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Demystifying Teachers Identity in Odisha within the Socio Professional Contour and Changing Educational Policies

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the perceptions of elementary school teachers in Odisha regarding their professional space, employment security, and socio-economic status in the context of shifting educational policies. Grounded in Social Identity Theory, Role Identity Theory, and Policy Implementation Theory, the research investigates how reforms such as the National Policy on Education (1986, 2020), the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the Right to Education Act (2009), and NCTE regulations have influenced teachers' professional identity and everyday work experiences. Using a qualitative design, in-depth interviews with sixty teachers from diverse urban, semi-urban, and rural schools in Cuttack were conducted and analysed thematically. Findings reveal a paradox of autonomy, where teachers exercise freedom in classroom-level pedagogy but lack influence in broader institutional or policy decisions. Limited policy awareness, inadequate institutional support, insufficient remuneration, and restricted career growth contribute to professional stagnation and low social recognition, particularly in urban contexts. The study underscores the need for inclusive, context-specific reforms that recognize teachers as active stakeholders in educational change, emphasizing the importance of aligning policy frameworks with the lived realities of teachers to strengthen professional identity and improve educational outcomes.

KEYWORDS : Elementary school teachers; Teacher identity; Educational policy; Professional autonomy; Socio-economic status; Odisha; Qualitative study; Policy implementation

INTRODUCTION:

Indian elementary education has seen many changes in teaching over time because of different reforms, government policies, and changes in society and the economy. Teachers' sense of self and how others see them are very important for the success of education. In India, a teacher's identity is connected to how much control they have at work, how they earn an income, and how they are recognized by society. Even though they are vital for the development of children and the nation, elementary school teachers in states such as Odisha still struggle with having enough space to do their job, poor financial benefits, and a lower position in society (Biswal, 2013). This study tries to explain these

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challenges by seeing how policy changes in education have affected the identities of elementary school teachers in Odisha. Teacher identity includes a person's sense of self as well as their jobs, duties, recognition from others, and the standards they are held to. Teachers are considered as guides for morals and social values as well as educators in India; their identity there is very important. Often, shifts in policies have changed the character of American identity (Sethy, 2019).

The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 was an important event that acknowledged the significance of teachers and urged measures to strengthen teacher education and training. It focused on improving the teaching profession and made sure teachers had better opportunities and resources (Surya Pratap, 2019). The actual delivery of the program was often inadequate, mainly in rural and low-resource places such as Odisha. The Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009 made sure that every child between the ages of 6 and 14 had the right to go to school by making elementary education mandatory. While the RTE helped many join school and made education more available, it was also a great source of work and teaching problems for teachers. Teachers were required to spend time on administrative chores such as record-keeping, surveys, and supervising mid-day meals, which took away from what they should be teaching (Alonso Sáez, 2017). Responsibilities has made it harder for teachers to keep a professional boundary, which has led to many experiencing stress and not being happy with their jobs. In 2001, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was created to make sure that all children were able to enrol in and succeed at elementary school. It resulted in hiring thousands of contract and para-teachers, which influenced the status and position of regular teachers (Pennington, 2016).

Through its 2009 guidelines, the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) set minimum requirements and established standard courses for teachers. By aiming to enhance teaching standards, this policy also closed down many poor teacher training programs and reduced the chances for marginalized students who wanted to teach (Van Lankveldet *et al.*, 2017). Teachers who were already employed often did not see their working lives improve or have their esteem as professionals rise. Despite many efforts to improve the state of elementary education in India, teachers are still dealing with concerns about job stability, their social and economic situation, and having control over their jobs. In Odisha, since the majority of schools exist in rural and tribal areas, the main problems are underdeveloped

infrastructure, weak support, and few career advancement choices (Jupp *et al.*, 2016; Looney *et al.*, 2018).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objective is to explore the felt identity of elementary school teachers in relation to the major educational guidelines like the National Policy on Education (1986-2020), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009, and the National Council for Teacher Education, 2009. This study focuses on:

- Professional Space and Autonomy: To realize the degree to which powerful educational policy has an impact on the perceptions teachers of elementary schools have of their professional space and freedom within the system.
- Professional Security and Capability Enhancement: To determine the difference in the perceived professional security and capability because of educational policies.
- Remuneration and Professional Worth: To assess teachers' perceptions of the sufficiency and value of their pay regarding educational policies, considering how these policies support their sense of professional value.
- Integrated Policy Impact on Teacher Identity: To investigate the collective impact of educational policies on the felt identity of elementary school teachers, focusing on their professional experiences and perceptions of identity in the educational landscape.
- Policy Awareness and Influence on Professional Identity: To evaluate the degree of knowledge and understanding of educational policies among elementary school teachers and how this knowledge shapes their professional identity and responsibilities in the classroom.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Conceptualizing Teacher Identity

Zembylas, (2018) stated that teacher identity is now considered dynamic and full of various aspects in current educational research because educators are being asked to perform different roles and meet new standards. People are now seeing it as a mix of personal values,

job roles, and what is expected by organizations. Teacher identity is basically about how teachers feel about their jobs and how others in the education system see them. This identity develops from the personal beliefs, teaching style, and care for students' success and happiness. What a teacher is expected to teach, how, and how well can have a big impact on their professional persona.

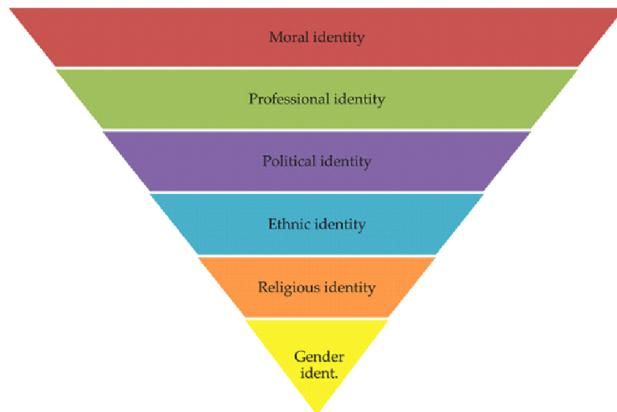


Figure 1 The Hierarchy of Teacher's Identity

https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-hierarchy-of-teachers-identities_fig1_320043818

Henry, (2016) examined that teachers must adopt policies and goals from their institutions, which means they might find themselves facing challenges between their ideals and what is required by others. Yazan, (2023) pointed out that the structure of many institutions, such as layers of control, a high workload, little freedom, and no active decision-making role, makes it more difficult for individuals to form an identity. People in teaching have to keep adjusting their personal goals to fit the expectations established by the school system. A supportive school setting is very important for promoting a positive and strong identity among teachers, research says. Seeing that teaching is this complicated is necessary to make rules that respect teachers' skills and point of view.

Table 1 Conceptualizing Teacher Identity

Author	Key Points on Teacher Identity
Zembylas (2018)	Teacher identity is dynamic, shaped by personal values, roles, and institutional expectations.
Henry (2016)	Tension arises when teachers' ideals conflict with institutional policies and goals.

Yazan (2023)	Institutional structure (e.g., control, workload, lack of autonomy) hinders identity formation.
General View	Supportive school environments are crucial for fostering strong teacher identities.

2.2 Teacher Identity and Educational Policies in India

Clarke *et al.*, (2023) stated that educational policies, including the 1986 National Policy on Education (NPE), the 2009 Right to Education (RTE) Act, and initiatives like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the 2009 National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE), have greatly changed and improved the education system in India. They targeted giving access to everyone, boosting quality, and upgrading teaching skills. Gupta, (2021) analyzed that applying them has changed the responsibilities and identity of teachers in elementary schools differently for some. Whilst these approaches acknowledged the importance of teachers, they also included new demands, greater responsibility, and duties outside of teaching that have become too much for teachers. Although the RTE Act stressed child-centered approaches, inclusion, and regular assessment, there were not enough resources or assistance for teachers.

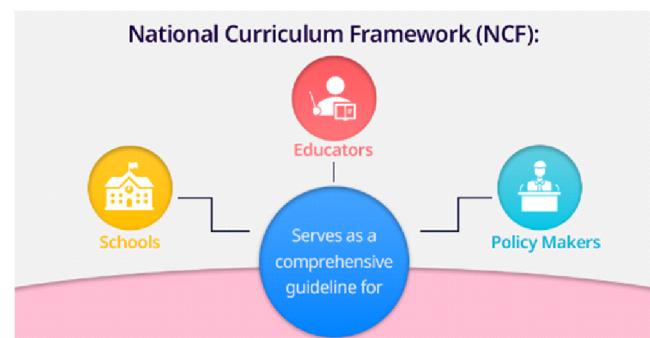


Figure 2 National Curriculum Framework

<https://www.21kschool.com/us/blog/national-curriculum-framework-ncf/>

Chandran, (2022) pointed out that SSA promoted the training of many teachers and implemented large recruitment drives, but it also introduced contract-based work and thus created job instability and divided the teaching workforce. In 2009, NCFTE focused on reflection and development for teachers, yet its ideas were not always adopted consistently into how teachers were trained and schools were run. The gap between

policy goals and street-level action influences a divided sense of a professional's identity. Many times, teachers find it difficult to connect ambitious policies with their daily problems, which may reduce their determination and willingness to continue in their job.

2.3 PROFESSIONAL SPACE AND AUTONOMY

Oolbekkink-Marchand *et al.*, (2017) stated that teachers have professional space in education when they are free to shape how they teach, select the content, and manage the interactions in the classroom. It covers the right to try new methods, change teaching strategies, and take part in the management and decisions of an institution. According to the National Curriculum Framework 2005 and the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education 2009, teacher autonomy matters and urges educators to move away from strictly centrally guided lessons to techniques they can decide on. The focus in these policy documents is on teachers as people who think innovatively and guide the learning process, rather than those who just obey rules. Maaranen, (2022) stated that teachers are still managed closely by rules and regulations, strict curriculum guidelines, lots of paperwork, and tests, which prevent them from having much choice in their actions. Teachers find it hard to act as professionals, which reduces their motivation, makes them unhappy at work, and alters their sense of identity. Whitchurch, (2018) analyzed that professional space experiences are not the same for all teachers; they change widely due to gender, location, and management of the school. For example, women working as teachers in rural government schools could encounter additional challenges because of existing gender roles, poor infrastructure, or the way schools are managed. So, it is important to address systemic issues so that all teaching professionals can act with independence and confidence.

2.4 Economic Identity: Remuneration and Professional Worth

Bowen *et al.*, (2021) stated that teachers' economic identity and view of their value in the community are strongly shaped by their pay. Besides allowing people to live, fair compensation for nurses is tied to their dignity, their motivation, and their commitment to the profession. There are many cases where teachers in India at the elementary level complain about late payments, low salaries, and missing benefits such as pensions, health insurance, and housing allowances. Skerritt, (2019) examined that many such financial difficulties are seen in rural and remote regions like those in Odisha,

where it is more difficult to make payments on time because of logistical issues and problems in the administration. Due to financial uncertainty, teachers feel vulnerable and discouraged, which lowers their motivation and involvement in their duties. Pennington, (2016) pointed out that under programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), contract and para-teachers often have even greater problems with financial uncertainty and marginalization. They are not treated the same in terms of pay and job security; teachers working under different contracts often feel divided and less connected as one group. Lacking a steady income often challenges the traditional idea of teachers as respected members of society and reduces the respect teachers once had in Indian society.

2.5 Social Recognition and Teacher Status

Zhang, (2023) stated that the importance society gives to education links closely linked to how it sees teaching as a prestigious profession. Teachers are respected in India because their profession is thought to be essential for the progress and building of the nation. In the past few decades, views on economics have changed a lot. Movsessian, (2018) examined that lot of elementary teachers make it clear that they feel less valued and recognized in public and everyday discussions. How much respect their society has for them is being affected by their conditions of work, which include low income, a heavy workload, and not much influence over their work. How school administrators, colleagues, parents, and the wider community treat teachers heavily affects their self-concept. Muhammad, (2022) pointed out that if teachers are not included in decision-making, kept under intense supervision, or tasked with non-teaching roles, they usually feel frustrated and demotivated. Rather, good support, appreciation, and teamwork can raise their confidence and help them identify as part of the profession. The importance given to teachers in society helps determine both how people in America view education and the way teachers see themselves. Reinforcing this valuation is necessary to improve the status of teachers and to remind everyone that they are key in guiding the future of the country.

2.6 Gaps in the Existing Literature

Much research on teachers in India has examined single elements like the job satisfaction they feel, the workload they carry, and insecure finances, mainly by working with numbers and not much else. Even though these studies give useful information on certain issues teachers

encounter, they usually do not reflect how closely related these issues are in teachers' daily lives (Biswal, 2013). There is not much research that looks at how different parts of a person's identity, such as work, money, and status, interact, particularly due to changes in education policies. These attributes are felt together by teachers, shaping their view of their jobs, duties, and position in society. Educational inequalities are even greater in Odisha, a state where different economic and geographic conditions greatly affect access to and quality of education. People who are directly responsible for carrying out new education laws are rarely heard in discussions about academic and policy topics (Surya Pratap, 2019). Even though they help shape change, politicians and lawyers are usually not represented in key discussions.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory, as proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, explains that the sense of self mainly comes from being part of social groups (Trepte & Loy, 2017). In addition to what they believe, teachers' professional identity is also shaped by how they are viewed by the community, other teachers, and their school system (Toom, 2019). Teachers at elementary schools are usually seen as less important and valued members of the teaching hierarchy. If their work is not respected or if they are excluded from decision-making, it harms both their collective group and their sense of self. Using this theory, researchers analyze how teachers feel included or left out and how these feelings change their willingness to stay engaged. Teachers in rural and poor regions often feel judged by society, which can lower their confidence and views of their self-worth.

3.2 Role Identity Theory

Role Identity theory, in comparison, concentrates on the identities people take on because of the social roles they have (Stets & Burke, 2000). Many teachers in elementary schools act as instructors as well as caregivers, administrators, social workers, and representatives for the community. How they see themselves as a teacher develops from what society expects and from their understanding of being a good educator. When educational policies like the Right to Education (RTE) Act, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), or teacher training from NCFTE 2009 are introduced, additional expectations are added to teachers without

providing the right support. With Role Identity Theory, we learn how teachers' ideas of their role can clash with the expectations others have for them, leading to stress and identity trouble.

3.3 Policy Implementation Theory

Policy Implementation Theory, led by Lipsky's concept of street-level bureaucrats, makes it easy to examine how teachers deal with policies daily. In the view of Lipsky, street-level bureaucrats are those who connect with the public and decide how policies are applied. Frontline educators, like teachers, help carry out and explain new educational reforms from the government (Lipsky, 2010). They frequently act under budget troubles, a lot of rules, and unclear instructions. Lipsky, (2010) shows that the ways policies are understood, adapted, or resisted are greatly influenced by what happens in daily settings. It accepts that implementing policies is not just copying a guide but relying on the judgment and local details of those involved. All these theories help explain the way teachers in Odisha deal with their identities when facing different professional, cultural, and policy challenges. The study uses these theories to help understand in more detail the lives and beliefs of teachers under different educational systems.

4. Research Methodology

The research used qualitative survey method to identify the perceptions of elementary school teachers regarding professional space, employment security, and socio-economic status with regard to the shifting educational policies in Odisha. The qualitative design was selected to obtain deeper information about the lived experiences and personal interpretations of teachers by the way in which the issues of change on national level of the survey policy affect their identity and the practice of everyday. The study population was elementary school teachers in government and private schools in Cuttack district of Odisha. Gender and location of respondents was used as the stratification technique, and in this case urban, semi-urban and rural schools to make up the sample as a way of ensuring diversity and inclusivity. The research involved 60 teachers (30 males and 30 females) as respondents. Participants were identified by purposive and incidental sampling methods in order to find individuals who could describe rich, relevant and varied views. The teachers were chosen due to their accessibility, readiness to be part of the study since they participated in the changing education system of Odisha and their experience in teaching. The interviews

followed a semi-structured interview schedule which contained open-ended questions that aimed at finding out the views of the teachers on autonomy, institutional support, awareness of the policies, remunerations and identity. It was mandatory to record the interviews, with the consent of the participants, to ensure accuracy and permit detailed transcription. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data collected. This included coding and classification of themes and patterns that kept emerging during the interviews. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to not only interpret what the teachers said but also the way they expressed their experiences which gave a deeper understanding of how policy changes affected the teacher identity and well-being.

5. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

5.1 Introduction

This research project is named Elementary School Teachers Perceptions on Professional Space, Security, and Socio- economic Status in Odisha, which aims at analysing the way the national education policy influences the everyday experience and identities of elementary school teachers in Odisha. In the current social and economic issues facing the state, teachers are crucial in basic education and nation building. In the study, a qualitative survey in which 15 open-ended questions are put to ten elementary teachers will be used to capture their perceptions about their job stability, professional freedom, wages, empowerment and social relevance. The study provides thematic accounts on how centrally developed policies influence, enable, or limit the personal and professional lives of teachers at the grassroots level, studied through their responses within the context of policies such as the National Policy on Education (1986, 2020), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 and NCTE regulations.

5.2 Generate Key Themes

Based on respondent opinions and relevant research questions, the following table indicates the themes, along with their subheadings.

Table 2 Key Themes

Theme	Subthemes
Professional Autonomy	Autonomy in pedagogical approach, Autonomy in organizing school events, Lack of institutional teaching

constraints, Freedom in lesson planning, Flexibility in classroom delivery

Policy Awareness & Practice Gap between training and classroom reality, Selective adoption of policy-based practices, Lack of clarity in policy implementation, Superficial understanding of new mandates

Institutional Support & Development Absence of institutional support, Government-provided training exposure, Lack of promotion opportunity, No incentives for extra duties, Inadequate infrastructure support

Remuneration & Job Security Inadequate remuneration, Partial financial security, Regular salary and CPF support, No health benefits or bonus

Teacher Identity & Social Perception Contextual variation in teacher identity, Low societal recognition of primary teachers, Respect in school village only, No presence in urban professional networks

Challenges Limited decision-making at policy level, Lack of promotion opportunities, Inadequate remuneration, Lack of recognition and respect, Poor infrastructure and support, Gap between training and classroom needs, Limited awareness of educational policies

Professional Autonomy: The teachers in Odisha elementary schools stated that they felt quite free to select the mode of teaching and design classroom activities. This independence has created a feeling of responsibility, ownership and job satisfaction. The fact that teachers were not interfered with by the School Management Committees was also appreciated as this gave them freedom to be more creative and independent in their teaching methods.

Policy Awareness and Practice: Educators were not aware of any recent changes in the educational system and they sensed some sort of disconnect between what they had been taught and the reality of classroom practice. Many took the policy of selective implementation as they lacked clarity, support, and orientation. This mismatch undermined trust in reforms and effective realization of the same.

Institutional Support and Development: Institutional support was remarkably absent and teachers were left to find their way through responsibilities with little or no guidance or resources. Training programs offered by the government were generic and inapplicable to the local demands.

Remuneration and Job Security: The majority of teachers indicated that their wages were not enough to cover the increasing cost of living that makes them insecure and discouraged in their profession. There was a lack of merit pay raises, performance pay or benefits which allowed a sense of stagnation. Even though regularisation offered continuity in jobs, there were few growth opportunities.

Teacher Identity & Social Perception: The teachers experienced status on the both local and school levels, but not on the larger society, particularly the urban areas. They thought their occupations were rendered invisible in policy and professional discourses, and this caused low self-esteem as well as the professional identity crisis.

Challenges: and Job Security: Systemic problems included marginalization of teachers in policy development, limited professional advancement, lack of training, financial straining and inadequate basic facilities. All this along with the little recognition in the society created a scene of a hardworking but underpaid workforce that cannot

relate to the vision of the system in terms of education transformation.

6. DISCUSSION

The results of the research on the background of the available literature and theoretical approaches, providing a detailed picture of the understanding of elementary school teachers in Odisha about their professional environment, safety, and socio-economic position in the conditions of changing educational policies. The responses revealed several major themes as well as the complexity and contradictions of what it means to be a teacher in our contemporary educational environment. Among the most notable trends was the high level of professional agency that the teachers experienced when doing classroom work. In line with the international literature on teacher agency, the participants reported that they had the freedom to determine how to plan lessons and implement various teaching practices depending on their individual class settings. This correlates with theory of professional capital by A. Hargreaves in which the education sector considers teacher autonomy to be key in promoting commitment and innovativeness in learning. Teachers had no decision-making authority in higher-level issues such as institutional or policy issues although autonomy at classroom level was highly valued (Somech, 2010). This paradox emphasizes a disjointed feeling of control, when the empowerment is restricted to micro-level actions, but macro-level influence is impossible to access. Many teachers have shown lack of knowledge about current reforms or lack of attachment to new policy initiatives like the NEP 2020 and the RTE Act (Singh, 2023). This is a reaffirmation of the evidence of previous studies that proposed that the top-down policy frameworks usually do not fill the divide between formulation and implementation at the grassroots level. The lack of correspondence between in-service training and realities in the classroom and the lack of systematic orientation and follow-up led teachers to be cautious to adopt change initiated by reforms. This detachment further contributes to the theory of conscientization posed by Freire, which emphasizes the significance of the understanding and critical awareness and dialogue in the transformation of educational practice, which are contributing factors that lack much in the relationship between policy and teachers in this study.

Teachers also gave a dismal picture in terms of institutional support and career development (Grollmann, 2008). They cited training like Diksha and Samarthya, but they are one-size-fit-all training with low contextual relevancy, and thus they are ineffective. Professional development literature indicates the

importance of localized sustained and responsive training, which could not be traced here. The teachers were isolated in their career paths and they had little in terms of support by the school management or education officers. The absence of professional growth opportunities or motivation to work extra left the people demotivated. This observation can be compared to the two-factor theory of Herzberg, in which lack of motivation factors, including recognition, advancement, and achievement, can cause job dissatisfaction (Alshmemri, et al., 2017). Compensation and employment security were of major concern. Teachers would constantly complain that they did not get enough salary that could sustain even their very basic needs, leave alone savings and continued growth in life (Farkas, et al., 2000). Lack of incentive on the basis of performance and the freezing of the pay scales were considered as significant de-motivators. As compared to the symbolic significance attributed to teachers through policy rhetoric, the real-life scenario presented conspicuous mismatch between institutional acknowledgment and reality. This is corroborated by the existing body of literature on teacher devaluation in developing nations, where teachers tend to exist in the margins, both socially and economically. It has also been found that there are ways in which teacher identity is dependent upon policy structures and on local realities. In their immediate school or village communities, a lot of teachers were respected and appreciated. But they felt invisible or constricted in value elsewhere, particularly in the urban or working circles (Zhi, et al., 2025). This duality is representative of a contextual and stratified identity, with the professional value only affirmed in some contexts, and denied in others. This divide can be explained with the help of social identity theory that indicates that status and self-perception are of crucial importance to social comparison and collective recognition. The low visibility of teachers in policy discussions and in the urban discourse of education reform further sidelines the voice of education experts and reduces their professional self-esteem (Miah & Hasan, 2022).

Lastly, the regional characteristics of Odisha were also a factor in shaping perceptions in the form of urban, rural, gender-based, and the type of school (governmental vs. private). Teachers in rural areas tended to face more challenges regarding infrastructure, resources and connectivity whereas urban teachers, albeit having superior facilities, experienced standardization and surveillance. Female teachers especially were burdened more with social pressure and family roles. The results can be represented as a complicated environment where elementary teachers

have to move along the lines of autonomy and restrictedness, reputation and disregard, empowerment and marginalization. Their identities are strongly affected by the overlap of policy frameworks, institutional practices, and realities of daily life, thus it is essential that future reforms find a more comprehensive, context-specific, and teacher-focused strategy.

7. CONCLUSION

The present research aimed at investigating how teachers of elementary schools of Odisha perceive their professional sphere, employment stability, and economic and social well-being, particularly in the context of new educational policies and changes. A qualitative research design employing in-depth interviews with sixty teachers in both government and private schools has provided important data regarding the daily lives and identities of teachers at the grass-roots level of the Indian educational system. It shows how complicated and sometimes conflicting life as an elementary school teacher in a state where social inequality, inhibited infrastructure, and centralization of policymaking are brought together to determine their professional and personal lives. One of the key lessons that the study unveiled is the professional autonomy paradox. Teachers were satisfied on the one hand about the freedom that they have in classroom level decisions especially the flexibility to adjust pedagogy to the needs of students (Ryan & Tilbury, 2013). Teachers did not feel they were truly participating in the changes in the system and this is part of a broader process of marginalization that is still preventing bottom-up reforms in India. They have voices but they are not heard in the planning and assessment of the educational policies, even though their voices are chief in the implementation of the policies.

Teachers often described the lack of proper policy communication, training, and institutional support and became ill-prepared to successfully employ reforms. The mismatch between the professional growth initiatives and the reality of classroom practice marks the necessity of teacher preparation that is more local and context-based. Lack of incentives, career growth prospects, and infrastructural support were often mentioned as the obstacles leading to professional stagnation and emotional burnout (Precessalas&Bauyot, 2025). These results are congruent with larger issues in educational research that point to the necessity of systemic reform to be based on the experience of the practitioners rather than the frameworks of administration. The research article also highlights how teacher identity is a major but underrecognized aspect of education policy-making. Identity, in this case, is not only about perception of

self but is also closely interconnected with the way society, institutions, and policy system see and place teachers. A large number of respondents had an overwhelming sense of purpose and commitment in their schools and their communities, yet they felt unseen or underestimated outside of those environments. This stratified identity of respect that is not absolute in its adherence and socially constrained illustrates the mental cost of laboring in a system that privileges teachers symbolically yet ignores them in material terms. Such knowledge is crucial to develop an improved policy and to regain dignity and sense in the profession.

This study has implications to educational research and policy by bringing to the fore the voices of elementary teachers, which is a group usually poorly represented in academic and policy arenas. It provides a grass-roots view of the experience of national and state-based educational reform as experienced by those charged with its implementation. It also reveals the necessity of policy making that would not only address logistical and infrastructural parameters but would also address emotional, social and professional components of the teaching experience. The study invites more participatory, empathetic and contextual solutions to educational reform. The study supports the belief that teachers are not mere instruments of policy, but are players with much influence on the possibility of successful or unsuccessful educational reforms through their perceptions, identity, and conditions of work. When their voices are heard, their struggles are understood, and their contributions are acknowledged, the policy frameworks can be redesigned and made inclusive, efficient and responsive.

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Consent for publication

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Competing interests

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