A Conversation of Teachers: In Search of Professional Identity

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Abstract

The authors describe teacher professional identity as lived experience in the context of educational change. Adopting activity theory and its genesis in cultural historical theory (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004) as a framework, the article discusses the way teachers see themselves as professionals and how they compose their identities in schools, the educational space, which is their workplace. Activity theory is utilised as the broad theoretical lens and the design type and methodology are discussed accordingly. The school and the classroom are activity systems (Engeström, 1991), and social and semiotic ecosystems (Lemke, 1995). It is therefore in the tensions within the activity system that we capture and represent a constructed teacher conversation, composed of the voices of three social actors on an imaginary social stage, which is the empirical text of the article. Main findings speak to multiple roles, struggling voice and forging professional identity in the changing educational landscape.

This article attends to teacher identity as lived experience in the context of educational change. In a young democracy such as South Africa, teachers play a critical role in educating the youth and advancing the social collective good. We argue that, in a society where the social capital divide is increasing, teachers are one of the last hopes for the young from especially rural and poor township communities. Adopting activity theory and its genesis in cultural historical theory (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004) as a framework, the article discusses the way teachers see themselves as professionals and how they compose their identities in schools, the educational space, their workplace. This workplace is neither fixed nor static, but a site for intersecting networks of relations, technology (tools) and practice which extend in complex interrelations beyond what is seen as the institution (McGregor, 2003). All of these aspects are enlarged in a society in transition where there are numerous structural and semiotic changes.

The guiding research question for this inquiry relates to what constitutes the identity of three teacher participants and how the negotiation of identity interfaces with the ethnographic characteristics of the schools. That said, the purpose of this particular inquiry as part of the larger study[1] is to capture the *lived experience of three teachers* and to construct *identity portraits* that have been negotiated with them. The larger study involved 12 researchers visiting 10 schools in the northern part of South Africa. These schools varied from rural village schools to inner city schools, townships schools, informal settlement schools and farm schools. For the purpose of this article, the authors produced data of three teachers, to construct a conversation, using teachers' voices to explore their respective identities as negotiated within the educational landscape in transition. Teachers were purposively selected, based on their experience and number of years in education. Empirical data were analysed for ethnographic, thematic content in grounded theory mode, after which we searched for discourse markers that would reveal *social action* (Van Dijk, 1997). A prominent theme of "struggling voice" in the educational space of complexity points to culture and identity in flux.

In the process of working the data and implementing the design of the larger project, we used activity theory as our broad theoretical lens and discussed our design type and methodology accordingly. Our vantage point was that the school and the classroom are activity systems (Engeström, 1991), and that they are also social and semiotic ecosystems (Lemke, 1995). It is thus in the tensions within the activity system that we capture and represent a *constructed teacher conversation*, consisting of the voices of three social actors on an imaginary social stage, which is the empirical text of this article. In addition, we explore and explain data themes and indicate the discursive invocations.

Framing Identity Theoretically

Activity theory is the analytical framework of this study, and also frames the larger project. We employ it as an analysis tool of identity representation in the activity system of the schools where the teachers work. This means that we examine the teachers' activities, the types of physical tool/mental models that they use in these activities, the goals and intentions of those activities and the outcomes, and/or artifacts with the educational space (socio-cultural context) in which they operate. According to Van Vlaenderen and Neves (2004), Vygotsky's approach to activity is that it is historically located and that it requires individual internalisation and uses various mediational means, such as linguistic and numerical systems, maps and technical drawings, as well as language and other semiotic devices. Mediated action is therefore the unit of analysis. Teachers' actions, we argue, are mediated by history, and by the social semiotic ecosystems (activity systems) in which they struggle to find "identificational" meaning (Fairclough, 2003). Engeström's (1991) explication of an activity system includes socio-culturally mediated action in an environment comprising various (analytical) components

including, a subject, an object, an outcome, a community, tools, rules and division of tasks and power.

According to Stetsenko and Arievitch (2004, pp. 475-476), the research on the self, which would imply identity, has evolved toward "…viewing the self as being embedded within sociocultural contexts and intrinsically interwoven with them…human development is located not 'under the skull' but in the process of ongoing social transactions". This development does not negate individuality, which is distinguished from individualism (Hargreaves, 1993, p. 241) and, additionally, it is a view that also integrates well with activity theory as frame of the inquiry. In this view of human activity, learning and development, individual subjects act in a complex system of actions, tools, members, rules and a community (Engeström, 1991). The individual identity, therefore, is the composite of activity in context and space. From the perspective of activity theory, schools (and classrooms) can therefore be seen as activity systems that are connected to other systems, each within which there are tools and contexts. We acknowledge that traditionally, according to McGregor (2003), schools have been considered as bounded containers in which professional identities of teachers are shaped by practices and social interactions. Of late, however, schools have been recognised as complex systems embedded within the wider sociocultural networks. This implies that teacher identity emanates from multiple lived experiences and sociocultural histories that converge. Forging identity is in the becoming in the interaction between tradition of the workplace and the flows of meanings, values, and discourses (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2004).

Furthermore, we understand the concept of identity to be formed and characterised by a number of aspects such as cultural, political, societal, economic, racial, ethnic and religious features (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Beijaard et al. argue, "identity is not something one has, but something that develops during one's whole life" (p. 107). Identity is socially constructed throughout one's life, as individuals interact with people and society at large. Put in another way, identity varies in different contexts. It is not a fixed attribute of a person, but a relational phenomenon (Beijaard et al., 2004). Also, identity is negotiated, shifting and ambiguous, the result of culturally available meaning and the open-ended power-laden enactment of those meanings in everyday situations (Sachs, 2001; Melluci, 1996).

Gee (2001, p. 99) offers another view on identity, namely identity as an important analytic tool for understanding schools and society. More specifically, he claims, the "kind of person" one is recognised as being at a given time and place, can change from moment to moment in the interaction (activity), can change from context to context, and, of course, can be ambiguous or unstable. Identity in his view therefore is recognised as a certain kind of person in a given context, and in that sense all people have multiple identities, "connected to their performances in society" (Gee, p.

99). He develops a perspective of identity built around four perspectives on what it means to be recognised as a certain kind of person. He views identity as nature, institution, discourse and affinity. The institutional and discourse perspectives are useful to map our activity system and to interpret our conversational data. Issues such as authority, power, and position have to do with institutional identity, the official identity of our teachers.

Methodological Choices

The design type (Henning, with van Rensburg, & Smit, 2004) of this inquiry is an ethnographic case study (Brewer, 2002; Delamont, 2001; Carspecken, 1996) with elements of narrative, (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cortazzi, 1993; Riessman, 1993) in the constructivist-interpretive paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 22-27). The school culture and teacher identity are ethnographically portrayed. As part of the larger project, three schools were purposively selected, which were sites in the northern part of South Africa. In the staged and constructed conversation, which follows we present the schools as scenes from the educational landscape. The three teachers are the (social) actors and through their voices, predominant themes from the landscape are presented as the outcome of the data analysis. Thus, the thematic content is composed in a dialogue.

We use data gathered through field notes and analyses, covering a variety of methods, such as passive and non participant observations (Carspecken, 1996), informal conversations with participants, narrative interviews (Wengraf, 2001), photo data (Wang & Burris, 1997), artifacts from the schools, such as vision and mission statements, newsletters, and journal entries of one school term. We visited the schools regularly, approximately twice a month, and spent the days in the schools "hanging around", observing classes as well as staff meetings, making field notes, transcribing informal conversations and interviews. These interviews were conducted mostly between classes, when they had free sessions and during breaks. Data were analysed for ethnographic thematic content in grounded theory mode, (Brewer, 2002; Delamont, 2001), discourse (Rogers, 2004), and narrative, (Roberts, 2002) to give thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of the schools and portraits of teacher identity. We collated these data and set the stage of a workshop of the Education of Department. Making sense of the dialogue we adhered to the warning expressed by Carspecken (1996), that as researchers we can only offer some *possibilities*, to reconstruct meaning. We use activity theory as a broad theoretical lens to shed light on possible data themes (including discursive trends) and interpret these using the notion of *D-Identity* (Gee, 2001) for an in-depth elucidation of teacher identity. This approach enabled a discursive analysis of identity, to clarify how teachers forge identity in their work environment, which shifts beyond the boundaries of what is normally known as *school*. The immediate environment, and far beyond, shape the

teacher's perception, meaning, work ethics, commitment, compassion and enthusiasm or apathy in their daily engagement with the learners.

A Constructed Conversation of Three Teachers

The conversation that follows is constructed by the authors, based on the data sourced from interviews, informal conversations, observations and journals. As such this is a descriptive presentation that captures a typical day of teachers and their activities. It also speaks to identity narratives in their daily professional lives. We purposively selected segments of texts from the raw data to construct this conversation. Content and discourse are as close to the raw data as possible to re-present this discussion as truthfully as possible of teacher lives during educational change. The reader is exposed to composed clips of the raw data in the format of a conversation. To this end, the conversational text is not interrupted; instead it speaks for itself, although reconstructed from raw data. The discussion follows after the conversation.

The scene
While attending a compulsory Saturday workshop presented by the Department of Education on assessment implementation, the three teacher participants are enjoying a break, eating sandwiches and drinking tea. Shepherd, Naledi and Coral (pseudonyms) are our participants. Each participant works in a different educational setting, which portrays three distinct contexts of education in South Africa. What follows are narrative descriptions of the respective educational landscapes and narrative portraits of each teacher.

Shepherd teaches at a school situated in a Black Township, which is attended by Black learners. This school has overcome a number of hurdles in an attempt to become an outstanding educational institution. This is evident in their vision and mission statement, which communicates: quality education enhanced teaching and learning, improvement and progress, transformation, equity, redress and *ubuntu* (humaneness). Neatness and cleanliness characterise the school and management and staff take pride in the appearance of their school. The gardens are well maintained and set the surroundings of beautiful lawns with trees and flowers. Access to the school premises is controlled with an electronic gate and by gatekeepers. This control is reminiscent of a Military camp, where the army general gives permission for visitors to gain access, an inevitable measure brought on by the increase in crime in the country. Although state schools have opened their doors to all groups, this school's population has remained unchanged – still serving the Black population living in the area.

Shepherd is in his late thirties, softly spoken, casually dressed and teaches senior phase in the primary school. He is worried about the implementation of the assessment

policy, lack of resources and promotion possibilities, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate training in terms of Outcomes Based Education (OBE) and curriculum implementation, and unmotivated learners – he thinks about Pietzo, one of his learners, who was once again late yesterday and omitted to do his homework, like most other learners. Shepherd is concerned about his own future as he contemplates leaving the profession, due to feeling inadequate in teaching a subject he was never trained for. He thinks back to the situation where once again he had to go to the city library for lesson preparation, due to the lack of resources and textbooks in his own school. Although he feels disillusioned, he sees himself as father, guide, and as role model for his learners as well as a caregiver.

Naledi teaches at a school in the Gauteng Province, close to the border of Mpumalanga Province. The parents of the learners prefer to send their learners to schools in the Gauteng Province, as opposed to Mpumalanga, because, they say, resources and delivery are better managed in the Gauteng Education Department. The school is situated in a very poor area, combining mostly rural elements with typical township elements, including informal settlements and short term squatting areas. Learners attending the local secondary school come from extremely poor households, often having very little or nothing to eat, and are not in the position to pay school fees. The learner enrolment of around 1900 students (in year 2005) exceeds the physical capacity of the school, which results in overcrowded classrooms. Noticeable is the reasonably well maintained garden, with a few flowers which add some colour to the brownish brick building. The school grounds are fenced with a strong and heavy security fence; a "security guard", although not in uniform, watches the school entrance, which is the only access point.

Naledi is in her mid-forties, has been teaching for twenty years and has been head of the department of Biology for six years. She is neatly dressed in a black sweater, coloured skirt and flat shoes. She presents as a powerful, knowledgeable and assertive woman, takes pride in being an examiner for Grade 12, and facilitates workshops in the district for Year 12 Biology teachers. Whilst drinking her tea, she is concerned about her matrics (Year 12 learners), who are without their teacher today and write exams very soon. She realises that time is limited for covering all the work in time for the examinations, in light of the fact that the learners have no textbooks and therefore rely only on her for content knowledge. She too is contemplating her future as a teacher, as she reflects upon the incident she had with the headmaster, where he failed to recognise all her efforts of preparing the Year 12 learners for the final matric examinations (K-12 finals). In spite of this, she prides herself in being "an old horse" at what she does. She takes courage from the realisation that she has to "be the light" and "think about God's work, teaching as God's work, His calling".

Coral teaches in an Afrikaans primary school, which was previously funded by the government and now only partially subsidised, situated in a quiet residential area in a predominantly White middle to lower class suburb on the outskirts of Johannesburg. She is proud of her school, which has been in existence since 1936, initially starting off as two separate schools and integrating into one in 1983. She is concerned about the social and economic decline in the area, as the mines in the area have closed down and blue collar workers have lost their jobs, as squatter camps arise and petty crime increases and worklessness prevails. In the mornings she drives to school along a fence with the barbed wire before entering the electronic gate. Unfortunately this gate and the security fence did not keep the computers safe from two burglaries. Theft is a big problem in the area.

Coral experiences the staff of twenty-two as one big family and knows most of the stories of the nearly six hundred learners, having experienced one sibling followed by the next in her thirty years of teaching. She is in her fifties and has been teaching for thirty years, at the same school. She is a tall, outgoing, vocal and energetic woman, who is casually dressed in black slacks and a navy sweater with slip-on leather clogs. Whilst talking to the other teachers, her mind wanders to the posters for the open day that she still needs to collect this afternoon after this workshop. She also reflects on the tree-planting day they had at the beginning of the week, and how poorly the parents' evening was attended at the end of that same day. Furthermore, after this workshop, she needs to prepare for the fundraising meeting later that evening, and she realises the salaries of the two governing body appointees need to be discussed – an urgent matter. She equates herself to an octopus, where even eight "arms" are not enough.

Coral I wonder what time this workshop will end.

Shepherd I hope it won't drag on. I heard one of the presenters saying that we will be finished by three.

Coral I hope they will be more prepared this time. The previous workshop I attended was not very good.

Naledi I wish they would present us with information that can actually make a difference. How do they expect us to learn if they themselves know even less than we do? The Department is quick to say that we are not doing our job, but they should look at themselves before pointing at us. I need to get my learners through grade twelve for if I don't, they are quick to say that the school is not doing it's job, pointing a finger at us as teachers, yet I am still waiting for textbooks.

Shepherd Me too, no textbooks in my class. I have to rely on the library for information on which I can base my lessons. I am waiting for a workshop that can guide me in presenting lessons in the absence of books. The Department seems to expect one thing, but does another.

Coral Have you also had the experience of the Department saying they will come on a certain day and time and then on that day, they just fail to pitch?

Naledi It happened a couple of times.

Carol I think it's all about respect.

Naledi Not a lot of that in education, certainly not from my principal or the parents. No-one ever says "thank you". What about you?

Shepherd I know the learners value what I do, although I sometimes have my doubts. What gets me down is the fact that I am teaching a subject I know nothing about. I have to learn as I am preparing for the next class.

Naledi What do you teach?

Shepherd Science. I am not trained for it and having no textbooks is therefore a huge obstacle.

Naledi Me too. I find myself writing the whole day on the chalk board in order to give the learners the information they need for end-of year examinations. We have these nice computers, but it is of no help seeing that they are not connected and no one knows how to work with them. I would have preferred textbooks. Fortunately I am an old horse at being a Biology teacher.

Coral For how long have you been teaching?

Naledi Twenty years and I must admit, I am strongly considering leaving the profession.

Coral I have been teaching for thirty years. On bad days, I have thought about leaving, but teaching is who I am. I do not know how to be anything else. The learners make it worthwhile.

Shepherd I wish I could say the same, but the large classes, eish; I struggle to cope with all of them.

Coral How many learners do you have in your class?

Shepherd Sixty four.

Naledi I have fifty-five.

Coral Wow, listening to you I consider myself having pudding. I have twenty-seven learners in my class and I must admit, in the past it was easier for me. Teaching has changed for me in many ways. Nowadays it seems as if the parents are shifting more and more responsibility on us in educating the learners. I feel like their mother, grandmother, clown, financial organiser, sports coach, administrator and caretaker in the afternoon, which makes me feel like an octopus with too few arms and at times like scrambled eggs.

Naledi Do you also have the problem of learners coming to school without food?

Coral Yes, we have a feeding-scheme at the school and supply sandwiches to the learners and food parcels once a month. I serve on the financial and marketing committee and every opportunity we get; we try to collect some money. It seems as if the parents are less concerned about their learner's education. I can understand that if the dad has no job and there is no food on the table, school and homework is less important.

Naledi Most of the learners in my school come from the nearby farms and their parents earn very low salaries, while others do not even have jobs. A very large number of learners come from the informal settlements in the area, where the living conditions are deprived and so I find that the majority of the learners in my class cannot concentrate because they are hungry.

Shepherd Money is a problem, even for me. It seems I will get nowhere, even though I work hard. Hearing about how bad teachers are in the news also does not help. You seldom hear about the good work being done, always only the negative stories.

Naledi How do they expect us to teach when we have sick, hungry learners in class, learners whose parents have died from HIV/Aids related illnesses, learners who are responsible for taking care of their siblings, chilled-headed household and learners who have very little hope for a better future?

Shepherd I have learners in my class who are abused and neglected. There is no one to address their needs as the social services are over-worked and these learners just fall through the cracks.

Coral Listening to you I once again realise how lucky I am. I am acutely aware how the divide between the "have's" and the "have-not's" in my school is becoming bigger. In spite of it all, I have realised that there are no days that are just good or bad. Every day is filled with ups and downs, but what keeps me going, is when a child accomplishes that which he has been struggling with for a long time or when learners bring me flowers to cheer up my day. Then I feel validated and my professional life has meaning.

We end the conservation at this point and speak to similarities in the respective social ecologies of teacher practices. In the same manner that learners are confronted with barriers to learning and development[2], so too are teachers faced with the barriers of teaching. These barriers vary depending on the social and economic environment of the school. Social and economic issues, such as poverty, violence, limited resources in terms of textbooks and mismanagement of funds, overcrowded classrooms, workload and bureaucratic management pertaining to the Department of Education, set the stage for a profession that is lacking in stature and recognition. Conversely, teachers are tasked with "pseudo-parent" responsibilities to solve the ills of society. These are just a few of the obstacles that teachers encounter in their daily pedagogic activities. Furthermore, these three schools signify the South African society. The school population mirrors the society, which in spite of democratic changes since 1994 still has to cross the divide of segregation. This is evident in the schools where barbed wire and electronic fences attempt the protect learners and teachers form the escalating crime in South Africa. Against this broad background we discuss three themes constructed from the data in the following section.

Making Sense of the Conversation

Conversational data speak to the heart of what it means to be a teacher in the current educational landscape, a theme of multiple roles of being a teacher. This awareness or consciousness is located in teachers' everyday practice: they are what they do. The

teachers talk about their lives and activities in school and indicate how the "components of their activity systems" feature in their actions. Naledi refers to herself as an old horse – although she experiences little support within the school community and is confronted by numerous social barriers along with the pressure for learners to pass matric – as this will affirm her worth as a teacher – she has no seeming choice but to teach to the chalk and rely on her experience. On the one hand, Shepherd sees himself as a father, a guide and a role model. He questions what is it that he is modelling to the learners, considering the lack of resources and uncertainty about his content knowledge, which often make him anxious and insecure. He doubts his future as a teacher. In fact Shepherd experiences, "the constancy of identity [which] is called into question, thereby continuously threatening the sense of constant self that is maintained over time" (Roth, et al., 2004). Coral on the other hand, reflects her multiple roles within her school by referring to herself as the octopus "where eight arms are not enough". Even though she is confronted by a community perceived as declining socially and economically, her identity is energised by her involvement in multiple tasks for which she receives acknowledgement within the school community. She utilises the resources at her disposal optimally and as such the "…dynamic multiplicity of I-positions in the landscape of the mind, intertwined with the minds of other people" (Hermans, 2002, cited by Stetsenko & Arievitch 2004, p. 479) is integrated and empowered.

Understanding teacher professional identity in the educational space is facilitated by the activity system in that there are interaction and relations between all the nodes in an activity system. The mediated action as unit of analysis points to the fact that what the teachers do is already signified by the very space in which they find themselves. In this space, Engeström (1991) would argue there may also be contradictions or conflicts and tensions. For instance, rules and policy changes in education compel teachers as subjects to renegotiate their object/motive to create a good learning environment for effective learning. Also, tools such as textbooks and auxiliaries, to mediate learning, are absent in many schools, thus impeding the learning outcome. Teachers are active agents (according to activity theory) in their own development and professional growth but often do not act in settings entirely of their own choosing. Teaching in school does not take place on an island – on the contrary what goes on inside the classroom is not at all separate from what is conceptualised as outside, namely political, economic geographical and social forces that shape schooling (community). In other words, school and teaching cannot be separated from the external (wider social practices) as well as the internal (organisational) and personal experiences (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006). This is clearly evident in the conversation; teachers share their context of poverty, hunger and need. Schools are ill-equipped with hardly any basic learning and teaching material: we thus argue that power relations are inscribed into the material practices (here the absence

thereof) of the school. In fact, research shows (Little, 1982 cited by McGregor, 2003) that in successful, organised schools, teachers valued and participated in norms of collegiality and continuous improvement. Such practices appear to be absent for two of the three teachers as reflected by Naledi and Shepherd, where they feel isolated, not appreciated and often overwhelmed. Coral does not express the same feelings of disempowerment and disillusionment. The previous apartheid Model C schools were often well-resourced and, in spite of departmental prescriptions, had the opportunity to empower teachers to act with innovation and resourcefulness.

The theme of struggling voice in the educational space of complexity points to culture and identity in flux, characteristic to when teachers are confronted with reform (George, Mohammed, & Quamina-Aiyejina, 2003). The struggling voice is indeed apparent in the teacher discourse, which is often the case. These teachers seldom talked about teaching, rather they discussed issues *around* teaching, such as the present workshop attendance and whether it would enhance their teaching practices, lack of parental involvement, lack of content knowledge, the need for textbooks, overcrowded classrooms, workload, lack of money and the intent to leave the profession.

In forging professional identity as another theme, we consider Gee's (2001, p. 100) notion of Discourse-identity, that recognises identity in the dialogue. Naledi and Choral speak and act with authority and power. They both understand their teaching activities, for which purpose they engage the learners for intended outcomes of learning. Identity from this discursive perspective (Gee, 2001) is forged because of other teachers, learners, or the headmaster, or perhaps parents who talk to and interact with these teachers. This may be appropriated by the *community,* where teachers interact with the larger environment. Conversely, Shepherd speaks with less authority when he admits his lack of content knowledge; he does however take responsibility for his learning by visiting the library regularly to access relevant material for his teaching. Studying in the library to broaden his teaching knowledge is evidence of the multiple roles that teachers play in their profession, which often change over time. Choral also indicates the numerous roles and functions she has to fulfil (*division of labour*), which have changed in the many years she has been teaching. In fact Naledi tells us that *we must forget that we are teachers only.* In sum, this is without a doubt the struggling voice in the educational space of complexity that points to culture and identity in flux.

Concluding Thoughts

Forging identity often takes place at the margins of the educational space. We cannot offer fast or feasible solutions to all the social ills of the educational space, the workplace of teachers. Perhaps teachers could learn how to negotiate their workplace more effectively and positively. To this end an analysis of teacher metaphors on how

they refer to themselves and how they describe their power of identity within the respective activity systems (George et al., 2003) might be helpful. Improvement of learning is the ultimate goal, together with positive, inspired teachers. Such improvement can only come from within schools themselves. These diverse educational spaces and networks need to be understood much better, specifically values, beliefs and norms of school cultures. It is for this reason that we recommend further in-depth inquiries into teacher ecologies of practice, specifically where teachers are coping amidst poor and unsupportive conditions.

Endnotes

[1] This research project was funded by the South Africa Netherlands Programme for Alternative Development: Teacher identity and the culture of schooling

[2] Barriers to learning and development can be related to the learner, the educational context, the curriculum, the school and the social context which can influence the learning process (National Department of Education, 1997, p. 30).

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