Shadow ESL Education from North American Tutors’ Perspective: Are We Real Teachers?

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Abstract

For-profit, private tutoring services, often referred to as shadow education, are tutoring students for pay and are made use of as a concurrent supplement to their standard academic courses or programs. These tutoring sessions are often online and given by tutors who work for companies that are for-profit businesses in the education services industry. Tutors are often subject matter “experts” working as independent contractors, many of whom have little or no formal training as teachers. This is a qualitative case pilot study consisting of semi-structured interviews with two such tutors working at a company that offers online tutoring in content areas and ESL to Chinese international undergraduate students studying abroad in Canada, the US, Australia, and the UK. Data reveal that these tutors have concerns with their sense of professional identity as teachers. These results elicit questions of who has the privilege of being called a “teacher” and the status of online for-profit tutors as compared to classroom teachers. Findings also include that tutors’ perceptions of working for a for-profit shadow education company impacts their teaching practices.

Keywords: shadow education, ESL, online tutoring, for-profit tutoring, supplemental tutoring, tutor perspectives, teacher professional identity

Introduction

Because academics at the undergraduate university level are quite different from those at high school, many undergraduate students, especially at the freshman and sophomore levels, require additional assistance with their courses in the form of tutoring in order to achieve the grades they desire. The field of shadow education and private supplementary tutoring has been continuously and rapidly growing worldwide throughout the 21st century (Bray, 2013). However, definitions of shadow education and what it includes have been inconsistent throughout research (Bray & Kobakhidze, 2014).

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Today’s technology offers university students and their parents the ability to procure additional online supplementary tutoring from for-profit tutoring businesses in the education services industry. Businesses and organizations providing these services include those that target international students because they frequently require both academic and linguistic support when preparing to start college in an English as a Second Language (ESL) setting. Adapting to changes from high school to higher education is significant enough, but when it happens in a second language and culture, it can be even more challenging for students. These students may have greater difficulty following lectures, understanding readings and assignments, and writing coherently than their native-speaking peers. Thus, for-profit private tutoring companies offer help for these students so they can better understand course content and academic expectations.

Due to the advent of the internet and its networking capabilities, it is easier for students and tutors to connect, and therefore much of today’s shadow education is in an online setting, a one-to-one teaching context, or both, as opposed to a classroom full of students. As such, the tutors who work in shadow education tend to be subject matter “experts” based on their education and work experience, but many have not had formal pedagogical training in teaching or any formal teaching experience. Because of this and the context in which they teach, tutors in this type of educational setting do not meet the traditional definition of a teacher (Aurini, 2004). Therefore, tutors working in the for-profit shadow education industry may question their own professional identities as educators. This is of concern because a weak professional identity can lead to tutors’ depersonalization (Xiong et al., 2020), including (a) whether or not they get to claim the title of teacher; (b) whether their professional status is equal to that of a more traditional classroom teacher; and (c) whether the for-profit organization’s focus on profit affects their teaching practices. As both a researcher and a tutor in the for-profit shadow education industry myself, an insider in the context, I have experienced difficulty seeking employment in more traditional settings. Despite having the required educational background and many years of teaching experience, my experience is often not considered as being adequate because it has not been in a traditional setting, which has led to me questioning my own professional identity as a teacher and an educator.

Current literature shows that the professional identities of tutors are largely affected by both discourse and context in terms of how they are viewed and what they do. As Cross (2006) argues, the understanding and awareness of the “contexts within which [educators] are positioned … plays perhaps the most significant role in constructing what they then ‘do’ in that role” (p. 7). In other words, the teaching context informs a tutor’s identity-in-practice. A study by Xiong et al. (2020) finds that private EFL tutors “have constructed a range of hybrid identities” (p. 1) based on the contexts in which they teach. Likewise, researchers Yung and Yuan (2020) claim “the[ir] study sheds light on how implicit values and beliefs about for-profit shadow education are created and manifested in educational and social discourses” (p. 153), particularly due to the commercial genre of tutors’ biographies used for promotional purposes. Additionally, Trent’s (2016) study of private tutors in Hong Kong reveals that existing discourses rigidly divide tutors and mainstream educators, which “constrain[s] the capacity of the former to construct their preferred professional identities” (p. 115). Likewise, Xiao’s (2016) study of 155 tutors from Chinese open universities discovered the inferiority that tutors felt as compared to their conventional counterparts, reflecting the division Trent (2016) describes. Thus having “less power to shape the environment in which they work” and being “more constrained by contextual factors” (Stickler & Emke, 2015, p. 31), tutors can experience difficulty seeing themselves as educational professionals. The current pilot study expands on this idea as participating tutors describe how their experiences shadow tutoring online in the ESL content area context inform their own professional identities as educators.
Theoretical Framework

Professional identity is defined as “one’s professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences” (Slay & Smith, 2011, p. 85). Additionally, based on Bandura’s (1977/1986) social learning theory that social ideas mediate processes and behavior is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning, Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) define a teacher's self-efficacy as “the teacher’s belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context” (p. 233). This definition goes hand in hand with that of professional identity based on the self-concept that Slay and Smith (2011) give. In other words, if online shadow education tutors learn to teach based on their specific teaching context and believe they have the necessary attributes and experience to give them the capacity to be successful in the teaching tasks required of them, they can develop professional identities as teachers. However, because educators in online shadow education often do not have specific training in teaching and often lack experience in a traditional classroom (Aurini, 2004), they do not have the same experiences as a person who fits the more traditional definition of teacher and thus may believe the identity of teacher is beyond them.

Methodology

Study Design

The methodological approach of this pilot study is a categorical and thematic analysis of interview data based on theoretical frameworks of identity including Gee’s (1989/2002) concept of identity as Discourse (capital D), “distinctive ways of ‘being and doing’ that allow people to enact and/or recognize a specific and distinctive socially-situated identity” (2002, p. 160) and Fairclough’s (2003) concept of identity, seeing discourse “as part of social practice—ways of acting, ways of representing, ways of being” (p. 27). As such, through their discourse during interviews, the participants recall that their being and doing in their work is a means to socially situate or represent how they view their professional identities.

Data collection for this study included interviews with two tutors working at one such shadow education company based in Toronto, Ontario, and Beijing, China and offering supplementary online ESL and content area tutoring services to Chinese undergraduate students who are studying abroad in Canada, the US, Australia, and the UK. The company connects students with tutors who are positioned as being “experts” in their fields based on their educational background, as the company requires tutors to have earned at least a master’s degree in their field. Online tutoring takes place both synchronously in one-on-one online live tutorials in video chat sessions and asynchronously via the online platform where students can submit their essays and questions about their assignments in their university courses or about English language learning. Some of these tutors have had pedagogical training, such as retired teachers or professors or those who work in tutoring in order to supplement their primary teaching incomes. Although many of the company’s tutors are current or former graduate students who have had experience as a teaching assistant (TA) at a university, many have not had any formal pedagogical training, including in ESL teaching and teaching content in the ESL setting. Therefore, they lack the pedagogical knowledge that comes from this training, which could help them further develop their teaching skills and classroom practices.

Finally, it is important to note in terms of positionality that I, as the researcher, also work as a tutor for the same company as the participants. While this position provides an emic view of my participants’ experiences and perceptions, there is room for possible bias in the interpretation of data. However, in order to address the issue of bias, my data collection focused on reflexivity. I also
developed an audit trail and maintained a reflexive research journal accounting for my actions and
decisions as a means to work through my positionality. As such, taking a reflexive position assisted in
my interpretation and presentation of the data because I understand firsthand where the participating
 tutors are coming from.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions and impressions of two tutors in this online
shadow education setting regarding how they see and have developed their professional identities and
what has influenced their development. Data for this study is derived from semistructured interviews
(see Appendix) conducted with the two participating tutors and addresses the following research
questions: How do participating tutors at this company define or describe their professional identities?
How have they formed their professional identities as educators? How, if at all, has teaching online in
the shadow education context influenced the formation of their professional identities? How, if at all,
has the context of online shadow education affected their teaching practices?

**Participants**

The participating tutors will be given the pseudonyms “Tony” and “Clint.” These tutors teach both
ESL and content areas, and they were chosen for this study specifically because they are among the
company’s most active tutors. Both participants have been with the company longer than the majority
of tutors, both have high ratings from both management and students, and this job is their primary
source of income. Out of mutual respect as colleagues at the same tutoring company, they agreed to
participate in the study. Tony is an American of Chinese heritage from California who worked as a
TA as a graduate student. At the company, he tutors English Literature, ESL, and Academic Essay
Writing. Similarly, Clint is a Canadian from Ontario who also worked as a TA as a graduate student.
He tutors Sociology, Criminology, ESL, and Academic Essay Writing. Neither tutor has had any formal
pedagogical training in ESL teaching, Tony had limited pedagogical training as a TA, and Clint has not
had any pedagogical training at all.

**Data Analysis**

Data for this study included interview data from both of the participants. To transcribe the interview
data, I used the online transcription service Transcribe, which provides not only verbatim transcriptions,
but also provides the option to distinguish among speakers and includes time stamps within the
transcription. Transcribe (2020) claims “90% accuracy for well-recorded, clear audio in select
languages” (transcribe.wreally.com), including English, for its automatic transcription service. Upon
the completion of transcription, I reviewed the transcripts provided by the app and was easily able to
identify any discrepancies or errors made by the application and thus made all of the necessary
corrections.

To code the interview data, I used a thematic analysis to constructively develop themes from
the patterns that emerged in the participants’ discussions. I chose codes based on answering the
research questions listed above and developed themes that reflected Slay and Smith’s (2011) definition
of professional identity and that of teacher efficacy by Tschannen-Moran, et al. (1998). The findings
the data yielded were then divided into two primary categories consisting of tutors’ identity
constructions and the substantiating factors informing those constructions. Then I used an adapted
version of Saldana’s (2009) streamlined model of codes-to-theory for qualitative inquiry to code and
categorize the most substantiating factors that influenced the construction of these tutors’
professional identities. Finally, I viewed the data reflexively and memoed it with my own thoughts as
both a researcher and as an active tutor for the company, thus analyzing it with an insider’s perspective through a lens based on my own experiences working for the company and based on the formation of my own professional identity.

Findings

Identity Constructions

Tony. Tony considers himself as being, in the general sense, one who teaches, but not in the traditional sense of being a teacher, meaning that he believes his work does not allow him to fulfill the traditional criteria or personification of what one would associate with the meaning of the word teacher.

“I don’t consider myself a teacher like a normal teacher. I’ve never taught in a public school ... to call yourself a true teacher you have to have a few years teaching public school ... I still don’t consider myself an ESL teacher; I just pretend to be one.”

It is clear that the traditional idea of who a teacher is has impacted his own professional identity and that Tony believes in order to meet those criteria, one must have had experience teaching in a public school. Hence, in using the phrase “normal teacher,” Tony clearly sees himself not only as not allowed to claim the title or identity of the teacher but as something lesser or even abnormal with respect to being an educator. Therefore, Tony may feel marginalized in terms of the education industry or as being a part of the community of practice that is teaching. Additionally, the use of the word “pretend” makes it seem as if he sees himself as just playing at being a teacher, as if it were make-believe.

Clint. When Clint describes his professional identity as an educator, he seems to reject the idea that he should be considered a teacher because what he does is not something that fits with the general concept of the teacher. He says:

“I almost kind of don’t look at myself as a teacher, and maybe that’s because of my experience in education where I never necessarily had good relationships with teachers. People would tell me, ‘hey, you’d make a good teacher,’ and I’m like, ‘there’s no way I’m becoming a teacher,’ that sort of thing. I guess I view myself more as a consultant.”

Clint’s professional identity as a consultant rather than as a teacher seems to be preventing him from seeing himself as part of the community of practice that is teaching, as if he rejects that title and the identity of the teacher. His past educational experience relating to his own teachers seems to have negatively affected his ability to see himself in what he perceives to be the role of the teacher.

Substantiating Factors

Findings from the data revealed three specific substantiating factors that participating tutors indicated as playing a part in how they have formed their professional identities. These factors include (a) the types of expectations tutors feel that both management and their students have of them based on how the students have been sold the services the company provides; (b) the idea that these expectations blur the line between academic pedagogy and customer service; and finally, (c) the fact these tutors are paid on a “pay-per-pop” basis. This last factor means that these shadow education tutors as independent contractors for the company are paid per live tutorial taught, per essay edited and revised, and per question answered rather than based on a regular salary. These factors are specifically related to teaching in the context that these tutors work in, and although adjunct instructors in colleges may be paid per course taught or per student and substitute K-12 teachers may be paid per diem, these circumstances in the more traditional teaching context do not necessarily come with the same implications as they do for shadow education tutors. Additionally, because the online context affects their classroom and teaching practices, it should be noted as a tacit or secondary factor that
plays a part in forming the professional identities of these tutors. Viewing these substantiating factors through the lens of the research questions, it is clear that they do not fall in line with the traditional concept of teacher and are not generally factors that affect everyone who identifies as a teacher. This then begs the question of who can be included in the description of the teacher.

**Expectations of management and students.** Expectations of tutors held by management and clients—i.e., students—may not always be realistic in terms of what tutors can accomplish in a one-hour live tutorial. These tutors expressed their concerns about such unrealistic expectations specifically regarding live tutorials for essays, indicating pressure from feeling that management and students expect measurable progress on writing an essay in a one-hour tutorial.

I feel real pressure not to fuck up … If a student complains that we just got through the introduction, management would be like ‘hey, what’s going on here?’ … Sometimes you feel compelled to kind of like overextend yourself because you need to walk away feeling like the students got, got something on paper. I'm not going to be able to teach them all the nuances of grammar and syntax, how to structure an essay, how to do research and find appropriate evidence, and master a citation guide in one hour.

—Clint

This pressure continues not only when tutoring academic essay writing, but also when tutoring other subjects as well, and tutors feel this based on what the students have been sold, not just from the beginning, but during the semester.

The company provides students with an advisor, referred to as a Student Development Coordinator (SDC), who helps the student determine where they need help and when they should sign up for a live tutorial session or submit an essay for editing and review or a question; as such, this SDC continues to sell the company’s services.

[The SDC’s] job is to act as ongoing salesman, to kind of continue to check up on students, you know, ostensibly to see how they’re doing, but really to say, “Okay, well, here, where are your needs? Let me find a class that I can sell you to fill them.” … That's their job, and so they're salesmen. —Tony

In this sense, tutors are concerned that the SDC is not able to truly gauge what the tutor can do in the given time frame of a live tutorial, and only encourages students to spend money.

Understanding what we are unable to teach and what the student can or can’t learn in the given time and context goes against the promise made to the students as customers. So, in terms of what you’re considering, it’s not solely the merit of the work, but other factors creep into it, including, you know, marketing and sales, and making sure that you're not ruining someone’s business model. —Tony

In other words, it is clear Tony feels that he is under pressure to fulfill promises made to his students based on what they were sold, for example, when the tutor receives information that the student wants to cover the first fourteen chapters of the textbook in preparation for an upcoming exam. Tutors feel the pressure that students were promised this could be done, when in reality it cannot. Additionally, this shows how the pressure to fulfill promises to students reduces a tutor’s feeling of self-efficacy and thus their ability to see themselves as a teacher.

**The ambiguous line between pedagogy and customer service.** The for-profit shadow education setting can make it difficult for tutors who may prefer to focus on academic integrity to see this line because they also answer to management in terms of a focus on profitability. The company may stress academic integrity as well; however, the factor of profit has an impact on the tutors’ teaching in terms of what they are and are not able to do in the classroom. The crux of the situation can be seen in terms of asking where that line between customer service or sales and pedagogy or academia is drawn. Unfortunately, the definitions of customer service and academic integrity are very ambiguous in the shadow education industry due to profit being the bottom line, which affects tutors’
pedagogical practices in their classrooms, and in turn, affects their own professional identities as educators. This is mostly due to not knowing where to draw the line with students. Tutors know they cannot just give students answers or rewrite or even add their own words to a student’s essay. However, since students are customers, they expect results in terms of their grades for the money they pay for tutoring services, and management expects them to be satisfied customers.

I have a really hard time kind of knowing where to draw the line with academic integrity and I know other tutors have expressed the same … We need to make this worth it for them. You know … for shelling out all this money, we can’t have kids going home and showing [their parents] Ds and Fs on their report cards. —Clint

Clint feels the ambiguity of where this line is drawn and relates it to grade inflation in high schools or universities due to athletics, so talented athletes can continue to play in order to draw money into the university.

I think there’s so much palliation … I was approached by the person overseeing the classes and they said, “Hey, you gotta, you gotta give them a little bit more of a bone here.” —Clint

This, of course, raises questions for tutors regarding the line between pedagogy and customer service, because it is not clear as to where that line is, how much of a “bone” is appropriate to throw to students while adhering to academic integrity, and when and how this should be done. Again, this illustrates how this ambiguity between academics and customer service affects these tutors’ teaching practices.

What we do is not quite completely a hundred percent pedagogical … part of what we’re doing is we’re selling it to them that they’re learning something, and I think with that kind of mercantile aspect in mind. —Tony

Both tutors and the company want to stay within the realm of academic integrity, but it seems that the tutors are reluctant to draw such a firm line based on the need for customer service and satisfaction. This ambiguity between customer service and academic integrity affects their self-efficacy as teachers and therefore can cause them to question their own professional identities as educators.

“Pay-per-pop” teaching. The way tutors are compensated for their work also factors in as a means to affect what they can and should do in the classroom. Tutors are paid based on how much work they can get, meaning they have a vested interest in selling their services.

Because you’re not paying people by the salary, you’re paying people per lesson, and so, with the goal therefore is just, if the more lessons you can give the more you can elongate your, your lessons, right? And so, it’s like if you’re doing like pay-per-pop sort of, that model, then, then that changes the nature of teaching where you’re no longer concerned with teaching, you’re concerned with making money.

— Tony

Because tutors are paid per lesson rather than by salary, the fact that the more lessons they give, the more pay they will receive also has an effect on their teaching and on their professional identities as teachers, because professionals who are thought of as teachers do not experience this in their teaching context.

I may withhold information so that I could sell it to them later. I phrase it so that like next time it’s what we didn’t have time to cover in class today … and so, so, like I think that changes the relationship a little bit … our, our end goal is as much profit as it is ensuring that students learn something. —Tony

Thus, the forced sense of having to also be a salesperson and market their offerings to students in order to be successful as described by these tutors is something that not only affects teaching, but also their professional identities as teachers.
The online teaching context. Participating tutors did not discuss this idea as it directly relates to their professional identities. However, because the participating tutors discussed how the other substantiating factors of the for-profit shadow education context mentioned above affect their teaching practices and therefore their self-efficacy, it is clear that because the context of the online setting also affects their teaching practices, it too will have an effect on their self-efficacy and therefore professional identities as teachers. Although both tutors discussed their appreciation of the technological advantages of online teaching, such as the speed that technology offers in terms of using the web, file sharing, and finding images, participating tutors identified prominent issues based on the one-on-one teaching context and how the online context affects student–teacher interaction and relationships.

"In a one-on-one situation online, you're dependent on the one student to bounce ideas around. If they don't respond, you've got nothing, but in a traditional classroom everyone else can see what's going on and share ideas. —Tony

Clint, on the other hand, appreciates the personalized setting where he can work with students in a more comfortable setting where he can address their individual needs without students having to worry about what their classmates might think of them; he values the privacy the one-on-one online context offers the learning transaction in live tutorial sessions.

Having one person means [students] are more open to sharing. In a private setting when the student and teacher are in the comfort of their own homes or dorms allows them to be more vulnerable. —Clint

Tony, however, points out some of the difficulties this situation offers in terms of interacting with the students via technology during live tutorial sessions and explains how this changes how he interacts with students in the virtual classroom.

Sometimes the student doesn't turn on their cameras, and it's hard to make eye contact and it's hard to use body language, and I can't walk around, and these things are unavailable to me. —Tony

He feels that although technology gives him certain advantages, there is something lost in the way he can interact with his students. On the contrary, Clint sees the distance that asynchronous online teaching provides as an additional positive factor:

[Online asynchronous teaching] removes a bit of some acrimony from the student–teacher relationship in general … it allows me to step away from my students and come back later. —Clint

He seems to prefer the barrier that the asynchronous online context provides him so he can have the ability to hide any frustration with students that he might feel.

Discussion

The lack of a professional identity as a teacher that the participants discussed is related to aspects of the online for-profit shadow education teaching context such as the expectations of management and students, the ambiguous line between pedagogy and customer service, and the “pay-per-pop” manner in which teachers earn their income. Having the professional identity of the teacher must include the “attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences” (Slay & Smith, 2011, p. 85) that go along with the concept of the teacher. However, because the attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences of these tutors do not match those they associate with being a teacher, they do not feel they can claim such a professional identity. Identity dissonance such as this prevents a person from adopting a specific professional identity (Warin, et al., 2006). On the contrary, the beliefs, motives, and experiences these tutors have that come from the for-profit shadow education context do not allow them to completely
adopt the professional identity of the teacher, nor do they allow them to believe they have the self-efficacy “to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task” (Tschannen-Moran, et al., 1998, p. 233). Thus, the participating tutors see themselves as consultants or as pretending to be a teacher rather than actual being a teacher.

Another aspect of the shadow education industry that Aurini (2004) notes is an overall lack of formal training in pedagogy and a lack of formal teaching experience among shadow education tutors as they tend to be subject matter experts rather than trained teachers. As the participating tutors indicate, this lack of formal pedagogical training, especially when it comes to the ESL setting, further negatively impacts their self-efficacy and their professional identities in terms of being a teacher. Aurini (2004) states that shadow education companies see teachers as “lack[ing] ‘entrepreneurial’ or ‘commercial’ ambition” (p. 481), which such companies balance by employing a more business-oriented management team. The participating tutors indicated that they have experienced such ambition in their shadow education company's attitude, as their work seems to involve sales and marketing to some extent, which is not only a source of revenue for the company but also a source of income for the tutors. Educators who are considered traditional teachers are not expected to have entrepreneurial or commercial ambition, as Aurini (2004) notes, and such beliefs, experiences, motives, and values (Slay & Smith, 2011) are not attributes of their work. However, because this difference is not a part of a teacher's professional identity, but it is that of participating tutors, therefore these tutors feel that they cannot adopt the professional identity of the teacher as their own due to the dissonance in identity (Warin, et al., 2006).

Additionally, due to the for-profit nature of the shadow education sector, the bottom line as a factor is not part of the traditional educational setting, nor would it affect traditional teachers and classroom pedagogy. Consequently, its effect on teaching practices in shadow education is based on the additional factor of both sales and marketing, as well as customer service. Aurini (2004) refers to this as a “marriage between markets and education” (p. 487), and just as the participating tutors indicated, there is a problem when the expectations of tutors that are held by management, students, and parents as customers may not always be realistic or pedagogical in terms of what tutors are able to accomplish. Participating tutors indicated that this sales-driven context and the ambiguous line between customer service and pedagogy has not only affected their teaching practice, but it has also negatively impacted their self-efficacy in terms of teaching, thereby hindering their abilities to form the professional identity of the teacher. As this line is not something traditional teachers are concerned with, this difference in beliefs and values (Slay & Smith, 2011) thus will have an effect on these tutors’ professional identities as compared to educators who would be considered traditional teachers.

Finally, the online teaching context for these tutors affects their teaching practices in terms of a change from the traditional community of inquiry (COI) that a teacher leads. In the online one-on-one teaching setting, forms of presence, i.e., teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence (see Garrison, et al., 2001) have changed based on the differences in the online one-on-one COI. Teaching presence includes “organization, design, discourse facilitation, and direct instruction,” and social presence includes “discourse that promotes positive affect, interaction, and cohesion” (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010, p. 1722), which together create a cognitive presence (Garrison, et al., 2001), which can be seen as evidence of learning (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). In the case of the participating tutors, they discussed how these differences in COI affect their teaching practices in terms of the one-on-one setting and how they interact with their students. As their setting dictates that their teaching practices differ from those of a traditional teacher, this may make them question that label as a professional identity, as these differences in attributes determine their actions and experiences that construct that identity (Slay & Smith, 2011).
Implications and Recommendations

The professional identity of teachers is “a profoundly individual and psychological matter because it concerns the self-image and other-image of particular teachers” (Varghese, et al., 2005, p. 39), and the development of professional identities plays a critical role in teacher education, training, and their professional development (Warin, et al., 2006), and specifically in a second language teaching or ESL setting (see Varghese, et al., 2005; Yazan & Peercy, 2016). Moreover, the development of their professional identity as a teacher is a conjunctional focal point of teachers’ growth as educators (Johnston, et al., 2005). Thus, in order for tutors to continue to develop their teaching skills in the context of the online ESL shadow education setting, it is important that they first have the opportunity to develop their professional identities as that of teachers, as data indicate that they see the “attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences” (Slay & Smith, 2011, p. 85) of their work as being different from those of a teacher. As the participating tutors expressed, they do not yet have the ability to see themselves in the role of teacher.

Slay and Smith (2011) argue that stigma can impact professional identity similarly to how experiences of personal transformation can alter one’s professional identity. Therefore, as a way to help these tutors construct their identities as teachers, professional development (PD) is recommended as a way for these tutors to focus on building their professional identities. This PD would be used as a way to allow personal transformation based on changing the tutors’ frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997) as to what is meant by the concept of teacher in order for them to enhance their self-efficacy. For example, Clint rejected the identity of the teacher based on negative experiences from his past due to what is known as an apprenticeship of observation. This is a phenomenon that occurs because novice teachers or those who teach without having had formal pedagogical training have “spent thousands of hours as schoolchildren observing and evaluating professionals in action” (Borg, 2004, p. 274). Moreover, as Yazan and Peercy (2016) explain, emotions have an impact on the development of teachers’ professional identities, and these negative emotions related to his educational experience have affected Clint in terms of his own professional identity development. Therefore, this type of PD could help Clint cultivate his professional identity as being that of a teacher by reconciling his dissonance (Warin, et al., 2006) in values, beliefs, and motives with those attributes he perceives as belonging to a teacher and eventually become able to see himself in that role.

Finally, as PD can only help bridge the gap between the tutors’ beliefs and experiences working for the company, there are ways the company could also make changes in order to promote their tutors’ professional identities and self-efficacy in terms of being teachers. Many of the issues the participating tutors mentioned have to do with company policies, such as being independent contractors versus employees, how the compensation as “pay-per-pop” teaching makes tutors feel expendable, and how they feel out of touch with the company in terms of being part of an educational community of practice. Additionally, improved understanding as to clarity of the company’s expectations of tutors, the line between pedagogy and customer service as it relates to academic integrity, and finally reconsidering how students and their parents are being sold the company’s services could also positively impact the professional identities and self-efficacy of the company’s tutors because it would help tutors better understand their role as it relates to the company as a whole.

Opportunities for Future Research

Research into the online for-profit shadow education and tutoring industry is still lacking in terms of the tutors. Researchers can find a wide range of opportunities for further research as this industry continues to grow, and the case study discussed here opens the door for this additional research. This is becoming increasingly necessary in today’s COVID-affected world as education and supplementary
tutoring have rapidly moved to online platforms. For example, similar studies regarding the professional identities of tutors in shadow education marketed towards other types of students could reveal more about this topic. Moreover, additional research that further delves into the site studied in this case will add to the perspectives discussed here, such as perspectives of management, other tutors, and even students. Additionally, research into a framework for the development of professional identities of shadow education tutors could help determine ways to mitigate substantiating risk factors for deprofessionalization. Finally, research into the idea of what a teacher is and whether there are criteria for legitimately claiming this title or identity could give insight and legitimacy to the different types of educators out there, including determining requirements for pedagogical training for tutors, and even for university professors who have had none.

Conclusion

Due to the differences in their work with students, tutors in online for-profit shadow education settings may question their own professional identities as educators in comparison to that of a traditional classroom teacher, specifically regarding whether or not they are entitled to the identity and status of teacher and what that identity encompasses. In order to explore the perceptions and impressions of shadow education tutors as educators regarding their professional identities and how they have developed, this qualitative case study of two shadow education tutors based on the theoretical frameworks of professional identity and teacher self-efficacy answered these research questions: How do these tutors define or describe their professional identities? How have these participating tutors formed their professional identities as educators? How has the context of online shadow education affected their teaching? The participating tutors work for the same Canadian-based company that offers ESL and content area tutoring to Chinese students studying abroad in Canada, the US, Australia, and the UK. Data collected from semistructured interviews with these tutors revealed that instead of identifying as teachers, the tutors identified as consultants or “pretended” to play the role of a teacher instead of being what they think of as a “real” teacher.

The most significant factors affecting the formation of these tutors’ professional identities are related to the for-profit organization’s focus on its bottom line, i.e., company profit in terms of (a) expectations that both management and students have of tutors; (b) the way in which students are sold the company’s services; (c) how such expectations blur the line between pedagogy and customer service; (d) being compensated on a “pay-per-pop” basis, and finally (e) the tacit effects of the differences in their community of inquiry in the online one-on-one setting. These factors affect tutors’ teaching practices based on different experiences, attributes, values, beliefs, and motives than those that are often associated with the professional identity of the teacher. These differences contribute to the dissonance between the professional identities of these tutors and their impressions of what constitutes a professional identity as a teacher.

Because there is so little research into the educators who work in the for-profit shadow education industry, more knowledge about who they are and how they identify will benefit this rapidly growing industry. Hence, this study paves the way for additional research into both this site and others that serve different types of students. Uncovering the factors of the for-profit shadow education industry that seem to give these educators the motivation to doubt their credentials and professional identities as teachers or educators could lead to professional development for such tutors, thereby helping them create a more solid construction of their professional identities. It could perhaps even prevent them from feeling marginalized in terms of how they see themselves in their careers. This is important, as such marginalization may influence how they are seen by the education industry as a whole, which could then negatively affect their careers and professional growth. Therefore, additional
research may assist the education industry in reconstructing the concept of what it means to be a teacher in order to expand this notion to be more inclusive in terms of the online shadow education context.

**Disclosure Statement**
There are no potential conflicts of interest in this research.

**References**


Appendix

Interview Guide
(Probing questions were asked if necessary.)

1. Background.
   Why did you start teaching, and why ESL and content courses to ESL students?
   What is your native language and what other languages are you fluent in?

2. Teacher knowledge and professional development.
   What types of teacher education and training have you had?
   What forms of professional development have you found most useful?
   To what extent did your previous training prepare you for your current job?
   What have you learned since, either formally or informally?
   What kind of training do you wish you had had?
   What are your goals for learning and for professional development for the future?
   What do you feel you still need to learn or what do you think would help improve your teaching?

3. Online teaching context.
   What types of teaching contexts have you had experience in?
   What do you have to say about these contexts?
   How has teaching online impacted your work and your knowledge of teaching?
   How is online teaching different from face-to-face teaching for you?

4. Identity.
   How do you see yourself as a teacher?
   How do you see yourself as a professional?
   How does your (in)ability to speak your students’ L1 impact your professional identity?
   How does teaching online impact your professional identity?
   How does your ability to use scaffolding in your classes impact your professional identity?