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Professional Identity of Mongolian Adult Learning Facilitators— Biographical Perspective

Abstract: Adult learning professionals lack a unified identity due to the diversity of adult learning and education, which poses challenges to recognizing adult learning professionals and may lead to a fragmented focus on their professional development. However, a coherent and unified professional identity can be determined by referring to adult learning professionals' specific roles and sub-fields. Hence, how adult learning facilitators, who belong to a non-formal sub-field, conceptualize themselves as professionals may be an example of coherent, yet unified, professional identity. Moreover, it is essential to know how adult learning facilitators understand themselves as professionals because this knowledge provides a framework for facilitators to construct their own ideas of being professional. Thus, this research aims to bring insights to the questions of how adult learning facilitators became professionals, how they define their profession, how they determine themselves as professionals and how they perceive their future in the professional context. Thirty-five adult learning facilitators were interviewed using semi-structured interviews with biographical perspectives. Results revealed that adult learning facilitators seem to have a conflicted identity resulting from a gap between ideal and real. Concerns about current qualification and competences were also articulated. Findings implied that professional development programmes for adult learning facilitators need to pay close attention to identity formation, concerns about appropriate qualifications, and adequate support for professionalism through systematic policy-making.

Key words: professional identity, adult learning facilitators, biographical perspectives, Mongolia.

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Introduction

Adult learning professionals lack a unified identity due to the diversity and heterogeneity of adult learning and education (Egetenmeyer & Strauch, 2009; Merriam & Brockett, 2007; Reischmann, 2015), which poses challenges to the recognition of adult learning professionals and may lead to a fragmented focus on their professionalization. However, a unified professional identity could be determined by referring to adult learning professionals' specific roles (Milana & Skrypnyk, 2009) and sub-fields (van Dellen & van der Kamp, 2008). How adult learning facilitators, who belong to the non-formal field, conceptualize themselves as professionals can be an apparent example of a unified professional identity. Thus, we explored the professional identity of Mongolian adult learning facilitators who work in non-formal adult education because little is known about them as a professional group, although they have been recognized as providers of lifelong and non-formal educational opportunities for adults. It is essential to know how adult learning facilitators conceptualize themselves as professionals as this "provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society" (Sachs, 2005, p. 15 as cited in Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 178). This research therefore aims to understand the professional identity of Mongolian adult learning facilitators and bring insights to the questions of how adult learning facilitators became professionals, how they define their profession, how they describe themselves as professionals and imagine their professional future.

Professional Identity

Professional identity, in general, indicates how a group of people who belong to the same community identify their profession and thus make the profession distinguishable from others. Three main aspects of professional identity can help us understand this notion. *First,* identity is context dependent (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Nichols, Schutz, Rodgers & Bilica, 2016; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). A context can be defined as an environment that an individual belongs to and there can be multiple contexts, consequently the individual can have multiple identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, Meijer, Verloop, 2004; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). *Second,* identity is relational and emotional. Identity is formed by not only an individual's own perception, but also others' perception of the individual, in that a relationship is inevitably necessary for one to have identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009;

Davey, 2013; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). As contexts vary, relationships vary, meaning that multiple contexts create multiple relationships. Further, multiple relationships construct emotions which are experienced and expressed by teachers (Nichols et al, 2016; Schutz, Nichols & Schwenke, 2018; Zembylas, 2003). Emotions should be seen as a socially and culturally embedded notion which has a great impact on one's identity construction (Zembylas, 2003). Flores and Day (2006) point out that teachers' attitudes and practices toward teaching and learning could be affected by their emotions. Schutz et al (2018) repeat this idea, but clarify that not all emotions influence identity formation and reformation. Emotions can be both pleasant and unpleasant. Commonly named pleasant emotions are "love, care, job satisfaction, pride, excitement, pleasure in students' progress and achievement" (Flores & Day, 2006, p. 220–221). Meanwhile, "professional uncertainty, confusion, inadequacy, anxiety, mortification and doubt" are considered to be unpleasant emotions (Jeffrey & Woods, 1996 as cited in Flores & Day, 2006). "Anxiety due to complexity of the job, frustration, anger exacerbated by tiredness and stress, guilt, sadness, blame and shame at not being able to achieve ideals or targets imposed by others" are also added to negative emotions (Flores & Day, 2006, p. 221). These pleasant or unpleasant emotions can support or challenge forming and reforming identities. For instance, when teachers experience certain unpleasant (negative) emotions, these emotions may trigger a danger to their identity by questioning existing identities related to their belief in teaching (Nichols et al, 2016; Schutz et al, 2018). Similarly, pleasant (positive) emotions may also enforce existing identities of teachers (Nichols at 2016; Schutz et al, 2018). Thus, understanding and dealing with their own emotions is important for facilitators' identity because they need to interact and navigate complex and multiple contexts and relationships (Day, 2018). *Third,* identity is continuous (Beijaard, Meijer, Verloop, 2004; Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Davey, 2013). As it is an ongoing process that lasts through time, place and contexts, identity is dynamic.

Akkerman and Meijer (2011) expand on these three aspects of identity. They posit paired yet opposing aspects of identity. The researchers argue that though identity can be multiplied by contexts and relationships, it can also be unified because those multiplicities can come under a unified concept (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Moreover, teachers' identity is continuous because of constant engagement in different contexts through time, but at the same time it can be discontinuous in some periods and contexts (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) highlight this idea too, mentioning that one's professional identity is a reflection on the questions of 'Who am I at this moment?' and 'Who I want to become?'. As we understood it, the initial question

indicates discontinuity, while the latter refers to continuity. Kelchtermans (2009; 2018) also defines one's professional identity as a product at a certain point in time, as well as an ongoing process of making sense of one's experiences. Akkerman and Meijer (2011) point out that teacher identity can be an individual's uniqueness, but it is influenced by social factors, thus it can be both individual and social. Social indicates the relational nature of identity which we discussed earlier. Holding together these natures of identity, Akkerman and Meijer (2011) define identity as simultaneously unified and multiple, continuous and discontinuous, and individual and social. We believe that this definition complemented the understanding of the notion, but also showed the complexity of it. However, this research has explored both the unified and discontinuous aspects of Mongolian adult learning facilitators' professional identity. In particular, we set out to answer the question of "Who are they at this moment?".

The Mongolian Context

Non-formal adult education aims to support employment and alleviate poverty among adults by eliminating illiteracy, improving educational levels, and helping adults to learn life skills (Yembuu, 2019). Currently, six broad types of lifelong educational opportunities are offered to adults: family education; citizenship education; moral education; aesthetical education; life skills education; and science education (Ministry of Education and Science [MES], 2013a; The Law on Education, 2016). Under these lifelong educational programmes, numerous trainings on various topics are offered to adults by lifelong education centres. There are 351 such centres nationwide (National Centre for Lifelong Education [NCLE], 2018). In terms of status, these centres are divided into two types: dependent and independent. The majority of lifelong education centres (94.0%) are considered 'dependent' centres because they are mainly affiliated with local secondary schools (NCLE, 2018) and they are often found in less-populated areas in the country. This kind of centre usually has only one adult learning facilitator who is supervised by the affiliated school principal. The other 22 lifelong education centres operate independently from local secondary schools (NCLE, 2018); hence, they are 'independent' centres. These centres have several staff and receive a share of the state budget. The independent lifelong education centres have more human, physical, and financial resources; therefore, they can offer various types of training to adults.

A total of 619 staff work for lifelong education centres (NCLE, 2018). Adult learning facilitators, whose role is to teach adults, make up 76% of the

total staff (NCLE, 2018). Out of all facilitators, 30.3% has been working at independent lifelong education centres; while the rest is based at dependent centres. Although facilitators' main role is teaching adults, 13 discrete tasks are listed in their job description (MECS, 2010a) which can be grouped in three categories: (1) tasks directly connected to their teaching role, such as assessing adult learning needs, conducting various training using appropriate contents and delivery methods, developing training programmes and plans; (2) other tasks, such as cooperating with other stakeholders, establishing information and data system, reporting; and (3) the task of increasing adult participation in programmes (MECS, 2010a).

In terms of their qualification, they must have a higher degree specializing in teaching (Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science [MECS], 2010a). However, the adult education qualification, which is offered by the Lifelong Education Department of the Mongolian National University of Education has been available since 2014 as a pre-service specialization (MES, 2014). In the last three years, 26 professionally-prepared adult learning facilitators have graduated from the programme (Erdenetsetseg, 2019). This demonstrates that most current facilitators are those who have no pre-service specialization in lifelong education, although they have a teaching specialization. In-service professional development programmes for adult learning facilitators are expected to be offered at national, regional and institutional levels. However, in-service professional development programmes at all levels have been inadequate (Yembuu, 2019). Thus, basically, adult learning facilitators are left responsible for their own professionalism.

Methodology

This research employed biographical perspectives. Several authors, such as Bron and Jarvis (2008) and Kelchtermans (2009) have emphasized that the biographical perspectives could be the most suitable approach to understanding one's professional identity. Bron and Jarvis (2008) claim that the biographical perspectives help to understand how individuals become professionals and how their professionalism changes through time. Bron & Jarvis (2008) moreover suggest that this approach could be a key tool to explore the professional identity of adult learning professionals, including facilitators. Kelchtermans (2009) explains the biographical perspectives as follows:

> Central to this approach [biographical perspectives] is the idea that human existence is fundamentally characterized by temporality. People have a personal history. Their life develops in time, between birth and death. Interpretations, thoughts, and actions in the pre-

sent are influenced by experiences from the past and expectations for the future. (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 260)

We hence aimed to understand both the unified and discontinuous nature of professional identity which meant understanding adult learning facilitators' present as professionals. Their present must be affected by their past experiences and future imaginations, therefore we also needed to look at "Who were they?" and "Who do they want to become?" in order to understand "Who are they at this moment?". Biographical perspectives could uncover answers to these questions, so, to this end, we utilized semi-structured interviews which were particularly useful for exploring professional identity (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2015).

We purposely selected five independent lifelong education centres in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city of Mongolia because these centres have more resources (human, physical, etc.), and therefore offer a variety of adult education training. Moreover, there has been a misconception among adults that schools are only for children (NFDE, 2009); consequently, adults seem to be reluctant to attend centres located in school premises (Zagir, 2014). These five centres own or rent premises other than school buildings, and can therefore conduct comprehensive activities because they attract enough participants. These centres had 45 adult learning facilitators, but based on voluntary participation, we interviewed 35 facilitators (33 female and 2 male). Their mean working experiences as an adult learning facilitator was 5 years. The research received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education and Psychology, Eötvös Loránd University on June 25, 2019 (document ID: 2019/232). Data was collected from September to November, 2019.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interview data. This method is particularly useful when attempting to understand a set of common experiences, thoughts, beliefs and behaviours which are explicitly and implicitly expressed and illustrated across the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020; Clarke & Braun, 2013), as it enables us to define and summarize main features of the entire data set and to generate collective understanding.

Findings

Adult learning facilitation as a profession

Adult learning facilitators tend to share four common ideals about their profession. (1) Adult learning facilitation is a profession in which the needs of adult learners are key. In other words, adult learning needs seem to be a feature distinct from other

professions. Therefore, they tend to highlight the importance of facilitators' competence for assessing adult learning needs. Assessing adult learning needs is a unique and specific activity in adult learning and teaching, according to Knowles and his colleagues (Knowles, 1980; Knowles, Holton III & Swanson, 2005). Therefore, the existing studies have listed competence for assessing adult learning needs as one of the common competences (Bechtel, 2008; Bernhardsson & Lattke, 2011; Jääger & Irons, 2006; Research voor Beleid, 2010; Wahlgren, 2016). (2) Many facilitators tend to conceptualize their profession as transmission of essential information, knowledge and skills to adults in order to build their capacities. This may imply facilitators' teaching perspective. Indeed, Pratt (1992) highlights that the transmission perspective is the most common belief among teachers and there is nothing wrong with it. (3) Adult learning facilitation is a challenging and pressured profession because of adults' high expectations and rich experiences. (4) Adult learning facilitation is a mutually beneficial profession both for facilitators and learners. Indeed, "two-way learning" (Gessner, 1966, p. 166) cited by Knowles, Holton III & Swanson, 2005, p. 39) happens in adult education courses, meaning that both adult learners and facilitators can learn and be empowered. These four ideals about their profession have been expressed by adult learning facilitators collectively, so that we may say that these are the distinguishing characteristics of the profession of adult learning facilitation from other professions.

Adult learning facilitators as professionals

We also inquired about adult learning facilitators' concepts of professionalism. Our interviews revealed three common concepts: (1) Adult learning facilitator as a qualified professional in his/her subject field, adult teaching methodologies, and communication. These three domains—subject-matter specialization; adult teaching methodology; and communication—are perceived to be the three core competences which adult learning facilitators must acquire to be competent professionals. This finding is consistent with existing studies which highlight that these core competences are required by all facilitators regardless of national, work and cultural contexts (van Dellen & van der Kamp, 2008; Wahlgren, 2016). (2) Adult learning facilitators as professionals who are knowledgeable in multiple fields and are versatile. Being versatile means, according to our interviewees, that one has the ability to deliver certain training content through several different methods and to teach a variety of content. Yet, being knowledgeable in multiple fields meant that though they taught a specific programme, they tend to think that they need to be across many areas of content in order to answer any ques-

tions raised by adult learners. They appear concerned that they would lose credibility and respect as professionals if they could not respond to a wide range of questions. Moreover, as we mentioned earlier, facilitators tend to define their profession as challenging due to the high expectations and rich experiences of adults. Satisfying their learners' expectations may be the reason for adult learning facilitators indicating the need to be able to address many subjects. (3) Adult learning facilitators as professionals who have traits such as being confident, respectful towards others' opinions, flexible, coping, empathetic, supportive, accountable, non-discriminating, setting positive examples and having positive attitudes. These seem to be personal traits any facilitator needs to have. Some personal traits seem to be very important in establishing a learning environment for adult learners, which is a determinant of adult learning and teaching (Knowles, 1980; Knowles, Holton III & Swanson, 2005). Particularly, personal traits such as being respectful, empathic, supportive and non-discriminative could be important for establishing a positive learning environment for adults which help learners to persist and complete their learning journeys. Moreover, personal traits such as being confident, empathic and supportive are mentioned as being essential in some existing studies (Milana & Larson, 2010; Bernhardson & Lattke, 2011).

These conceptualizations indicate facilitators' ideal vision of a competent adult learning facilitator. However, they seem to consider themselves far from their ideal vision of competent non-formal education professionals given their tendency to be concerned about their lack of professional advancement. The majority of facilitators, explicitly and implicitly, questioned their competences as professionals, particularly in relation to their subject-matter specialization and adult teaching methodologies. This seems to lead them to develop negative emotions, such feeling of inadequacy and unfitness for the profession.

Initial qualification of adult learning facilitators

Our results revealed that like many other countries in the world (Research voor Beleid/PLATO, 2008; UIL, 2016; 2019), the majority of interviewed facilitators entered into the field without any specialization in adult learning and teaching. They had a teaching specialization, but they were trained to teach a particular subject to school-aged children (Yembuu et al, 2009). Only three interviewees were trained to specialize in lifelong education, adult learning and teaching. In addition, most interviewees (21 facilitators out of 35) had not heard about non-formal adult education centres (now lifelong education centres), their function and programmes when they were hired as adult learning facilitators. This shows

that most facilitators entered the field without a specialization in adult learning and teaching or a proper understanding of non-formal adult education or lifelong learning centres. Even though some in-service professional development programmes were available, they did not seem to meet facilitators' learning needs. Thus, according to our interviewees, they became adult learning facilitators but developed their competences on the job.

Future expectations

The research found that most facilitators had positive expectations towards their future as professionals. They wanted to become more competent in their field. However, there were a few facilitators who doubted their professional potential. Facilitators' expectations seem to be largely dependent on the growth, prestige and respect for the field of non-formal adult education in the society. Some, particularly those who stayed longer in the field, were likely to have positive visions of adult learning because they had witnessed gradual developments. However, other facilitators thought that their field was not thriving and they would be more likely to shift to different areas of education if they were promised better conditions.

Moreover, we found two scenarios in their career plans. *The first scenario* is that more experienced facilitators, particularly those over 40, tend to stay in the field and continuously upgrade their competences because they had witnessed their field's growth and significance. *The second scenario* seems to constitute two different paths. Novice facilitators, particularly those below or in their 30s, are likely to change careers completely because they think their field is under-valued. Other novice facilitators tend to take breaks from work to advance their competences by pursuing formal studies, but plan to return to the field because they value its importance. Thus, we can conclude that how facilitators recognize their field's growth, recognition and value influences their professional expectations.

Discussion

Conflicted identity

Adult learning facilitators appear to have a conflicted identity resulting from the gap they perceive between their ideal and actual competence as facilitators. When asked to define themselves as professionals, facilitators were likely to describe the competences of their ideal of an adult learning facilitator—subject matter

specialization, adult teaching methodologies and communication. At the same time, facilitators were concerned about their lack of training in their subject-matter specialization and adult teaching methodologies. We see this as a broader issue because, as Shulman (1987) claims, all teachers need to know the subject s/he teaches and how to deliver it to her/his audiences. Hence, subject specialization and methodological skills are the core competences needed by all facilitators (Bechtel, 2008; Bernhardsson & Lattke, 2011; Wahlgren, 2016).

Facilitators' concerns may also cause anxiety which impedes and forces them to question their professional identity (Nichols, et al, 2016; Schutz, Nichols & Schwenke, 2018; Zembylas, 2003). Our findings seem to resonate with Flores and Day's (2006) claim, according to which facilitators could feel inadequate due to "frustration, guilt, sadness and shame at not being able to achieve ideals" (p. 221). These emotions may have a negative influence on facilitators' professional identities, in as much as they cannot establish their professional authority nor reflect on their practices, which in turn could risk burn-out and facilitators leaving the job.

Different entry paths and their impact on unified professional identity

There could be two entry paths for adult learning facilitators. *The first entry path* is those who directly become adult learning facilitators without specialization, while *the other entry path* is those who enter the field after developing the necessary competences through specialized training programmes. In line with previous studies (Andersson et al, 2013; Brown, Karmel & Ye, 2012), we assume that different entries may have an impact on professional identity of adult learning facilitators. In our understanding, these different entries may present challenges to shaping a unified professional identity. Having a unified identity which distinguishes adult learning facilitators from other professionals could be a key aspect of professional identity. Lack of unified identity among facilitators could threaten their collective practice as professionals (van Dellen & van der Kam, 2008) because if individual practice dominates the field, the profession may lose its distinction. Bron and Jarvis (2008) emphasize that becoming someone involves learning the specific 'language' used in a particular professional community. Thus, we believe that there should be specific language that adult learning facilitators could learn collectively. However, if the first path of entry continues, ensuring the quality of adult learning and education training will be difficult, thus perpetuating a poor image in the society.

Adult Learning and Education as a Means for Creating Lifelong Learners

There seems to be a common tendency to believe that adult learning and education simply transmits essential information, knowledge and skills to adults. Further, facilitators are more likely to identify themselves as 'being knowledgeable in many fields' when describing the professional traits of adult learning facilitators. However, facilitators need to see beyond these preconceptions. Adult learning and education should be a means for helping adults to understand, cope and adjust to the world around them for their own and others' benefit. In particular, adults need to be lifelong learners to cope with ongoing rapid changes in societies, and thus, adult learning programmes need to focus on building and supporting autonomy of adult learners (Knowles, Holton III & Swanson, 2005) as the basis of lifelong learning competences.

Concluding Remarks

Professional identity refers to the idea of how a group of people who belong to the same community identify their profession and thus make the profession distinguishable from others. Our research shows that assessing adults' learning needs and considering those needs in learning processes can be a key task for adult learning facilitators. This provides an identity characteristic for facilitators as professionals. Indeed, an andragogical model for adult learning (Knowles, Holton III & Swanson, 2005) emphasizes that assessing adult learning needs is a unique as well as specific activity in adult learning processes. Therefore, Mongolian adult learning facilitators are likely to identify themselves as professionals who are able to assess and consider adults' learning needs. However, adult learning facilitators seem to lack core professional competences such as subject-matter specialization and adult teaching methods; consequently, their self-esteem as professionals seems to be quite negative which is clear from their expression of emotions. This reality conflicted with their ideal vision of a competent adult learning facilitator, which shows the need of supporting adult learning facilitators' professional development.

Moreover, adult learning facilitators tend to define their profession as a transmission of essential knowledge and skills to adults. However, we argue that adult learning and education should aim at building and developing adults' learner autonomy since it is a basis for lifelong learning competences rather than just transmitting knowledge and skills. This change requires the establishment

and implementation of systematic professional development opportunities for Mongolian adult learning facilitators which enable them to build and upgrade their professional competences collectively. This could enhance the quality of adult education programmes, and promote recognition, prestige and respect for the profession in the society.

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Profesionalni identitet nastavnika u obrazovanju odraslih u Mongoliji – biografska perspektiva

Apstrakt: Nastavnici u obrazovanju odraslih ne poseduju jedinstveni identitet usled raznolikosti u učenju i obrazovanju odraslih, što predstavlja izazov pri prepoznavanju pozicije nastavnika u obrazovanju odraslih i može umanjiti značaj koji se pridaje njihovom profesionalnom razvoju. Međutim, koherentan i jedinstven profesionalni identitet može da se uspostavi na osnovu konkretnih uloga i područja stručnosti nastavnika u obrazovanju odraslih. Dakle, način na koji nastavnici u neformalnom obrazovanju odraslih konceptualizuju sami sebe može predstavljati primer koherentnog, a ipak jedinstvenog profesionalnog identiteta. Osim toga, neophodno je znati kako nastavnici u obrazovanju odraslih razumeju sopstvenu profesionalnu ulogu jer taj uvid predstavlja referentni okvir na osnovu kojeg oni mogu da izgrade sopstvenu ideju profesionalnosti. Dakle, cilj ovog istraživanja je da se iznedre uvidi u vezi s tim kako nastavnici u obrazovanju odraslih postaju profesionalci, kako definišu svoju profesiju, na koji način utvrđuju sopstvenu profesionalnost i kako vide svoju budućnost u profesionalnom kontekstu. Sproveli smo polustrukturirane intervjue sa trideset pet nastavnika u obrazovanju odraslih koristeći biografsku perspektivu. Rezultati su ukazali na to da nastavnici u obrazovanju odraslih naizgled gaje sukobljen identitet koji je posledica raskoraka između idealnog i stvarnog. Ujedno su izrazili nedoumice o aktuelnim kvalifikacijama i kompetencijama. Nalazi istraživanja ukazuju na to da programi profesionalnog obrazovanja za nastavnike u obrazovanju odraslih moraju naročito da se fokusiraju na formiranje identiteta, nedoumice o adekvatnim kvalifikacijama i da omoguće prikladnu podršku za razvoj profesionalizma donošenjem sistemskih politika.

Ključne reči: profesionalni identitet, nastavnici u obrazovanju odraslih, biografske perspektive, Mongolija.

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