

A Qualitative Study on Identity Construction among Teachers Working with Students with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to explore multiple facets of the professional identities of Iranian in-service teachers in exceptional schools. The study adopted a qualitative design. The data were collected through in-depth interviews with 14 in-service teachers. The participants were selected through purposeful sampling. Each interview lasted up to 40 minutes. The whole procedure of the data collection was audio-recorded, and verbatim transcriptions were made. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the qualitative data. Three themes emerged: relationships, lower identity, and professional identity. The study has some implications for policymakers, curriculum designers, educational psychology, and teacher educators.

KEYWORDS: qualitative research, exceptional schools, professional identity, teacher identity, teacher education

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Working with children with disabilities started with Itard and Séguin in the early 1800s and was developed by Montessori in the early 1900s. Jabbar Baghcheban was a founder of the first Iranian deaf school in Tabriz city in the early 1900s. Successively, several private institutions were established to assist exceptional children, including Noor-e-Aeen in Esfahan in 1929 for girls who were blind. Today, more than 23,000 teachers teach in 1,570 exceptional Iranian schools. Many studies have been conducted about the exceptional school teachers; for example, surveys on identity construction among teachers with various disabilities, including teachers with dyslexia (Burns & Bell, 2011); student teachers with a physical disability (Dvir, 2015); and teachers' feelings and attitudes, including their self-efficacy concerning meeting the needs of students with disabilities (Ekins et al., 2016), their feelings about inclusion (Goddard & Evans, 2018; Siuty, 2019; Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012; Woodcock, 2013), and their preparation to teach students with special needs (Cooc, 2019).

However, no investigation exists regarding the multidimensional identity of teachers without disabilities who teach students with intellectual disabilities. Until recently, researchers primarily considered the shortcoming or disability aspect of exceptional school teachers. Also, the effects that one's perceptions have on the development of professional identity have not been empirically investigated. Thus, we believe there is an urgent need for a study to fill this void. This article elucidates the multifaceted identity of teachers without disabilities who teach students with intellectual disabilities in the Iranian context. The study is based on in-depth interviews with fourteen teachers and elaborates on teachers' perceptions of their identity, as well as their perceptions of what society, the educational system, parents, and students think of them. It attempts to demonstrate how these teachers understand and portray their social and professional identity without trying to generate typologies of the identities. We investigated the commonalities and difficulties that the teachers experienced in both shaping their social identity and developing their professional identity. We also considered how several social, institutional, and collegial factors affected the teachers' perceived professional identity. This investigation has implications for teacher development (Chien, 2019) and is associated with successful teaching (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). The analysis was thematically focused on teachers' semi-structured interviews. The clarification of discussions was developed within Bucholtz and Hall's (2004, 2005) framework for the discursive production of identity.

Literature Review

Becoming a teacher is a complex (Hinchion, 2017) and incomplete process, which involves socialization (Hinchion & Hall, 2015) and the negotiation of a new identity with an older one (Alsup, 2006). Different scholars defined teacher identity as a process of self-assessment (Looney et al., 2018), a relationship between themselves and others (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), and something that is socially negotiated (Watson, 2006). Special education teachers act as the gatekeepers between general and special education, and their identity is developed in relationship with the identity of their colleagues and their social positioning within the school system (Siuty, 2019). The identity of special educators is reconstructed through the perception of others, the space where they are teaching, as well as their interactions with space and others. Therefore, the identity of special education teachers is in close relationship with the environment in which

they are teaching and the professional learning community in which they are a part (Siuty, 2019).

The lower identity is a control system that acts to bring perceptions of the situations into alignment with the adjustments in lower identity's goals. Higher identity is a control system that acts to control its perceptions by altering the standard of lower identity in such a way that the behaviors of lower identity also alter the meanings that higher identity perceives/controls (Burke & Stets, 2009). Lower identity influences the performance of teachers negatively. In their research, Rostami and Yousefi (2020) found that the teachers whose identities were considered lower than their colleagues, peers, or society were demotivated to exercise agency to develop their professional identity. The lower identity perception affects the social and academic performance of the individuals. It can exacerbate the social-class achievement gap, lower academic achievement, and put practitioners into more social and academic difficulties (Veldman et al., 2019). Burke and Stets (2009) introduce two hierarchies of identity level, higher-level identity and lower-level identity, in which any alteration in an individual's perceptions can lead to ways society perceives the lower and higher identity. In this regard, Rostami et al. (2021) probed the teachers who changed their major, got new degrees in a new major, and started teaching new subject matter. They found that teachers of new subjects shifted their lower identity to higher identity through academic achievement, thus allowing teachers to gain more social appreciation.

In their single case study, Rostami et al. (2020) showed that a participant's lower identity was concerning to them. No doubt, their perception of lower professional identity affected their instructional practices in their role as primary school teacher. The negative force of this lower identity was regarded as a demotivating force for the case's professional identity construction.

It is believed that studying teachers' professional identity provides insight into how teachers view their teaching and how their views influence their practices (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013). Thus, teachers' professional identity starts to form when teachers learn how to teach, practice, and develop their awareness as a continuous process. In her study, Thorius (2016) found that special educators pathologized their students with dis/abilities, as well as constructed their professional identity around a central goal of fixing them. Special education teachers developed their professional identity by being involved in multiple tasks inside and outside their teaching environments.

In the current study, the perception of teacher identity is in line with Tsui's (2007) concept that what we think of ourselves, others think of us. It is negotiated individually, socially, and grounded in the experience of daily life. Based on the "I Do, You Do, We Do" model (Sachs, 2005), the teachers in this study established a Telegram social media group to raise and solve the incidental problems that contribute to the formation of professional identity. To reach the objectives of the current study, we attempted to answer to the following questions:

1. How do teachers teaching children with disabilities evaluate their own identity in comparison to regular school teachers?

2. How do the exceptional school teachers perceive stakeholders' (educational department, parents, society) views about their identity?
3. What activities do the teachers apply to promote their own professional identity?

Theoretical Framework

According to the sociocultural framework, identity is assumed as an active, ongoing process constructed through social practice. Seen from this approach, identity is no longer a set of inherent characteristics; rather, it is how people interact in a continual process of formation and debate (Bloome et al., 2005). According to sociocultural theories of identity, a person needs to build an identity that supports the new practices that are going to be developed by those practices (Holland et al., 2001). Since identity can span contexts and let the practices be transported from one place to another place, the teacher researcher identity can be developed during teacher education programs and the practices obtained during research inquiries into the classroom.

Identity allows individuals to visualize new worlds, and in the process, to see new identities for themselves within those worlds; thus, the individuals provide space for "improvisation and innovation" (Urrieta, 2007, p. 108). In addition, although identity may be constructed in one setting, individuals can carry identity into new discursive contexts, allowing identity to serve as a resource that travels over space and time (Bloome et al., 2005).

While sociocultural approaches to identity allow for an understanding of how identity is constructed by individual activity, attention must be paid to the role of discourse within this relationship (Scollon, 2001). Bucholtz's and Hall's (2004, 2005) framework for the discursive production of identity builds on this work from a linguistic anthropological perspective by categorizing different ways identity is constructed through social interaction. As cited in Taylor (2017), this framework focuses on the construction of identity occurring at the level of talk, where, the authors argue, identity is continually emerging through social positioning within interaction. This approach is applied to both "identity-in-discourse and identity-in-practice" (Varghese et al., 2005, p. 39), recognizing how identity is discursively constructed with others in the context of the activity. Within their framework, Bucholtz and Hall identify "'tactics' for the 'interactional negotiation in the formation of identity'" (2004, p. 382), including ways to position an individual as similar to or different from a particular identity position.

In this study, teacher identity is conceptualized as the dynamic shifting process of an ongoing conception of oneself (Vähäsantanen, 2015), comprising biographical and professional trajectories as well as interpersonal, physical, and material resources. In other words, teachers might be aware of the past and present experiences and roles, yet negotiate their sense of being as professionals according to the circumstances in which they find themselves. This process is guided by the organizing principles that teachers use to make sense of themselves and contexts alike, as well as (re)interpreting their values, beliefs, and experiences to achieve (trans)formation in answer to personal, social and cognitive influences (Flores & Day, 2006). The outcomes of this process are

manifested through the multiple aspects of teachers' being, acting, and understanding (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

Methodology

Research Design and Setting

Our methodology for this study is thematic qualitative design (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers teaching students with intellectual disabilities in an exceptional school in Baneh, Iran. It is the only school established specifically for children with different disabilities to prepare learners with minimum basic living needs. Learning and teaching happen in small classes serving both male and female students. Both male and female teachers teach at the school. Teachers' degrees are in either special education or educational psychology. For ethical approval, we took account of confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent of interviewees after meeting the principal of the school.

There are more than 182,000 students with different disabilities, 23,000 teachers, and 1,600 exceptional schools in the Iranian context. The students fall under seven disabilities: autism, deafness, visual impairment including blindness, speech or language impairment, intellectual disability, and specific learning disability including (among others) dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia. Exceptional school teachers are more highly educated than regular school teachers because of their special training and more vulnerable because of their involvement with students with various disabilities. However, they receive only five dollars more per month than regular teachers and work an additional seventy-two days per year (Irna, 2019). These issues influence their professional identity, making the setting significant for investigation.

Participants

A hallmark of thematic analysis is flexibility in terms of the research question, sample size, data collection method, and so forth (Braun et al., 2017). Purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2014) was applied. Thirteen teachers and an administrator teaching in Baneh, Iran participated in the study from April 29th to May 1st, 2019. In order to maintain privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms were initiated for all the participants. The interviews were conducted in a room at the same school that the principal assigned for the researchers. Each interview took thirty to forty minutes to be conducted. The age of teacher participants ranged from 28 to 35. The teachers in this study did not suffer any disabilities; they all had from seven to ten years of teaching experience at exceptional schools. Four of the interviewees had taught primary students at regular schools prior to teaching at the current school.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Persian, the formal and instructional language of the country (see Appendix for the basic interview questions). Exceptional school teachers were individually asked questions about their identity, their

internally and externally perceived identity, the development of their professional identity, current school culture, and their perceptions about teachers teaching at regular schools. The first author asked follow-up questions and clarification questions to evoke in-depth answers. Interviews were audio recorded. Furthermore, field notes were taken during the interviews by the interviewer. As was stated earlier, this study aimed to delve into the emerging identity of the teachers without disabilities who taught exceptional learners with conditions such as Down syndrome, autism, etc.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim into Persian, the national and formal language of instruction at schools. In line with our aim in conducting qualitative research, we utilized thematic analysis following the guidelines put forth by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a sophisticated qualitative tool that helps research to be precise, consistent, and exhaustive through recording, systematizing, and disclosing methodological and analytical details so that readers can determine the credibility and validity of the process (Nowell et al., 2017).

After becoming familiarized with the content of the data, Microsoft Excel 2010 was used to help the researchers code and identify themes (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). As we did not have pre-coding in mind, we used axial coding and code description at the semantic level. Then the relationships among the codes were identified and categorized into themes according to the research questions. In order to establish inter-coder reliability (Armstrong et al., 1997), the second author re-read the raw data, noted similarities, and coded them. Then the authors compared their codes, found similarities, and agreed on the desired codes and themes. The similarity and consistency of interviewee responses were noticeable such that the researchers could find little dissimilarity among the obtained data. Having identified the relationships among the codes, the researchers consented to cluster and collate the codes into themes. The themes were “defined and refined” to organize them into a coherent and internally consistent account (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.92). There were three final core themes including: “relationships” from codes such as *intimate space*, *deep cooperation*, *spiritual achievements from the prayers of the children*; “lower identity” from codes like *having less prestige*, *underestimations from outsiders*, *inappropriate judgments*; and “professional identity” from codes such as *related academic major*, *joining social media clubs*, *lack of informative workshops* and so on.

Achieving Quality in Qualitative Research

To reach high quality, qualitative research is required to be rigorous. To this end, Tracy (2010) provides eight key markers as a pedagogical model; the authors employed some of the markers to achieve rigor in the current qualitative paper. First, the topic is worthy as there is still a gap in the construction of identity among teachers without disabilities who were teaching students with special needs. Second, to increase sincerity, the results were shared with participants to approve the trustworthiness and transparency of the data. Third, for credibility, data were collected through in-depth interviews, precise transcription, and rechecking the data with participants. An appropriate theoretical framework was studied and selected to crystalize the qualitative research. Finally, the current qualitative paper has implications for curriculum developers and policy-makers.

Results

The generated data from the semi-structured interviews among 14 interviewees revealed more commonalities than varieties. Three predominant themes emerged from the data: “*relationships*,” “*lower identity*,” and “*professional identity*.” The themes will be explored separately, illustrated by quotations from the interviewed teachers.

Theme 1: Relationships

In response to the reason participants opted to become teachers, they stated that they had had a retrospective view of their ties with their primary school teachers and that these memories inspired them to be teachers in the future. They mentioned that their perceptions toward the higher identity of teachers trace back to their elementary schooling. Teacher 1, for example, said:

I had a teacher when I was in the second primary school. She kept in touch with her students easily and warmly. She loved us and was very kind. She mostly smiled at us. I wished to become a teacher like her, and now I am a teacher.

Teacher 1’s expressions clearly pinpointed how the intimate relationships with his primary school teacher directed him to perceive teachers as sympathetic, lovely, and kind people, and contributed to his decision to select teaching as his future career.

This was not the only *relationship* they mentioned. All teachers indicated that working with children with various disabilities was upsetting. However, when they were asked whether or not they would like to change their school and teach non-disabled students, they unanimously refused to give up their current vocation. Their reasons were the strong ties among the teachers and learners. As Teacher 2 stated:

Here the teachers and students have good relationships with each other. Most of the students are subject to intellectual disability, and they do not have the power to perceive, for example, family relationships. They see their teachers as members of their family, consequently. They feel dependency on us and easily express their feelings and emotions. They require everything from us on the spot.

Teachers felt that they were treated as family by their students. This close relationship impacted teachers’ decisions to stay in their vocation despite the difficulties they came across during their careers.

Teacher 7 revealed his/her ideological assertion, saying, “I believe in students’ prayers, and whenever I asked them to pray for me, I noticed relief in my life.” From Teacher7’s comments and those of others, it can be concluded that the teachers may have seen divine ties with disabled children. More follow-up questions showed that they saw their students as innocent and sacred children who contributed to tightening their relationships not only with each other but also with God.

The last significant relationship that appeared from the data was cooperation and correlation among teachers. Teachers proclaimed that cooperation among teachers was noticeable to them and that their relationships with one another were more intimate in comparison with the regular school teachers. Both male and female teachers uttered that they sat around a table in the teachers' room during their break time, laughing, sharing their experiences, and solving their incidental problems.

In the Iranian educational system, exceptional school teachers are committed to teaching for 25 years, while regular school teachers must spend 30 years of teaching or other services. Nevertheless, when the first author asked the teachers if they would like to retire sooner, they did not demonstrate any consensus to give up their work. They argued that they would not like to leave their work setting as they were well-connected to their colleagues and students. Overall, the teachers found supportive, strong, and easy relationships inside the teachers' group and with the students. These relationships had a positive impact on the performance of the teachers, as Teacher 2 said, "Although working with these students is exhausting, needs a lot of patience, and makes you grow gray hair and get older, I prefer to stay here and keep this intimate and cooperative home going." Many teachers shared that they felt they and their students were like members of the same family.

Theme 2: Lower Identity

Here, the term *lower identity* refers to the mismatch between one's ideal/anticipated identity and the lower – or different, less satisfying – identity he/she currently possesses. This perception is elaborated from teachers' views toward themselves as well as their perceptions of the views of parents, students, society, and the educational system toward them as teachers of the exceptional school.

The teachers maintained that they could not observe the results of their hard work with the children promptly and easily. Students memorized and learned tasks with difficulty. Sometimes six hours of work with the children did not result in any learning. This quandary comes greatly into sight when they all come back to school after three months of summer holiday. As Teacher 10 said, "When students come back to school in fall, their brain is formatted just like a USB flash drive and we need to resend data and review the material for a few months." Such comments revealed that teachers experienced guilty consciences about their performance, leading them to trivialize themselves compared with the capabilities of regular school teachers.

The first researcher asked the interviewees how they thought parents realized and comprehended the position and identity of teachers in the exceptional school in contrast to regular school teachers. Again, the teachers asserted that parents attached higher identity to regular school teachers. The attachment was further clarified by four participants who had taught at regular schools previously. They proclaimed that they had observed parents' immense gratitude for regular school teachers and much less gratitude for exceptional school teachers. For example, Teacher 13 said:

Most of the students come from families with no or less-educated parents. They refuse to accept that they have a kid with special needs. Their needs will be met by cooperation and coordination of both home and school. They bring students to get rid of their rudeness or bothersome behavior at home. They never check their progress and literacy. However, at regular schools, the progress of students is regularly checked by parents. At regular schools, parents are in close contact with principals and teachers and even send them Teachers' Day congratulation cards. In contrast, at this exceptional school, it has never happened and will not happen neither.

As Teacher 13 declared, the parents of the students with disabilities are different in that that they send their children to school to occupy their time with any activities while other parents sent their children to schools to use the time of learning for their future career. Her comments reflected how exceptional schoolteachers feel they are treated differently; for example, they do not typically receive Teachers' Day gratitude cards, while in regular schools, ceremonies honor teachers on Teachers' Day.

Regarding teachers' perceptions of what society thinks of them, Teacher 5 offers a clear-cut reply:

When people realize that I teach at the exceptional school, they ask "Have you gone mad working with the students there? How do you work with those crazy students?" Their attitudes are different to us than to regular schoolteachers. It has been a long time since I have stated that I teach here at the exceptional school.

Teachers' perceptions of the public attitude toward teachers in exceptional schools is lower than regular schoolteachers since they believe people think the teachers work where mad students are trained. Teachers blamed policymakers for this attitude because policymakers have not discussed the hard work of teachers in exceptional schools well.

The last research question that led to the emergence of the *lower identity* theme was teachers' perceptions of the attitude of the educational system and officials to them as exceptional school teachers. The participants remarked that the only superiority they had over regular school teachers was their earlier retirement by five years. However, the interviewees did not want to retire sooner, as mentioned in theme one. The teachers were dissatisfied that the officials seldom visited their school and listened to their problems. They felt the department of special education did not pay enough attention to their urgent needs for equipment and facilities that were essential for their school. At the same time, the same requirements were available at regular schools. They concluded that their identities and positions are much lower in the eyes of educational policymakers than regular school teachers.

Theme 3: Professional Identity

The theme of *professional identity* was an anticipated theme that the researchers expected to emerge from the data. As was mentioned in theme 1, the deep relationships among the interviewees and the teachers in their early childhood was a determining factor

in becoming a teacher, the first step shaping their professional identity. Most of the teachers majored in *exceptional student education* and a few majored in *educational psychology*, mostly relating to educating children with special needs. When the participants were asked, “Do you find yourself as a successful teacher?” they largely considered themselves successful. Then the first researcher asked the participants to elaborate. They traced their success back to the experiences they gained and the majors they studied to educate children with special needs and various disabilities. They added that, although they did not see the results of their hard work and patience sometimes, they tried to do with children what should be done.

Another major contributing factor in making teachers successful in their profession was what they called “*case teaching*.” Teachers were aware that teaching at regular schools was teaching to a more homogenous group, and whenever teachers posed a question, most of the students replied immediately. However, at exceptional schools, it is improbable that a question is answered by all the students at the same time. The teachers asserted that they taught individually, and after asking each student a question, they wait for the response. As each student is intellectually different than the others, the teachers have to perform case teaching, assigning time for each student differently. They elaborated that, in contrast to regular school classes, the number of students in each class is limited to 10; however, case teaching still can be time-consuming.

The researchers put forward another question to challenge the development of participants: “What have you done to promote your professional identity?” They hesitated before saying “nothing.” The lead researcher mentioned options like “study” and “workshops” as features to advance their professional identity, then Teacher 9 commented:

I have not studied for a long time. It is better to say I have not studied after my graduation. I am tired and without enough energy to study after a busy day working with these children. I just remember the materials from my textbooks. But gathering with colleagues in the teachers’ room is helpful. Unfortunately, there are not any appropriate courses for in-service teachers. The educational policymakers do not have any course to upgrade teachers’ specialized knowledge. If there are any courses or competitions, they are both rare and useless. Education officials undervalue the teachers of exceptional schools in many cases, not only improving our proficiency but also in case of salary, facilities, etc.

One of the common ways of improving the training of teachers is by holding in-service courses. Teachers found few of these courses available, and if they were available, they would not increase their knowledge. Having consumed their energy at school, the participants did not feel they had the capability to improve their professional identity. As Teacher 9 complained, the range of salary and facilities was not enough that the teachers could only concentrate on the teaching profession.

Discussion

The results of the present study indicate that the theme “relationships” was the dominant and most common theme in the data. The participants stated that their experience as learners and their close relationships with their primary school teachers were inspirational and motivated them to become teachers in the future. The teachers’ positive relationships with their students might have a positive effect on shaping the students’ identity as learners and possibly encouraging some of them to enter the teaching profession in upcoming years. This possibility aligns with Fober-Pratt’s & Zape’s (2017) conclusion that forming a deep relationship with someone with a disability aids in the identity development process. The whole teacher education circle should educate teachers in a way that prioritizes developing close relationships among teachers and learners.

Another facet of the “relationships” theme was the close teacher-student relationships at the exceptional schools. The participating teachers uttered that they had close and positive relationships with their students with intellectual disabilities. They believed their students regarded teachers as members of their families and expressed their feelings and emotions with their teachers. It can be claimed that education for both teachers and learners at exceptional schools is not only a cognitive but an emotional endeavor. This, in turn, poses a demanding challenge for exceptional teachers: They should be open to both their students’ ongoing cognitive and emotional needs. Both cognitive factors and emotional variables constantly go hand in hand in educating exceptional students. Teacher education should also take this fact into consideration: Teachers’ psychological well-being or emotional regulation strategies might play a vital role in shaping and modifying their professional identity. Developing successful relationships among teachers and students at exceptional schools might be a motivating factor in tolerating the troublesome task of educating students with intellectual disabilities. Seen from an ideological perspective, some of the participants claimed that they felt their students’ prayers in favor of the teachers were a motivating force for them in the classrooms.

To a large extent, exceptional school teachers perceived their identity as lower than those of regular school teachers. Teachers pointed out that they felt both parents and society assumed lower prestige and recognition for exceptional school teachers compared to regular school teachers. This might be because of the end result of education at regular schools; they may judge identity status in terms of the progress made by the students rather than the rewarding work experienced by the teacher. Another justification can be the fact that the majority of Iranian people possess product-oriented world views and tend to evaluate things based on the end results. Teaching at regular schools leads to noticeable progress on the part of students; however, teaching at exceptional schools, everything being equal, can lead to little measurable progress by the learners. Exceptional school teachers may feel that society views them as experiencing much pain, less gain.

Another dimension of the lower identity is that officials do not equip exceptional schools with the required and modern facilities essential for educating students with

intellectual disabilities. It diminishes what Siuty (2019, p.1034) called “spatial identity;” the teachers were not able to benefit from the required materials in school space to interact with society and reconstruct their identity. According to the participants, the lack of modern and required facilities and technologies contributed greatly to their perceptions of the lower identity of exceptional school teachers. Furthermore, the participants believed that they received much less pay and benefits compared to their highly demanding work conditions. This, in turn, can lead to a lesser degree of job satisfaction by the teachers.

The participants mentioned that they did assume their perceptions of peoples’ evaluations of their positions as inappropriate. This might be because they felt that people and parents judged the teachers by the schools where they taught rather than by their professional development, their expertise, and their teaching methodologies. This aligns with Rostami’s and Yousefi’s (2020) findings that undue attention and social support on the part of stakeholders led the teachers to have a lower identity of themselves and to feel a low sense of agency. Teachers believed that the members of society were less familiar with the demanding and emotional task of educating exceptional students. The teachers were involved in the exhausting task of teaching students with special needs, while little academic progress and achievement could be pinpointed in the long run among the exceptional students.

The bright side of the story of the exceptional school teachers is the sense of collegial and social support they shared. The teachers, nationwide, enjoy a strong community of practice (Wagner, 1990). They have strong social ties in social media with each other and share their ideas as to how to overcome difficulties in the classrooms and enhance their mental health. They also share their experiences in resolving critical incidents and exercising agency (Rostami & Yousefi, 2020). The strong ties and social support they received from each other and involvement in activities inside and outside the teaching environment (Thorius, 2016), like creating online groups to discuss the problems and solution of the classes, helped develop their professional identity.

Conclusion

As was highlighted earlier, professional identity is not a fixed and structured notion; rather, identity is always in a state of flux and ever-changing. Iranian exceptional school teachers construct and reconstruct their professional identity daily with respect to related social, institutional, and cultural factors. The results indicate that, as Iranian exceptional school teachers’ professional identity is established, their perceived identity affects their teaching practices and their perceptions of both self and social status. They may no longer feel a sense of self-esteem and dignity. Their understanding of their professional identity may also lead them to accept that members of society do have negative or lower identity perceptions toward exceptional school teachers. Although Iranian exceptional school teachers tend to have negative identity perceptions, they have taken some compensatory measures to fill the identity gap. Through social media and strengthening the collegiality ties among themselves, they feel connected and can construct a collective professional identity.

However, whatever the cases are with Iranian exceptional school teachers and irrespective of the lower identity they feel and the lack of dignity they see in the eyes of both the community and the parents of the children involved, the bright side of the story is that they feel connected and supported through creating some sort of professional community and developing collegial ties. As social identity theory postulates, individuals define their own identity concerning social groups that protect and bolster their self-identity (Tajfel, 1978). The process of the creation of group identities, according to the theory, involves both the categorization of one's in-group vs. an out-group. The result is identification with a collective, depersonalized identity based on group membership and filled with positive aspects (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The findings of the present study, moreover, indicate that possessing a positive collective identity can downplay the lower identity perceptions by the teachers.

Whilst exceptional school teachers do not gain the same social identity as regular school teachers, the findings enhance our understanding of how the teachers feel the lack of desired identity or position in the eyes of others, what we called *lower identity*. The perception of low identity compatibility leads to low social adjustments (Veldman et al., 2019). *Relationships* was a predominant theme which highlighted that teachers can develop a sense of connectedness, engagement, and appreciation (Van Lankveld et al., 2017). This is the aspect of teacher identity created between individuals who are controlled by others and social context, as well as their social relationships at work (Kayi-Aydar, 2015).

The teachers studied believed that society and parents perceived students with special needs as lacking interest to learn. If the learners raised a question and pursued the process of learning, the teachers had to search for scientific resources to find answers. All teachers felt the need for professional development through in-service courses. Training courses can give teachers optimism and self-confidence to cope more easily with students' difficulty in learning. The teachers established a self-organized way, Telegram social media, to develop and share knowledge by exchanging experiences. Teacher education should improve the recruitment and training of teachers teaching at exceptional schools.

Implications, Limitations, and Suggestions for Further Study

A clear implication of this study is the need to train teachers to develop their professional identity opportunities and make a better sense of their social identity as a result. The data suggest that, in the Iranian context, more collaboration is needed between the teachers and education departments in a way to provide them with not only the developmental practices to prompt their professional identity but also to meet the needs of teachers and the schools where they teach. There is an urgent need to raise both the professional and social identity of in-service teachers. Furthermore, shifts in culture and parents' perspectives are needed to give the teachers' confidence in their teaching. Moreover, the government is actually required to pay more attention to the families who have children with various disabilities. The families are required to receive regular workshops on how to deal with disability phenomena and increase their cultural

awareness. Families with disabled children are also given financial and academical support in order for the disability to be considered not only as a family concern.

While this study improved our perceptions toward the nondisabled teachers of the exceptional schools teaching students with intellectual disabilities, some limitations need to be regarded. First, this study was conducted on a quite small scale in a city in western Iran. Generalizability to a bigger context should be done with caution. Thus, more qualitative research is needed to be done either on the same or larger scale to compare and contrast to the findings and content of the current research. Second, this study was based on the perceptions of the teachers toward their multifaceted identity in the realm of their views. It is suggested that future researchers investigate stakeholders' perceptions toward the teachers of the exceptional schools. Third, we mainly focused on the teachers teaching intellectually disabled students. As a result, it was impossible to get the views of these students toward their teachers. It is recommended to explore the views of teachers who teach students who do not have intellectual disabilities, such as deaf, blind, physically disabled, etc. Future studies should look at possible cultural and ethical factors mediating the parents' and teachers' views on exceptional school teachers' professional identity construction.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

- 1- How did you decide to be a teacher?
- 2- How is teaching to students with special needs different than teaching to students without disabilities?
- 3- What are the most significant problems to teach?
- 4- Do you want to change the school and teach at a regular school?
- 5- How do you think stakeholders (educational department, parents, society) perceive your profession and identity?
- 6- How do you evaluate your identity in comparison with regular school teachers?
- 7- To what extent do you try to develop your professional identity?