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### **Understanding Teacher Identity within subjectivity and Agency: Implications for an African Pedagogical Advancement**

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#### **Abstract**

The study is premised on the assumption that identities are not static entities, but forms of selves subject to change with time and space in that the study of teacher identity is subject to different interpretations because it involves processes, experiences, and practices which are attached to historical circumstances of individuals who become subjects. Given the multiple factors

exist about what it is to be a teacher, individuals face with multiple possibilities available in the contexts and the extent to which they are capable of producing and influencing their own contexts to suit their expectations is determined by the extent to which the contexts they inhabit support multiple subjectivities which are influential to their own identities. The aim of the study is to explore how images, metaphors, and cultural myths negotiate individual experiences in the identity formation. The main argument put forward in this study is that the study takes seriously into account not only the external barriers (structural factors) but also the individual experiences of constructing teacher identities particularly in the domains of subjectivity and agency, an approach that tends to neglect identity construction as critical factor.

**Keywords:** *Subjectivity, Agency, Identity, Images, Metaphors, Cultural Myths*

## **Introduction**

Teachers quit teaching fraternity for different reasons. This has been attributed by various constraining structural conditions including poor salaries and benefits (SADTU, 2004; Kruger, 2002; Badenhorst, 2003), school violence (Gibbs & Sinclair, 2005), persistent overcrowding and lack of resources (Carrol, 2003; Lee, Ostrosky, Bennett & Fowler, 2003), corruption (SADTU, 2004; Kruger, 2002; Leach, 2002), gangsterism (Dreyer, 2002; Dolombisa & Porteus, 2004; Wilde, 2002), sexual abuse (Dreyer, 2002), lack of professionalism, (Badenhorst, 2003), poor recruitment and retention (Mona, 2004); and corporal punishment (Dolomisa, & Perteus, 2004) to mention but few.

Thus, more research focusing on meanings attached to experiences and its setting is needed. Lief, Baker, Mori, Egan-Lee, Chin and Reeves (2012) suggest that more also need to be uncovered pertaining to how teachers understand themselves, interpret experiences and draw meanings from them, as well as how they present themselves and wish to be perceived and recognized by others in the professional schooling fraternity. Similar sentiments are shared by Brew, Boud, Crawford & Lucas (2017) who suggest that more needs to be known about the schooling as a sites of social practice where there is interplay between the school, the working lives of teachers, what they do, what they think and about profession as networks. Given the multiple dimensions exist about what it is to be a teacher, thus this study takes seriously into account not only the external barriers (structural factors) but also the individual

experiences of constructing teacher identities particularly in the domains of subjectivity and agency, an approach that tends to neglect identity construction as critical factor.

### **Aim of the study**

Since other studies pay less attention to teacher identity as the narratives of experiences and meanings attached to being a teacher in a school (structure) versus individual's beliefs and values (agency) as determinants of work behaviour, job attitudes and loyalty to schools. Too much emphasis is on structural factors at the expense of experiences and subjectivity, which does not give adequate focus to issues of agency and identity. The overarching aim of the study is to explore how images, metaphors, and cultural myths negotiate individual experiences in the identity formation.

### **Significance of the study**

The study is significant because it has uncovered a peculiar insights in the discourses of identity formation and serve as a springboard for other researchers, policy makers and made necessary contributions in the existing debates.

### **Analysis, discussions and findings from literature**

So far, I have identified the multiple *structural factors* of schooling environment that influence the teacher experience. Thus, these alone cannot explain the multiple experiences which individuals have. Experiences are disintegrated and often determine by the individual (Deem & Brehony, 2000) so that it is possible for more than one individuals working in the same department, with the same head of department to have competing experiences. To understand these differences, I consider an element of *subjectivity*. In this study, the word subjectivity means a person's perception of the self, as constituted by and mediated through language, culture and society (Mikula, 2008). Therefore, the subject is said to be constructed by social and cultural discourses.

Individuals are subject to the school discourses that they come across in the schooling context. These discourses determine and constrain who

they may be. It is evident that schooling involves constructing subjects, that is the discursive construction of subjectivity (Green, 2005). Discourses are the building blocks of subjectivity of which a particular configuration is called identity (Mikula, 2008). It is argued that subjectivity and identity are both used in explaining experiences of schooling context. Scholars around identity formation and individual experience include (Christiansen & Slammert, 2005; Dison, 2004; Green, 2005; Johnson, Lee, & Green, 2000; Lee & Williams, 1999; Lesko, Simmons, Quarshie, & Newton, 2006; Malfroy & Yates, 2003), to mention but a few. Identities resemble the manner in which individuals describe themselves. In the next section we explore how images, metaphors, and cultural myths negotiate individual experiences in the identity formation.

### *Images*

Images are integral elements which display or portray a range of meanings to individual experience and to convey those meanings to other people and are thus open to reconfiguration and reinterpretations overtime (Weber & Mitchell, 1995). It is for this reason Kelchtermans (1993) submits that they are integral elements of oneself *memory* in the construction of subjectivity and identity. In the same vein, this is in support of the views of Britzman (1986) who observes that teachers bring past and present memories in the schooling context that may frame differently their future identities. Arguably images negotiate individual experience which may be communicated to others in the form of actions and practices (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). It is evident that images are embedded on human experience which may produce multiple subjectivities in the identity formation, hence people carry past memories which inform present memories and ultimately determine their future aspirations (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988).

Therefore, it within this context that their past memories of schooling as learners, as well as in their own early teaching careers assist teachers to create images about teaching fraternity as journey of their life long career. In what ways do images construct identities? We should think instead of identity formation as an ongoing process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation (Hall, 1994). An individual's sense of belonging to a particular group, thinking, feelings and behaviour can also be referred to as identity. While individuals or groups can be identified by

certain characteristics, they can also be given their identity by certain symbols. The use of racial stereotypes can help to identify an image or give the underlying message that an object conveys. The study is based on the assumption that examining personal identity through images benefits individual self-awareness. This conscious reflection permeates beyond self to allow individuals to expect and build relationships with others to embrace the concept of shared beliefs of ones' own identity and to acknowledge multiple identity perspectives using images. Individuals should be afforded the opportunity to explore real life interests and concerns of becoming a teacher. Exploring these issues can lead to a personal transformation, thus identity formation.

### ***Metaphors***

Metaphors play integral role in the identity formation in that they are characterization of a reality in the form of graphic, visual, and physical representation to understand certain reality in a meaningful way (Dickmeyer, 1989). On the one hand, Bullough (1991) observes that individuals applied personally meaningful metaphors for their work, which derived from their lived experiences. As per Provenzo, McCloskey, Kottkamp & Cohn (1988) they may assist in making sense or display meanings and understanding to a particular experience which may frame differently future identities. It is against this background that metaphors play a pivotal role in displaying what is desired through creating images which produce subjectivity in the identity formation. In understanding how metaphor shapes identity formation, we seek out personal metaphors to highlight and make coherent our own past including schooling experiences, our present activities and our future aspirations of becoming a teacher with the hopes and believes of overcoming the constraining structural conditions along the way. This implies that understanding your own plans, hopes and dreams demonstrate individual own metaphors that make sense of our own sense of agency in teaching fraternity. Self-understanding requires unending negotiation and renegotiation of the meaning of our experiences to ourselves including whether to remain or quit the idea of becoming a teacher. It involves the constant formation of coherences in our lives, coherences that gives new meaning to old experiences including to remain focus or refocus to our predetermine goals of becoming a teacher. The process of self-understanding is a continuous

process of construction of new life stories for ourselves as anchores by Lakoff & Johnson (1980).

### ***Cultural myths***

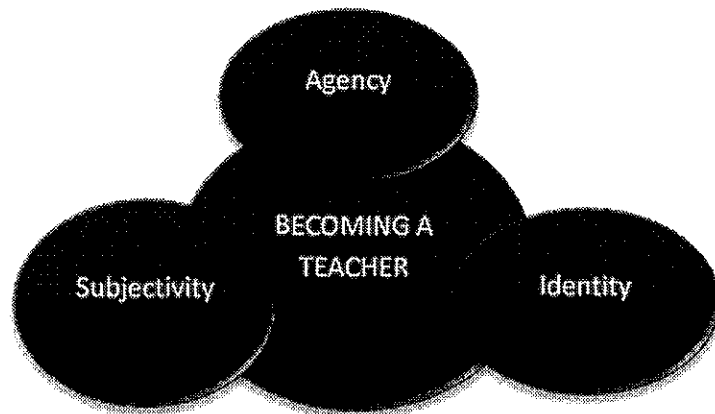
Given the integral role of metaphor in the identity formation, Britzman (1986) argues that *cultural myths* are attached to different contextual issues including individual experiences and structural contexts in framing differently the identity formation. They represent visual, descriptions and rationalization for believes, hopes and dreams which sustain a normal opinion of the reality it intends to aspire. Some of the myths she deconstructs depicts the individual's abilities and capabilities of the classroom management, and the individual's knowledge expertise. She warned that myths, images and metaphors are thus closely related and it may be difficult to extrapolate them clearly (Britzman, 1986). Individual human agency is most evident in the construction of identity. In the traditional constructionist school of thought, culture is not merely escalated to historical legacy, however it is a recipe of the mixture of past and present identities (Nagel, 1998). Hence cultures are not static entities in that they are imitated, reconfigured, reinvented, and rebranded. It is for this reason that the importance of human agency in the identity formation is not always a conscious act because in denying a particular societal association in so doing a person is constructing a new identity unaware. Just as most people view cultures through primitive way, this implies that they are constructing alternative identities unaware (Nagel, 1998). Nagel (1998). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, cultural myths are attached to individual experience and school context and metaphors associated to images derived from the experiences.

### **A conceptual framework for understanding the becoming of a teacher**

The literature review so far has given us some concepts that are very useful to capture the process of the identity formation. Thus, this section brings together the concepts and deliberate them as a frame for unpacking identity formation. There seems to be different opinion of identity formation. On the one hand, there are those who advocate the idea of identity formation as classification of the self as an occupant of a role in terms of the meanings and expectations associated with the

teaching role and its responsibilities (Burke & Tully, 1977; Thoits, 1986). In contrast, there are scholars whose argument is that identity formation as meanings attached to social group with similar views and identifications (Hoggs & Abrams, 1998). Differences between these two perspectives seem to signal some ideological tensions among scholars. One that gives emphasis on the self as occupant of particular role and the other that focuses on social group. The issue, then, becomes how to understand the becoming of a teacher out of these two perspectives, given that both of them offer pertinent insights on the process of how identities are constructed. There is a possibility of reconciling these two perspectives by looking at how key concepts speak to each other from one perspective to the other.

The perspective that emphasises on the schooling context rests on the notion of cultural factors from which identity formation is negotiated. More precisely, identities are said to be constructed through discourses (narratives) such as ambition, autonomy, enjoyment and commitment on what it means to be a teacher (Down & Warren, 2008). These discourses also include stereotypes (Davies & Harré, 1990; Hytti & Heinonen, 2013), metaphors (Davies & Harré, 1990; Wee & Brooks, 2012), and images (Davies & Harré, 1990). Identities are also said to be produced through discursive practices such as beliefs and practices in the processes of de/identification with others (Rigg & O'Dwyer, 2012) and practices of self-making and being made (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Moghaddam, 2014). In this study, both cultural factors, that is, discourses and discursive practices should be viewed within the specific context in which identity is constructed.



(Source: Adopted: Matsepe, Cross & Maluleke, 2019)

The above conceptual framework builds on the assumption that becoming a teacher is a continuous process depending on an individual's subjectivity in relation to social structure, more precisely, schooling context and the social context. In that sense, it seems pertinent to think that there are cultural factors in both schooling context and social context. So, to understand how identities are constructed, the key concepts guiding this study are: identity, subjectivity, and human agency as the above diagram illustrates. These concepts speak to cultural factors of both social context, that is society at large and the schooling context, that is, teaching, learning, learners, and schooling at large. As one of the integral guiding principles of the study, subjectivity is used to explain the range of experiences that individuals have. As per Deem & Brehony (2000) experiences are fragmented and often depend on the individual so that it is possible for two or more teachers in the same curriculum department to have very different experiences. To understand these differences, the study turn to the concept of subjectivity. As explain by Mikula (2008) the concept subjectivity can be understood to mean an individual's perception of the self as constituted by and mediated through language, culture and society that is produced by social and cultural discourses.

In this study, the concept is used to understand how social context positions teachers and how teachers position themselves towards schooling context on becoming a teacher. Ultimately, subjectivity helps us to understand processes, experiences, and practices through which teachers are made and make themselves when they are exposed to discourses of cultural factors of both social context and the schooling context. Discourses and discursive practices allow for multiple possibilities of subjectivity of which a particular configuration is called identity, that is who am I. Thus, identity is a temporary fixing of subjectivity that is the space of potential identities (Mikula, 2008). This distinction is not always clearly spelled out in the literature and subjectivity and identity are both used in explaining experiences of teachers in this study. In this study, discourses include stereotypes, metaphor and images that are used to describe experiences and processes of becoming a teacher. Some of these factors include descriptions of a teacher as someone who has ambition for growth, commitment, passion, and has autonomy. As far as discursive practice, it is understood as a set of beliefs and practices that mediate how teachers make choices based on



experiences of socialisation either to be like those with whom they are related or to be something different from what they were socialised with.

Thus, the structural elements are not static entities in the sense that teachers as actors in the system may navigate or maneuver through to change them, depending on their own sense of agency in that in turn influenced by the discourses of the contexts and the subjectivities they produce, teachers may be able to a) change a context to make it more conducive for themselves; b) change the configuration of the context; or adapt their own identities to align to the existing context. In this study, the context is understood to be a set of factors that influence processes and experiences of becoming a teacher. It is used to refer to the constraining structural factors of becoming a teacher within a particular time, places, and social space. Finally, these set of concepts guiding the study frame it to capture schooling experiences teachers navigate or maneuver through and how discourses mediate the becoming of a teacher as journey of self-discovery and life-long career.

### **Conclusion**

The study is premised on the assumption that identities are not static entities, but forms of selves subject to change with time and space in that the study of teacher identity is subject to different interpretations because it involves processes, experiences, and practices which are attached to historical circumstances of individuals who become subjects. Given the analysis, discussions and findings from literature, the main argument put forward in this study is that too much emphasis is placed on structural factors at the expense of individual and collective experiences particularly in the domain of subjectivity and agency, an approach that tends to neglect identity formation as critical factor. The study concluded that experiences and meanings are negotiated through images, metaphors and cultural myths in the identity construction. Finally, the study is significant because it has uncovered a peculiar insights in the discourses of identity formation and serve as a springboard for other researchers, policy makers and made necessary contributions in the existing debates.

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