An Activity Theory Inquiry into Emotional Vulnerability and Professional Identity Construction of Language Teacher Educators

Mostafa Nazari[a], Hassan Nejadghanbar[b*], Guangwei Hu[c]

[a]Postdoctoral fellow, Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR. mostafa.nazariabbasbolaghi@polyu.edu.hk

[b]Research Assistant Professor, Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR. hassan.nejadghanbar@polyu.edu.hk Tel.: + 0852 3400 2062

[c]Professor of Language and Literacy Education, Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR. guangwei.hu@polyu.edu.hk Tel.: +852 2766 7564

Mostafa Nazari is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His area of interest is Second Language Teacher Education and he has published *in TESOL Quarterly, Journal of Teacher Education, European Journal of Teacher Education*, etc. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1087-126X

Hassan Nejadghanbar is a Research Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His research focuses on English for academic purposes, research ethics, and teacher education. His papers have appeared in *Language Teaching, TESOL Quarterly, System, Journal of English for Academic Purposes, RELC Journal,* and *Learned Publishing*. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7821-8128

Guangwei Hu is Professor of Language and Literacy Education in the Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His research interests include academic discourse, English for academic/specific purposes, research ethics, and second language writing. He has published extensively on these and other areas. He is Co-Editor-in-Chief for Journal of English for Academic Purposes. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2297-4784

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Abstract

Despite the growth of research on language teachers' emotion and professional identity in the past decades, little is known about the emotional life of language teacher educators (LTEs), much less about their emotional vulnerability. Accordingly, the present study drew on activity theory and explored 14 Iranian LTEs' emotional vulnerability and professional identity construction. Drawing on data from narrative frames and semi-structured interviews, our study demonstrated how context created tensions that profoundly shaped the LTEs' emotional vulnerability and identification processes. Specifically, we found that LTEs' emotional vulnerability results from others' malpractice and/or their own lack of autonomy, leading to further identity investment. Although they faced a myriad of challenges serving as sources of emotional and professional identity tensions, the LTEs adhered to ethics in maintaining their identity standards to positively contribute to teachers' professional growth. We provide implications for institutional policymakers to better acknowledge the professional status of LTEs so that they become less emotionally vulnerable.

Keywords: Emotional vulnerability, emotional life, professional identity, language teacher educators, activity theory

Introduction

Over the past decades, research on language teachers' emotion and professional identity has grown exponentially (e.g., Blake and Dewaele 2023; Dewaele 2020; Her and De Costa 2022; Song, 2016). This body of research has examined how language teacher emotions and professional identity connect to contextual particularities, define teachers' professional performances, and intertwine with other professional competencies such as agency, motivation, self-efficacy, and wellbeing. A central motif of this developing scholarship is how teachers experience positive and negative

emotions, and how experiencing negative emotions positions teachers in a vulnerable situation (Gao 2008, Lasky 2005, Song 2016, 2022). As a central type of vulnerability (Song 2023), emotional vulnerability has become key to understanding teachers' professional work and growth because various internal (e.g., beliefs, knowledge, and thoughts) and external (policy, discourse, and culture) factors define teacher vulnerability in the face of contextual particularities (see Kelchtermans 2011, Song 2016).

Despite the growing body of knowledge on emotion and professional identity in applied linguistics, there have been calls to expand the emotion-identity landscape to examine how different educational groups experience emotions in response to contextual particularities and what impact such experiences have on their professional identity construction (e.g., Authors 2023, De Costa and Norton 2017). While the literature on language teacher professional identity and emotion has grown significantly, little attention has been given to language teacher educators' (LTEs) emotions (Authors, 2024a). In their recent comprehensive review of research on TESOL teacher educators, Yuan et al. (2022b, p. 18) underscored "the lack of attention to language teacher educators' emotions in the existing literature". In this study, we took a step further and explored the emotional vulnerability and professional identity construction of Iranian LTEs. Such an inquiry is particularly significant because, besides the lack of research on LTEs' emotional vulnerability and professional identity, the Iranian context (see the Method section) bears ideologically-laden features that can profoundly influence LTEs' professionalism. We capture these features through the lens of activity theory (AT), a perspective that unpacks the layers of influence exerted on and by individuals within the activity systems of their working environments (Ahn, 2013; Engestrom, 1999). As we show later, this context impacted on the participating LTEs' emotions and professional identity across their self-perceptions as professional educators, the goals they set for

navigating their vulnerabilities, the outcomes of such vulnerabilities for their identities, the way they perceived the division of responsibilities in the school, the macro-level policies adopted by the schools, and how they used their personal skills for guiding the teacher candidates and practicing teachers more effectively, collectively creating tensions for Iranian LTEs. Thus, the study addressed the following research question:

How do Iranian language teacher educators experience emotional vulnerability and what are the associated implications for their professional identity construction from an activity theory perspective?

Literature Review

Teachers' emotional vulnerability and professional identity construction

Emotions are crucial factors in teacher professional identity negotiation and construction (Benesch 2012, 2017; Song 2022). Teachers can experience strong emotions related to their professional skills, students, supervisors, colleagues, parents, school policies, and social structures, community factors that can profoundly influence teachers' emotional work (Barcelos et al., 2022; Dewaele & Wu, 2021). Relatedly, emotions may expose teachers to risks of vulnerability in that their professional life may be fraught with moments of pain and powerlessness, substantially influencing their subjective experiences and meaning-making (Zembylas 2003). In this sense, teachers usually experience emotional vulnerability when there is a schism between "what they try to feel" and "what they actually feel" (Zembylas 2002, p. 196).

In a broad sense, Lasky (2005 p. 901) defined vulnerability as a "multidimensional, multifaceted emotional experience [and] a state of being that can be influenced by the way people perceive their present situation as it interacts with their identity, beliefs, values, and sense of competence". Kelchtermans (2005), however, questioned the conceptualization of vulnerability as

an emotion and argued for going beyond the experiential aspect. He contended that vulnerability is not an emotion in itself but is a structural characteristic of the profession or a structural condition faced by teachers that can invoke positive or negative emotions. In his view, this new conceptualization helps us understand vulnerability in terms of felt emotions and, at the same time, look for coping strategies and action plans. It should be noted that, in this study, our understanding of emotional vulnerability aligns more with Kelchtermans's (2005) conceptualization in highlighting the structural rules that position Iranian LTEs in a vulnerable position.

Earlier, Kelchtermans (1996) contended that teachers experience vulnerability when their deep-rooted principles and practices are uprooted by policy changes or when their moral integrity is challenged by students, parents, or the public. Teachers' emotional vulnerability also has political roots because it is connected to matters of interest. When teachers feel that the valued workplace conditions are threatened or lost, they try to maintain or re-establish them (Gao 2008, Kelchtermans 2011, Yuan et al. 2022a). From this perspective, emotional vulnerability is fundamentally linked to contextual particularities related to system-related performances. For example, Kelchtermans (2009) maintained that three groups of factors can account for vulnerability in teaching. The first group consists of factors that are out of teachers' direct control such as policies, rules, and quality control mechanisms, a point also emphasized by Song (2016) and Yuan et al. (2022a). The second group comprises personal-subjective and social factors that make it difficult for teachers to attribute their students' good performances to their own effective teaching (Song 2022). The third group include factors that contribute to challenging teachers' decisions, no matter how appropriate and justified their decisions are with regard to certain situations, students, and time (Gao 2008). Accordingly, teaching is a practice full of emotional vulnerability and possible criticism for every decision or action (Song 2022, 2023).

It is important to acknowledge and study teachers' emotional vulnerability because it is inherent in the teaching profession, can have an immense impact on the quality of their teaching and job satisfaction (Kelchtermans 2011, Song 2022), and can help us understand teachers and their development (Gao 2008). In fact, emotional vulnerability can have both positive and negative dimensions (Zembylas 2002, Lasky 2005). It can lead to teacher isolation by imposing massive emotional labor (i.e., the clash between internal feelings and external discourses/expectations, Zembylas, 2003) or teacher transformation by providing a deeper understanding of realities and alternative choices (Zembylas 2002).

Language teacher educators' emotional vulnerability

Teacher educators' work profoundly determines the quality of future teachers. Teacher educators are expected to fulfil a wide spectrum of responsibilities such as designing curriculum, contributing to scholarly research, and instructing/supporting/supervising/guiding student teachers (Barkhuizen, 2021). While LTEs often receive no or very little formal education to support their transition to being a teacher educator (Yuan 2015), they are normally expected to have language teaching experience, a graduate or postgraduate degree, and theoretical knowledge of the field (Barkhuizen, 2021), challenging areas that demand teachers to devote themselves to the labor they should fulfill as educators and colleagues. Teacher educators are also expected to engage in multiple communities of practice; Malm (2020) notes that teacher educators need to participate in three domains or communities: choosing pedagogical/teaching methods, self-cultivating and knowledge-production through research and scholarship, and fulfilling administrative/service responsibilities. Barkhuizen (2021) adds one more domain by splitting administrative/service responsibilities into service and leadership work within institutions and community, and leadership service work outside the institutions.

The multitude of roles that LTEs are supposed to fulfil may expose them to feelings of emotional vulnerability and tension arising "from the interplay of discourse and agency" (Trent 2013 p. 272). Each domain of LTEs' (identity) work can be challenged and questioned if their decisions and judgements are dissonant with the prevailing discourses of each community (Barkhuizen 2021). LTEs may have to conform to the institutional norms when institutional particularities and power structures are not aligned with their professional identities. They may be compelled to comply with the norms even if they disagree with them, which can make them feel marginalized and undermine their sense of belonging (Barkhuizen 2021). When LTEs attempt to keep the balance between their different roles based on their preferences but the institution requires them to act differently, tensions arise and LTEs can experience emotional vulnerability.

While language teachers' emotion and professional identity development has been the focus of much research over the past decade (see De Costa and Norton 2017, Yazan and Lindahl 2020, Yuan et al. 2022b), much less attention has been paid to LTEs' emotional vulnerability. Previous research has addressed LTEs' professional identity construction and their journey from being a language teacher to becoming an LTE (Yuan et al. 2022b). Although there are many calls to study LTEs' identities in relation to their emotions (Barkhuizen 2021, Peercy et al. 2019, Sarasa 2022, Trent 2013, Yazan 2012, Yuan et al. 2022b), there is scanty research on LTEs, especially their emotional vulnerability. Most of the existing studies on emotional vulnerability focused on language teachers rather than LTEs. For example, Song (2016) examined South Korean English language teachers' emotional vulnerability and found that they felt vulnerable before returnee students who had studied abroad in English-speaking countries. In a similar study, Gao (2011) explored how the shifting educational context and contextual changes in Hong Kong led to feelings of vulnerability in language teachers. As a TESOL teacher educator, Song (2022) explored, in an

autoethnography, her emotional reflexivity and experiences of vulnerability in online teaching. She experienced emotional vulnerability in online teaching because of the absence of face-to-face interaction, her low confidence in teaching online, and her feeling of being a non-native English speaker teaching in the USA. Authors (2024b) studied 15 language teachers' emotional vulnerability and identity negotiation on social media. Their findings revealed that these teachers grappled with issues of visibility and competition in an online milieu that prioritized content with mass appeal. The study underscored the teachers' endeavors to uphold their authenticity and legitimacy in the face of self-branded individuals who dominated the popularity spectrum.

In sum, the above literature shows that vulnerability in general and emotional vulnerability in particular are closely related to the professional identities that teachers construct because being positioned in a vulnerable position is likely to challenge their identity web and impose on them practices and decisions that negatively influence their self-perceptions, particularly in terms of emotional and identity tensions. This role of emotional vulnerability stems from the very nature of teachers' emotions and sense-making processes being defined by personal, professional, and broader sociocultural contextualities, processes that are inextricably intertwined with the way professional identities and emotional vulnerability have been conceptualized in the literature, as presented above. However, this issue has been little explored among teacher educators, which is the gap we seek to bridge in this study through an AT lens.

Theoretical framework: Activity theory

As a theoretical stance that originates from the works of Vygotsky (1978), AT aims at "understanding historically specific local practices, their objects, mediating artefacts, and social organization" (Engeström 2005, p. 307–8). Over the years, AT has developed in pursuit of capturing the complexity of individual and systemic changes, and the way they relate to daily

activities (Engestrom, 1999). As a perspective that captures "the ways sociocultural historical contexts shape human activity" (Anh, 2013, p. 2), AT can be a useful conceptual framework to explore how the components of subject, object, tools, division of labour, community, and rules feature in individual sense-making and activity development because in AT, both the individual and the system are of central concern (Cross, 2020). From this perspective, subject refers to how individuals' personal histories and biographies shape their being and performing in the setting (e.g., teacher educators' identities as fulfilling multiple roles); object involves the goals that individuals seek by engagement in the setting (e.g., educators' contribution to institutional accountability); tools are the instruments used for navigating organizational interactions and performances (e.g., affordances); division of labour features how different roles and responsibilities are negotiated and fulfilled (e.g., navigating the roles of supervisors and observers by teacher educators); community relates to how different small and big organizational communities inform each other (e.g., the community of teachers and that of teacher educators); and rules are the set of regulations that should be observed (e.g., the sociocultural contextualities of the educational setting).

In recent years, AT has been adopted as a theoretical framework for exploring language teachers' identity and emotion (e.g., Authors, 2022; Feryok, 2012; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019; Ebadijalal & Moradkhani, 2022). For example, Karimi and Mofidi (2019) used AT to explore the identity construction of two Iranian EFL teachers. Data were collected from interviews, observations, and Instagram pages. Data analyses revealed that system-related factors can define the teachers' identity from historical-cultural perspectives. Furthermore, Authors (2022) explored the emotion labor and identity construction of 10 Iranian teachers, capturing the complexity of their emotion labor and how such labor contributed to their identity construction in light of contextual factors. Despite these advancements, the application of AT to exploring emotional

vulnerability and identity construction of LTEs remains largely unexplored, a gap that this study addresses, thereby introducing a novel dimension of the study.

Method

Context and participants

The present study was conducted in Iran with LTEs who were working in private language institutes. In the Iranian context, LTEs work in different sectors including universities, private higher education institutes, and private language institutes. The LTEs working in the first two groups of institutions usually have a relatively secure tenured position because they teach higher-education students and can become faculty members after a while. However, the LTEs working in the third group of institutions are freelances who either have had extensive experience in the private language institutes or have obtained their credentials in Applied Linguistics (especially PhD). They have to work in the private language institutes mainly because there are not enough positions available in the first two groups of higher education institutions (echoing the community component of AT in terms of its effects on LTEs' professionalism).

Among the challenges that the last group of LTEs experience are disjunctures between theoretical and practical knowledge, extensive engagement in practice and little focus on research, high institutional demands, pressures from institute managers and policymakers to comply with certain institutional policies, and professional identity tensions arising from the particularities of the institutional context (rules that demand excessive workload by LTEs). Crucially, these particularities could put the LTEs in a more vulnerable position (the outcome of the system), which is why we recruited focal participants from this group in our study. In response to such a condition, the LTEs could adopt various professional, personal, and institutional affordances and alternatives

to regulate their behaviors and memberships (tools that LTEs can use to experience less emotional vulnerability and higher institutional engagement).

The participants (subjects that experience emotional vulnerability) were 14 LTEs who were selected based on the criteria of having experience (1) working with private language institutes and (2) running pre- and in-service teacher education courses for teachers at different levels (division of labour being high for LTEs arising from multiple responsibilities). We selected the LTEs from this sector because the literature from the Iranian context (e.g., Authors, 2022; Ebadijalal & Moradkhani, 2022; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019) has shown that AT better lends itself to capturing the complexity of teacher professionalism in this sector. These criteria were important to consider because the literature on emotion and professional identity has underscored the key role of context in teachers' sense-making processes and professional understandings, in resonance with both the character of LTEs' professional work in the Iranian context and our research purposes. There were eight male and six female participants, and their age ranged from 27 to 40 with an average of 6 years of work experience as LTEs. As regards qualifications, six had a master's degree, another six held a PhD, and two were PhD candidates. They held various international certificates such as CELTA, DELTA, and Cambridge Teacher Trainer. It must be emphasized that the main reason for getting such international credentials is their widespread recognition in the eyes of institutional policymakers, students, and parents: Individuals holding such degrees are more welcomed in terms of job recruitment and making more profit by running tutoring classes.

Design and data collection

To explore the LTEs' emotional vulnerability and professional identity construction, we adopted a qualitative approach (Creswell 2014) with a focus on contextual influences on their emotional

vulnerability and the associated implications for their professional identity construction (Song 2016), a perspective that aligned well with AT. In exploring how context would shape the LTEs' experiences, our understanding of emotional vulnerability and professional identity construction resonated with the literature (e.g., Kelchtermans 2009, Song 2016, 2022). In particular, our definition of professional identity was in line with Varghese et al.'s (2016) characterization of teacher identity as being "produced and discursively constructed within hierarchically organized racial, gendered, linguistic, religious, and classed categories and processes within teachers' personal lives as well as in and through their teacher education programs, classrooms, schools, disciplines and nation-states" (p. 546). We thus sought to understand how the LTEs' *personal* and *professional* lives would undergo emotional vulnerability under the influences of the *processes* underlying educational work in the Iranian context. To this end, we collected data with narrative frames and semi-structured interviews. It must be mentioned that due to its focus on both the person and the system, AT could be effectively materialized through these data collection tools in regard to capturing the six components discussed above.

We first asked the LTEs to share one of their memorable experiences through a narrative frame, as suggested by Barkhuizen and Wette (2008). Serving as prompts that trigger teachers' recollection of past experiences, narrative frames are useful tools to unpack how textures of thought, identification, and emotion define teachers' professional work (Kayi-Aydar 2021). Thus, we designed a narrative frame that asked the LTEs to identify a concrete experience of emotional labor, describe how the experience was implicated by emotional tensions, explain how it put them in a vulnerable position, and reflect on how it shaped their self-perceptions as LTEs. The participants were provided the frame in a Word document file and filled it out in English. The frame could uncover the layers of community, rules, individual sense-making, and how these are

collectively shared and negotiated within the activity system of the schools. The experiences thus collected served as valuable sources of information for us to understand how context impacted on the LTEs' emotional vulnerability and professional identity construction.

We then invited the LTEs to participate in semi-structured interviews to expand on their experiences captured by the narrative frame and answer more questions related to their own and other Iranian LTEs' emotional vulnerability and professional identity construction. The interviews could be helpful in concretizing AT because they could tap into the intersections of person and context in light of system-related contingencies. These interviews were conducted via Skype or WhatsApp as these applications were less affected by Internet disconnections (a common problem in the current Iranian context). In the interviews, we first asked the LTEs to elaborate on their narrative frames and provide more details. This was important to unpack more details of those narratives. We then asked questions about (1) the most positive and negative emotions that our LTEs and Iranian LTEs in general experienced, (2) how such emotions were rubbed against contextual ties to become positive and/or negative, (3) how context, especially the institutional context, put the LTEs in an emotionally vulnerable position, and (4) how such emotional experiences contributed to their professional identity construction. Relevant follow-up questions were asked to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences. The interviews were conducted in either Persian or English based on the LTEs' preferences. The interviews lasted on average 45 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

Data analysis

The dataset (14 narrative frames and 14 interviews) was analyzed based on the guidelines of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). After familiarizing ourselves with the data by reading the dataset twice, we (the first and the second authors) engaged in generating the initial codes. At

this stage, we used the color-coding affordance of Microsoft Word to create clear paths in the coded data. That is, we read the data and generated codes to capture the meaning and patterns of the various data segments. In this regard and following a micro-level coding of the data, we assigned and color-coded headings to the data extracts encountered. For example, when the LTEs talked about how interactions with teachers positioned them under pressure and posed challenges for them in terms of keeping their professional identity standards, the relevant data segments were coded as instances of "emotional vulnerability due to interaction with teachers". When the LTEs related how their identities as professional stakeholders were challenged by the school managers to lead to pressures on them, the data extracts concerned were coded as manifestations of "managers' behavior as a source of emotional tensions". This process resulted in a list of codes that covered personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors shaping the LTEs' emotional vulnerability, which was resonant with the AT perspective as well in capturing personal, interpersonal, and institutional particularities. Next, we proceeded to sort the codes and develop themes to capture the meaning of related codes at a higher conceptual level. For example, the code of "vulnerability due to oppressed voice" generated for the narrative frame data and the code of "lack of freedom for the LTEs" for the interviews were synthesized and captured in the theme of "vulnerability due to lack of autonomy imposed by institute manager".

At this stage, we shared and discussed the tentative themes we had independently arrived at to enhance the trustworthiness of the thematic analysis and steer it toward issues that dominantly influenced the LTEs' emotions and professional identity construction in relation to our research questions. Through constant comparison, we were able to construct themes that aligned with AT, reviewed the themes against the coded extracts and the entire dataset, and defined them. Thus, the coding and thematization process involved the stages of (1) micro-level coding of the data, (2)

developing initial themes based on the codes, (3) peer reviewing the codes and themes, (4) refining the themes based on peer discussion, and (5) finalizing the themes as defining Iranian LTEs' emotional vulnerability. In particular, three themes emerged from the data by engaging with how the sociocultural context of Iran shapes LTEs' professionalism in line with AT principles. That is, community-related challenges, subjective sense-making processes, and (inter)personal navigation of institutional responsibilities created tensions for the LTEs in the activity system of their work, as featuring in the form of the three themes detailed below. As we note below, this context had a significant role in the way LTEs experienced discursive and institutional tensions that in turn motivated them to invest more in their work with teachers. For example, in analyzing the data, we realized that a central theme was how LTEs could invest in developing emotionality with the teachers, which constituted the content of the third theme. The finalized themes are presented in the following section.

Findings

Through the thematic analysis described above, we found that the LTEs' work gave rise to emotional vulnerability that was linked to institutional and sociocultural dimensions of working in the Iranian context. These links had implications for their professional identity construction in creating excessive tensions for the LTEs' personal investments, professional visions, interpersonal communications, and navigating responsibilities. That is, the teachers' work within the activity system of their schools was closely related to the other activity systems that shaped part of their vulnerability and identity construction, yet one which was imbued with tensions between LTEs' personal standards and external realities. Furthermore, such vulnerability was influenced by broader job-related particularities as discussed in the first theme, influenced the teachers'

autonomy as shown in the second theme, and served as a site of investment as detailed in the third theme, all of which closely relate to AT principles.

Emotional vulnerability arising from dominant job-related discourses

One of the major sources of the LTEs' emotional vulnerability was how job-related discourses (i.e., circulating discourses that influence educational work) featured strongly in institutional work. Such discourses were chiefly related to how inappropriate teaching-related practices extended to institutional work and functioned as a source of emotional and professional identity tensions for the LTEs, an observation that aligns closely with the rules and community components of AT, negatively shaping the LTEs' developing identities. Two chief manifestations of the prevalent job-related discourses were the consumerist beliefs held by prospective teachers (n = 12) and the private language institutes' deliberate misrepresentation of teaching as a prestigious job (n = 11).

A commonality in the LTEs' statements was how teaching TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) courses has become a "lucrative job" (LTE14, Interview) in the Iranian context, which has motivated many individuals to choose English language teaching as a job. The central point here, however, was not the thriving of such courses, but the overwhelmingly economic considerations of prospective language teachers who would teach such courses. The patent consumerism was in direct opposition to the LTEs' understanding of language teaching as a profession and invoked their emotional vulnerability by challenging their own identity standards: "Many people come to language schools to become teachers and it has become very common that they want to teach IELTS and TOEFL classes because they think that there is a lot of money in it, but they don't pay attention to teaching as something that needs deep and technical knowledge" (LTE8, Interview). Such an invasion of consumerism positioned the LTEs in a vulnerable situation by creating conflicts between their

perceptions of professionalism and their trainees' perspectives on language teaching, as aptly put by LTE2 regarding his identity as a professional: "I don't deny the role that income should play in our work as teachers, but when this becomes the major purpose, I can't stand it because I think that something deeper should be there. This condition really demotivates me" (Interview). A similar observation was made by LTE12 who moved beyond personal considerations and discussed how such consumerism impinges on LTEs' professional identity and generates emotional tensions, particularly in the way consumerism creates a divide between teacher educators and teachers: "I don't have myself in mind, but I think that when you have the money in mind as the major factor, you sacrifice many other important things like values. This issue is a challenge that detaches emotionally many teacher educators from teachers and challenges our perceptions" (Interview). LTE5 also described how he had to comply with institutional demands (e.g., implementing policymakers' wants) due to economic problems despite the fact that "when at some point you find out that their main goal is to make some money and become famous and accordingly attract more students, then you feel bad and regret working with them or for them" (Narrative frame).

A second dimension of the LTEs' emotional vulnerability was the private language institutes' misrepresentation of language teaching as a profession in the promotion of their courses. They constructed a discourse that masqueraded the unpalatable realities of teaching to attract trainee teachers to their courses: "Many institutes try to disguise the realities of teaching in their advertisements in the hope of enticing people into teaching so that they could exploit trainee language teachers by giving them many classes with little payment" (LTE13, Interview). This discourse became highly problematic for the LTEs in teacher education courses, because of the type of individuals that they faced as a consequence, and the ensuring negative impact on their

identity web as professionals: “An unethical aspect in institutional work is to recruit individuals that are not meant to be teachers as they complicate educating the teachers effectively and this becomes a source of excessive emotional tensions” (LTE1, Interview). Such tensions for LTE1 featured in the form of negative emotions such as depersonalization, disappointment, and stress, especially with regard to the devaluation of his professional identity: “Such things give me negative feelings, especially that I feel disappointed or not respected adequately” (Interview). Such emotional vulnerability of handling unfitting individuals negatively influenced the LTEs’ professional identity construction by flying in the face of their cherished principles: “I hold certain standards and when I want to run a course, I should do so based on what I find as sound. But, when I see that there are persons who, as I know, have come to the course because of the prestige of the job the institutes portray, I feel that I have to change my principles”. Thus, the discourse on teaching that the private language institutes promulgated put some LTEs in an emotionally vulnerable position by undermining their standards and principles. Although we cannot ascertain that all of the teachers were or were not suitable for the teaching profession, the LTEs were considering and criticizing the dominant ideology followed by institutional policymakers in teacher recruitment.

Emotional vulnerability due to lack of professional autonomy

The second major source of the LTEs’ emotional vulnerability pertained to how their professional autonomy was challenged by institutional managers on various occasions (n = 11). From this perspective, the findings comply with the rules (i.e., top-down banking regulations), community (i.e., expectations from the LTEs), division of labour (i.e., navigating multiple roles), and subject (i.e., LTEs’ personal understanding of their work) components of AT, collectively shaping the outcomes of the system work as identity negatively.

Such challenging could take the form of questioning the LTEs' status as professionals and their ability to implement their ideas. Sadly, the LTEs often had to submit to such challenging out of the need to keep their job and suffered emotional vulnerability as a result of having their professional standards of conduct unsettled: "I am a supervisor and I have to work a lot so that I can pay my bills and family expenses. I have faced many cases when I had to comply with disputable issues because I don't want to lose my job. This is emotionally draining for me, but I have to come along and find a middle ground" (LTE3, Interview). Clearly, driven by his financial need, LTE3 had to manage his negative emotions when his professional autonomy was challenged by the institute managers. Similarly, LTE5 shared a narrative of how he had to manage the tensions between his internal feelings and the external pressure encroaching on his autonomy, leading to the strategy of overlooking the reality in his attempts to reconstruct his identity: "I have problems with many decisions and this creates constant tensions for me and my autonomy, but it is my job and I have to overlook many things" (Narrative frame). Other LTEs also commented on how the economic side of their work forced them to submit to the questioning of their autonomy and status as professional educators, with ensuing emotional vulnerability and professional identity conflicts.

Another contributor to the LTEs' reduced or suppressed autonomy was the persistent interference of institute managers with their professional plans (especially the plans for teacher education courses). The LTEs mentioned numerous cases when the managers attempted to thrust their ideas into the LTEs' plans for the teacher education courses. For example, LTE6 related the pressure on her from the institute manager to change her plans for a teacher education course in which she wanted to promote reflectivity among the teachers, but she faced the manager's emphasis on delivering ready-made contents that prepare the teachers for practice swiftly, which ran opposite to the professional standards she had held as an LTE. She argued that "Actually, I

have been working hard to guard against this pressure from the manager but honestly, I had to make some compromises such as changing the syllabus. I made some changes to my plan. I have always pressed on to try to make sure that every time I am providing them with a suggestion, a plan, a technique" (Narrative frame). Such compromises and changes, together with their triggers, gave rise to emotional tensions and challenged her status as a professional teacher educator. Other LTEs also described how their autonomy was trampled by the managers in relation to syllabus designing, textbook selection, and evaluation.

Emotional vulnerability as a source of identity investment

Despite the high pressure of the contextual particularities on their emotional life and professional identity construction, the LTEs' sharing of their experiences indicated that their emotional vulnerability could also lead to further identity investment to maintain their standards of professionalism (n = 10). Specifically, the LTEs attempted to show agency in their professional responsibilities and follow ethical principles in preparing the trainee teachers despite the institutional pressures. Echoing the subject component of AT (i.e., investing their personal ethics and agencies in the work), this theme reveals how the teachers employ rules, the community standards, objects in the system, and the labour divided among themselves to face less emotional vulnerability and construct their identities more effectively.

Regarding their investment in agency, the LTEs explained that although they experienced many emotional stressors and professional identity conflicts, they tried to respond to such emotional vulnerability by positively and agentively contributing to institutional and teacher growth so that such actions would align with professional standards: "it is true that I've experienced many uncomfortable situations and emotional tensions in the school, but I've tried to use these emotions to create a context where teachers do not feel vulnerable (e.g., supporting them

emotionally and establishing friendship out of school) because I am a teacher educator and I should cling to my standards to promote such perspectives of care as well" (LTE14, Interview). Such strategic deployment of emotional vulnerability was fueled by the LTEs' beliefs that they should agentively invest in their work so that trainee teachers would feel less of similar pressure: "I've experienced a lot of emotional pressures, but I don't want the [trainee] teachers to know about them or experience them. So, I try to create a condition in which they experience a little of such hardships" (LTE7, Interview). Such an identity investment was accompanied by positive contributions to the LTEs' professional identity construction, as LTE1 stated: "When I try to manage the situation so that teachers experience less tension, I feel like a grown-up person, one that is strong when faced with challenges" (Narrative frame).

This line of thinking was also extended to the LTEs' adherence to ethical principles in preparing teachers through their identity investment. Most of the LTEs mentioned how they had handled excessive liabilities beyond their defined responsibilities because they defined their own identity investment in ethical terms. For example, LTE7 shared how he constantly recollected his experience of a course for which there was pressure on him to deliver watered-down content rather than what he had planned. This experience was fraught with feelings of guilt arising from the emotional tensions for LTE7 and the way he conceived of his professional identity: "I always think about them. I think it wasn't moral to do so. I think that we should always follow ethics in our teacher education courses because we are like models for them" (Narrative frame). Such an ethicality also featured in preparing the trainee teachers as a result of the emotional tensions that the LTEs themselves experienced: "We experience many emotional tensions in the courses, which often happen due to what the institute should do but doesn't do. But we should always adhere to our standards and invest in our work because such ethics are what gives real value to the course"

(LTE12, Interview). Identity investment was thus dependent on the LTEs' attempts to follow ethical principles in preparing teachers through which they could claim the identity of a professional teacher educator. Relatedly, such identity investment followed from the LTEs' efforts to address their emotional vulnerability ethically. Thus, the LTEs attempted to use their emotionality with teachers and maintain ethics (e.g., having personal discussions with teachers, assisting them with problem management, and holding interpersonally-fitting standards of behaving) as the major tools to transform emotional vulnerability into a site of development.

Discussion

The data presented above show how context played a key role in the Iranian LTEs' emotional vulnerability and professional identity construction in relation to different aspects of their work. In this regard, sociocultural and institutional characteristics of professional work were crucial in defining how emotional tensions and conflicts occurred, and how such issues profoundly shaped the LTEs' professional practices and engagement in system-related developments.

The existing literature on emotional vulnerability and LTE professional identity construction has consistently discussed how structural and job-related dimensions of society become functional in the way individuals view their professional work (e.g., Gao 2008, 2011, Kelchtermans 2009, 2011, Lasky 2005, Song 2016, Yuan et al. 2022b), a point that also aligns with the conceptual lens of AT and has been reflected in the related scholarship (e.g., Engestrom, 1999; Karimi & Mofidi, 2019). For our LTEs, the discourses embodied by prospective teachers' consumerist perspectives and the private language institutes' vested interest partook in the LTEs' emotional vulnerability and professional identity construction, primarily in relation to their job-related discourses. That is, such discourses were manifested in institutional terms and then played out as sources of emotional tensions, which adds to the literature on how consumerist perspectives

extend to educational work and serve as a source of LTEs' emotional vulnerability to impact on their identification processes. It should also be observed that such tensions between profit-making and professional integrity of teachers could also influence other stakeholders such as administrative staff, parents, and the general atmosphere of educational work. This finding shows the nexus between social structure, discourse, and institutional work in that they define each other and serve the purposes of certain stakeholders through which they become malpractices. This finding contributes to the literature (e.g., Barkhuizen 2021, Yuan et al. 2022b) by showing how LTEs experience complicated emotional and professional identity tensions due to discourses that concretize at the level of practice. We are not surprised by this finding because, as the first and second authors are from Iran, we have personally seen how institutions reproduce sociocultural beliefs and broader policies in the Iranian context. Nonetheless, the harmful implications that such policies and discourses bear for LTEs' emotional and professional identity work deserve serious attention because they are intensifying and undermining LTEs' self-understandings.

Notably, the LTEs had to engage in intensive management of emotions due to their submission to institutional pressures out of economic necessity at the expense of their professional autonomy. A number of scholars such as Kelchtermans (1996 p. 2005), Yazan (2012), Peercy et al. (2019), and Song (2022) have discussed how emotional vulnerability arising from power relations influences teachers' and LTEs' personal perceptions, especially in the Iranian context and in relation to teacher professional identity as understood from an AT lens (e.g., Karimi & Mofidi 2019). For our LTEs, however, such power relations were mainly connected to the economic side of their work and autonomy, a finding that has received little attention in extant scholarship but merits more research in the future. Relatedly, the persistent interference of some institute managers with the LTEs' plans reveals to us that perhaps because the managers knew that

the LTEs needed their jobs, they were not retrained at all in interfering with the LTEs' work. In any case, these findings show that sometimes LTEs have to compromise their autonomy for the sake of keeping their jobs, creating persistent conflicts for their professional identity construction (see Barkhuizen 2021). We believe that such conflicts could be alleviated by institute managers' recognition of and respect for LTEs as professionals with the requisite knowledge and skills to do a good job. When they can exercise their professional autonomy, LTEs do not fulfil their responsibilities just because it is their job; rather, they invest in their job because they feel emotionally connected to the institutional context and/or the students.

In dealing with the trainee teachers, the LTEs apparently experienced the emotion of care, as evident in their investment, a dimension that is quite novel in the literature on both emotional vulnerability and LTE professional work. Further, it attests to the subject component of AT that has little gained focal attention in previous research on AT and teacher professionalism. Such an investment was of an ethical nature and motivated the LTEs to agentively step toward preparing the trainee teachers more effectively, a point that aligns with Darvin and Norton's (2015) conceptualization of investment as relating to ideology, capital, and identity. Encouragingly, the LTEs attempted to maintain their standards of professional work despite the institutional pressures. This finding is consistent with the complexity of LTEs' professional work highlighted in the literature (e.g., Barkhuizen 2021, Malm 2020, Yuan et al. 2022b). Nonetheless, the important point here is that the LTEs in our study responded to their emotional vulnerability by making more identity investment and by situating their work within an agentive and ethical sphere. Such a professional stance is highly commendable because despite the range of challenges they experienced, the LTEs endeavored to maintain their ethicality and identity as professionals (Yazan and Lindahl 2020) and turn emotional vulnerability into a transformative tool for greater

responsiveness (Lasky 2005). This finding shows that although Iranian LTEs face a multitude of challenges stemming from structural and institutional particularities, they still strive for keeping their standards high and observing ethicality in teacher preparation.

Conclusion

This study presents several novel findings on LTEs' emotional vulnerability and professional identity construction from an AT perspective: (1) the LTEs' emotional vulnerability was immensely influenced by the circulating job-related discourses that extended to institutional work and countered the identity standards that the LTEs held for professional practice; (2) the LTEs was forced to comply with institutional demands due to their economic needs, resulting in loss of their professional autonomy and emotional conflicts such as guilt and frustration; (3) some LTEs adhered to ethical considerations in their professional practice to pave the way for agentively contributing to trainee teachers' professional growth through acting on their emotional vulnerability in a positive manner. These findings help to unpack the less-researched dimensions of LTEs' professional work and contribute to the literature by showing how emotional vulnerability can have both negative and positive outcomes.

The findings have important implications for institutional policymakers. As demonstrated in our study, Iranian LTEs face many emotional and professional identity tensions due to pressure from sociocultural and institutional forces, which negatively shape different aspects of their career (e.g., agency, autonomy, emotion, and identity). This sounds a clarion call for policymakers to strive to better recognize the professionalism of LTEs. Moreover, we highly appreciate our focal LTEs' efforts to adhere to ethics in doing their job. Nevertheless, we have to ask the question: How long can LTEs persist in observing ethicality when they are constantly faced with malpractice imposed from above? We do not know the answer to this question, yet we are possessed by

apprehension of the LTEs losing their standards of professionalism. We think that if institutional policymakers do not (start to) respect LTEs' emotional life and professional identity, the consequences may be LTE attrition and burnout. A first step toward addressing the issues can take the form of joint initiatives and partnership practices (both online and in-person) that have as their foci attention the resolution of arising tensions and institutional challenges. We hope that institutional policymakers heed the findings of the present study so that they can create a more positive atmosphere for LTEs and contribute to their emotional experiences and identification processes. Since many LTEs may face similar levels of emotional vulnerability and identity conflicts in other EFL/ESL contexts, it would be better if policymakers could consider the study findings as a lens through which they reconsider their approaches toward LTEs as long as LTEs face similar tensions. This way, LTEs could invest in system development more wholeheartedly, with an ultimate goal of leveling up institutional growth for all members.

Although the present study provided insights into how Iranian LTEs' emotional vulnerability and professional identity are defined by contextual particularities, we believe that future research in other contexts should examine the emotional vulnerability and professional identity constructs because activity systems of teaching in different contexts could differentially contribute to teacher educators' professional growth. In particular, exploring such emotional vulnerability in relation to the disciplinary considerations of teaching in various contexts would unpack important dimensions of teacher educators' work, especially in teacher education courses. Indeed, we spoke about how teacher education could become a site of emotional vulnerability for teacher educators, yet tracking such vulnerability during teacher education courses would be a helpful line of research. Tracking how such vulnerability contributes to teacher educators' professional identity (re)construction can provide a more comprehensive and textured picture of

their growth as educators. A point made clear by our study is that LTEs are in a highly vulnerable position, yet how such emotional vulnerability mediates their professional growth and in relation to different professional competencies needs more research.

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