

Hermeneutic Encounters: English Teachers' Professional Growth and Identity Formation in Light of Gadamer's Fusion of Horizons

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Abstract

This study employs Gadamer's fusion of horizons framework to explore the transformative role of professional development (PD) workshops in shaping the professional identity and practices of young learners' English language teachers. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with seven teachers. The findings reveal four key themes: Personal Transformation, Changes in Teaching Practices, Evolving Professional Identity, and the Impact of Professional Development. These results highlight the critical importance of reflective practices in PD programs by enabling teachers to critically examine their beliefs, values, and instructional methods. By fostering greater self-awareness and role clarity, such programs not only enhance pedagogical skills but also contribute to the development of a strong professional identity. The implications highlight the need for tailored PD initiatives that support teachers in navigating the complexities of teaching young learners while encouraging their continuous growth and professional evolution.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 07 August 2024

Revised: 20 March 2025

Accepted: 22 April 2025

KEYWORDS

Gadamer's fusion of horizons, professional identity formation, professional development workshops, qualitative phenomenology

How to cite this article (APA 7th Edition):

Javahery, P., & Shafiee M. (2025). Hermeneutic encounters: English teachers' professional growth and identity formation in light of Gadamer's fusion of horizons. *Language Teacher Education Research*, 2, 11-34. <https://doi.org/10.32038/lter.2025.02.02>

Introduction

In today's dynamic educational landscape, the role of teachers, particularly those working with young learners, has evolved from merely imparting knowledge to guiding students through complex cognitive and emotional growth (Afzal et al., 2023). Central to this transformation is the professional development (PD) of teachers, which fosters not only pedagogical skills but also the development of professional

identities (Kamali & Javahery, 2024). As novice teachers begin their careers, they often encounter a range of challenges that can affect their sense of self and teaching practices (Javahery, 2024). In this context, PD programs have become crucial for equipping teachers with the necessary tools to navigate the complexities of teaching, particularly for those working with young learners who require a distinctive approach to language instruction.

One framework that can offer valuable insights into the process of professional growth is Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of fusion of horizons. Rooted in hermeneutics, Gadamer's theory emphasizes the intersection of different perspectives, specifically, the teacher's own worldview, the perspectives of their students, and the broader educational discourse. In the context of teacher development, fusion of horizons provides a lens through which the evolving professional identity of teachers can be explored as they reflect on their teaching practices and engage in the broader educational discourse.

This article investigates the impact of PD workshops on young learners' English teachers, using Gadamer's fusion of horizons to understand how these experiences shape their professional growth and identity. Through semi-structured interviews with seven teachers, this study uncovers their transformation and highlights how PD programs can serve as a catalyst for both personal and professional change. By examining the teachers' experiences through a hermeneutic lens, the study offers insights into the ways in which reflective practices in PD workshops contribute to the ongoing journey of self-discovery and pedagogical development.

Literature Review

Gadamer's Fusion of Horizons

Fusion of horizons, a concept introduced by Hans-Georg Gadamer, is a foundational element of his hermeneutic philosophy, which explores how understanding is shaped through the interplay of different perspectives. In Gadamer's view, individuals do not approach understanding in a neutral or detached manner. Rather, their prior experiences, cultural background, and historical context – what Gadamer refers to as their horizon – inevitably influence the way they interpret and understand the world. Fusion of horizons occurs when these distinct horizons, that of the interpreter and that of the subject or context, engage in a dynamic process of mutual influence and integration (Gadamer, 1977).

This process is not a simple merging of viewpoints; it is a transformative interaction where the boundaries of each horizon are expanded and modified. In Gadamer's framework, understanding is always historically situated, meaning that it is shaped

by the individual's own historical and cultural context (historicity), and it evolves through dialogue and reflection (Pertierra, 2022). Gadamer emphasizes that true understanding emerges not through a static agreement but through an ongoing dialogue where the interpreter and the subject co-create meaning.

Rather than dismissing pre-existing perspectives, Gadamer emphasizes the continuity of the past and the present. He suggests that understanding is always mediated by tradition and prior knowledge. In the context of professional identity formation, fusion of horizons offers a lens to explore how teachers' prior experiences, beliefs, and values intersect with new professional contexts and interactions, particularly during reflective practices or professional development (van Manen, 2016). Through this dynamic interplay, teachers evolve their self-perception and professional identity by reinterpreting their roles in response to challenges and opportunities. This framework is especially relevant in educational settings, where meaning-making is deeply rooted in personal and collective narratives (Mezirow, 1991).

In the context of teacher identity development, Gadamer's concept of fusion of horizons offers a unique perspective. Teachers bring their personal and professional horizons to their practice, shaped by their prior experiences, beliefs, and values. According to Gadamer (1977), fusion of horizons is a dialogical process wherein differing perspectives merge into an integrated understanding. Vessey (2009) points out that in PD, such processes help teachers reconcile their pre-existing beliefs with new pedagogical approaches, fostering innovation and adaptability.

Professional Development and Teacher Identity Formation

Professional development (PD) is widely acknowledged as a key mechanism in enhancing teaching practices and shaping teacher identity. Desimone (2009) argues that effective PD equips teachers with not only technical skills but also reflective practices that enable them to better understand their professional identities. For teachers of young learners, PD is critical in developing strategies that address the unique developmental needs of their students.

Sutherland et al. (2009) highlight that for novice teachers, PD plays a vital role in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and classroom practice, an essential process for constructing a coherent professional identity. Nguyen and Loughland (2018) emphasize the collaborative nature of PD, where peer interactions promote shared learning and mutual support, aligning with Gadamer's concept of fusion of horizons, where individual perspectives merge into a collective understanding. Collaborative PD activities thus foster professional narratives and a strengthened sense of purpose, particularly crucial for those teaching young learners, who must

respond to the complexities of working with students whose linguistic, cognitive, and social development is still emerging. The continuous negotiation of meaning between teachers and young learners necessitates an openness to multiple perspectives which reinforces the role of collaborative PD in shaping adaptive teaching approaches and a stronger professional identity (De Oliveira & Jones, 2023)

Another critical aspect of PD is mentorship. Friesen and Besley (2013) argue that mentorship provides vital guidance, support, and constructive feedback, helping novice teachers cope with the complexities of their professional roles. Mentoring facilitates reflective dialogue, which resonates with Gadamer's hermeneutical principles of interpreting experiences through interaction and discussion. Effective mentoring programs are pivotal in boosting teachers' confidence and competence (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011)

In addition to technical and reflective development, emotional involvement is a crucial yet often-overlooked aspect of PD. Cheng (2021) highlights that emotionally reflective PD fosters resilience and adaptability by integrating personal emotions with professional insights. This perspective aligns with Gadamer's fusion of horizons, as teachers' identities evolve through the interaction of personal and professional dimensions. Similarly, Noonan (2019) underscores the significance of affinity spaces in PD, arguing that environments rich in dialogue and emotional support contribute to a more cohesive teacher identity. Structured PD initiatives that encourage teachers to engage with past experiences can also play a role in reshaping their professional identities, as suggested by Ahmad et al. (2018).

Teacher Identity: A Dynamic and Complex Process

Teacher identity is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by personal experiences, professional relationships, and sociocultural influences. Golzar (2020) defines teacher identity development as a recursive process influenced by classroom practice, reflection, and professional relationships, allowing teachers to adapt to evolving roles while maintaining authenticity and purpose. Experiential learning plays a crucial role in this process. Friesen and Besley (2013) stress the importance of experiential learning in teacher preparation programs, which help teachers align personal values with their professional roles. Reflective practices, such as self-assessment, further consolidate this alignment by aiding teachers in articulating professional goals. Mizell (2010) asserts that for reflective practices to be impactful, they must be embedded within structured PD frameworks. These activities provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their teaching styles and beliefs, making the abstract concepts of pedagogy tangible and personal.

Mentorship and peer collaboration also play pivotal roles in identity formation (Kamali, 2024). Nguyen and Loughland (2018) argue that collaborative PD provides teachers with opportunities to vocalize their professional goals and insights, which in turn strengthens the sense of community and shared purpose. Sharing experiences with colleagues allows teachers to see their challenges and triumphs from different perspectives which broadens their understanding of what it means to be a teacher. Additionally, reflective approaches, such as journaling and self-assessment, allow teachers to critically engage with their experiences and reshape their self-concept. For teachers of young learners, identity formation requires attention to the cognitive and emotional needs of their students. Rita and Msibi (2020) highlight that targeted PD in early childhood development equips teachers to create supportive, productive learning environments. These initiatives help build a sense of purpose and commitment, integral components of a strong professional identity.

The Influence of PD on the Identity Formation of Young Learner Teachers

Teachers of young learners face distinct challenges due to the cognitive, emotional, and developmental complexities of their students. At this stage, learners are in the process of developing foundational skills such as attention regulation, abstract thinking, and emotional self-regulation, which differ significantly from those of older learners. As such, teaching strategies for young learners must be tailored to accommodate these developmental characteristics, emphasizing interactive, engaging, and multimodal approaches to facilitate learning (Edossa et al., 2017; Hautakangas et al., 2021). PD programs tailored to young learners education have been shown to significantly impact the professional identity of these teachers. Huang (2021) argues that continuous PD supports long-term professional growth, helping teachers address the specific challenges associated with early childhood development. Rita and Msibi (2020) emphasize that effective PD goes beyond technical training to address the interpersonal and ethical dimensions of teaching. This holistic approach aligns with Gadamer's fusion of horizons, enabling teachers to integrate personal and professional narratives to build cohesive identities. Suarcaya et al. (2023) advocate for reflective and dialogical PD activities that help teachers navigate institutional and social challenges while maintaining their authenticity.

Garner and Kaplan (2019) and Huang (2021) both highlight that identity construction is a continuous process of reflexivity and adjustment, particularly for teachers of young learners. PD, grounded in the fusion of horizons, has the potential to strengthen teacher identities, leading to improved educational outcomes. Myers (2006) argues that philosophical dialogues in professional settings promote cognitive processing, supporting the refinement of teacher identity.

While much research has explored PD's role in enhancing teaching practices and shaping teacher identity, there has been limited focus on how the fusion of horizons—merging past experiences with new knowledge—contributes specifically to the identity formation of teachers working with young learners. These teachers face unique challenges that are often overlooked in current research, particularly regarding the emotional and dialogical aspects that support adaptability and cohesion in professional identity.

This study expands on the existing literature by applying Gadamer's concept of *fusion of horizons* to explore how teachers reconcile their pre-existing beliefs with new pedagogical knowledge gained through professional development (PD). By focusing on the reflective and dialogical elements of PD, the study examines how these processes shape teachers' perceptions of themselves as educators and their evolving professional identity, particularly in the context of teaching young learners. This approach highlights how PD helps teachers adapt to the cognitive, emotional, and developmental needs of their students while fostering a resilient and adaptable professional identity.

While much research has explored PD's role in enhancing teaching practices and shaping teacher identity, previous studies have primarily focused on skill acquisition and instructional strategies (e.g., Desimone, 2009; Mizell, 2010; Sutherland et al., 2009). Some studies have examined teacher identity formation in relation to institutional policies and broad educational frameworks (e.g., Friesen & Besley, 2013; Golzar, 2020). Others have analyzed the impact of reflective PD practices on teacher identity (e.g., Cheng, 2021; Tavakol & Tavakoli, 2022; Noonan, 2019), but they have largely overlooked how these practices specifically influence teachers of young learners, who face distinct pedagogical and emotional challenges. To the knowledge of the researcher, there are no studies that explicitly investigate how Gadamer's fusion of horizons informs the identity development of teachers working with young learners through reflective and dialogical PD.

This study fills this gap by applying Gadamer's concept of fusion of horizons to examine how teachers reconcile their pre-existing beliefs with new pedagogical knowledge gained through professional development. By focusing on the reflective and dialogical elements of PD, the study explores how these processes contribute to teachers' evolving professional identities and their ability to integrate new instructional approaches. This perspective provides a deeper understanding of how teachers navigate cognitive, emotional, and professional shifts, ultimately informing the design of more effective PD programs that foster adaptability, resilience, and improved teaching practices for young learners.

This study aims to address the following research question:

How do professional development (PD) workshops facilitate the fusion of horizons in young learners' English teachers' understanding of their roles and teaching practices?

Method

Context and Participants

This study was conducted at a well-known language institute in Iran. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological research design, the research sought to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of English language teachers. Phenomenology, as emphasized by Creswell and Poth (2018), provides a framework for examining lived experiences and gaining deeper insights into participants' perspectives, making it a valuable approach in educational research.

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who met specific inclusion criteria to ensure that only those who had attended all eight workshops without absence and had been employed at the institute for more than one year were included. This approach excluded individuals who had missed workshops or had recently joined the teaching profession, thereby selecting participants with sustained engagement and experience in the academy's professional development programs. All participants had attended eight workshops on professional development skills one year prior to the study and had been employed at the institute for at least one year. The participants were specifically chosen for their familiarity with the academy's developmental programs, ensuring valuable contributions to the study's findings.

The workshops were designed and delivered by the supervisors of the academy and were conducted in-person at the institute. Following each workshop, supervisors observed multiple classes throughout the term to ensure the correct implementation of workshop content in teaching practices.

The workshops covered various aspects of teaching, including lesson planning, classroom management, assessment strategies, and student engagement. Below is a summary of the content and objectives of each workshop:

1. *Setting Context for Teaching Different Skills*: This workshop introduced key features of an effective teaching context, emphasizing authenticity, clarity, engagement, and appropriateness to ensure students receive optimal exposure to lesson content.
2. *Teaching Writing*: Focused on equipping teachers with strategies for teaching writing modules, including structured stages of writing instruction, providing effective feedback on language and tasks, and incorporating brainstorming techniques.

3. *Resource Management*: Aimed at optimizing classroom resources, this workshop guided teachers on the appropriate use of workbooks, practice books, and video materials (such as those from the Super Minds series) to reduce homework load while maintaining an interactive classroom environment.
4. *Assessment and Grading*: Designed to promote fair and consistent grading, this session outlined a structured grading system based on class assignments, participation, and progress. Teachers were trained to assess introverted students effectively, ensuring that quieter learners received appropriate attention and evaluation.
5. *Classroom Management*: Covered essential techniques for maintaining an effective classroom environment, including rapport-building, board management, seating arrangements, dress code, voice modulation, attention-getting strategies, and overall student behavior management.
6. *Oral Exams*: Provided strategies for conducting structured oral exams, detailing a three-part format consisting of interviews, role-playing, and presentations. Teachers were given customized materials and assessment criteria for different proficiency levels.
7. *Using Games in Teaching*: Introduced a variety of engaging games tailored for different lesson modules, aiming to enhance student participation and motivation in the learning process.
8. *Student Engagement Inside and Outside the Classroom*: Explored strategies for motivating students beyond the classroom environment. Teachers were introduced to educational websites and online resources that could be used to design interactive homework activities that encourage language learning at home.

The sample consisted of seven female English language teachers, aged between 21 and 38 years. Since all teachers at the institute were female, all interviewees in this study were also female. Among them, six were university graduates, and one was an undergraduate. Their academic backgrounds included English Translation (2 participants), TEFL (3 participants), English Literature (1 participant), and Arabic Literature (1 participant). This diversity in academic specializations provided varied perspectives, enriching the study. Detailed participant information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Participants' Demographic Information*

Teacher	Gender	Age	Experience	Education
Julie	Female	38	1 year and a half	BA in English Translation
Laura	Female	23	2 years	BA student in TEFL
Claire	Female	25	4 years	BA in TEFL
Sophia	Female	21	3 years	BA student in English Literature
Maya	Female	24	5 years	BA in TEFL
Emma	Female	39	8 years	BA in Arabic Literature
Rachel	Female	23	4 years	BA in English Translation

Data Collection

The data collection process was designed to explore participants' experiences of professional identity formation through the lens of Gadamer's fusion of horizons. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method, providing flexibility for in-depth exploration while maintaining a focus on the study's theoretical foundation. A full set of the interview questions is included in the Appendix for reference.

To recruit participants, the researcher collaborated with the manager of the Institute. Permission was secured to reference the institute in the study and to interview its teaching staff. Before the interviews, participants were thoroughly briefed on the study's objectives and assured of strict confidentiality regarding their data. They were informed that participation was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any stage without consequences. A consent form was provided, detailing the purpose, process, and participants' rights, ensuring transparency and ethical compliance.

The semi-structured interviews consisted of 17 open-ended questions and were conducted online to provide convenience and accessibility. Each session lasted between 40 minutes and one hour. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim by the researcher, ensuring accuracy for subsequent analysis.

The interviews were conducted over a two-week period, with schedules tailored to suit participants' availability and comfort. The questions were designed to elicit rich, narrative-based responses by focusing on key elements such as the process of professional identity formation, critical moments or "incidents" during the workshops, and the influence of peer interactions on their development.

Data Analysis

We collected and analyzed the data following the guidelines for qualitative thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). After transcription, the interviews were subjected to a manual deductive thematic analysis, with codes generated through the

lens of Gadamer's fusion of horizons. This theoretical framework guided the coding process, focusing on how participants' past experiences and new understandings interacted to shape their professional identity.

In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) stages of thematic analysis, we followed a systematic process to ensure that the data were meticulously reviewed and analyzed. First, we read through each transcript multiple times to familiarize ourselves with the content of the participants' experiences. We then made detailed notes in the margins to capture initial impressions and key phrases. We carefully highlighted significant sections of text relating to core themes, such as 'self-perception, self-doubt, and uncertainty,' ensuring that each part was thoroughly considered in relation to the broader context. We used color coding (for example, yellow for 'Personal Transformation') and a coding matrix to organize and track recurring ideas. Once initial codes were generated, we collated them into categories and further refined them by grouping related codes together under potential themes. To ensure consistency, we engaged in multiple rounds of cross-checking and revising the codes, consulting with a peer reviewer to verify the accuracy of the coding process.

Additionally, we maintained a separate Microsoft Word file for each theme, which allowed for a clear, structured approach to storing the data and providing an overview of the key ideas within each theme. As the analysis progressed, the themes became more refined, and by the final rounds of coding, the data began to exhibit clear patterns. When conducting the interviews, we allowed participants to elaborate on their responses to ensure we captured the full depth of their lived experiences. As the interviews continued, the emerging themes became increasingly repetitive, and new insights became rare, signaling that data saturation had been achieved.

A collaborative meeting between the researchers was held to further refine, name, and define the emerging themes, ensuring alignment with Gadamer's concept of fusion of horizons. During this process, themes were shaped to reflect how participants' historical perspectives merged with new understandings gained through professional development. To address potential subjectivity, both researchers collaboratively conducted the data analysis, which allowed for cross-checking of interpretations. Additionally, we engaged in member checking, revisiting the interview transcripts with participants to ensure accuracy and allow them to clarify or elaborate on any points. We also carried out peer debriefing with a colleague who was not involved in the study.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), two strategies were implemented. First, inter-rater reliability was ensured through a collaborative

coding process. After independently coding a sample of the data, the researchers compared their codes, discussed discrepancies, and refined the coding framework until a consensus was reached. This process minimized selective perception or interpretive bias (Cole, 2023) and ensured a balanced interpretation of the data. Additionally, interviewee transcript review (ITR) was conducted to verify the accuracy of the analysis. After coding and interpreting the data, the researchers shared the key findings with participants by inviting them to review and confirm whether their perspectives were accurately represented. Participants provided feedback, which was incorporated into the final analysis to enhance authenticity and credibility (Rowlands, 2021).

Findings

The findings illustrate a profound transformation in teachers' professional identities, shaped by the interaction between their pre-existing beliefs and the insights gained during year-long professional development workshops. Grounded in Gadamer's fusion of horizons, this process involved teachers critically questioning their prior assumptions about teaching, integrating learner-centered methodologies, and re-evaluating their roles in the classroom. For instance, several participants initially viewed their role as knowledge transmitters, relying heavily on grammar-based instruction. However, through reflective discussions and exposure to alternative pedagogical approaches, they gradually adopted more facilitative roles and prioritizing student engagement, autonomy, and emotional well-being.

Personal Transformation

Gadamer's concept of fusion of horizons describes the way two separate viewpoints come together through dialogue, creating a shared understanding. In this case, the teachers' original perspectives (their "horizon") on teaching were shaped by their prior experiences, personal beliefs, and the specific pedagogical models they had been exposed to. After participating in the professional development workshops, their horizons were expanded by creating a new shared understanding between their prior teaching practices and the new ideas they encountered. The workshops acted as a vehicle for this fusion allowed teachers to reflect critically on their prior assumptions and practices, which was instrumental in their personal transformation.

For instance, in the *Classroom Management* workshop, teachers who initially believed that strict discipline and teacher-centered instruction were necessary for maintaining order began to reconsider their approach. Three of the participants had believed that group activities were not effective because they made the class atmosphere noisy. They were convinced that maintaining a quiet classroom was essential for learning. However, after attending both the Classroom Management and Using Games in

Teaching workshops, they mentioned that they had changed their minds about this belief. They came to see that structured group activities and interactive games could enhance student engagement without compromising classroom control. This shift in perception illustrates the fusion of horizons in action by critically reflecting on their prior assumptions and integrating new strategies, teachers redefined their approach to classroom dynamics and student interaction:

"I used to think that a quiet classroom was a productive classroom. Group activities always seemed chaotic to me, and I avoided them as much as possible. But after the workshops, I realized that noise doesn't always mean disorder, it can mean engagement. Now, I see how games and group work actually help students stay involved and learn more effectively." (Claire).

Through the workshops, teachers experienced a shift in their self-perception, notably in terms of their confidence and professionalism. This process of fusion is evident in their reflections on how they saw themselves before and after the workshops.

before the workshops, I felt insecure about my teaching, especially when handling young learners. Now, I feel like I have a clearer idea of what I am doing. (Emma)

Here, we see the teacher's original horizon—self-doubt and uncertainty—being met with new concepts and frameworks that provided a sense of clarity. Their self-perception has fused with new practices that enable them to feel more competent and professional. Moreover, the fusion is evident in their comment: *"Now, I feel like I have a clearer idea of what I am doing."* The teacher's previous horizon, marked by insecurity and a lack of understanding, has been transformed through the acquisition of new knowledge. The fusion of these two horizons—a previously narrow perspective and the broader, more informed one gained through the workshops—has brought clarity and a sense of confidence.

The workshops opened my eyes to how much more I could do as a teacher. I didn't know that I could engage my students this much. It's like my identity as a teacher has evolved. (Julie)

This transformation reflects the fusion of their earlier, perhaps narrower, understanding of teaching with a broader view informed by the workshops. The teacher now perceives herself not just as someone delivering content, but as a facilitator of student engagement and learning.

The process of fusion in this context involves teachers revisiting and reconsidering their existing beliefs about teaching, blending them with new understandings from the workshops. This fusion enables a transformation in their identity, not simply from a technical perspective but also emotionally and professionally.

Ultimately, the process of fusion in the context of professional development workshops is not just about acquiring new techniques; it's about synthesizing those techniques with existing beliefs and personal experiences which leads to a more holistic transformation. Teachers not only enhance their technical proficiency but also undergo an emotional and professional evolution. They move beyond their insecurities and limitations by merging the new with the old, and emerging with a richer, more comprehensive understanding of themselves as educators. This transformation was not immediate. The participants encountered difficulties in adapting to the strategies, methods, and approaches they learned in the workshops. Teachers occasionally reverted to their traditional approaches out of habit or uncertainty. However, through trial and reflection, which were supported by peer discussions and guided feedback, they gradually found ways to integrate new insights with their established practices. As a result, they emerged as more confident, reflective, and adaptable educators, capable of balancing structure with flexibility in dynamic classroom settings.

Changes in Teaching Practices

When teachers encounter new strategies, techniques, and methodologies in a professional development setting, they are forced to critically reflect on their existing practices. The concept of fusion of horizons applies here in that the teachers' current practice (their "horizon") is confronted with new ideas which results in a synthesis that transforms their teaching approaches.

The teachers' new teaching practices reflect both a fusion of horizons and a process of reflective practice. They discussed how the workshops challenged their previous methods and led to experimentation with new techniques:

Before the workshops, I only used traditional lecture methods, but now I use more interactive techniques, like role plays and group discussions. It's been a game changer for engagement. (Laura)

This teacher's previous horizon, which likely involved more didactic methods, has merged with new, learner-centered methods from the workshops. The fusion here is a shift from passive learning to more active student participation. Furthermore, the teacher's use of *traditional lecture methods* prior to the workshops suggests that they

likely felt their teaching was effective in conveying knowledge, but it may have been limited in engaging students actively or in creating meaningful connections with the material. The passive nature of lecture-based teaching might also have led to student disengagement or a lack of motivation. The *horizon* at this stage is one of controlled delivery of information, where the teacher's confidence stems from their mastery over content and structure, but it may lack the depth of engagement that fosters long-term learning and critical thinking.

I never really thought about using games as a structured part of my lessons. Now, I realize how effective they are in getting students to focus and have fun while learning.

(Sophia)

Here, we see the merging of the teacher's earlier, more conventional approach with a new, innovative perspective on engaging students. This change in practice is part of their professional growth, as they adopt new techniques that they hadn't considered before.

In conclusion, the process of teachers encountering new strategies, techniques, and methodologies through professional development can be understood as a profound journey of transformation, where their established teaching practices are critically challenged and reshaped. This transformation is a clear example of the fusion of horizons, where teachers' previous frameworks of knowledge and practice merge with new, innovative approaches and leads to a synthesis that redefines their teaching methods and professional identity. The teachers' shifts in their use of more interactive, learner-centered methods, such as role plays, group discussions, and games, demonstrate how this fusion occurs not only on a technical level but also emotionally, as they recognize the potential of engaging students in more dynamic, participatory ways. Moreover, the teachers' shifts in practice can be understood through the lens of *Vygotsky's (2012)* concept of *scaffolding*. As teachers engage in the professional development process, they gain tools (scaffolds) that allow them to stretch their practice beyond what they previously thought possible. The integration of these tools—through reflection and the fusion of old and new practices—supports the teachers' evolving approaches to classroom management and student engagement.

Evolving Professional Identity

The development of professional identity is an ongoing, socially constructed process. According to Vygotsky's *social constructivism*, learning and identity formation are socially mediated, meaning that teachers' self-concepts as professionals are shaped through interactions with colleagues, students, and the wider professional community. The workshops act as a site for this social interaction, where teachers'

previous identities (formed through earlier experiences) are confronted with new pedagogical perspectives, creating the fusion of horizons that informs their evolving professional identity.

Teachers reflected deeply on how the workshops reshaped their identity as educators. The professional development experience challenged their pre-existing notions of teaching and allowed them to see themselves in a new light, as more adaptable, reflective, and student-centered instructors.

I used to think of myself as just a 'teacher of English,' but now I see myself as a facilitator of learning. The workshops helped me realize that my role is to guide and support my students. (Emma)

This teacher's shift reflects a fusion of their previous, possibly narrow, role identity (as a content deliverer) with a broader, more constructivist view of themselves as a facilitator of learning. This quote also embodies a profound shift in professional identity. Initially, their self-concept was rooted in a traditional, teacher-centered model of education, where their primary role was to transmit knowledge to students – often understood as the "sage on the stage." This narrow, content-delivery-driven identity reflects a horizon that emphasizes the teacher's control over the classroom, the transmission of pre-defined content, and a limited interaction with students beyond the instructional framework.

The workshops made me think about how my students experience learning. I feel more empathetic toward them now, and that has changed the way I teach. (Claire)

Here, the teacher's evolving identity is connected to a shift in perspective. Through the fusion of new ideas about student-centered learning, the teacher becomes more aware of their students' emotional and cognitive needs. Furthermore, this quote signifies a profound transformation in both their professional identity and pedagogical approach. This shift points to a deeper understanding of the role of empathy in teaching, where the teacher moves beyond simply delivering content and begins to consider the emotional and cognitive experiences of their students. The fusion of horizons here involves the teacher integrating new, student-centered approaches into their existing belief system about teaching, resulting in a more nuanced and compassionate perspective on the learning process.

The workshops provided a critical space for the fusion of horizons, where teachers' pre-existing notions about teaching and their roles were confronted with new, student-centered approaches. This synthesis of old and new perspectives enabled

teachers to shift from being traditional content deliverers to facilitators of learning. The teachers' growing empathy toward students, as seen in their reflections, further underscores the profound impact of these workshops on their evolving identity. It is clear that their journey of professional growth is not merely about acquiring new teaching strategies but about reimagining their role as educators—one that encompasses both cognitive and emotional engagement with their students. This shift is not only an intellectual transformation but also an emotional and relational one, highlighting the continuous nature of identity formation in teaching. As teachers continue to reflect on and integrate these new perspectives, they move closer to an identity that is adaptable, compassionate, and more attuned to the holistic needs of their students. Ultimately, the workshops facilitated a deeper understanding of the teaching profession, one that positions educators as reflective practitioners dedicated to fostering both academic success and emotional growth in their students.

The Impact of Professional Development

Mezirow's theory of *transformative learning* emphasizes how individuals undergo a profound change in their worldview through critical reflection on their assumptions. In the context of professional development, the teachers experienced transformative learning as their perspectives on teaching, learning, and their professional identity were fundamentally altered by the workshops. This process mirrors the fusion of horizons, where the teachers' existing frameworks were confronted with new insights, leading to transformation in their practices and beliefs.

Teachers reported that the workshops led to significant changes in how they viewed themselves and their profession. Some acknowledged that the experience was challenging, but ultimately beneficial.

At first, I struggled with some of the new concepts in the workshops, but looking back now, I realize how much they've helped me grow as a teacher. (Laura)

This reflection suggests a transformative experience. The teacher initially faced discomfort (the challenge of integrating new ideas) but ultimately experienced growth and transformation, which is characteristic of *transformative learning*.

The workshops gave me the tools to think critically about my teaching. It's not just about what I teach, but how I teach and why I teach it that matters. (Sophia)

This quote highlights how the teacher has adopted a more critical approach to their own teaching, which is a key element of *transformative learning*. They have now

merged their previous view of teaching with a more reflective, purpose-driven approach.

The impact of professional development emerges as a profound illustration of the fusion of horizons, where teachers' established beliefs and practices encounter and integrate new ideas, creating a transformative synthesis. This process is neither immediate nor effortless; it demands teachers grapple with the unfamiliar, confront their assumptions, and ultimately reconstruct their professional identities. As seen in the reflections, this journey from discomfort to growth mirrors Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, where critical reflection reshapes understanding and drives meaningful change.

Teachers' initial struggles highlight the friction inherent in merging old and new perspectives. The quote, "*At first, I struggled with some of the new concepts in the workshops, but looking back now, I realize how much they've helped me grow as a teacher,*" exemplifies this challenge. The discomfort represents the destabilization of their established frameworks—a necessary disruption for deeper transformation. Through reflection and practice, this tension resolves into a more nuanced and empowered teaching approach, enriched by the fusion of horizons.

Moreover, the workshops enabled teachers to move beyond technical execution to embrace a more reflective and intentional pedagogy. As one teacher articulated, "*It's not just about what I teach, but how I teach and why I teach it that matters.*" This shift underscores the depth of their transformation: a movement from viewing teaching as a static transmission of knowledge to seeing it as a dynamic, reflective practice deeply intertwined with purpose and student-centered values. The fusion of horizons here represents not only the integration of new methodologies but also a reawakening of their role as educators committed to both intellectual and ethical growth.

Ultimately, the transformative power of professional development lies in its capacity to challenge and expand teachers' horizons, fostering a reimagined professional identity rooted in critical reflection and purposeful action. This fusion enables teachers to align their practices with their evolving values, ensuring that their growth is both profound and sustainable. Through this synthesis, the workshops leave an indelible impact, equipping teachers to navigate the complexities of their profession with renewed clarity and commitment.

Table 2*Findings and Relation to Gadamer's Fusion of Horizons*

Themes	Pre-Workshop Horizon	New Insights	Fusion of Horizons (Transformation)	Teacher Reflections
1. Personal Transformation	Insecurity and uncertainty about teaching role.	Exposure to new methods and deeper pedagogical knowledge.	Teachers merged old doubts with new strategies, boosting confidence and reshaping their teaching identity.	"I feel more confident now with a clearer sense of purpose in my teaching."
2. Changes in Teaching Practices	Traditional, lecture-based methods.	Introduction to student-centered, interactive techniques.	Teachers integrated new, active learning methods with their old practices, creating a more engaging approach.	"Now, I use role plays and discussions to engage students more effectively."
3. Evolving Professional Identity	Self-identity as content deliverer.	Realization of role as facilitator and emotional support for students.	The fusion of old beliefs with new insights expanded their professional identity to be more holistic and empathetic.	"I see myself not just as an English teacher, but as a facilitator of learning."
4. Impact of Professional Development	Fixed perceptions of teaching.	Introduction to critical reflection and self-assessment.	Teachers' engagement with reflection merged past practices with new insights, leading to growth and transformation.	"The workshops made me think critically about my teaching and how to improve."

Discussion

This study explores the development of professional identity among teachers, specifically focusing on teachers of young learners and their involvement in professional development (PD) activities. The findings from this study align with and expand upon existing literature on teacher identity formation, particularly in the context of PD, mentorship, and emotional engagement. In this section, we will interpret the results, evaluate their significance, and discuss how they relate to the broader theme of teacher identity development.

One of the key findings of this study is the central role of professional development (PD) in shaping the professional identity of teachers. As discussed in the literature, PD is not merely about acquiring technical skills; it also involves reflective practices that help teachers align their personal beliefs with their professional roles (Friesen & Besley, 2013; Mizell, 2010). The results from this study show that teachers who engage in PD activities are able to articulate a clearer sense of their professional identity and teaching purpose. This finding is consistent with the work of Sutherland et al. (2009) who emphasize the importance of PD in helping teachers bridge the gap between

theoretical knowledge and classroom practice, leading to a more coherent professional identity.

Reflective practices, in particular, were found to play a crucial role in helping teachers navigate their evolving identities. The participants in this study reported that engaging in regular reflection allowed them to better understand their own beliefs and teaching practices, which in turn facilitated the development of a stronger professional identity. This is consistent with Mizell's (2010) assertion that reflective practices embedded within PD frameworks help teachers gain clarity and confidence in their roles. Moreover, the findings suggest that the process of reflection helped participants make sense of their teaching experiences, thus reinforcing the idea that identity formation is a recursive and ongoing process (Golzar, 2020).

Another significant finding from this study is the impact of mentorship and peer collaboration on teachers' professional identity formation. This finding resonates with the work of Nguyen and Loughland (2018), who highlight the collaborative nature of PD in helping teachers articulate their professional goals and build a sense of community. The study found that teachers who participated in mentorship programs and collaborative PD activities experienced a more profound sense of belonging and professional purpose. This aligns with Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons, where teachers merge their personal and professional experiences through dialogue with mentors and peers, leading to a more integrated and coherent professional identity.

The literature also emphasizes that mentorship is essential in helping teachers navigate the challenges of early teaching (Friesen & Besley, 2013). The participants in this study echoed this sentiment by describing mentorship as a critical source of support and guidance during their first years of teaching. Mentors not only provided technical advice but also facilitated reflective dialogues that allowed teachers to critically examine their teaching practices and identity. This finding underscores the importance of mentorship in the early stages of a teacher's career, as it provides both emotional and professional support that fosters growth and resilience.

Another finding of this study is the significant role that emotional engagement plays in teacher identity formation. While much of the literature on PD focuses on the cognitive and technical aspects of teaching, the emotional dimension of PD is often overlooked. This study, however, found that teachers who engaged in emotionally reflective PD activities experienced greater resilience and adaptability in their teaching practice. This is consistent with Cheng's (2021) assertion that emotional

reflection within PD fosters resilience by helping teachers process personal emotions and integrate them into their professional understanding.

The findings suggest that for teachers of young learners, emotional engagement is even more crucial. These teachers are often required to balance the cognitive, emotional, and developmental needs of their students, which can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout if not managed effectively. Therefore, PD that includes emotional reflection provides teachers with the tools to process these emotional challenges and retain a strong sense of professional identity. This aligns with the work of Tavakol and Tavakoli (2022), who argue that PD that incorporates narrative inquiry can help teachers understand and reshape their identities through reflective practice. A key theoretical lens for this study is Gadamer's concept of fusion of horizons, which highlights the dialogical nature of identity formation. The findings of this study demonstrate that teachers engage in a dynamic process of merging their personal beliefs with their professional experiences through PD activities. This fusion of personal and professional narratives is essential for developing a coherent and adaptive professional identity. Teachers in this study reported that PD activities, particularly those involving mentorship and peer collaboration, allowed them to merge their personal teaching philosophies with new teaching strategies, fostering a more integrated professional identity.

The findings also support Vessey's (2009) argument that PD that facilitates fusion of horizons allows teachers to balance their pre-existing beliefs with new approaches to teaching. For teachers of young learners, this balance is especially important as they navigate the complexities of child development while staying true to their pedagogical values. The iterative nature of this process, as described by Garner and Kaplan (2019), suggests that teacher identity is not a static construct but rather a fluid and evolving aspect of a teacher's professional journey. PD activities that encourage reflective practice and dialogue, therefore, offer an ideal environment for this ongoing development.

The findings of this study have several implications for the design of PD programs for teachers, particularly those teaching young learners. First, PD programs should prioritize reflective practices that encourage teachers to critically examine their beliefs, values, and teaching practices. This process of reflection not only enhances teachers' pedagogical skills but also strengthens their professional identity by fostering greater self-awareness and clarity in their roles.

Second, mentorship and peer collaboration should be integral components of PD programs. The findings highlight the importance of building supportive networks

that allow teachers to share experiences, offer feedback, and develop a collective sense of professional purpose. By creating spaces for dialogue, PD programs can facilitate the fusion of horizons among teachers, helping them integrate personal and professional narratives into a cohesive identity.

Lastly, PD programs for teachers, especially those working with young learners, should include emotional reflection as a key component. As this study shows, emotional engagement plays a crucial role in building resilience and adaptability, which are essential for sustaining a long-term teaching career. PD programs that help teachers process their emotions and integrate them into their professional practice can help prevent burnout and support the development of a strong, sustainable professional identity.

In conclusion, to strengthen teachers' professional identity development, PD programs should be designed based on the specific needs of teachers working at institutes. Action research and classroom observations conducted by educational supervisors or directors of studies can be valuable tools for collecting data to tailor these programs effectively. By using these methods to assess teachers' needs, institutions can create PD programs that are more relevant and responsive, fostering a supportive environment that promotes professional growth and the development of a strong, cohesive professional identity for teachers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the professional identity formation of teachers in the context of professional development (PD). The findings reveal that reflective practices, mentorship, and collaborative activities play significant roles in shaping teachers' professional identities. The fusion of horizons theory has served as a robust framework for understanding the dialogical processes involved in this journey of self-discovery. Teachers, through their engagement in PD, not only develop technical teaching skills but also navigate the complexities of reconciling their personal beliefs with their evolving professional roles.

The study underscores the importance of PD activities that foster emotional reflection, collaborative learning, and mentorship. These elements help teachers construct cohesive and adaptive professional identities by allowing them to better respond to the challenges of teaching young learners. However, despite these findings, several questions remain about the long-term impacts of such PD interventions and the extent to which they sustain teachers' professional growth beyond the initial stages of their careers. One limitation of this study is that all participants were female, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to male teachers. Further research is needed

to explore how PD can be designed to address the unique needs of different teacher populations and support continuous identity development throughout a teacher's career.

Looking ahead, future studies could focus on expanding the sample size to include a broader range of teaching contexts, particularly in diverse cultural settings. Investigating the role of digital and hybrid PD formats could also provide new perspectives on how teachers' identities are shaped in increasingly virtual learning environments. Ultimately, this research highlights the centrality of PD in teacher development which reinforces its pivotal role in shaping not just teaching practices but the very identities of educators. As teachers continue to face evolving challenges, their ability to adapt, reflect, and grow will remain key to their success and fulfillment in the profession.

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Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Funding

Not applicable.

Ethics Declarations

Competing Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

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