

On becoming and remaining a teacher: rethinking strategies for developing teacher professional identity in South Africa

Michael Cross^{a*} and Elizabeth Ndofirepi^b

^a*Education and Curriculum Studies, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa;* ^b*School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa*

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The paper is based on interviews with a sample of 200 teachers from the Limpopo province about their life histories, particularly those aspects related to their choice of teaching as their first career path, and their expectations, experiences and perceptions in this regard. It argues that current approaches to teacher education in South Africa require a paradigm shift to integrate the transposition of knowledge and skills required in teaching with strategies to enable teachers to navigate through the complex processes through which shared meaning about the teaching profession is negotiated in order to develop and consolidate teacher identity. If this dimension remains neglected, current strategies proposed by the National Planning Commission and the Department of Basic Education are doomed to failure. While this is implicit in the notion of ‘teacher education’ vis-à-vis ‘teacher training’, apart from few and limited experiments, it has not yet gained substance in actual teacher development practice in South Africa.

Keywords: higher education; educational policy; educational leadership, management and governance; student epistemic access

1. Introduction

The paper was inspired by a conversation with two graduate students during an introductory session of an MEd. Research Design course at the University of the Witwatersrand. We asked one of the students what she does for living, and she said: ‘I am a teacher; I have been teaching for 25 years. Although I have tried different jobs in the past, teaching has always been my primary choice’. We asked a much younger student the same question. She first said, ‘I do not know’, which appeared to be an expression of anxiety about her current occupation, she seemed to dislike. When we insisted, she replied: ‘I work as a teacher’. We insisted: ‘What do you mean?’ She elaborated: ‘I completed my teaching diploma years ago at Wits University and since then I have been teaching in a school while looking for a different job. I do not like it’. The answers of the two students drew our attention to an important distinction between those who see themselves as teachers by choice – who have developed teacher identity – and those who see teaching just as a job – who work as teachers by virtue of having being trained as teachers but have found it difficult to identify themselves with the teaching profession. Against this

*Corresponding author. Email: mcross@uj.ac.za

background, the paper addresses the following main question: How do people become and remain teachers? The question is pertinent to ask at the time when there is a widespread realisation that current teacher preparation programmes fall short from contributing towards the individual process through which teacher professional identity is negotiated.

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Teaching, nursing and police service were under apartheid regarded as the only high-status professions with better salaries and working conditions for black people. As such they were *highly racialised*, and in the context of African traditional practices, they were and still remain *highly gendered*, with women very often prevented from entering them because of prescribed family roles (e.g. get married and have children). However, the status of the teaching profession has changed considerably. First, the attractors that motivated people into teaching are increasingly being superseded by competing concerns about low pay, inadequate resources, subordinate status and limited career opportunities. Second, in South Africa occupational issues reside with the Departments of Basic Education (DBE) as the main employer of teachers; academic issues with the South African Qualifications Authority; and professional issues with the South African Council of Educators (SACE), the main professional body for teachers. However, teaching has turned into an unusually strongly unionised occupation which tends to relegate professional bodies to a secondary role, and create uncertainty about how to cater for the professional integrity of the teachers.

Against such background, government has flagged a new strategy focused on teachers. Based on the assumption that ‘the main problems in schools lie in teacher performance and school leadership’, the NPC (2011, 15) proposes an approach to teacher professionalism rooted on performativity, accountability, strong leadership and rewards with four key pillars: (i) make teachers accountable; (ii) make teachers competent; (iii) get rid of union dominance in schools; and (iv) provide incentives to the teaching profession (DBE 2012, 5, 6). The DBE has embraced a more ‘activist/transformational’ approach (Avis 2005, 209–222), which locates teacher professionalism in the context of union struggles with attempts to engage them in teacher development. It is a sort of ‘if you cannot beat them, work with them’ strategy. Accordingly, the DBE ‘is giving more support to professional bodies by encouraging the establishment of subject associations and professional learning communities and giving unions a funded role in teacher development – having responsibility for it – will strengthen their commitment to the professional development of their members’ (DBE 2012, 6), though it has already banned school principals or teachers from holding a political office.

The question arises as to whether such ‘policy technologies’ will have any significant impact in promoting teacher professional identity. As Ball (2004, 4–16)

has indicated, if ill-managed such strategies can also have serious side effects: ‘a shift in emphasis in the concerns of teachers from ethics to efficiency, a reconstruction of teachers as technicians, the production of feelings of uncertainty, instability and ontological insecurity and a growing emphasis on presentation and “fabrication”’.

2. Developing teacher professional identity: insights from the literature

The question of identity has occupied sociological and anthropological research for several years. Rajchman (1995) brings together *inter alia* the views of Stanley Aronowitz, Etienne Balibar, Homi Bhabba, Ernesto Laclau, Cornell West. Borrowing from this wider debate, we reject the tendency to ‘naturalise identity’, making it a matter of biology or history or culture, i.e. merely ascribed conception of identity. Rather we historicise identity to centre our discussion on the analysis of its production as a dynamic process (Scott 1995, 8) which discloses the complex ways individuals have constructed their desire for recognition, association and protection within the teaching profession under the difficult circumstances of education in South Africa. Thus, identity cannot be thought about without considering the social interplay between the individual and the larger environment or community (Wenger 1998, 145).

Beyond recent attention to the role of democratic and managerial professionalism in shaping the professional identity of teachers (Sachs 2001), three important theoretical insights can be drawn from current debates: (i) the role of ‘learning communities’ (Avery 2001; Graven 2004; Wenger 1998); (ii) the role of teacher workplaces (Kostogriz and Peeler 2004); and (iii) the role of professional development or formal teacher education, i.e. the transposing of teaching skills into persons who already have the virtues required to become teachers, and as such focus their analyses on professionalism, deprofessionalisation, managerialism and the idea of vocation (Alsup 2006, 2006a; Avis 2005; Ball 2004; Beck and Young 2005; Blackmore 2004; Benjamin, Dotger, and Smith 2009; Pearce and Morrison 2011; Sexton 2008; Tsui 2007). Overall, an important controversy running through these debates separates those who emphasise the role of ‘lived experience’ (pre-teaching, ‘fictive’ and lived teacher experiences), i.e. those who recognise factors that fall beyond professional development or teacher training, from those who elevate the role of professional development. Underpinning the general conception of this paper is an attempt to reconcile these two perspectives (see for e.g. Day et al. 2007). As articulated by Sumara and Luce-Kapler (1996, 65):

Becoming a teacher involves more than transposing teaching skills onto an already-established personal identity: it means including the identity ‘teacher’ in one’s life. Beginning teachers must negotiate at least three teaching identities: those they bring with them into teacher education, those they develop while doing university course work, and those they develop during student teaching practicums. Because university and school experiences are generally only weakly connected for beginning teachers, the negotiation of these disparate teacher identities often remains unacknowledged and uninterrupted.

To these we add teaching identities developed or consolidated at workplaces and other social spaces. In this regard, the literature also offers useful constructs that have been considered in this paper. From Wenger (1998), we borrow the concepts of ‘social learning’, ‘community of practice’, ‘community as learning space’, ‘critical

friends groups' 'buddies', etc. The value of these constructs is in the assumption that 'Learning about things that are "not us" means being involved in a learning relation that informs one about himself or herself' (Sumara and Luce-Kapler 1996, 70) and certainly the choices one makes. They highlight the role of learning spaces offered by informal and formal social networks within and outside the profession in meaning construction, choice making and consequent forms of identification. These learning spaces act as a 'commonplace book' for communal interpretation of teachers' experience. As they engage with each other, interpret themselves, interpret one another and interpret their sense of community, the knowledge of their practice deepens and their understanding of themselves and how their position themselves in relation to the teaching profession changes. Schools and related institutional and social spaces may be also useful in uncovering the processes through which teachers learn or negotiate the promises of reform and their tasks and responsibilities as change agents, indeed how they become change agents.

From Wenger, we also consider what he refers to as 'modes of identification', namely: (i) engagement with others, which means that through relating ourselves to other people we get a sense of who we are; (ii) imagination, which occurs when we intellectually reach beyond the world of own networks or more specifically our communities of practice; and (iii) alignment, when bonding and bridging takes place within a community of practice. This is what enables the identity of a large group to be constructed through the alignment of actions and practices. So, we also explore the construction of teacher identity from the perspective of communities of practice.

Finally, we also found useful the notions of 'Pre-teaching image', 'Fictive image' and 'Lived image' (during the practicum). This is how Sumara and Luce-Kapler (1996, 67) explain them:

We have come to believe that beginning teachers negotiate the dissonance between their pre-teaching lives and their lives as experienced teachers with a 'fictive' identity. This fictive identity, like characters in literary fictions, is composed not only of elements of the student teacher's already-experienced world of understanding, but also of the various cultural myths associated with the idea of 'teacher'. As they learn to teach, beginning teachers negotiate at least three conceptions of self-identity: the 'pre-teaching' image of themselves as teachers they bring to teacher education; the 'fictive' image that develops while they learn to teach; and the 'lived' image that forms during their interactions with students in the practicum. Although we do not believe these exist in isolation from each other, we have found this 'three identity' formulation a useful heuristic for understanding the complexities of learning to teach and, furthermore, have found it helpful in developing teacher-education curricula that call into question the idea that one can maintain an identity separate from the role 'teacher'.

From this conceptual framework, we decided and conveniently so to place the emerging themes into three chronologically interlinked sections: pre-teaching experience, formal learning including teaching experience and workplace experience and learning communities.

3. Method

Our research strategy is rooted in the tradition of narrative inquiry – what Goodson and Sikes (2001) coin 'learning from lives' (see Altenbaugh 1992; Kreinberg and

Nathan 1991). Narrations of lived experiences offer opportunities to interpret the relations among past, present and projected events in teachers' lives, and in particular how they become teachers and remain teachers under unpredictable and changing circumstances. These include, for example, life history accounts, storytelling and discourse analysis. In this regard, using unstructured interviews with open-ended questions, the paper involved intensive face-to-face conversations with the interviewees recalling their experiences and perceptions from their childhood to current experience.

In these conversations, attention was given to critical issues with some bearing on the life experience of the teachers, namely: (i) their background to highlight their experiences before joining the teaching profession; (ii) teacher education/teacher development experience to solicit details on their training, programmes, courses and workshops attended, the difficulties faced and how these were overcome; (iii) teaching experience and the challenges confronted in the teaching profession and strategies used to address them; (iv) the interface with professional bodies (e.g. SACE) and teacher unions, and the impact of these on their professional development; (v) teacher professionalism and change to probe how they perceive themselves (as professionals or workers), what motivates them to remain or leave the profession; (vi) workplace experience, interactions with the school and government bureaucracy; and (vii) home life (some teachers live with their parents, some live in their own homes, some live in school premises, some rent flats or room where these are available, and as such they all enjoy different living conditions that may enable or interfere with their work). As Kvale (1996, 173) has suggested, it is important in such perspective that people are given the opportunity in the interview to describe their own lifeworld, their opinion and their acts in their own particular words.

Tsui (2007, 657) points out that stories provide 'a narrative thread that teachers draw on to make sense of their experience and themselves'. Particular attention was paid to different codes used in their day-to-day communication and the languages of expression in the narratives of their experiences, perceptions and understanding of these. For this purpose, the interviews explored critical incidents that might have influenced their choices and decisions with bearing on their profession (e.g. how a teacher at school, your wife or husband, or even a friend might have motivated you to become a teacher). These are very often forcefully articulated through metaphors, images, catchphrases and cultural myths – context-specific artefacts through which meaning is negotiated (Mitchel and Weber 1999).

The data for the project were drawn from a purposeful sample of 45 of the 200 teachers from Limpopo enrolled in the Bachelors of Education (B. Ed.) – Foundation Phase Programme in the School of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand. For ethical reasons, we have used pseudonyms instead of their real names. Note that, given the emphasis and the purpose of the study, the sample does not have to be representative, though there was a gender balance in the sample. The aim was to gain insights on participants' subjectivity constitution by understanding their contexts (Merriam 2009, 77). More precisely, the sampling technique was to concentrate on '*information-rich* cases for study in depth' (Patton, quoted in Merriam 2009, 77). The teachers attended a re-grading teacher education programme, spear-headed and funded by the Limpopo provincial Department of Education in an attempt to improve the groups' skills and knowledge so that they become better teachers. The assumption is that, after the B Ed course, these teachers will be competent enough to teach confidently and effectively at high school. The purpose is an

improvement of the grade 12 results in the Limpopo Province. The teachers come from different schools and districts of the province, and their average teaching experience before coming to Wits is approximately 10 years, which represents significant exposure to the teaching profession. Most of them were over 35 years of age. It is important to note that the generation to which these teachers belong has an impact on the claims they make, which may not appeal to the younger generation of student teachers: ‘each generation has its own set of values, view of authority, expectations of the leaders and the work environment’ (Henry 2006, 5 cited in Plunkett and Dyson 2011).

The data were coded and categorised to generate themes for *analysis*. The first step in this process consisted of grouping the data according to the thematic categories derived from the literature (e.g. background/biography, family experience, school experience, teacher education exposure, workplace experience, impact of professional bodies and unions, interface with the employer and government bureaucracy, networks of peers and friends, fictive images of teaching, lived images of teaching, etc.). The second entailed identifying other segments of meaning from the codes emerging from the data (e.g. teaching in former Model C schools or historically black schools, teacher in a rural community, etc.). The study entailed *horizontal analysis* to freeze patterns and trends of themes across stories of all participants, and *vertical analysis* of each story to keep individual stories ‘intact’ by theorising from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases’ (Riessman 2008, 53). For Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett (2008, 9), this analysis has the advantage of providing ‘*entrées into the black box of subjectivity* by exploring its ... social [and cultural] dimensions’. Instead of lengthy narratives that would not serve any meaningful purpose for our argument, we have selected most expressive and data-rich quotations.

Pre-teaching experience: images of teachers, teaching and the imagined self

In his account on the seven *Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey 1989, 98) makes the point that the path to success is to begin with the end in mind to start with a clear understanding of your destination; or ‘to know where you’re going so that you better understand where you are now so that the steps you take are always in the right direction’. While this may be true for individuals with a sense of aligned ambition, i.e. capable of setting goals and devise suitable strategies for achieving them, they escape the imagination of an average high school graduate imagining the teaching profession in South Africa. We use the term of pre-teaching experience to refer to the contexts, the circumstances and the experiences through which they begin to imagine their role in the teaching profession and to develop awareness and an idea of teaching as job or profession. It is within this stage of life experience that individuals develop a conception of self-identity in relation to teaching and/or the ‘pre-teaching’ images of themselves as teachers, which they bring to teacher education.

We consider images here in the context of the mechanics of constitution or reconstitution of the self through a struggle ‘in and by words’ (Spivak 1988, 272) in the sense that images and representations of the self, the intellectual construction of a group’s self are not neutral intellectual activity; they are action and practice with profound implications for the affirmation of desire, interest and career paths. Representation is used here in the sense of ‘speaking for’ (as in politics) yourself.

Determining these images were positive experiences that attracted them or shoved them into teaching, which reflected different identities shaped by particular individual circumstances. In the case of the Limpopo teachers, reason for turning to teaching as a career was multifaceted, complex, at times emotionally charged, and contradictory: ‘to get a good job’, ‘to face new challenges’, ‘to provide a service to society’, ‘to make a worthwhile contribution to my community’, ‘to make a difference to the lives of young people’ or ‘to give something back to society’, and so forth. Besides positive identities, there were few cases of those who appeared shoved into the teaching field and still doubt their teacher identity.

(a) Family influence: ‘... [Father] saw a teacher in me’

Accounts about family influence were varied, indicating nonetheless that the family has played an important role in shaping their choices about the teaching profession: ‘I was influenced by my father and all my brothers and sisters who are teachers; it was the simplest thing that we can do’ (Thabo). The same applies to links to family members in the teaching profession as articulated by the following teacher: ‘My wife is currently a teacher as well, so I got this desire of teaching in fact through seeing what she is doing, through helping her here and there marking the books and looking at everything they are doing ... motivated [me] to fall in love with teaching’. (Isaac) This is not to deny instances where family members displayed strong opposition to teaching as a career: ‘My mother used to tell me that I must become a nurse instead of a teacher because of certain problems [I would face if] I became a teacher ... Because I do not have money ... I wanted to be a nurse, ... they did not admit me there; that is why I became a teacher’. (Sipho) Or, ‘I do not like this career ... I do not have money to do other things’. And ‘they did not admit me at certain places ... My mother used to tell me I must become a nurse and not a teacher but because of problem I became a teacher’. (Daniel) Family pressure can sometimes be disastrous:

In fact I did not want to be a teacher ... even now I do not want to be a teacher. When I passed my diploma I worked in brewery but my father said ‘no I want you to work for the government’. Because of the lack of knowledge, he did not know there is no money in teaching. I have been pushed to teach. (Zanele)

Cultural traditions have in particular exerted significant impact in case of girls:

My father did not want me to do teaching because in African culture a woman has to be married and have kids but my mom supported me but at the end of day they gave me money to continue studying. (Margaret)

Given the historical prevalence of the teaching profession alongside nursing and police service as blue colour jobs for blacks, the role of *direct family members* (parents, siblings and spouses) as *role models* and *sources of inspiration* cannot be underestimated. Borrowing from Wenger (1998), we argue that it is the constant vertical alignment (across generations) and horizontal alignment (across the family nucleus) of actions and practices that has enabled these teachers to frame positive pre-teaching images that inspired them to move into teaching. Under such circumstances, linking and bonding with family members seem to take precedence over other considerations, in making career choices. As already alluded to, family

pressure can be driven by market or utilitarian reasons (teaching as a better paid job when job opportunities are minimal), social justice reasons (plough back to the community), and so forth. Overall, the family represents a critical space where the ideas about teaching as career path obtained from the experiences in schools, the community/village and the media (e.g. radio and TV) are confronted and negotiated into career choices. Particularly in a rural context, it is also the site where ‘career choice’ is legitimised as *a highly gendered issue* following the prescribed roles for boys (who are allowed for more open choices to earn their living) and for girls (who must get married and reproduce the family). In this regard, the family exerts a decisive influence on one’s idea to pursue teaching as a career, particularly when family members include teachers.

- (b) Owing it to the community: ‘I felt that it was best for me to give back to the rural area where I grew up’

Choosing a career is very often linked to one’s *moral obligations* to the community: ‘I felt that it was best for me to give back to the rural area where I grew up, the community that nurtured me; I felt like part of that community’. (Ntsiki) This commitment to the community appears more salient among teachers from rural areas, where people have very strong relationships and a stronger sense of belonging to the community: ‘I decided teaching because of my disadvantaged background, so I thought of my community, ok’. (Jane) For the minister in the community: ‘it offers me even the opportunity to continue with my pastoring ministry since we do have this school vacation during the course of the year so I see myself as a teacher for life’. (Isaac) As elsewhere in Africa, it appears that communal life in rural villages in South Africa has a strong sense of ethics embedded in it, which, though not always consistent with social justice and human rights of the modern world, is nonetheless instrumental in building strong bonds within the community around important civic duties, namely solidarity, cooperative relations amongst community members and the need to contribute to the community. The perceived moral obligations towards the community serve as a proxy for non-market-oriented identities and emphasis on humanitarian and social justice rationales in imagining career paths. This is particularly emphasised within those communities where the role of teachers is recognised.

- (c) Accessibility of career choices: ‘There was no other choice’

Many teachers opt for teaching after failing to access these and other lucrative careers such as engineering, law, business and IT: ‘I grew up in a village where the most important jobs were considered to be a nurse, a police and a teacher. Those are the highest [paid] jobs but when I went to school ... other people who had potentials, who were geniuses and ... could do accounting, physics and maths, went to do better things like accounting, doctors, in my time’. This is eloquently articulated here:

Firstly, and foremost, I never wanted to be a teacher honestly enough. I initially wanted to be a social worker but because of financial constraints in family I could not afford to take me to university. So my 2nd option was going to the college to train as a teacher. I realised later that I have passion for teaching when I get deeper in the job especially working with the young children. (David)

No, it is just that because colleges are around our home village, so (for) everyone who passes matric and has no finance to get to the university college it is the last resort. That's why I became a teacher ... but now I developed this sense of appreciation ... (Margaret)

'No, I wanted to be a climatologist. Because of my poor background, I had to go to nearby college'. (Thabiso)

Currently, nursing and police services are increasingly perceived as less accessible careers compared to teaching. Limpopo teachers also allege reasons ranging from *lack of career guidance, lack of knowledge for career opportunities* ('we did not have people having to come to give us more information about other professions ...'), the *geographic advantage or proximity of teacher education colleges* ('The education college was in our village then that's the reason why I attended' (Nkosi) and *constraining socio-economic conditions* ('I like the job now, but initially I wanted to do nursing, but I did not [get] enough money to go to a nursing college'; or 'Actually I did not want to be a teacher, I was denied admission; I wanted to do law'. (Jessica)

(d) School context: 'Now you cannot tell a learner to become a teacher; they do not want'

For some teachers in the study, the idea of taking up teaching was sparked by *idolised images of teaching and teachers* which they formed when they observed their teachers teaching them: 'In my secondary level I was very much interested in seeing a teacher teaching in class. I saw myself doing that. I like to help and play with the young ones.' (Naledi) They went on to categorise their high school teachers as 'good', 'entertaining', 'inspiring', 'role models', etc. More notable in this regard is the image of teachers as agents of social change:

I want to take these learners somewhere. I want to see our black learners going somewhere. (Dudu)

Yes I think I like teaching ... I thought that I can teach the kids something collective and make a difference ... I want to help black learners and I want them to be educated. (Seepe)

What I like about teaching is that you can turn someone into a better person. (Chika)

... Even my former teacher used to tell me there is no money in teaching but you can make a change ... and even at church, they motivated us not to leave teaching because learners are suffering. Those old teachers ... are not able to click and change exactly as the education system in S.A ... is changing yearly. (Zanele)

While placing emphasis on the positive images that attracted them into teaching, some teachers were depicted as 'boring', 'rude', 'incompetent', images linked to horrifying stories: 'Actually I am not sure that I am a good teacher because I do not like this career ... What I dislike the most is the way the teachers behave at school. They used to beat me. That is why I do not like this career ...' (Sipho)

Some of their experiences at school made them realise that *teaching was a challenge that could be confronted successfully*: 'After ... matric, I was a private

teacher for 2 years ... I saw that I was going to be successful if I became a teacher' (Dudu). Or, 'Before I joined the teaching profession I thought about it ... I considered the passion for teaching first when I got the opportunity to help learners to get their answers. I saw ... that I can do it and that's it'. (Dudzile) For others, working with learners gave them the *necessary motivation* to become teachers: 'Before I went to a teaching college I had to do private teaching for four years, from 1987 to 1990 ... and this thing motivated me to be a teacher and because, I taught in lower grade there, when I went to tertiary (college) I was motivated to do junior primary from there yes I qualified and ... became a teacher'. (Ntsiki). In some cases, the experiences *gave them a 'feel' of what teaching is about* (some of its complexities) and that seemed to have marked the beginning of the development of their teacher identities:

I got a job as private teacher. It was confusing ... I did not know what to do; what was expected; I just worked for the sake of earning money so that I can survive. During that time, I got motivated and I went to school to study for teaching ... then I think after training I thought I can work as teacher because I knew that I am ready to teach ... (Margaret)

Some of this exposure took place within the family context: 'My wife is currently a teacher as well so I got this desire of teaching in fact through seeing what she is doing, through helping her here and there marking the books and looking at everything they are doing. This motivated [me] to fall in love with teaching'. (Isaac)

In the school context, students are exposed to a variety of teachers with a diversity of teaching styles with whom they forge different relationships, some good and inspiring and some bad and alienating, and ultimately develop an awareness and images about the nature of 'teacher' work. The significance of the imaginary of teaching was well captured by Hayes (2003) who uses the following metaphors to refer to the main ways teachers can be perceived in the classroom: (i) 'performers' to refer those teachers 'who sparkle in front of children, but because of their poor organisation or weak subject knowledge, fail to carry out their good intentions'; (ii) 'pedants' for those teachers 'who are knowledgeable about the subject, but lack the creativity to motivate children to learn'; and (iii) 'inspirers' for those teachers 'who are able to combine all the qualities'.

An important insight suggested by the data is that beyond this evaluative categorisation of teachers as a form of coming to terms with their own aspirations, the idea of teaching as a career choice was very often triggered by the possibility of practicing some teaching alongside their teachers. These experiences give them the opportunity to confront what it takes to be a teacher in terms of personal ability, responsibility and suitability, which shapes their pre-teaching images, or in other words, how they imagine themselves as teachers. Positive or negative and very often expressed through analogies and metaphors, these images are instrumental in the choices that individuals make about the teaching profession.

(e) Overall

Some theoretical insights are worth noting. First, the narratives provided by the participants about how they got into teaching place emphasis on the role played by positive pre-teaching images surrounding their early life experience in schools

(school environment, the nature of teaching materials and the social status of teachers), family and their communities. Particularly in schools, learners (as social agents) in schools (as fields of social practice) position themselves towards teaching through their categorisation of teacher practices ('boring', 'entertaining', 'inspiring', 'alienating', etc.) and in doing so create constructs, which come to play central role in the development of a teaching consciousness. Second, the opportunity to observe and most importantly experiment teacher's work within the family or schools was a primary motivating factor. By assisting other learners, they placed themselves in the role of teachers and, therefore, pressured to articulate imagined 'professional beliefs, negotiate compromises, and feel the tension of professional boundaries' (Benjamin, Dotger, and Smith 2009, 162). Their accounts suggest that their experiences in such encounters helped them in imagining their professional identities. However, the circumstances that generate these positive images and the status of the profession in the wider South African society have changed dramatically. The conditions in schools, particularly historically black schools, are increasingly becoming very unattractive. Union activity, which has entailed constant demands for improvement of working conditions (whether legitimate or opportunistic), through *toyi-toying* (*stay-ways*, strikes and school disruptions) is shaping a negative image of the teaching profession. This is articulated in a somewhat dramatic way by one of the teachers: 'now you cannot tell a learner to become a teacher; they do not want' (Themba).

4. Getting to know how to do the job

Getting to know how to do the job is a critical and decisive stage in the process of becoming a teacher. It comprises two complementary and related processes, the transposition of knowledge, skills and attitudes embedded in the teacher education programmes, and the lived teaching experience provided through the practicum, well known as school teaching experience. It entails mastering different forms of knowledge (background knowledge, subject knowledge and theoretical knowledge), pedagogy (knowledge of the methods of teaching and learning, pedagogical content knowledge and pedagogical reasoning and action), an understanding of the educational context (socio-economic context, policy and policy environment) and reflexive practice as well as suitable attitudes and values. In other words, it entails an understanding what is to be learned, how it is to be taught and under what value and social circumstances. Two important dimensions are important in getting to know the job: (i) formal teacher education (pre-service education); and (ii) continuous professional development programmes (in-service).

The importance of teacher education in professional identity construction cannot be overestimated. It shapes teachers' ambitions and expectations in new ways while introducing them to new regimes of professional life, though not always strategic to their career success. The work of Bernstein (2000, 86) shows beyond doubt how orderings of knowledge (knowledge structures) and forms of pedagogic transmission have consequences for identity and identity change for both practitioners and learners. Socialisation into differently structured knowledge domains has different consequences in this regard. Bernstein (2000, 86) also shows that, while particular historical circumstances are among the competing determinants, professional commitment and its accompanying sense of inner education – core elements of academic and professional identity – have also their origins in the structuring effects of the professional knowledge base inculcated in teacher education.

We thus argue that teacher education requires more than the imparting of specialist expertise (knowing what to teach and how to teach); but it should also involve a strong normative grammar. Given the deeply entrenched apartheid education legacy, such grammar should transcend the narrow considerations of performativity and profit driven by neo-liberal market discourses, and embrace strong ethical responsibility towards the learners. We concur with Beck and Young (2005, 188) that teacher education may require ‘intensive socialisation into the values of a professional community and its standards of professional integrity, judgement, and loyalty – in other words, *the creation of a professional habitus*’, or the dispositions and pre-dispositions to enable them to navigate successfully throughout their professional journey.

Some genericism at the level of skills, which could include, for example, problem-solving skills, team work and other key skills, may also be required to sustain the degree of flexibilisation of teachers to respond to the complex national (e.g. social and institutional diversity) and global pressures (e.g. information and technological revolution in education) in the teaching profession. However, as Bernstein (2000, 3) has warned, it is important, however, to recognise that emphasis on generic modes runs the risk of silencing teachers by denying them the forms of knowledge that allow for alternative possibilities to be thought through, rooted in the teachers’ conditions and experiences at the workplace. If not considered with the necessary precautions, it could certainly de-professionalise teachers.

(a) The role of teacher education: ‘A good teacher comes from the colleges’

The statement in the title is quiet revealing in so far as the conceptions of the participants on the role of teacher education are concerned. Having undertaken their initial teacher education at a college Simone had the following to say: ‘Now I am equipped, I feel like I have got lot of method and techniques to do certain things’. For Margaret, ‘a good teacher is (one) who knows what is expected from him or her ... knowing how to prepare before going to class, know the strategies and how to handle and motivate the learners’. Similarly: ‘I think I am going deeper into the mind of the child, with more strategies and methods, I can apply especially the issue of discipline; I realised the lack of discipline in our school. We do not focus so much on trying to motivate the learners themselves, make them aware, their self-awareness to build their self-esteem. They feel they are worthless; that’s why some of them get into misbehaviours they are exposed to’. (David)

Surprisingly, most participants see teacher education as a process of *induction into the method of teaching*. They perceive pedagogy as the most vital discourse in teacher training. It equips them with *tools to deal with disciplinary problems* they face in schools, including class management skills. These are dimensions of teacher education that were given primacy by the ‘didactics’ curriculum of the college model. It placed particular attention to child caring or ‘child upbringing’, a key pedagogical principle in the doctrine of Fundamental Pedagogics rooted in the Afrikaner nationalist ideology, well known as Christian National Education. Although this principle seems to have been reconstituted into the pastoral role prescribed by the Norms and Standards for Educators, it has not yet been embraced in the new teacher education dispensation. Within the apartheid strategy, child upbringing translated through a strongly framed visible pedagogy or didactics was designed to socialise children into the values, culture and social life of the different ethnic groups. Most of the teachers interviewed in this study are products of college training.

Consequently, not all the participants appreciate the programme they are attending at Wits University which in their view will not enable them to confront the specific challenges faced in their schools. The reasons, it is argued, are related to the lack of emphasis on how to cater for children. Interestingly, they articulate their dissatisfaction with the Wits model perceived as too academic by comparing how colleges and universities prepare teachers:

We have methods; lecturers at the courses are working very hard ... here at Wits concerning the methods ... but the standard there at the colleges is better than here, here the academic is more than them. (Chika)

I acquired lot of knowledge in terms of how to plan and manage the class ... That is the kind of knowledge the college taught me. (Jessica)

... I did not know how to deal with kids but the college taught me how to take care of children. It also equipped us with many skills I think I am good in caring for children. (Kibashni)

They marvelled the art of teaching they got during their training at college level, particularly the child-centred approaches, the emphasis on the planning and preparing their teaching (didactics) and caring for children.

The college legacy seems also to be related to the particular value placed on the lived experience provided by the practicum or teaching experience at Wits University. We picked from the data an expressed appreciation of the teaching practicum and the feelings of self-doubt, instability or even increasing confidence, which, to borrow from Benjamin, Dotger, and Smith (2009, 162), come along with the inevitable code-switch from the language of student to the language of the teacher. The participants pointed out that they grew professionally from the whole exercise. They learn to recognise and deal with diversity and adversity they encounter in schools: 'The schools, which we go to here are different from those in Limpopo'. Contextual complexity is mapped out through comparisons between the schools where they undertook the practicum and their own schools. They test different pedagogical strategies: 'We [get] different teaching styles, we grab from them; I think we are going to excel when we go back home' (Seepe). As one teacher put it:

The teaching practice ... that we do has made me now a better person. I do understand what really I have to do as a teacher in a classroom situation or in school situation. I get to understand exactly what teaching is all about, unlike when I desired to become a teacher but I was not after all aware of what is expected of me more especially in this new curriculum and statement. But now the teaching experience ... has helped me a lot ... (Isaac)

Lived experience provided by the practicum enables them to confront their pre-teaching and fictive images of teaching to position themselves more firmly in the teaching profession.

The legacy of OBE had the effect of gradually de-centring modernist conceptions of education that associated teaching and learning in schools with formal transmission of structured content knowledge through pre-conceived and prescribed methodologies that teachers had to master in favour of postmodernist forms of knowledge generated through constructivist, experiential, informal and reflexive epistemologies. As a result, with the failure of OBE, teacher education has become

a field of fierce contestation between three competing discourses. First, to fill the gap left after the demise of OBE is a discourse articulated around the question of ‘What to teach?’ reflecting a battle over the structures and forms of content knowledge required under the new curriculum and the relevant forms of integration, which warrants a re-examination of the role of teachers and the nature of their professional knowledge (Bash 2005). The second is a discourse surrounding the question ‘How to teach?’ manifested in the battle over the role of pedagogy in the classroom, more specifically the role of teachers as facilitators overemphasised under OBE and the role of teachers as educators. The third concentrates on the pastoral role of the teacher. It is not surprising that most of the teachers covered in this study expressed concern about the apparent neglect of strategies informed by the last strategy. We argue that the three discourses are important for framing sound teacher education programmes. Policy prescriptions and teacher education institutions need to strike a balance between the three discourses.

(b) Continuous professional development: ‘you become a new person everyday’

To support their continuous professional development in schools, the participants expressed their involvement in a variety of formal and informal activities such as workshops, short courses, seminars and informal chats of one form or another. For most of them, these made them better teachers: ‘The workshops will help a lot about teaching strategies and the resources ...’ (Pityana); and ‘Workshops and training make a teacher to be good’ (Pillay). However, some of them regarded them as waste of time and resources and preferred teacher interactions, especially those done through action learning activities in teachers’ own learning communities as critical in the development of teachers. These, they argued, enhance teachers’ skills, knowledge and attitude as they share ideas and, in the process, they grow emotionally, socially and personally.

5. The impact of the work place: ‘if I have to stay in a school, I would stay in a school like that one ... for the rest of my life’

The development of a professional self is dependent on the situations each novice teacher is placed within and on the degree and manner in which the novice teacher engages with that environment. In this regard, we reserve particular attention to the workplace. At the workplace, participants found a podium for competing and contradictory scenarios. Some of these are perceived as *source of motivation*: ‘It really helps a lot in breeding me as a teacher they motivate me trying to stay in the profession; if I struggle they help me out’ (Sibongile). This is particularly motivating when the *interaction between the principal, staff and learners is healthy*: ‘it was excellent the interaction which exist between the principal and the staff and learners; it was really exceptional so if I have to stay in a school I would to stay in a school like that one ... for the rest of my life’ (Queen). The unstable policy environment and their interface with state bureaucracy has been a source of frustration and demotivation. They referred to the top down reforms which place considerable demands on teachers: ‘Other thing is the way the Department is treating us ... [with] curriculum changes the people who are suffering the most are the teachers. You go for different training, you go for OBE, NCS, and RNCS, we do not know. We are suffering. They are not coming straight to us to workshop us’. (Margaret) To mention also

negative scrutiny of their work by the society at large leading to the blaming and shaming of teachers, and eventually destroying their credibility in the public eye: ‘... even myself I will not encourage my child to become a teacher it is just slavery, you get nothing. In past teachers were recognised by community and society. Today ... no one is respecting the teachers’ (Ntsiki). What do we make of these conflicting experiences?

Central for understanding the role of the workplace in the construction of the professional self are the concepts of *situated cognition* or *learning* (Lave and Wenger 1991) and *negotiated meaning*. Broadly, *situated cognition* suggests that identity takes shape and grows in complexity as an individual engages with new experiences, situations and activities. Under such conditions, *negotiation of meaning* around the new experiences, situations, environment and activities becomes an essential part of negotiation of self. Teachers enter the workplace when they are in the process of ‘constructing and reconstructing their sense of professional self (the values, purposes and practices that make up their identities as teachers), that they are most vulnerable’ (Smethem 2007, 469). Of importance to our argument is the fact that teacher constructs regarding the workplace drew our attention to the role a healthy social interaction between school managers, teachers and learners, spaces for *negotiation of meaning* as important sources of motivation. Constraining teacher’s motivation are factors such as lack of support by school management, poor remuneration, scarce teaching resources and indiscipline in the classrooms. In this regard, the teachers wish for managers who can operate as change agents working responsively and sensitively with teachers and for continuous learning opportunities in schools.

6. The role of learning communities

Learning communities have been an object of interest among those who approach teacher identity formation from the foundations of situated cognition, social learning and identity in community of practice (Benjamin, Dotger, and Smith 2009, 161). In this regard, participants’ constructs place value in:

- *Mutual support from colleagues*: ‘[The] staff ... were very supportive, they were supporting me where I had difficulties’ (Nokunlulelo); ‘It is very good, we sit together during break and they help when I need help’ (Barney).
- *Sharing of ideas*: ‘We plan together every lesson after school. To share we are very open, if one has problem he comes and shares, then we assist’ (Casper).
- *Linking with other teachers*: ‘We sit together during the break and talk about the learners’ problems and the needs of the school, issues related to our profession, and how to help the society’ (Nkosi).
- *Bonding between teachers*: ‘To other teachers they treat you like a teacher, like them, when they need help they come to me’ (Daniel).
- *Bridging between teachers*: ‘If I have a problem, I will go to them and ask where I don’t understand and they will help me because they are much more experienced’ (Jessica).
- *Teamwork*: ‘... in teaching we must work as team maybe form a a cluster, plan lessons together, share ideas on how to plan a lesson. In our school, if there is something that is not well with me, I talk to other teachers’ (Nokunlulelo).

The constitution of learning communities reflects the social energy teachers are able to mobilise. For newly qualified teachers, participation in a learning community has the potential of precipitating the construction of their identity through group intellectual and academic engagement. Wenger (1998) ties together his theory of learning communities with the concepts of *negotiated experience* within a community of practice and reflection of the meaning of this experience as well as *community membership*, or affiliation to the social contexts where professional experiences take place for which novices must develop the techniques and master its language and procedures. For him, identity is a collection of ‘what we think or say about ourselves ... what other think or say about us, ... and a lived experience of participation in specific communities’ (Wenger 1998, 151). We concur with Wenger (1998, 85) that as locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relations, shared knowledge and negotiation of enterprises, ‘such communities hold the key to real transformation – the kind that has real effects on people’s lives’. They provide *common spaces* and *resource networks* bonding, linking and bridging the knowledge gaps between teachers on the specific challenges they face in their schools, and promote professional growth. These nested systems support individual and collective effort to emerge and evolve within the dynamics of shared spaces.

7. Conclusion

The article has argued that professional identification is not just an outcome of transposition of teaching skills or how teachers negotiate the discourses of democratic and managerial professionalism, but also a product of complex contextual processes through which meaning is negotiated. Central to these processes is the role of ‘lived experience’ (pre-teaching, ‘fictive’ and lived teacher experience), including participation in both formal and informal professional networks and the networks outside the sphere of the teaching profession (communities, friends, buddies, etc.). As Benjamin, Dotger, and Smith (2009, 162) have correctly highlighted, professional self occurs ‘at the intersection of their professional training, their own experiences as students, the teachers whom they hope to model, and their tacit images of classroom teacher’, which place the new teachers in a position where they must organise and make meaning of their past, present and future experiences in order to construct an individual and coherent professional identity. Engaging with the experiences and the ‘teacher images’ that individuals develop throughout these processes could be instrumental in developing awareness about the centrality of self-change and the role of teachers as agents of change.

Thus, it is also argued that professional identification is essentially *an act of transformation*: negotiation of meaning through competence, affiliation, membership, participation and legitimacy of access to practice. These are key features of the appropriation and ownership of meanings in a learning community. In this perspective, teacher education in general and learning how to teach in particular have remained in many instances a mere transposing of teaching skills onto persons who have the virtues required to become teachers. The project of teacher education has been conceived as one of transposition rather than transformation (Sumara and Luce-Kapler 1996, 67). The challenge in teacher education in South Africa is of making teacher education part of this process of transformation. This paper proposes consideration of a reconciliation/hybridisation of the roles of the tripartite facets namely, lived experiences, teacher education/development and workplace and social

space in the curriculum for teachers' lifelong education. It is envisaged that in so doing, adequate attention is given in the entry phase, development phase and the teacher experience phase to realise transformation in teacher education.

The argument points to need to go beyond narrow conceptions of professionalism that ignore teacher identity or just subscribe to notions of ascribed identities which negate subjectivity. It also points to the need for research into the sites, moments and processes through which teaching consciousness and teacher identities are negotiated. The paper itself represents a tentative framework for such a research agenda. We need a deeper understanding of the role of the background and biography of student teachers, the school context where student teachers come from, the community and social networks that have influenced their lives, the impact of teacher social and educational networks, the complexities of the workplace as we conceptualise teacher education programmes.

Learning to be a teacher increasingly requires the ability to engage with the complex processes through which meaning is negotiated over the shaping of teacher identities. This would require an awareness of and deeper understanding of the different and competing discourses that shape teacher professional identity at school, community, workplace and teacher education environments. Teacher educators should facilitate learning moments and learning experiences that recall the experiences from those processes as teachers confront their pre-teaching images (fictive images) and their subjectivities through learning and teaching practice.

Notes on contributors

Michael Cross is a professor currently teaching courses in educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Johannesburg. He has been awarded teaching and research fellowships in several institutions including the Johns Hopkins University and Northwestern University. He is the holder of the 1912 Africa Award for Outstanding Mentors of Educational Researchers. He is author and co-author of several books, book chapters and numerous articles in leading scholarly journals. His book, *Imagery of Identity in South African Education, 1880–1990* (Durham, Carolina Academic Press, 1999), contextualises some of the issues discussed in this article. He has served as an education specialist in several major national education policy initiatives in South Africa, such as the National Commission on Higher Education and the Technical Committee on Norms and Standards for Educators.

Elizabeth Ndofirepi is a PhD student currently working on her PhD thesis on “Campus experiences of undergraduate students: does it matter to student achievement?”

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