- led to the acquisition of new skills, new modes of collaboration, and new senses of what was professionally possible. Post-pandemic policy will have to rise to the challenge of building on, instead of allowing the restoration of ‘normal’ institutional life to undercut, these achievements. This general pattern is consistent with Pearson and Moomaw (2005) conclusion that teacher autonomy “is intimately related to professional empowerment and a sense of efficacy, although it also existed when stress was severe.”

There are some important takeaways from this study. One thing is clear: Schools should retain the collaborative learning models that began during the pandemic.

Among these is the creation of a teaching team that meets regularly to exchange ideas, collaborate to address challenges, and develop digital resources. They do not have to be temporary adaptations, but could become a permanent part of how schools operate. The research suggests that such systems do not simply enable teacher learning and growth -they transform how teachers view themselves professionally, in ways that one-off training programs cannot. Maintaining this type of autonomy-supportive atmosphere for teachers' professional development may matter for more than just their own growth as professionals: Reeve et al. (2004) reported a similar finding with teachers, indicating that those who are afforded greater support for their own autonomy are themselves better able to provide supportive, autonomy-enhancing opportunities for their students, with positive student engagement outcomes.

We ought to see the skills teachers acquired during the pandemic as an asset that could enhance post-pandemic teaching -not as a substitute for in-person learning. To make it happen, they said, schools must spend more on technology, train teachers continuously and support those who want to bring digital tools into their classrooms. Some teachers said that once the pandemic was over, their schools did not back their attempts to continue using digital teaching methods - and instead reverted to ignoring technology the way they did before the pandemic. This is a problem because it can prevent teachers from applying the new skills they acquired, which could be useful for students. By backing their teachers and equipping them properly, schools can ensure that the gains born of the pandemic are not lost and that teaching will only get better. Such sustained, structured investment in teacher development is precisely what Vasquez (2016) identifies as lacking in many teacher education approaches to autonomy, which are prone to treat autonomy as something that will simply emerge rather than as a skill that can be intentionally cultivated.

Thirdly, the gendered aspects of the experience of the pandemic need to be fully accounted for in the way we plan for post-pandemic times. The further burdening of women teachers' household duties during the crisis proved that gender-neutral institutional responses to crisis conditions are not only insufficient, but also actively detrimental. Post-pandemic professional development models need to explicitly address gender equity in the distribution of labor and create structural accommodations (flexible scheduling, collegial support networks, leadership awareness training) that take into account and challenge the unequal domestic load that women educators bear. One final query inspired by these results is why so much autonomy and collaboration ought to be considered emergency exceptions in the first place. The fact that teachers can take significant responsibility and initiative in a time of crisis means that schools have no business withdrawing such trust and freedom when things are not so dire.

Conclusion

In Nepal, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown female teachers for a loop. To make them more self-reliant and sure of themselves in their jobs. Technology was becoming available and teachers were beginning to use it to teach—and to learn from one another—which gave them a feeling of greater control over their work. For them, it was a big change and it redefined how they saw themselves as professionals. The pandemic, though, also made it harder for them to balance work and home. They had more childcare responsibilities of their own and were doing more housework, which distracted them from teaching. This struggle to balance work and family stress would be a huge challenge for them, and it could have undone the progress they had made as professionals. In the accounts of four women teachers, we are introduced to how the pandemic disrupted their lives and how they adapted to such changes. These vignettes contribute a Nepali, crisis-specific case to a growing body of literature that has long asserted teacher autonomy to be a foundation for professional growth rather than an accessory to it (Benson, 2001; Smith, 2000).

In a broader sense, the pandemic laid bare a structural inequity long before it in the sense that schools and education policy never had to think of the unequal domestic burdens placed on women teachers, although these same women teachers had proved under duress that they could work creatively and collaboratively when given the opportunity. It is, therefore, as much a matter of equity as it is of practical necessity to sustain this capability beyond the crisis rather than let it die, as an underpinning of the effort to strengthen the education system in Nepal.

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