Original Article

Interplaying identity of Hong Kong primary school physical education teachers: a grounded theory exploration

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Abstract:
        This study explored the identities of Hong Kong primary school physical education teachers (PSPETs). It was carried out based on grounded theory methods of how Hong Kong PSPETs perceive their personal and professional identities. The research question addressed in this study was "How do PSPETs perceive their personal and professional identities in the schools in which they serve?" The sample included nine PSPETs with between two and thirty years of professional experience in Hong Kong primary schools. Data were collected during interviews with these teachers and were analyzed through open, axial and selective coding. Using the constant comparison method of the inductive approach, concepts of contribution of expertise, status construction, negotiation, bonding and personal characteristics were revealed in the grounded theory of "Interplaying Identity". The substantive theory contributed to an increased understanding of the identity of physical education teachers and to the literature on physical education teachers' professionalization.
Key words: identity; physical education teachers; Hong Kong; primary school; grounded theory.

Introduction

        Hong Kong primary school physical education teachers (PSPETs) are regarded as "subject specialists". They bear a heavy workload derived from teaching and administrative tasks in a turbulent climate for education and through constant waves of curriculum reforms. Recently, much attention has been given to the perceived need to improve the quality of teaching in primary schools in Hong Kong (Cheng, 2009; Education Commission, 2006 & 2000).

        According to the 2013/14 statistics on the number of primary schools in Hong Kong (EDB, 2015), there were 569 primary schools with 320,918 students enrolled and 22,651 primary school teachers (21,626 degree holders; 1,025 non-degree holders). The information provided above includes local, English Schools Foundation (ESF) schools and other international schools. The average class size was 27.1 with a student-teacher ratio of 14.2:1. Under this setting, PSPETs are not only required to teach physical education, but must also teach other subjects in the primary school education system in Hong Kong (Sum & Dimmock, 2014).

        Over the past decade, there has been considerable debate around the essential mission of physical education teachers in all sectors (Petrie & Lisahunter, 2011; Berryman, 2010; & McKenzie, 2007). Many studies have found that PSPETs have struggled for legitimacy in their schools as a consequence of feeling isolated and devalued by colleagues relative to their instructional duties, and believe that their subject area is marginalized (Kougioumtzis, Patriksson & Strahlman, 2011; Curtner-Smith, 2001; & Johns & Dimmock, 1999). While an international survey suggested that physical education seems to have attained the same or a similar legal status to other subjects, as a school subject, it is allocated less curriculum time, and hence its lower status in Asian cultures (Hardman & Marshall, 2005). According to many researchers (Flintoff, 2003; Macdonald & Kirk, 1996; & Sparkes, Templin & Schempp, 1993), physical education teachers experience school life very differently to other subject teachers, not only due to the low rank of physical education in the hierarchy of subjects taught at schools, but also that physical education has been defined as peripheral to the central functions of the school. Along this line, very little is known about the professional identities of PSPETs after the introduction of drastic changes to work hours and an increased workload, especially concerning ways in which teachers have adjusted to the changes associated with their working environment in Hong Kong.

        Most primary schools have gradually changed their system from a half-day school to a whole day school, beginning in the 1990s (EDB, 2011). The new school system, together with the new curriculum and education reforms, has added stress to primary school teachers and senior management personnel (Leung & Lee, 2006). In addition, it is common in Hong Kong primary schools that PSPETs have a duty not only to teach PE classes, but also to teach up to three other academic subjects, such as Chinese language, English language, and mathematics. Further, PSPETs have to coach sports teams as an additional duty unlike other subject teachers. Aside from teaching and coaching, there are still a number of administrative duties specific to this profession,

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such as annual athletic meets, swimming galas and different sports tournaments periodically assigned by the senior management of various schools (Sum & Dimmock, 2014).

Undisputedly, since the advent of education and curriculum reforms (Curriculum Development Council, 2004 & 2002) advocated by the government and scholars, there has been an increasing workload on teachers in schools at local levels. Hence, the study was significant as it focused on PSPETs and invited them to reflect on their own identities, and to discover whether or not there have been any discrepancies between their multiple identities in the socialization and professionalization process. Such findings and implications may also provide a more focused and culturally applicable framework to help PSPETs further understand the particular context of their work. As for policy makers attending to the need to plan the professional training of physical education teachers and retain young professionals who have just entered the field, this study may provide useful insights into the work environment, conditions, support, and particular career development of PSPETs in Hong Kong. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how PSPETs feel about their professional identity in the context of Hong Kong primary schools.

Theoretical foundations

The following discussion is an exploration of teachers' personal and professional identities to establish a theoretical framework that underpins the identities of PSPETs in Hong Kong.

Identity is a concept which embodies our sense of uniqueness as individual beings and as members of groups sharing values and beliefs (Taylor & Spencer, 2002, p. 1). Stone (1962) explained identity by differentiating between "identification of," meaning only membership, and "identification with," meaning identity. Erickson (1968) elaborated on identity by adding that "identity is not the sum of childhood identifications, but rather a new combination of old and new identification fragments" (p. 90). Since roles can be assigned, identity is not synonymous with roles. Weber and Mitchell (1996) asserted that "the taking up of an identity is a constant social negotiation that can be permanently settled or fixed, occurring as it necessarily does within the irreconcilable contradictions of situational and historical constraint" (p. 109).

It has been argued that the construction of one's identity often involves some sense of the past (Bender, 2001). The preservation of the past thus becomes a part of the process of preserving the present, as well as preserving one's own identity. Mercer (1990) pointed out that people may not mean the same thing when referring to identity, since identity contains so many different connotations. As he stated, "one thing at least is clear – identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty" (p. 43). In this vein, personal identities are not formed by individuals alone but are socially constructed by others (Webster, 2005).

Linking teachers' personal identity with their professional identity, Sachs (2001) defines teachers' professional identity as a set of attributes that are imposed upon the teaching profession either by outsiders or members of the teaching fraternity itself. Teachers' identity is clearly and closely entwined with institutional structures and processes. Zembylas (2003) argues that teacher identity is constantly becoming embedded in power relations, ideology, and culture. It also refers to how a teacher's "self" is constructed and reconstructed through the social interactions that he or she has in collaborative learning contexts (Pinho & Andrade, 2015). In particular, new teachers' identities are shaped and reshaped over time (Flores & Day, 2006). To further explore the understanding of professional identity, Coldron and Smith (1999) contended that the construction of social identity generally involves taking a position in social space. Consequently, Coldron and Smith (1999) stated that "the professional identity of teachers is a particular instance of this process. One's professional identity as a teacher is a matter of where, within the professionally pertinent array of possibilities, a particular person is located" (p. 714).

Cooper and Olson (1996) noted that the professional identity of teachers is continually "being informed, formed, and reformed as individuals develop over time and through interaction with others" (p. 78), in the preconceptions of how society, history, and culture influence who teachers become. Teachers' professional identity is created and recreated through continuous reflexive monitoring of their actions and reactions and, is therefore seen by Giddens (1991) as "steering a way between commitment and uncertainty" (p. 194). As regards the professional identity of physical education teachers, O'Connor and Macdonald (2002) indicated that identification as a physical education teacher is "reflective of the type of relationship between physical education and sport in different school contexts, teachers' personal philosophies, and the risks and rewards derived from dual commitments to teaching and coaching" (p. 49).

A physical education teacher's identity is composed of multifaceted aspects of behaviour, and that this is related to several school situations. Exploring different perspectives of the physical education teacher's identity may provide a useful insight into the structure of social interactions in school. In addition, physical education teachers' identity also "builds on an earlier socialization theory that was used to explain who physical education teachers were, their attraction to the profession, and how these teachers assumed assigned roles in the school setting" (O'Connor & MacDonald, 2002, p. 39). A physical education teacher is an individual in a particular organization who goes through the socialization process by experiencing changes in his or her personality identity and professional identity within that organization. Those changes might have a positive

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influence on his or her professional life, or create a negative perception of his or her profession, which might eventually lead him or her on a different career trajectory.

To summarize this literature review, despite the studies on primary school teachers' personal and professional identities (Day, Elliot & Kington, 2005; Sachs, 2001; & Vogt, 2002), the researcher found that very little is known about how PSPETs adjust to the changes specifically associated with their workload and how their varied roles impact on their personal and professional identities (Morgan & Bourke, 2008). The research question thus addressed in this study was: How do PSPETs perceive their personal and professional identities in the schools in which they serve?

Method

Strauss and Corbin (1998) expressed that "qualitative methods can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomenon such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods" (p. 11). Morrison (2002) also commented that all educational research needs to be grounded in people's experience: the core task of an interpretivist is to view research participants as research subjects and to explore the meaning of events and phenomena from the subjects' perspectives. The researcher employed the grounded theory approach to explore the richness and complexity of PSPETs' identities through their own voices, describing and exploring the meaning of those experiences for them, before finally generating a theory to explain their personal and professional identities. The theory was generated from the data, rather than the data being gathered to prove or disprove a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Initial data sources for this study were Hong Kong PSPETs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. To sustain maximum variation of the sample, individual participants were selected through snowball sampling techniques (Patton, 2002).

Participants/Sampling and data collection

PSPETs selected for this study were from a variety of backgrounds (see Table 1) and were able to enrich the contexts for analysis. Nine PSPETs (6 males, 3 females) between the ages of 25 to 59 years were purposively recruited. Their years of experience as PSPETs were between 2 and 30 years.

Table 1: Summary of Participant Characteristic

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Years of Experience
Alice	F	38	18
Ben	M	46	22
Calvin	M	31	9
Dennis	M	28	6
Eva	F	50	28
Francis	M	46	23
George	M	59	30
Henry	M	25	2
Irene	F	41	15

Interviewing

The researcher used semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data collection. The interviewer used this descriptive data to develop insights into how respondents interpret their perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). As stated by Charmaz (2002), "in-depth qualitative interviewing fits grounded methods particularly well." This kind of interviewing is "a flexible, emergent technique; ideas and issues emerge during the interview, and the interviewers can immediately pursue these leads" (p. 676). This method allowed for differences that appeared between participants to be maximized and, consequently, for relationships between categories to be more robustly tested and verified.

The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed by the researcher. Recorded material was then transcribed verbatim as soon as it had been collected, while the researcher's memory was still fresh. The researcher was responsible for data collection, transcription, translation, and analysis to ensure the quality, consistency, and accuracy of data processing and interpretation.

Access

Potential participants were contacted by telephone and electronic mail to seek their consent to take part in the study. Ten potential participants were approached. Nine accepted and one rejected participating in this study. Once a participant was identified, the researcher approached him or her directly in order to help establish a relationship of trust, which facilitated the process of data collection. To establish an equitable relationship between participant and researcher, it was important to be explicit about the nature of the study. The researcher explained to the participants how the information would be collected, processed, and utilized. A written consent form was obtained from each participant before data were collected.

The protection of the participants' anonymity was essential. As such, audio-tape recordings of interviews were transcribed and labelled using pseudonyms in the manuscripts. In addition, at the completion of

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the study, the audiotapes were destroyed. However, the transcripts were retained, using the established pseudonyms.

Steps in arriving at the theory

The researcher followed a study protocol related to a grounded theory methodology, which contained the instrument, as well as the procedures, for obtaining answers to the research question. This study sought an understanding of the identity of PSPETs as seen from their own perspectives. This was achieved by the researcher giving the PSPETs the opportunity to talk about their everyday experiences and to express their own points of view. Theoretical saturation was reached and sampling ceased when no new information emerged in the relevant categories, and adequate information existed for each relevant category to conduct in-depth analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using these principles to determine the appropriate sample size for the initial interviews, the analysis began with the first interview in a line-by-line coding method, by which new codes were created for every concept or idea presented. As each new code was created, the code definition and date of creation were also recorded.

To describe the process of arriving at the theory, the three stages of data analysis were presented below:

Open coding

In this study, line-by-line coding was used during the open coding process for all 9 interviews. This process evolved into simultaneously searching for new concepts and creating the appropriate codes, while at the same time observing the development of those concepts in the data. As the list of codes grew, it became necessary to consider the relationships between the emerging codes and to refine the code list accordingly.

Adaptation types. The PSPETs' identities were determined during the open coding stage. More than 60 labels were generated in open coding. Some of these labels were termed –"responding," "devoting," "inspiring," "delegating," "puzzling," "resisting," "surviving," and "escaping" – and were attached to the PSPETs to capture their accounts of their work experiences. The labels were then grouped into identity categories.

Interplaying dimensions. The identity dimensions were social status; personal characteristics; competence; and relationship between colleagues, students, and school.

Interplaying properties. After identifying the above dimensions, five concepts that described different facets of properties were also identified. These properties were focus, breadth, clarity, commitment, and consistency. In brief, focus referred to the degree of concentration on their identities shown by PSPETs; breadth was the embracing of different aspects of interplaying work life; clarity reflected the degree to which PSPETs made a priority; commitment indicated the PSPET's dedication; and, finally, consistency referred to the congruity in the application of interplay in similar situations.

Axial coding

Axial coding focused on the relationships between categories and their subcategories. Procedurally, axial coding involved "identifying the variety of conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences associated with a phenomenon" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 126). After the line-by-line coding of the first eight interviews, the same ideas were being described by many of the PSPETs, and fewer new codes were being developed with each new interview.

Because of the repetition of themes, as well as the volume and depth of the data in the first eight interviews, the decision was made to use the 9th interview as a test case for data saturation or informational redundancy. Analysis of the 9th interview proceeded in the same manner as the first eight interviews, with line-by-line analysis performed to reveal any new ideas and any further development of the current ideas.

The analysis of the line-by-line coding of the 9th interview revealed that, while there was some slight variation within categories, no new categories emerged. No additional codes were created during the coding of these interviews. Propositions were created, and these propositions were subsequently tested using existing and new data. The grouping of the categories was re-arranged.

Selective coding

Through constant comparison of the conceptual codes, a core category was discovered for the PSPETs in this study. The core category emerged from grounded theory methodology to explain how PSPETs strove to manage their personal and professional identities. An appropriate core concept of "*interplaying identity*" was thus created to reflect this. The *"Interplaying Identity"* consisted of five dovetailed concepts, each of which defined PSPETs' perceived identities. These concepts were (1) professional knowledge and contribution of expertise; (2) status construction; (3) negotiation; (4) bonding; and (5) personal characteristics.

Trustworthiness

In conducting this study, the researcher utilized five criteria for trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, confirmability, dependability, and generalizability) to ensure the reliability of the results. To avoid personal bias and to achieve an interpretive understanding of the subjects' own perspectives (Charmaz, 2000), the researcher attempted, at key points in the study, to keep an open mind and listen closely to the respondents in order to obtain accurate findings and corroborate them (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

To ensure that the study was credible, member checks were conducted by emailing the interview transcripts and analysed data to the participants, who were then asked to correct errors or inaccuracies therein. Through

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systematic record-keeping and ongoing evaluation of findings, confirmability of the research findings was established as a priority.

All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. During the process of data collection and analysis, memos and field notes were written, thus facilitating the creation of more robust categories. Data collection ceased when nothing new appeared from additional interviewees.

Although a small number of PSPETs in Hong Kong formed the sample, maximum variation was sought between them, so as to enrich the conceptualization of the emerging results.

Results and discussion

The Theory of Interplaying Identity emerges from five dovetailing concepts which are labelled as (1) professional knowledge and contribution of expertise; (2) status construction; (3) negotiation; (4) bonding; and (5) personal characteristics. In this study, "interplaying" related to the "personal characteristics" of PSPETs, which were reciprocally influenced by how PSPETs perceived their identities in the schools in which they served (refer to Research Question). Their bonding with colleagues and students, how they constructed their status, their expertise in the school, and their negotiation ability were all key concepts that interplayed with their professional and personal identities. The Theory of Interplaying Identity reaffirmed that PSPETs were able to cope with the preconceptions of the low status of physical education in schools (Stroot, Collier, O'Sullivan & England, 1994; & Sparkes, Templin & Schempp, 1993) through setting themselves as examples of committed professionals and being visible in their versatile roles (Sum & Dimmock, 2014).

Professional knowledge and contribution of expertise

Professional Knowledge and Contribution of Expertise related to the PSPETs' skills and knowledge, which were distinguishable from other staff members in school. All PSPETs had to be involved in sports activities at intramural and inter-school levels. Since all PSPETs must be physical education specialists, the basic physical education teacher education training in Hong Kong provided PSPETs with administrative skills to be used in sports activities. Alice stated:

> *We organized a sports day and our non-P.E. colleagues followed our instructions strictly on what to do. I think that they fully respect our professionalism. They would defer to us on things, such as students' injuries, because they know we can better handle such matters.*

Irene had similar experiences, claiming:

> *I feel that there is some difference between myself and other subject teachers during special school occasions, such as sports day. I have to be responsible for the arrangements. Other teachers don't know much about what I do. They have no idea as to the rationale behind picking athletes.*

Since identity referred to how a teacher's "self" was constructed and reconstructed through the social interactions that he or she had in a particular socio-cultural, historical, and institutional contexts (Zembylas, 2003), it was apparent that these PSPETs' professional knowledge and distinct areas of expertise were usually well received by their colleagues and the senior management of their schools. Eva stated that, if her contribution was valued by her school, her feeling of identification with the school was positively reinforced:

> *It depends on whether they appreciate and identify with me. I teach morning exercise sets. If they were aware of this and tried to promote it to other classes, or even to the whole school, I would feel a sense of value.*

Professional identity was a combination of all the PSPETs' distinct areas of expertise. Professional identity referred also to the individual's sense of worth and value based on how he or she was viewed by colleagues, and how he or she viewed himself or herself in the work situation (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Zembylas (2003) argued that teacher identity was constantly embedded in power relations, ideology, and culture. Identity, therefore, empowered PSPETs through decision-making processes, a key factor in dynamic schools (Fejgin & Hanegby, 1999). Dennis' experience echoed the above argument:

> *The school shows a positive attitude by giving us the freedom to add or cut a school team.*

Another noteworthy finding from the data is expressed by Francis:

> *In the present system, all PE teachers should have undergone professional training. We can teach other subjects without specific subject training. However, other subject teachers cannot teach PE without PE training. So, not everyone can teach PE, and, by comparison, this makes teaching PE appear more professional.*

Despite the fact that PSPETs were responsible for teaching a variety of subjects, their expertise as physical education specialists seemed only to be recognized within the field of physical education and sports. Henry stated:

> *They (colleagues) respect me as regards to sports. This is dependent on my expertise in this particular subject. My opinion towards Chinese language is less valued. But they respect my contribution to PE. They believe in my professional opinion.*

PSPETs see their professional identity as a combination of their distinct areas of expertise since professional identity refers to how individuals manage their attitudes and behaviours towards their career and profession (Leijen, Kullasepp & Anspal, 2014, p. 314). The experience of teaching is, therefore, continually a sustainable identity as a teacher (Coldron & Smith, 1999).

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Status construction

Status Construction related to how PSPETs constructed their ideal of honour, or attached influence to their positions in school. Although Mercer (1990) stated that identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, this study discovered that the PSPETs' construction of their status was crucial to the positive interplay of their personal and professional identities, since all physical education teachers in Hong Kong primary schools must be physical education specialists. Alice shared her views and values with her principal. This revealed that her status in school was reaffirmed through frequent communication with her seniors and colleagues. She explained:

> I talk to the principal first and see if he shares the same view. We normally begin with an informal dialogue, checking if other people, normally the relevant parties, would like guidance and counselling in this case, or share the same view on the content and target the responsible people. When things become more serious, we will initiate formal executive meetings.

Ben demonstrated his status by leading colleagues in school curriculum reform. He recalled:

> When I first started the curriculum reform, it was very smooth. We created a showcase for other subject teachers as well, in which we put a lot of effort into improving the curriculum.

Ben further elaborated:

> I understand that there are some structural matters that we cannot alter, but I can influence my colleagues positively on a more personal front, both emotionally and in how they tackle their subjects.

The prestige of the school for which PSPETs worked also influenced their professional status. Dennis claimed that his colleagues' opinions of his professional abilities did not matter, but that the reputation and popularity of his school strongly affected his status construction.

> First, it is not a famous school and maybe others haven't heard of it before. If I am teaching at a prestigious school, others will know which school I teach in. Secondly, the general working environment in the school has not been very good after classes were downsized.

Eva realized her importance when asked to assume a key position. She stated:

> I was asked to take his (vice-principal) position. I accepted the promotion, handling both PE (such as sports day) and administrative duties. I was happy at that time. I could bring my talent into full play and I felt important.

However, Eva chose to leave her school and join a new school. Thus, she had to reconstruct her status. She explained:

> At present, even the suggestion of buying a few more shuttlecocks would be rejected. As I do not know much about the students, they (colleagues) would not ask for my opinions about choosing students to join the track and field training. I do not feel important here.

George illustrated another construction of status:

> I think they understand my character as they've known me for a long time. They value my contribution in arranging students' activities. They highly regard my working performance and my devotion. I expend all of my effort in the school. The parents can see my contributions. Some teachers can see my work. Not all of them are against my work...I have established many new activities and they are quite successful. Students and parents accept my work, too. The result is recognized. I feel very satisfied because I've done this on my own.

It seemed that the longer PSPETs worked in a school, the easier it was to construct their status, which gave their positions in school greater influence. For example, Ben frankly claimed that his leading status was valued by his colleagues:

> Well, most of my colleagues perceive me to be a responsible teacher. They respect my views and, in some meetings, I can voice some of my opinions that they might want to express, but would not dare to do so. Therefore, I think I am valued.

Physical education has been perceived as a low-status subject (Stroot, Collier, O'Sullivan & England, 1994; & Sparkes & Templin, 1990) and has rested firmly at the bottom of the subject-matter status ladder (Schempp, 1989). However, two decades following, Solmon and Garn (2014) commented that physical education has the potential to be revitalized as a core element in school curricula, and that the establishment of a relatively high status in an educational setting has long been an elusive goal for the physical education profession (Solmon & Garn, 2014; & Amour & Jones, 1998). It was, however, worth noting that these PSPETs were not solely using their role as physical education teachers to raise their status. They made good use of their versatile roles (Sum & Dimmock, 2014) as teachers of other subjects, event organizers, and sports coaches to establish their status.

Negotiation

Negotiation related to the behaviour and attitudes that PSPETs used to resolve conflicts or influence outcomes to satisfy their various concerns. Identity was constantly changing and refining itself through social relationships with others. PSPETs refined and developed their values and beliefs in their work lives by means of their relationships with others. Calvin's experience in dealing with colleagues demonstrated this:

> Indeed, I hope to have more physical education classes so as to teach the students what I have learned at university. But the reality is that there are so many concerns that we can hardly have a perfect solution.

> *……Every teacher has his own ideal. One of my university classmates and I work in this school and we have similar ideals, but teachers from other universities have different thoughts. For me, it is far more difficult to promote sports in primary school than I originally planned.*

As pointed out by Goodson and Numan (2002), the daily work of teachers was politically and socially constructed. Calvin added:

> *I think the main difference is that we have different mindsets. Our workload is slightly different. But I would say the mindsets make more of a difference than the amount of workload.*

Standing together with colleagues in order to negotiate with the authority (Education Bureau, or 'EDB'), Alice had this experience of working closely with her colleagues:

> *I think the greatest disappointment is that my colleagues and I have worked very hard but, despite that, our efforts have not been recognized by the EDB. This is reflected in the external assessment. I don't think any of us is idle, but perhaps hard work does not guarantee quality after all, and people may not be satisfied with the quality of some of our colleagues. I am not very satisfied with the report. I think we have already done our best, but we were still not given approval on the new campus issue.*

George was the key person in organizing extra-curricular activities at his school. He realized that every professional had his or her own viewpoints. He possessed a strong personal identity and was also concerned about his colleagues' professional identities. George expressed this opinion:

> *There are restrictions since we have different viewpoints. We have different professional ideals. Not all of the teachers can spare time for specific aspects. This is impossible.*

According to Mead (1934) and Stryker (1967), identity negotiation might arise from the learning of social roles through personal experience. When justifying and considering Dennis' dedication to his school, Dennis claimed:

> *Some teachers are doing this in our school, as there are many lazy and slothful teachers. They are just doing that to meet a quota. I do not want to be that kind of teacher.*

In dealing with senior management, Dennis had built up his professional identity to the point where the principal has allowed him to attend coaching courses, an activity which conflicted with his other engagements in school. Dennis elaborated:

> *I care more about self-satisfaction. If we want to have these chances, the school should provide us with the resources. I remember that once, during the Easter holiday, we were asked to give supplementary math lessons. However, I registered for a coaching course and the schedule clashed. I discussed it with my principal. I was able to attend the course as he asked another teacher to substitute for me. The school did not restrict my study plan.*

It was apparent that the identity negotiation process took place within colleague interaction on a horizontal level, as well as between PSPETs and senior management on a vertical level. By choosing some, and rejecting other, possibilities in various fields of choice, PSPETs affirmed affiliations and made distinctions that constituted an important part of their professional identity (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Furthermore, teacher identity might be enhanced through proper negotiation and communication in the "Confucian Dynamism" (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987) and "Confucian-heritage Cultures" (Ho, 1991) of Hong Kong schools. According to Hofstede and Bond's (1998) explanation of "Confucian Dynamism", Chinese people are generally perseverant and tenacious in pursuing goals. Once achieving a goal has been determined to require action, they will work through difficult problems in order to reach the desired state.

Bonding

Bonding was related to the affinity that developed between the PSPETs and their colleagues, students, and the schools for which they worked. At the beginning of a PSPET's career, it was crucial to have significant mentoring during the socialization process. Alice recalled her early socialization experience, which secured her sense of belonging to the school:

> *My vice-principal talked to me a lot and taught me a lot, as he is much more senior than I. He was in his 40s when I was only in my 20s. He explained to me a lot of the administrative affairs in the school and why they were carried out. He even taught me why one thing is preferred over the others, as well as management tactics. He surely has influenced how I think and reason to a large extent.*

Being accepted by and sharing work experiences with seniors therefore gave PSPETs a sense of belonging to schools. Through gaining a strong sense of belonging, PSPETs identified more with the schools they worked for (Tait, 2002, p. 77). Following in this vein, the work in the physical education area seemed easier because, as Ben explained, his colleagues demonstrated good practices. Ben proudly said:

> *I am generally satisfied with my communication with my colleagues. Most of my P.E. colleagues are very positive and considerate.*

Dennis further emphasized the importance of colleagues who made him want to stay in his current position. He highly treasured team spirit and deep connections between colleagues. Dennis felt this pride and stated that:

> *I think my inter-personal relationships with my colleagues are the most impressive. We have a strong team spirit and we want to have better performance when we have to compete. This is the thing that impresses*

> *me most. My colleagues make me want to stay. The most important thing is that I feel a connection with my colleagues.*

This echoes Lung (1997) that Hong Kong physical education teachers had positive interpersonal relationships and working conditions influenced their job satisfaction. PSPETs had a strong sense of community in schools. This also echoes Armour and Jones' (1998) view that physical education teachers in sporting environments provide a more relaxed relationship with colleagues and they are able to establish "wonderful social relationships" (O'Sullivan, Siedentop & Tannehill, 1994, p. 425) with colleagues.

Personal characteristics

PSPETs' actions and behaviours were based on the maturity of their character and personality. Each PSPET's unique set of qualities, distinctive style, and disposition differentiated them from others. The present study revealed that PSPETs' identities were highly related to their personalities and characters. In line with Zembylas' (2003) clarification of identity formation, the dynamic process of identity formation emphasizes personal character. Identity connected people's thoughts, judgments, and beliefs. How people act and behave was based on their developed character and personality. Alice had a clear personal character and objectives in her work life. She expressed this opinion:

> *To me, I think it is more important that I ought to have recognition for myself first as this is more critical …When I find that the principal acknowledges my work performance or when he agrees with me on what I do, I think this is a kind of recognition or affirmation.*

How individuals managed their attitudes and behaviours towards their career and profession was crucial in developing their professional identity. Francis reflected on his interaction with colleagues as follows:

> *We have different backgrounds and personalities. This is what makes me most disappointed when we work together, and we do not share the same ideals. If one is not mature enough, one picks on you regarding the person himself but not the subject. He criticizes everything you suggest. Then you would be hindered in what you want to do, and even criticized by others afterwards.*

Templin, Woodford and Mulling (1982) suggested that socio-cultural factors, as well as personality factors, contribute to influencing or facilitating individuals to identify themselves in a given field. For example, Ben's character was predisposed to love children, and he very much enjoyed spending time with them. He believed that he was doing something good for them.

More importantly, however, PSPETs' identities interplayed and were firmly embedded with their personality and character in everyday interactions within the school. The identification between a school and its PSPETs was also a consideration. Dennis gave the following description:

> *Generally, the PE group has self-identification. Different teachers have their own approaches towards school-identification. Other subject teachers won't feel proud if we (PE teachers) are performing well. Generally, my character is that I don't mind how other colleagues see me. I have self-confidence.*

In general, PSPETs had been forced to become more strategic and political in defending their professional identity against the "countervailing inroads" of teacher social identity (Woods & Jeffrey, 2002). Additionally, findings indicated that a PSPET's identity was not primarily the property of a person, but rather of interactional processes, which were inherently unstable (Cote, 2006).

Conclusion

PSPETs perceived their personal and professional identities by interplaying their expertise and professional knowledge, using their versatile roles (Sum & Dimmock, 2014) to construct their status, negotiating both horizontally and vertically, bonding with colleagues and students, and acknowledging their personal characteristics including their unique set of qualities, and their distinctive styles. Different professional identities may have been derived from various experiences in their professional lives. Featherstone (2000) stated that physical education teachers, just as other individuals in an organization, had "multiple identities" and "fragmented identities," and that those identities were always unstable and evolving, subject to slippage, blurring, and entanglement with others (Hall, 1996). Their perception of how they think regarding their profession was especially influential. Identity was strongly connected to impressions regarding physical education teachers, which perceived them to be fit and strong, as well as good-looking, role models. The identities of PSPETs also depended on social expectations, which meant that the institutional environment shaped their identity and legitimized the professional status of the teaching force. Teachers' identities were clearly and closely associated with institutional structures and processes. Therefore, the key influences in teachers' work life contexts, particularly their professionalization experiences, included their school settings, students, and external policies with particular support from the school. Further, departmental leadership and staff collegiality were key contributory factors to how teachers perceived the stability of their identities, which influenced teachers' well-being and sense of effectiveness across all career phases (Gu, 2005).

The substantive theory thus contributes to an increased understanding of the identity of physical education teachers and to the literature on physical education teachers' professionalization. This study may help pre-service and in-service physical education teachers to gain more assistance in their work lives and career planning as it shows how PSPETs perceive their "interplaying" identities and professionalization experiences.

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Further studies might start at the point this study ends; that is, they might seek further theory development by testing the Theory of Interplaying Identity in similar and different contexts. Similar research may use these research findings as a framework to uncover other subject teachers' identities and professionalization experiences.

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