

# **Teacher Professional Development in an Era of Global Change: Discourse on Teachers' Identities as an Emerging Area of Teacher Professional development**

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## **1. Introduction**

Teacher professional development faces a major challenge worldwide but the challenge is most acute in sub-Saharan Africa. According to UNESCO (2010) estimates, 10 million teachers are needed worldwide to meet increasing enrolment due to positive progress with the Education for All goals. Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) alone requires about 4 million quality teachers at the primary level by 2015 to fill existing posts and new posts created to reach universal primary education. This is only part of the story. We are not including the teacher requirement needed to meet the increasing expansion of secondary education.

To complicate matters, the relentless advance of technology and the diminishing half-life of knowledge coupled with the drastic changes in the world economy place new demands on education from the business world. Graduates from the school system are required to think creatively, innovatively and critically; solve a range of problems, work in teams, and communicate clearly. They are also required to have certain basic literacies –financial, economic, business, information, ICT and media if they are to meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Teachers will have to acquire and be well-versed in these skills themselves, if they have to teach them to their students.

Meeting these demands in SSA will not be easy, as teaching in SSA is inundated with a number of problems including the following:

- Teaching, in the eyes of the public, suffers from what has been described as ‘chronic prestige deprivation’ which tends to repel excellent students from enrolling. Entrants into teacher education therefore come from the bottom quarter of qualified candidates (i.e., those with weak grades), thus making teaching the last resort for them.
- The morale of teachers is low due to poor salaries, conditions of service, inadequate teaching and learning resources, and lack of incentives. Their commitment to the teaching profession is therefore weak;
- There is a disjuncture between theory as taught in teacher education institutions and practice in the field that deprive teacher education of its mission;
- Limited capacity of the traditional face-to-face teacher training institutions in producing teachers at the scale required;

- Shortage of teachers due to an ageing teacher workforce ready to retire, deadly effect of HIV/AIDS on the teaching corps, and the migration of teachers to more lucrative sectors of society and/or other countries resulting in brain drain;
- High percentage (SSA average is 23%) of untrained teachers. This varies from country to country and can be as high as 85% in Togo, 65% in Chad, 50% in Ghana and 49% in Nigeria (UNESCO, 2010)

All these have contributed to a decline in the status of teaching and the teaching profession. Indeed, the role of the teacher together with the status of teaching as a profession has changed over the years; most especially, the demand and expectation that the society or community places on teachers has changed. The primary role of teachers in Africa is threefold: act as models to students and the communities around them; take responsibility for moral education; and encourage student learning. The third role however is overtaken by the need to pass exams for purposes of social mobility rather than learning for greater productivity. These roles delineate the teacher identity landscape. The high moral standards and the great respect and authority teachers used to wield seem to be things of the past now. Teachers have been reported to have engaged in examination malpractices, absenteeism, sexual harassment, rape, theft and the like, which tarnishes the teaching profession and their own self image.

## **2. Professional Development and Teacher Identity**

In Ghana and many other African countries, various measures have been or are being put in place to arrest the declining status of teaching and to pursue ways of attracting and retaining committed and talented teachers. Most of these measures have not succeeded in addressing the scale of the challenge. It is my candid opinion that part of the solution lies in the elusive concept of teacher identity that is not much talked about in teacher professional education programmes in sub-Saharan Africa. My experiences in Ghana and other African countries tell me that the development of teacher identity comes as a by-product and not the planned focus of teacher development programmes.

The figure below (modified from Eisenschmidt, 2006) shows that there are three dimensions to the professional development of the teacher, namely, the professional knowledge and skills dimension, the social dimension, and the personal dimension. The corresponding activities associated with the dimensions are developing teaching competences, socialization in school and in the profession, and cultivating professional identity.



Figure 1: Theoretical Foundations in Teacher Professional Development

The growth and development of the novice teacher in these three dimensions take place within an educational, political and socio-economic policy environment. The teacher's professional growth is influenced by the three dimensions as well as the prevailing policy environment, which is also influenced by global issues such as the new demand for 21st century skills, and the use of technology in teacher education. An effective teacher education programme creates a balance by placing appropriate emphasis on all three dimensions. However, the emphasis currently placed on 'developing teaching competences' in most programmes in SSA results in the neglect of the personal dimension, giving the impression that becoming a teacher is only a matter of developing the appropriate skills and competences. This reduces teacher professional development to skill development thereby relegating personal identity, which is key to the effective professional growth of the teacher, to the background.

In this presentation, I shall look in general terms at what we mean by teacher identity, factors that shape teacher identity, and the way teacher identity is developed. I shall then use the teacher education programme at the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) Ghana as an example of how one institution is using different strategies to foster the development of teacher's personal and professional identities.

### 3. Individual Identities

Individuals have their own identities which have been developed as a result of history and experiences. A person's identity is fluid as it changes within the environment or context the person finds him/herself. One moment, you are a teacher, another you are a student, a mentor,

friend, a parent or a classmate. These roles are different from one another – the life of a parent is different from that of a student, mentor or teacher. The way you talk as a teacher is different from the way you talk as a student or parent. So one can talk about an individual having a teacher identity, mentor identity, student identity or parent identity. The transition from one identity to the other can however be stressful.

#### **4. What is Teacher Identity?**

Teacher education admits people from different social, linguistic, ethnic, cultural backgrounds and gender orientation to become teachers. Such people need to cross socio-cultural and other barriers as they learn to be teachers. But how do we prepare such individuals to become teachers? What support structures or strategies are provided for them to grow into teachers? Teacher development programmes in Ghana like most other countries in SSA incorporate the following five elements: subject knowledge, knowledge of students (child psychology), foundation courses, methods of teaching and immersion in field-based experience or practicum, which fall within the three dimensions mentioned earlier – knowledge and skills, social and personal.

A missing area of focus in teacher education programmes is helping the individual to know him/herself and his/her role as a teacher (personal dimension). Questions such as ‘Who am I?’ ‘How do I see myself?’ and ‘How do others see me?’ are not raised; rather group-identity questions such as ‘What do I have to do as a teacher?’, ‘How do I act as a teacher?’, ‘What qualities do teachers have?’ and ‘How do I achieve these?’ take centre stage and drown out the question of self or teacher identity. The development of a teacher’s professional identity therefore comes as a by-product of teacher education programmes rather than a targeted outcome. Unlike Western countries such as Australia, the USA and Canada where teacher identity has received much emphasis and research, teacher identity is only now emerging as a subtopic within the field of teacher professional development in Africa and has therefore not received much research focus.

According to Ball and Goodson (1985), teacher identity refers to both the personal experience and role of teachers in a given society. It thus includes the subjective understanding of individuals who engage in teaching and how others perceive them. It is the product of the competing conceptions of the rights and responsibilities of teachers and of our different ways of understanding what teaching effectiveness is. Personal identity is the knowledge of self – strengths, weaknesses, attitudes, beliefs and values - while teacher professional identity is the interplay of this with the knowledge of the role of the teacher. The personal or individual identity interacts with cultural experiences to create a teacher professional identity or collective identity. Marsh (2002), sees teacher identity as a process of social negotiation, strongly shaped by our experiences as students and deeply rooted in historical and contemporary constructions of power. The teacher’s intellectual, emotional, moral, social and aesthetic qualities as well as the people who surround him/her are critical here in developing the professional practice of the

teacher. Knowing yourself is as critical to teacher development as knowing your subject, your students and your pedagogy. Good teaching comes from within a person. The inner landscape of a teacher's life is therefore critical to the teacher's effectiveness in reaching his/her students. Until you know who you are as a person you cannot grow as a teacher and a person. For example, developing a passion for teaching comes from knowing yourself and reaching out to students with your soul. The following quotation from Palmer (2010) emphasizes this:

*Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness ... .. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror, and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self- knowledge – and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject.*

Thus a person's identity is how s/he sees him/herself and how others see him/her. As a student on practicum, you are a teacher to the students you teach, but to your supervisor and mentor you are a student who is learning to teach. Your identity as a student is different from your identity as a teacher.

## **5. What Factors Shape Teacher Identity?**

Teacher identity is not a fixed or coherent set of traits but something that is complex, often contradictory and subject to change across time and space (Morgan, 2004). The development of a teacher's identity is therefore a continuing and dynamic process (Cooper & Olson, 1996). Teacher identity is shaped by the interplay of internal discourse - personal characteristics and experiences - and external discourse - cultural context, relationships, and interactions.

These internal and external factors range from personal experiences, pedagogical beliefs, media images, and pre-service instruction. Knowles (1992) identified four factors, which have an influence on the development of teacher identity by pre-service teachers. These are:

- Role models
- Previous teaching experiences
- Significant education classes
- Childhood experiences about learning and family activities.

Other researchers have indicated that a teacher's gender, social class, race, culture and his/her relationships with his/her colleagues and students are significant in shaping his/her identity (Morgan, 2004). The teacher spends most of his/her time with students, colleagues, and family members among others. His/her identity becomes shaped by the interaction and discourses s/he shares with these significant people.

## **6. How Can Teacher Identities Be Developed?**

Many novice teachers and teachers in training find themselves looking for techniques and tips for staying alive in the classroom. As important as methods of teaching may be, the most practical way of ensuring our teaching is well rooted, is to have an insight into what is happening inside us, our inner terrain. Teacher education emphasizes techniques rather than the inner self. Thus, teachers may teach without the inner self showing up. Until the inner self is developed, teaching becomes deprived of passion and commitment and may only be a routine, mechanically controlled by techniques of teaching. To develop teacher identity, we must find different ways to allow the teacher in us to show up. Good teaching requires the development of teacher identity. It is teacher identity, shaped by child centred discourse and socio-cultural discourse, that should inform the choice of pedagogy (Marsh, 2002). To achieve this we must talk to each other in all truthfulness – a risky thing to do in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant and the abstract (Palmer, 2010). However, it is not easy telling the truth about ourselves as many teachers fear exposing themselves publicly and becoming vulnerable. So rather we erect walls to prevent others from knowing who we really are. The ‘personal’ is thus separated from the ‘professional’ even though the two are inseparable.

Han (2005) describes the transition from a student identity to a teacher identity as a “challenge of a metamorphosis”; achieving success during this phase requires approaches that stir up the personal identity of the teacher. The approaches that have been used to promote teacher identity include metacognitive strategies and reflective practices (the keeping of reflective journals and portfolios), mentoring, action research, peer group discussions, and the creation of communities of practice. Some of these will be touched on in the next section.

## **7. Developing Teacher Identity at UEW**

I will now describe an aspect of the four-year teacher education programme at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana that attempts to give some attention to teachers’ personal and professional identities. This is the student internship programme (SIP) which is a partnership arrangement between the university, schools and the Ghana Education Service. The partnership converts the schools into professional development schools. The SIP which is a year-long immersion in the school system (currently modified to a 3-month programme) has the following components:

- Institution of a mentoring system in partner schools,
- Introduction of a portfolio as a tool for appraisal and reflection,
- Development of a teaching philosophy,
- Use of action research as a tool for reflection on ‘native theories’ and
- Involvement in community activities.

The SIP seeks to immerse student teachers in the practical ‘know-how’ of teaching but

at the same time it helps them to learn to develop their identity as teachers. The pedagogy underpinning the SIP allows for considerable emphasis on metacognition and reflective learning strategies, which challenge and enhance the development of constructs concerned with 'being a teacher' (Graham & Phelps, 2003). As noted by Flavell (1976), metacognition is knowing about one's own cognitive processes, and actively monitoring and regulating these processes in the pursuit of goals. Reflection as an aspect of metacognition is "the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern brought about by an experience which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective (Palmer, Burns & Bulman, 1994, cited in Graham & Phelps, 2003). Reflection allows the teacher to continually reconstruct his/her professional knowledge in response to changing imperatives, demands and expectations of 'being a teacher'. Thus student teachers engaged in reflection become active participants in their own learning, constructing and reconstructing their knowledge.

I will now look at the various aspects of the SIP that promote the development of teacher identities. These aspects are mentoring, portfolio development, teaching philosophy, action research, and community involvement.

### ***Mentoring***

The mentoring system at UEW involves the use of trained mentors (experienced teachers) in providing support to student teachers during their internship or practicum experience. The internship can be very stressful for the novice teacher who therefore needs someone to support his/her growth. The mentor teachers support the new teachers in a number of ways. They provide new teachers the opportunity to reflect on their beliefs concerning the content and pedagogy; provide on-going, collegial support to help combat their sense of isolation; assist novice teachers to come to terms with the context of their teaching situation; and assist them to deal with their conceptions of teaching, learning and teachers (Fox, 1995). Mentoring enables the teacher to use metacognitive and reflective strategies in his/her teaching. This enables the teacher to dig deep into his/her own knowledge system and critically confront issues as they relate to the different environmental inputs. Opportunity is given to them to stretch their imaginations and critique their assumptions about the teaching/learning process and about teaching as a profession. The teacher comes to grips with his/her own values, weaknesses, strengths, attitudes and re-adjust them to be able to deal with the context in question. But it also provides the opportunity for the student teacher to talk to someone (mentor) about his/her inner life.

### ***Portfolio development***

Involving student teachers in developing portfolios provides the opportunity for them to engage in reflective writing throughout the duration of their teaching. Student teachers were encouraged to record their reflections on their teaching experiences. This makes them active participants in their own learning. The reflective process engaged in by the teacher enables him/her to continually reconstruct his/her professional knowledge and identity in response to changing contexts. Interviews organized at the university at the end of the internship also allow

student teachers to reflect on the content of their portfolios and how it has influenced their practices and identities as teachers.

### ***Teaching philosophy***

Before student teachers proceed to their internship programme, they are asked to state their teaching philosophies. These philosophies are a product of their historical experiences as students, their perception of teaching and teachers, family view of teaching, books read, and interaction with colleagues. As they go through the internship, there is an interplay between this initial view and the new experiences acquired as the student teacher interacts through instruction with his/her students, with the mentor, with his supervisor and with his colleagues. These interactions shape the student teacher's identity. This is then related to their teaching philosophies at the end of the internship. Again this provides the opportunity for them to challenge their assumptions and their professional teaching identities.

### ***Action Research***

Action research enables the student teacher to conduct a small piece of research and intervention study in the school aimed at addressing an important issue in his/her class or the school. It could be something to do with the misunderstanding of a topic or concept. This is discussed with the mentor and university supervisor for their approval and input into the inquiry. This inquiry activity engages the student teacher in reflective activities that help to develop his/her identity as a teacher. It provides opportunity for the student teacher to challenge his or her teaching strategies, approach to intervention, and assessment approach, thereby making him/her creative.

### ***Community Involvement***

Community involvement pertains to the participation of student teachers in activities outside the classroom such as parent-teacher association activities, sporting activities, staff meetings, involvement in teacher professional activities, and engaging communities around the school to execute a project. Community involvement helps to extend the student teacher's critical reflection to cover areas beyond the classroom.

## **8. Conclusion**

In developing teacher identities, student teachers face situations that create tension, which they have to deal with. A major tension is being oneself (a student) and trying to fit into the role of a teacher; being the educated and the educator. Further tension occurs where teachers find themselves placed in positions where they have to implement contradictory policies and demands made on education. These demands come from all angles – political interests, pressures from academia, curriculum experts, global trends and forces, ideological paradigms and sectorial interests. For example, a teacher's adherence to sound pedagogical practices



for students' learning is countered by the expectation to prepare students to pass high stake national and international examinations. Such tensions tend to lead teachers to re-negotiate their own identities. In doing this individual teachers do not just respond to these demands in their teaching in a totally objective way; they bring their own ambitions, desires and preferences to the teaching and this shapes their identities.

To help teachers develop their identities, teacher professional development programmes should encourage the creation of situations that foster metacognitive and reflective practices. In addition, these programmes should make teacher identities an area of focus. A teacher who teaches without a full realization of his/her identity lacks the passion and excitement that teaching requires.

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