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Novice Versus Experienced Teachers: How They Transform Their Vulnerability Into Professional Identity in an Indonesian Junior High School

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**ABSTRACT**

The quality of education is influenced by many factors, one of which is the quality of the teachers. In the spirit of fostering a strong and resilient young generation, teachers in the capital city of Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT), Kupang, attempted to break through their limitations in order to form their identity. This research investigated how novice and experienced teachers shifted their vulnerability into professional identity and to what extent this strategy impacted on their professional identity construction in a Junior High School in Kupang. This research presented a thematic analysis on their expectation and anxiety, their strategies and how these strategies helped them to build their identity. Results from data analysis clearly indicated that without critical reflections and actions, both novice and experienced teachers could undergo burnt out when dealing with their vulnerability.

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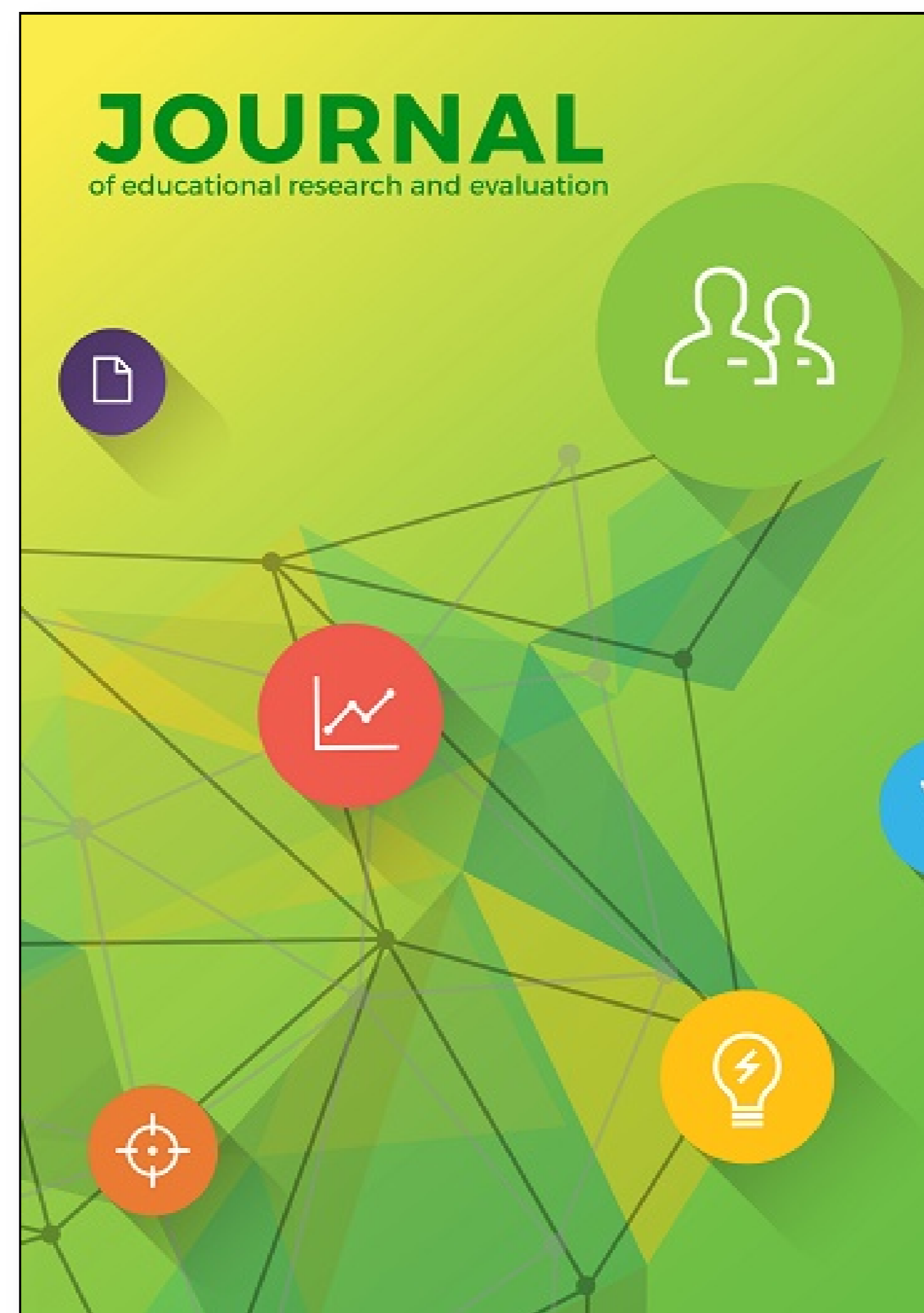
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# 17. Novice Versus Experienced Teachers

*by* Mbato Concilianus Laos

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### ABSTRACT

The quality of education is influenced by many factors, one of which is the quality of the teachers. In the spirit of fostering a strong and resilient young generation, teachers in the capital city of Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT), Kupang, attempted to break through their limitations in order to form their identity. This research investigated how novice and experienced teachers shifted their vulnerability into professional identity and to what extent this strategy impacted on their professional identity construction in a Junior High School in Kupang. This research presented a thematic analysis on their expectation and anxiety, their strategies and how these strategies helped them to build their identity. Results from data analysis clearly indicated that without critical reflections and actions, both novice and experienced teachers could undergo burnt out when dealing with their vulnerability.

## 1. Introduction

Citizens of East Nusa Tenggara Timur province, Indonesia (NTT) is still struggling to improve the quality of education. According to the former Indonesian Minister of Education and Culture, NTT is in the bottom three after Papua and West Papua province (Seo, 2018). This statement drew some comments from politicians. One of the parliament members from the region, Benny Harman, argues that many factors influence education quality in the province. The first is the demographic condition of the province itself. NTT is the largest island province of Indonesia with slow-paced infrastructure development and low connectivity. The second is about the educational funding from the central government, which is still concentrated in Java. He added that the inadequate honorary teacher salaries, poverty and underdevelopment issues affect the quality of education in NTT (Harman, 2017).

Kupang as the capital city of NTT province gives a portrayal of how the local government attempts to ameliorate the standard of their teaching. Many attempts are being carried out to improve the quality, both the facilities and the human resources. Teachers have an important role to improve the quality of education in the society and this role is grounded in their expertise on knowledge, skills and attitudes (Kelchtermans, 2013, pp. 257-258). Teaching is not only how someone transfers knowledge to others but also how they understand and construct themselves as a teacher. The clarification of the teacher's concept will develop through reflective attitudes and skills.

Self-reflection is important to do in order to help teachers to recognize their strengths and weaknesses. Since teaching is an emotional work, teachers are demanded to deal with stress and also maintain a healthy relationship among themselves and with their students. How teachers regulate their emotion is likely to make them remain committed and able to teach to their best. When teachers do self-reflection regularly, they will know themselves better, recognize how their vulnerability shapes and also embrace the idea that they are also the learners in this teaching process (Alsup, 2018, p.15). Palmer (2003) states whenever teaching becomes all pain and no joy, we have to identify what our strengths are. Instead of focusing on our failings, we have to focus on our strengths and how we bounce back again. While facing tensions or vulnerability, teachers must have strategic plans on how to overcome them and how they develop their professional identity.

Teaching as a career path can sometimes be very challenging. The pressures such as heavy workload, behavioral problems of the students, inadequate salary, demanding parents or not cooperative workplace's environment will emotionally drain teachers' energy. Palmer (2003, p.13) believes that all of those pressures can be handled by the teacher's identity and integrity. This does not imply that the teacher should use it to cover their own vulnerabilities or confusion, but that through the teacher's identity and integrity, they could recognize and strengthen their weaknesses and limits. In other words, identity is a hybrid combination of the internal self (the genetic from our parent) and external self (socio-cultural) which make us who we are. However, integrity is the harmony of what we believe and how we act. It is how we see ourselves and why we want to be a teacher. Both of them will represent the wholeness of our well-being and it can be achieved over time.

In the last decade, there were several studies investigating how teachers acknowledge their vulnerability and develop their professional identity. Hamman, Gosselin, Romano and Bunuan (2010) use possible-selves theory to understand the identity development of new teachers. They analyze how future-oriented teachers provide identity and reveal the expectations and fears facing beginning teachers in a public university in the Southwestern United States. The findings of the study suggest that new teachers' possible selves may be classified into four primary categories, i.e., professionalism, classroom management, interpersonal school relations, and instruction (Hamman, et.al, 2010).

Friesen and Besley (2013) analyzed how teacher identity develops in the first year of teacher education from a social psychological perspective. Their research concludes that personal identity development and social identity were significantly associated. The teacher education programs have two roles; to facilitate students' identity development at both personal and social level and to challenge the students' perception about the teacher and why they want to be a teacher. On the other hand, Pillen, Beijgaard, and den Brok (2013) draw the tensions and how the teachers deal with these. The teacher identity tension happens from unbalancing personal and professional side or in between what they desire and what it is in reality. Mostly, teachers face these problems with the feelings of anger or helplessness and they tried to search the solution themselves or share stories with their colleagues.

How teachers deal with emotion is examined by Song (2016). She interviews five secondary English teachers in South Korea. Each of them presented their conflicting stories in their classrooms. Song analyzed how their vulnerability affected themselves and their students' competence and curriculum, and how their emotion affected their pedagogical and self-transformation.

The studies cited above demonstrated how teachers dealt their weaknesses and transformed their professional identity. None of these studies show the comparison between novice and experienced teachers, let alone in the context of Indonesia or in East Nusa Tenggara province. As a province which still striving to improve the quality of its education, the researchers find that this research is important to fill in the gap in the literature on teacher professional developments, in particular regarding the teachers' strategies to acknowledge their weaknesses and develop a professional identity as a teacher. To this end, the writer offers theories of vulnerability, teacher identity, and identity development. According to Jun, Issa, Feng, and Zheng Zhi Lian (2018) identity develops through time.

"Teacher identity could shift with every new teaching skill, new expectation from students and teachers, new social context, new question and new idea. Its ever-changing nature presents an on-going challenge for teachers" (p.46).

The goal of this paper is to figure out the identity differences between the novice and experienced teachers, how they acknowledge the vulnerability and develop their professional identity in a junior high school in Kupang, NTT. To achieve this, the researchers addressed two situations that shaped teacher identity and professional vulnerability. They are: (a) the critical events which trigger their vulnerability; and (b) the current reform on teacher identity. Their awareness about the concept of vulnerability is likely to facilitate the teacher to do self-reflection about the early influences on their strengths and weaknesses' recognition, and; whether these tensions bring a new set of values and beliefs to construct their identity for teaching. If it does, it would be important to investigate how teachers understand and experience these ups and downs through the lens of their professional identity, as well as how they experience the transformation which is shaped by the experiences of vulnerability (Ulvik & Langrøen, 2012).

This research aimed to answer these following questions:

- What are the strategic plans used by the Indonesian novice and experienced teachers in order to transform their vulnerability into professional identity?
- To what extent do these strategies impact on professional identity construction?

Teacher Vulnerability

Vulnerability is a condition when teachers find themselves in the situation of lacking control while at the same time, they have to regulate their emotions (Kelchtermans, 2013; Kwo, 2018). In addition Liew (2018) argues:

"Painful but necessary, embracing vulnerability as part of change entails feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, loss and uncertainty. Indeed, reculturing for reform is emotionally straining to the extent that it threatens teachers' established beliefs, assumptions and routines" (p.256).

Teacher's vulnerability is the emotional experience which can be influenced by the way people perceive their present situation as it interacts with their identity, beliefs, values, and sense of competence. Lasky (2005) argues that vulnerability can make someone feel defenseless in situations of high anxiety. In these situations, people will have no control or feel powerless over factors that affect their environments, or feel they are being "forced" to act in certain ways which are not in accordance with their own beliefs and values. He claims that,

"It can be an experience of openness and trust, which is necessary for love, experiencing compassion, learning, and relationship building. In these situations, people willingly open themselves to the possibility of embarrassment, loss, or emotional pain because they believe that they, another individual, or a situation will benefit from this openness. A person being willingly open facilitates learning, trust building, and collaboration. In short, a person feels safe in his or her environment to take the risk of losing face and experiencing loss or pain" (p. 901).

Furthermore, Kelchtermans (2013, pp. 265-266) identified three elements of vulnerability in teaching. First, when a teacher has no full control of the situation in the school environment, such as in the regulation or in the quality control. Second, when a teacher is evaluated by the students' test scores and the third is when a teacher cannot make a decision about how to support students' learning development. During their professional job, teachers may find themselves in this fundamental condition that challenges them to properly balance between their self-efficacy and acknowledgment of their personal limitation.

In the Indonesian education context, English teachers are faced with various kinds of demands, such as applying Curriculum K-13, students' various ability at understanding the materials, salary, working hours, language facilitates and infra structure in the school. These burdens are likely to make a teacher vulnerable and if they cannot handle them well, they will experience burn out from her professional job.

Teacher Identity

Teacher identity is the way a teacher sees themselves and how they are recognized by others; the stories that teachers create and tell about their teaching lives (Sloan, 2006). "Identity commitment



influences teacher agency not only in how they position themselves towards reforms but also in how they act towards reforms" (Tao & Gao, 2017, p. 353).

Hwang (2007, cited in Miyagamwala, 2015, p.234) states that the teachers who had superior competencies, comfort, empathy, leadership and self-esteem tended to perform better in overall teaching effectiveness. Yet the teachers who performed superior in overall emotional intelligence skills tended to achieve higher teaching effectiveness. Seen this way, teacher identity affects how teachers understand and interact with the school environment, whether it is shaped in the school policy, curriculum, students, or between fellow teachers.

Those explanations about identity show that identity has a connection with emotional intelligence skills. In order to be a successful teacher, one should have an identity. It can be concluded that identity is more than a personal issue; it is a social learning process, lived and negotiated. That is why; identity is not fixed but always changes from time to time especially when the process is difficult and painful. Teachers should develop their professional identity so that they will be able to engage their self into the professional/cultural expectations of what it means to be a teacher (Alsop, 2018, p.15).

## 2. Methods

This research was conducted qualitatively since it aimed to describe teachers' perspectives and their experiences in transforming their vulnerability into professional identity. The data were presented in narrative forms as Creswell (2014, p. 254) suggests that "qualitative methods should end with some comments about the narrative that will emerge from the data analysis".

### Participants

The participants of the research were English teachers with different lengths of the teaching experiences in one of junior high school in Kupang, NTT province. To protect their confidentiality, pseudonyms were given. The researcher classified the participants as novice teachers (NTs) and experienced teachers (ETs). The NTs were those who had the English teaching experience under 5 years while ETs had more than 5 years of the teaching experience. The different lengths of the teaching experiences were used in order to give us a clear picture of any specific details on how they formed and achieved their identity.

### Data collection and analysis

The researchers used teachers' reflections and semi-structured interview for gathering the information. The participants were asked to reflect about what they believed and how they saw their identity as a teacher and shared their critical incidents while dealing with their vulnerabilities. The semi-structured interviews were conducted to help the researchers get the background knowledge of how far the participants acknowledged their strengths and weaknesses and what strategic plans they used to develop their professional identity. It offered an in-depth exploration of the ways teachers understood and experienced their professional vulnerability. The teacher's conception about how they see themselves as a teacher should appear naturally in the act of telling (Kelchtermans, 2013). All participants were asked to explain the critical events which sometimes triggered their vulnerability. Then, the discussion moved to incoming identity goals, standards, and beliefs; emotional episodes; teacher attributions, and identity adjustments. One interview was conducted because of the distance between the researchers and the participants. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the research.

The data was organized in the compare-contrast structure in order to analyze the differences and the similarities between novice and experienced teachers. It aimed to establish the underlining conditions and lead the researchers to discover the concepts and incidents. Then, the researchers would compare this concept to another concept (see Shimura, 2001).

## 3. Result And Discussion

The goals of this research was to describe the strategic plans used by the novice and experienced teachers in order to transform their vulnerability into professional identity and to what extent this strategy impacted on their professional identity construction. Based on the findings, the researchers catalogued the results into two representative answers from the novice teacher (NT) and the experienced (ET) one.

### Novice and experienced teachers' strategic plans

The participants believed that by doing critical reflections daily, they could be assisted in assessing their work and the classroom learning process. They do self reflections as an attempt to

understand a situation and find the solution in every problem. This reflection is not for surface learning, but also for personal development as shown in the table below.

**Table 1:** Teachers' Reflection

Question	NT	ET
Why do you want to be a teacher?	"I am interested in English since junior high. I had a dream to be a translator. Although I have some teacher's relatives, but I never thought that I will end up as a teacher. Since there was no English literature department in the Nusa Cendana University, so I took English education. During my study, I started to enjoy teaching."	"I love being a teacher. Teaching is my passion. I was graduated from SPGA (Catholic Education School) and I got teaching basic and method there. Then I took a double degree in my bachelor study. I was graduated in Law and English Education. First, I studied in the Law department because my father is a Policeman, but then I believe English is important, so I took English Education too."

The teachers who participated in these interviews said that they had a passion for teaching and believed that mastering English was an important skill as global citizens. Both NT and ET said that their choice to be a teacher was not influenced by their family, but how they responded their environment's needs. In the local context, these teachers aimed to prepare Kupang's young generation to be able to compete in the global era. At the beginning, NT did not like being a teacher, but then she began to enjoy it because of the interaction with her pupils. From her teaching experiences, she started to develop her identity as a teacher. While ET, even though she had no teacher family background, developed passion in teaching and she followed her dream to be a teacher. Both of them might be different in responding to their experiences, but they hold a similarity on how they feel touched by the students and want to teach them. Their experiences resonate well with Harrison and Lee (2011), who argue:

"Experience allows for the building up of a mental model of the way the world (of the school/classroom) works, and subsequent experiences may conform to this particular structure without any change to the mental model (non-learning). Sometimes if the reaction to an experience is mental or physical discomfort, the personal trauma itself demands its own attention and thus prevents reflection" (p.201).

The different experiences will lead them to the different responses. The researchers believed that the reason why these teachers wanted to be a teacher was important. By recognizing their purposes, teachers will be able to bounce back whenever they face problems.

### Teacher's Vulnerability

In order to do their professional job, teachers are often confronted with many conflicting situations such as educational reforms, workload, curriculum adaptation and also the students' behavior. Vulnerability is considered not only an emotional experience but also a structural characteristic of the profession (Kelchtermans, 2013). This will challenge the teachers to keep their professionalism and at the same time demonstrate their ability to regulate their emotion. The capacity to know their strengths and weaknesses help teachers to deal with stress and also maintain a healthy relationship among themselves and with their students. How teachers regulate their emotion make them remain committed and able to teach to their best and well.

**Table 2:** Teachers' Expectations and Fears

Question	NT	ET
What do you expect and fear from being a teacher?	"As a teacher, I wish I can share my knowledge to them and help them fluent in English. The thing that I am worried about is when my students have low achievement eventhough I did my	"I hope I can share my knowledge to my students and then, they can take the point why they were learning English today. I think I am not afraid of being teacher, because teaching is a noble job. How we taught students from know

best to help them. You know, people easily judge the teacher when her students didn't pass the exam."

nothing to know something. Its great."

...

"Honestly, I dont like administration work. This curriculum 13 is very tiring. How can we transfer our knowledge if teachers are busy with this paper works? What is the expected output?We are teaching hundreds of students, how can we assess each details of each person as objectively as possible?"

The table indicates that NT is worried about other people's evaluation of her performance and credibility as an English teacher. She attributed students' failure to herself even she knew that it was not always right. Many factors influence students' outcomes, like motivation, perseverance or social factors which are difficult to change or control. This kind of evaluation creates contradictory ideas among the teachers. When the students have a good score, teachers will feel proud and satisfy. Meanwhile, when students have low achievement, teachers tend to felt frustrated and blamed themselves. Even worst, they ascribe the student's results to factors beyond their efforts and control and hence have a discouraging impact on their motivation and finally their self-esteem. Her situation strengthens Kelchtermans' (2013) argument that the vulnerability results from "unfair evaluation of their work, doing injustice to their specific working conditions" (p.266).

On the other hand, ET experienced a conflict in her workload. ET was no longer worried about other people's assessments toward her teaching, but rather the administrative demands and the curriculum changes. ET was expected to be up-to-date and creative in answering all school's demands and regulations. As a teacher, she considered transferring knowledge to her students as her main responsibility instead doing on administration works.

*"This curriculum 13 is very tiring. How can we transfer our knowledge if teachers are busy with this paper works?"*

ET felt powerless in that situation and it influenced her performance. It can not be denied that their workplace conditions are imposed by regulation and particular infrastructure. Her experiences echoes Ball (2003, pp. 220-221) who believes that teacher performativity on strict standards and output measurements will strengthen their vulnerability experiences.

### Teachers' strategies to overcome negative impacts of vulnerability

Vulnerability experiences can bring negative impacts "due to the feeling of powerlessness, betrayal or defenselessness in situations of high anxiety or fear" (Lasky, 2005, p.901). That is why, instead of being 'burnt-out', these teachers set strategies to overcome this vulnerable state and try to be in control of everything as shown in the table 3 below.

**Table 3.** Teachers' strategies to be ideal teacher

Question	NT	ET
What are the efforts you had to become an ideal teacher?	"I don't know why these students were great during class discussion and they were fun but showed low scores in the exam. So, I decide to teach them privately and this strategy really helps. Besides, I keep improving myself and trying to find more information related to the technique of teaching English."	"I try my best in teaching practises and making documentation report. At the beginning, we take care of the administration before the initial effective week. This strategy makes it easier. All teaching plans will be presented on MGMP workshop before it presented in the class. For the students' assessments, I appreciate my students who showed an improvement. I can't force them to be excellent or put the high

standard. If I do so, I lie to myself.”

Considering their own limitations, both NT and ET keep improving themselves to be better. NT was afraid if her students failed in her class, so she <sup>20</sup> willing to learn how to teach English effectively and cope with her students. What she did supports Van der Want et al., (2018), who contend that the relationship between teacher and student plays important role to develop teachers' identity. She believed that her relationship with her students was quite good and they looked happy and enjoyed learning English with her. Her willingness to improve herself as a teacher is a sign that she is developing her professional identity.

However, ET realized that she was not good at administration work. ET was seeking help from her colleagues to generate some ideas and make lesson plans together. Through the teachers' meetings in the teachers' organization (MGMP), they discussed and set some strategies on how make everything balanced between the teaching activities and the documentation required in K-13. Her belief about teaching reflects Ball (2003, p.226) who states that the education reform is not only change the organizations, but also change one's identity.

### The impacts on professional identity construction

Teacher identity is represented through a dynamic interplay between efficacy, agency, and emotion in teacher self. When teachers are able to meet challenges, they can achieve their success in their life. Teachers are supposed to have a design about how to run and manage the class. When they faced a problem at teaching, they should find out what is wrong. Therefore, teacher identity will encourage teacher to find new ways or an suitable approach to teach (Day, 2018, p.61). NT and ET were asked about their view of a good teacher and how they saw themselves as a teacher as shown in the table below.

**Table 4.** Teachers' presumptions of their identity

Question	NT	ET
What do you think about good teacher?	“For me, a good teacher is a teacher who has mastered the knowledge and has an ability to simplify it and make it fun. So students will interest in learning English.”	“Good teacher is a teacher who is loved by the students.”
Do you think that as a teacher now you are better than before?	“I cannot say that I'm better now. I am still on process to be better. I am new here and don't really know the new curriculum. So far, I haven't attending the K13's training yet and the socialization itself is unclear. However, we are required to apply the K13. So, I am still learning and adapting.”	“Sure. I learn from my experiences, the ups and the downs, the success and the failure. When I throw back, I evaluate my teaching technique. Which one is the most suitable approach for my students.”

Both teachers had their own image of a good teacher. During the identity development process, each of them was copying different teachers, doing adaptations and adoptions and figuring out which one was the best strategy for them. This kind of modeling can be improved by learning through experience or self-st<sup>13</sup> (Dimitrieska, 2018).

As a novice teacher, NT felt that she needed to learn more. On the other hand, ET with 14 years of the teaching experience felt positive and she was becoming a better teacher over time. Teachers as “reflective practitioners” (Harrison & Lee, 2011, p.200) should recall their memory during certain kinds of significant incidents in school. The purpose of reflection is to emphasise teacher's awareness in developing their skill and construct their professional identity. Basically, reflection needs action to be followed up

#### 4. Conclusion

This research reveals that each teacher, both novice and experienced, should practice critical reflections and be honest with themselves in order to enable a comprehensive evaluation about what they should and should not do in teaching. This study attempted to discover the teachers' strengths and weaknesses and what strategies they set to transform their vulnerability into professional identity. In order to overcome the negative impacts of vulnerability, one should be able to regulate their emotion and seek help in the community or from other teachers.

In order to improve education quality, teachers are required to be able to bounce back and become resilient in every challenge. In order to develop an ability to deal with their vulnerability, both emotion and structural, teachers need to be motivated and possess integrity. Both new and experienced teachers are important elements at the school. A cooperative working condition can help each member of the school to grow together and this in turn will help them to develop their professional identity over time.

It is obvious that teachers' identity is not static but always develops through time. Many factors can shape their identity, be it internal or external. It may takes time to process, to do trials and errors, to adjust to teachers' self-characteristic and also the socio-culture where they work. During the process of identity development, teachers will face many frictions and obstacles, which may or may not accord with their own belief. Teachers' ability to juggle between those issues are expected lead them to personality changes, both in their mind and habits

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