

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH LIVED EXPERIENCE: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF AN ELEMENTARY ENGLISH TEACHER

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ABSTRAK

Pengembangan profesional guru umumnya dipahami sebagai proses dan kegiatan formal untuk meningkatkan kompetensi profesional guru. Namun, dalam praktiknya, pengembangan tersebut juga dibentuk oleh pengalaman hidup individu yang dimiliki guru. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman hidup seorang guru bahasa Inggris di sekolah dasar pedesaan di Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain naratif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan dianalisis secara kualitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya pengaruh praktik mengajar selama perkuliahan dalam membentuk identitas profesional guru, penggunaan strategi adaptif dalam menghadapi tantangan mengajar di daerah pedesaan, serta integrasi pengalaman informal dan budaya populer untuk meningkatkan kesadaran lintas budaya siswa. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa pengembangan profesional guru merupakan proses reflektif yang menghubungkan aspek personal dan profesional. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini merekomendasikan agar otoritas pendidikan menyediakan program pengembangan guru yang mendukung pengalaman hidup dan aspek kontekstual selain pelatihan teknis secara umum.

Kata Kunci: *Pengembangan Profesional Guru, Guru Bahasa Inggris, Sekolah Dasar, Penelitian Naratif*

ABSTRACT

Teacher professional development usually takes the formal process and activities to increase teachers' professional skill. However, in practice, it is also shaped by teachers' individual lived experiences. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of an English teacher at a rural elementary school in Indonesia. The study applied narrative design. The data were collected through in-depth interviews and analysed qualitatively. The findings reveal that the influence of teaching practice in college in constructing professional identity, the use of adaptive strategies regarding the challenges in teaching in a rural area, and the integration of informal experiences and popular culture to enhance students' cross-cultural awareness. This study concludes that professional development is a reflective process that connects personal and professional sides. Therefore, it recommends the education authorities to provide teacher development programs that support lived experiences and contextual aspects beside general technical training.

Kata Kunci: *Teacher Professional Development, English Teacher, Elementary School, Narrative Research*

INTRODUCTION

Teacher professionalism in English Language Teaching (ELT) at the elementary school level plays an important role in shaping young learners' early language experiences. Elementary English teachers are expected to demonstrate pedagogical competence as well as to cope with



diverse classroom realities, institutional demands, and changing educational policies. In Indonesia, the curriculum shifts and technological changes require teachers to continuously develop professionally in order to enhance students' English proficiency (Susanto & Arifani, 2023; Zein, 2022). Unfortunately, the opportunities for professional development among English teachers are not always equal especially in rural schools due to limited access to resources, mentoring, and institutional support (Apriliyanti et al., 2023).

Professional development is commonly defined as a structured and formal process involving workshops, certification programs, seminars, and in-service training. Recent studies showed that teachers' professional growth is not only shaped through formal institutional programs, but also developed through personal experiences, teaching contexts, and social relationships that influence how teachers understand themselves and their work (Mann & Walsh, 2021; Yuan & Burns, 2023). Nguyen & Dao (2023) and Trent (2022) revealed that teachers' professional identities evolve through lived experiences, including prior learning experiences, personal struggles, critical incidents, and contextual negotiations within their teaching environments. In other words, teacher professionalism encompasses not only technical competence but also how teachers make sense of their professional lives.

Most previous research on teacher professional development in ELT focused on formal professional learning, teacher competencies, technology integration, and the outcomes of professional training programs (Fitriani et al., 2022) and the participants were usually secondary school teachers and preservice teachers in urban educational contexts (Nguyen & Dao, 2023; Yuan & Burns, 2023). Limited attention is given on how English teachers in rural schools accommodate personal experiences, institutional limitations, and sociocultural realities in shaping their professionalism.

In Indonesia, elementary English teachers often determine the classroom instructions on their own initiatives despite inconsistent education policy and various school conditions (Zein, 2022). Teachers in rural areas frequently encounter challenges such as limited facilities, insufficient professional support, and limited access to professional development opportunities. These conditions force them to generate adaptive strategies and pedagogical practices based on their experiences and contextual knowledge.

To address this gap, this study employs narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of an elementary English teacher working in a rural school in Kudus, Indonesia. It inquires how personal experiences and challenges faced during teaching in a rural school contribute to the teacher's professional development. By focusing the narrative of a single teacher, this study is expected to provide deeper insights into how professionalism develops beyond formal training structures and how teachers sustain their commitment to English teaching in challenging environments.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry design to explore teachers' professional development through their life experiences. This method was chosen based on the argument that life stories are the primary means for humans to make sense of their experiences, especially in the context of teachers' professional identities (Clandinin, 2013). This study focuses on three dimensions of narrative space, including temporality (past, present, and future), sociality (personal and social interactions), and place (the physical context of the school), to obtain a complete picture of the participants' career journeys (Nigar 2025).

The participant in this study was a 37 year old English teacher (pseudonym: Lina) at a public elementary school located in a rural area of Bae District, Kudus. Participant was selected using purposive sampling with the criteria of teachers who had more than ten years of teaching experience (since 2014) and had a unique career transition background from college to becoming practitioners in rural areas. The participant was selected for her ability to provide rich narratives about pedagogical adaptation and emotional conflict resolution in facing social challenges in elementary schools (Gavidia and Adu 2022).

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview instrument was designed to explore crucial moments (epiphanies), personal experiences, and teaching challenges in rural area. Data analysis was conducted through a process of restorying, which is reorganizing the stories scattered throughout the interview script into a chronological and thematic framework. The data were transcribed verbatim, coded for the main themes such as professional identity, rural challenges, and adaptation strategies, and then rearranged into a coherent narrative. To ensure the trustworthiness, this study applied the member checking technique, in which draft narratives were returned to participant for verification of accuracy in accordance with the participant's lived experiences (Sonday, Ramugondo, and Kathard, 2020).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings in this study are organized into three main themes that represent the participants' life experiences in shaping their professionalism as elementary school English teachers. Those themes are identity construction through critical moments, pedagogical adaptation in rural area, and integration of popular culture into English learning.

Identity Construction through Critical Moments

Lina's journey toward becoming an English teacher began with uncertainty and practical considerations rather than a clear professional aspiration. After graduating from high school, she found herself choosing between two different fields: Accounting and English Education. Her decision to pursue English Education was influenced not only by her interest in English during high school but also by practical academic considerations. Since the Accounting program at the university she considered was still offered as a diploma program, while English Education had already been established as a bachelor's degree, Lina eventually chose the latter. Despite this decision, she admitted that becoming a teacher was not initially part of her long-term plan. Lina explained:

At first, I chose English because I enjoyed the subject in high school. When I was about to enter university, I was unsure whether to take Accounting or English Education. Since Accounting was still a diploma program while English Education was already a bachelor's degree, I eventually chose English Education.

However, Lina's professional identity began to develop more clearly during a critical moment in her fourth semester when she was assigned to conduct a teaching practicum at an elementary school. Before this experience, Lina questioned whether she was capable of becoming a teacher, particularly at the elementary school level. Classroom practice became a turning point that allowed her to recognize teaching as something she could do and potentially pursue professionally. As Lina recalled:

Previously, I had never really thought about whether I was capable of becoming a teacher. But during that moment in my fourth semester, when my lecturer asked us to teach at an elementary school, I realized, 'Oh, it turns out I can become a teacher.'

This experience marked an important turning point in Lina's professional journey. Her professional identity developed through direct engagement with classroom realities and reflection on her own teaching capabilities, not just by formal coursework. The practicum experience gave Lina the opportunity to see herself differently and transformed teaching from an uncertain possibility into a meaningful career path. Similar moments have been described as critical incidents that significantly influence how teachers understand and reconstruct their professional identities (Chuc & Anh, 2023; Trent, 2022).

Lina's narrative reveals that teacher identity is dynamic and continuously shaped through lived experiences. Her initial hesitation in choosing a major, followed by growing confidence during teaching practice, reflects a gradual process of professional "becoming". Castañeda-Trujillo (2022) and Daud (2021) state that teacher identity is not static but rather a continuous process of "becoming" which develops through personal histories, reflective experiences, and interactions with educational contexts. In Lina's case, the teaching practicum functioned as a meaningful early experience that helped her gain confidence and grow stronger commitment to be an elementary English teacher. As Clandinin (2013), Parks (2023), and Johnson (2009) note, this initial experience becomes the foundation for a long-term, sustainable professional commitment. This journey reflects what Ho (2001) and Ni and Wu (2023) refer to as the process of self-reconstruction through meaningful life stories.

Moreover, Lina's story highlights the importance of autobiographical experiences in shaping teachers' professional pathways. Her decision-making process, moments of uncertainty, and eventual confidence show how professional commitment often emerges from meaningful life experiences rather than from institutional preparation alone. This finding supports arguments that teachers continuously reconstruct their professional identities through reflection on significant life events and practical experiences (Ni & Wu, 2023; Ubaidillah et al., 2024). For Lina, becoming a teacher was not an immediate ambition but an identity gradually formed through experience, reflection, and growing confidence in her own capabilities.

Pedagogical Adaptation in Rural Area

Teaching English in a rural elementary school required Lina to continuously adapt her pedagogical practices to the realities of students' backgrounds and the limited educational support available outside school. One of the main challenges she faced was related to students' low learning continuity at home, which she associated with socioeconomic conditions and limited parental involvement. Lina explained that many of her students came from lower-middle-income families and had minimal opportunities to learn English lessons after school. As English was taught only once a week, students frequently forgot what they had learned in previous meetings.

Lina shared:

The difficulty is that most students come from lower-middle-income families, and they only learn at school. After I teach them, they do not review the lesson at home, so the following week they often forget, especially because English is taught only once a week.

Lina's account shows how rural teaching is shaped not only by classroom instruction but also by social and family conditions. She noticed significant difference between rural and urban schools regarding parental involvement and students' independence in learning. According to Lina, parents in rural settings tended to be less responsive to school communication and less consistent in accompanying children's learning at home. She stated:

There is a very clear difference between teaching in villages and cities. Parents in rural areas tend to be less cooperative. Without guidance, children easily forget, and parents often pay less attention to school information shared in communication groups.

To overcome those challenges, Lina implemented a peer tutoring strategy and an individualized approach to address students with learning difficulties. For students who needed more intensive support, including those with special learning needs, Lina provided different materials and closer supervision during classroom activities. These aim to maintain student engagement and assist learners experiencing difficulties. These adaptive measures are in line with Sugianto (2022) and Jaramillo (2021) who note that the complexity of teaching in rural areas require teachers to be able to negotiate methods with the local context. Rather than relying only on standardized instruction, she negotiated her teaching practices according to students' circumstances and learning capacities. This finding supports previous studies indicating that teachers in rural areas often develop context-sensitive pedagogies to cope with limited resources, low parental support, and diverse student needs (Behak et al., 2021; Gavidia & Adu, 2022; Mędrzecka, 2021); and Tagudando, 2023).

As she explained:

I use an individual approach and discuss with peer tutors. For students with special needs, I ask them to sit beside me, guide them in reading and writing, and provide different materials from the rest of the class.

In addition, Lina's use of peer tutoring and individualized instruction highlights the pedagogical creativity that emerge from constrained teaching conditions. Such strategies not only functioned as practical classroom solutions but also reflected her professional commitment to ensuring that all students remained engaged in learning despite the limitations. Similar findings have emphasized that teacher agency in rural settings is often demonstrated through adaptive practices that connect teaching methods with local realities rather than through rigid implementation of formal pedagogy (Rani et al., 2023; Tafazoli & Meihami, 2023).

Lina's narrative shows that professional growth in rural schools is also shaped by place-based experiences. Her teaching decisions were not formed merely through formal teacher preparation but through repeated interactions with students, families, and school realities. Therefore, in her case, pedagogical adaptation became both a survival strategy and a form of professional learning that strengthened her identity as an English teacher working within a rural context.

Integration of Popular Culture into English Learning

Lina's professional development was shaped not only through formal education or classroom experiences but was also influenced by her personal interests and life experiences outside school. Based on the interview, it was found out that Lina transformed her hobbies like watching Western films, listening to Western music, and following vlogs about Indonesians living abroad, into applicable pedagogical resources. She used them as a source of authentic teaching materials to introduce students to cultural diversity, global perspectives, and intercultural awareness.

Lina explained:

I enjoy watching Western movies and listening to Western music. I also like watching vlogs about Indonesians living abroad. Because of these hobbies, I can share information about Western culture with my students.

According to Lina, introducing cultural understanding was important because many students in rural areas had limited exposure to global information. She viewed English learning not only as language acquisition but also as an opportunity to broaden students' perspectives about social norms and intercultural communication. Through simple and contextual examples, she introduced cultural differences that students might encounter when interacting with people from different countries. As Lina further stated:

Western culture is different from ours. For example, people usually do not ask about age, salary, or religion when meeting someone for the first time.

The use of hobbies such as watching vlogs and Western films to teach cross-cultural awareness that Lina has done is a significant innovation. This finding indicates that Lina's informal experiences became valuable resources that enriched her classroom practices. She used everyday experiences and popular culture to make English learning more meaningful and relevant to students' lives and thus did not depend on textbooks only. This reflects how teachers' personal interests may become important pedagogical assets, particularly in contexts where formal resources are limited. Ni & Wu (2023), Parks (2023), and Safrizal et al. (2022) mention in their studies that teachers' informal experiences and everyday knowledge can be valuable sources of professional innovation and contextualized teaching practices.

Moreover, Susanto and Arifani (2023) and Nigar et al. (2024) notify that the boundary between teachers' personal and professional spaces is very thin. This practice demonstrates that knowledge gained outside formal training, such as popular culture, can be adapted into effective teaching materials (Parks 2023); (Ni and Wu 2023). This also reflects teachers' efforts to meet the global competency needs of elementary school students even though they are in rural areas (Dwi et al., 2017 and Safrizal et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the professional development of elementary school English teachers is a personal and evolving process shaped by lived experiences and contextual realities. Teachers' professional identities are formed not only through formal education or training but also develop through meaningful experiences, reflection, and classroom practice. Critical moments experienced during teaching practicum in teacher education and challenges faced in school played an important role in gaining teachers' confidence and professional commitment. The findings also show that teaching in rural areas requires adaptability and pedagogical creativity. Teachers need to respond to challenges such as limited parental support, students' learning difficulties, and restricted access to educational resources. Therefore, adaptive teaching strategies like individualized support and peer tutoring became important ways to maintain student engagement and learning. In addition, this study reveals that personal interests and informal experiences can contribute to teaching practices. Lina's use of popular culture and intercultural knowledge shows that meaningful authentic learning materials could come from teachers' everyday experiences outside formal professional development.

This study recommend that teacher professional development programs should provide more space for reflection, contextual adaptation, and the integration of teachers' lived experiences. By understanding teachers' personal and professional journeys, educational institutions can design more relevant and meaningful support, especially for educators working in rural and under-resourced areas.

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