Student Teachers Negotiating the Teachers' Professional Identity

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ABSTRACT Recent studies in education, especially in South Africa, have shown that teachers' professional identity is a fluid concept, which is continually changing. In this qualitative case study, the researcher explores how student teachers negotiate teachers' professional identity when facing their teaching practice sessions. Seven student teachers were used as participants for the study and the data was generated using semi-structured interviews and was analyzed using grounded analyses. Student teachers enumerated a number of challenges, which come with becoming a teacher. The research suggests that being and/or becoming a teacher is a function of knowledge about syllabus, lesson delivery, content and pedagogy. Teacher education should therefore develop programs, which will cater for all the components of teaching, making it easy for student teachers to negotiate teachers' professional identity.

INTRODUCTION

In 1997, Curriculum 2005 was launched in South Africa, which marked a breakaway from the apartheid curriculum towards democracy. It attempted to rid the education system of dogmatism and outmoded teaching practices and to put in place values and attitudes for democratic nation building (Singh 2001). The new curriculum brought with it an almost new educational process and language and a range of new demands, which most teachers are not familiar with. Hence, according to Parker (2014), OBE and the new curriculum redefined teachers' professional identity in the classroom. This trend has repeated itself with the Revised National Curriculum Statements (RNCS), National Curriculum Statements (NCS) and Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS). Singh (2001) agrees with this, as he maintains that policy ideas enacted in South Africa are, by and large, conflicting with teachers' beliefs, and as such, bring controversy. Khoza (2014) points out that educational research has neglected to focus on how student teachers struggle with new roles while negotiating teachers' professional identity. This paper therefore comes in handy to fill this gap. Beltman et al. (2015) concur with Khoza (2014) when they add that experiencing the role of a teacher or becoming a teacher has become increasingly more complex than student teachers may have initially thought. This complex role needs rigorous training to effectively navigate it. Exploring the experiences of student teachers in negotiating teachers' professional identity becomes necessary. Jourdan et al. (2016) confirm this by arguing that teacher professional identity is negotiated through technical knowledge, such as classroom management and subject expertise, which is acquired over time. This informs this research as the researcher therefore seeks to explore how student teachers negotiate teachers' professional identity so as to ascertain how best to help them to ensure that they eventually emerge as excellent teachers. According to Nhlapo (2012), becoming a teacher entails a development from student teacher to the teaching profession, and this development results in the shift in task orientation from learning to teach, in teacher education programs, to practically teaching in the classroom. It is therefore important to explore how student teachers negotiate teachers' professional identity and how these results can be used to improve teacher education. According to Schwab (2012), South Africa's educational system was ranked at 140 out of 144 countries that were graded. This points to the fact that learner performance is poor, as well as the quality of teaching and learning. As such, how student teachers negotiate teachers' professional identity needs to be explored so that teacher educators might use the results to improve teacher education in order to avoid such calamities.

Review of Relevant Literature

Teachers' professional identity is a fluid concept, which keeps changing, based on what

teachers think of the curriculum in place, and many other factors. This makes the definition of teachers' professional identity a difficult concept to define. This review will therefore define teachers' professional identity, discuss the nature of teachers' professional identity and finally discuss teacher education and teacher professional identity.

Defining Teachers' Professional Identity

Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) maintain that there is always a struggle to understand the link between identity and the self, the role of emotions and reflection in shaping identity, the power of stories and discourses in understanding identity, the link between identity and agency, the contextual factors that promote or hinder the construction of identity, and ultimately, the responsibility of teacher education to create avenues for the exploration of new and developing teachers' professional identity. In line with this, Beijaard et al. (2004) see teachers' professional identity as a complex and dynamic equilibrium where professional self-image is scaled with a variety of roles teachers feel that they have to play, while Timostsuk and Ugaste (2010) see teachers' professional identity as a continuous process of interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences, which is a notion that corresponds with the idea that teachers' professional development never stops and can best be seen as a process of lifelong learning. As such, each teacher negotiates his or her own individual identity in the course of teaching, and renegotiates it as the teaching process continues. Ruohotie-Lyhty (2013) asserts that teachers' professional identity implies both person and context. This is not entirely unique, as a teacher's professional identity comprises of diverse identities that more or less harmonize. The idea of diverse identities relates to teachers' different contexts and relationships, some of which may be broadly linked and can be seen as the core of teachers' professional identity, while others may be more peripheral. Teachers' professional identity can also be seen as an organizing characteristic in the teachers' professional lives, or as a resource that teachers use to explain, justify and make sense of themselves in relation to others, and the world at large (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009). It is therefore clear that a teachers' professional identity differs from one person to another and also

from one context to another. With this knowledge of what teachers' professional identity is, it is necessary to look at the nature of teachers' professional identity.

The Nature of Teachers' Professional Identity

Teachers' professional identity is central to a teacher's belief system that guides his or her actions and practices, inside and outside the school environment. Timostsuk and Ugaste (2010) assert that the teachers' professional identity can be considered one facet of multiple identities belonging to an individual, which comes as a result of his position within society and his own understanding of himself. To this effect, teachers' professional identity is constructed by individuals under the influence of society. Akkerman and Meijer (2011) also agree that teachers' professional identity is multiple, discontinuing and social in nature, and therefore this identity is shifting in nature. As such the teachers' professional identity changes with time, place and circumstances, such as change in curriculum. Burns and Bell (2011), adding to this, propound that teachers' professional identity is constructed and reconstructed in time and space. Since the relevance of every curriculum is determined by time, the teacher's identity is therefore shaped by the curriculum, which itself is shaped by space, time and relevance. Timostsuk and Ugaste (2010) also agree with this as they see teachers' professional identity construction as learning or making meaning out of experiences. They see learning as experiencing, that is, the ability to experience another's life or sense of self and the surrounding world as meaningful. They also see teachers' professional identity development as a joint action, relying on common historical and social resources, background ideas, and societal viewpoints. To them, teachers' professional identity development is also about belonging, that is, belonging to a social community where one's activities and ideas are recognized as valuable and important and again, teachers' professional identity as becoming, or an understanding of how learning, within the community, affects and shapes one. However, this identity is not static (Shoulders and Myers 2011) but it is dependent on the environment in which it is located. Teachers' professional identity "can be best characterized as an ongoing process, a process of interpreting oneself as a

certain kind of person and being recognized as such in a given context" (Beijaard et al. 2004: 108). They see the development of teachers' professional identity as closely linked to the constructivist approach to teacher education. To them, the notion that the development of teachers' professional identity is an ongoing process, anchors on the interpretation and meaning-making of experiences, involving both people and society, and joins sub-identities that more or less co-exist harmoniously in an individual. Sachs (2010) posits that under circumstances of change, uncertainty and continuous educational restructuring, teachers' professional identity emerges from retrospective and prospective identity. The retrospective identity draws from the past and that provides the framework for the prospective identity, while the prospective identity is basically future orientated. She continues that prospective identity changes the way teachers relate and are recognized by the community. The prospective identity is influenced by teacher organizations and unions, as they engage in discussions to develop their professional identity. There are incongruities between the defined teacher professional identity, as proposed by educational systems and unions, and individual teachers themselves. Teachers' professional identity is forever recreated and negotiated. It determines their ability to speak and act separately and creates room for the delineation of themselves from others, while continuing to be the same individuals (Sachs 2010).

Teacher Education and Teacher Professional Identity

Teacher education also has a role to play in the development of teachers' professional identity. Student teachers undergo teacher education to become teachers and this also helps equip them with the tools with which they will be able to construct a professional identity for themselves. Chong et al. (2011) argue that the process of becoming an effective teacher begins with the pre-service or a student teacher's understanding and creation of personal knowledge, creation of self, and knowledge of identity development. As they progress up the academic ladder, they therefore begin to develop insights and gain experiences of what it means to become a teacher. They add that the process of professional identity formation by student teach-

ers spans their four years in the teacher education program (or entire period of study, since some programs are less than four years) and this process is shaped by the diverse teaching and learning experiences they go through. After these experiences, identity is then negotiated and renegotiated as the student teacher matches his experience to his teaching career, and is also due to the various determinants of teachers' professional identity. Teacher professional identity development is invariably the product of teacher education, and this is due to the fact that student teachers are initiated into the business of teaching through the different courses and practices they go through. When student teachers go out for teaching practice sessions, they experience what it means to be a teacher. It is therefore clear that teachers' professional identity is a broad concept and how student teachers negotiate it determines the kind of teachers they become. This paper therefore investigates how student teachers negotiate this identity and discusses how these findings can be used to improve teacher education programs.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Opie (2004) articulates that research methodology and methodology are the methods or approaches working together to generate data and findings, which reflect the research question. The methodology seeks to explain the methods used and why they have been used. This research is a qualitative case study of how student teachers negotiate teachers' professional identity, and the critical question, which necessitated the use of this design is, *how do student teachers negotiate teachers' professional identity?* This question will help explain how student teachers negotiate teachers' professional identity and how these experiences can be used to improve teacher education. For the purpose of this research, participants were student teachers at a university in KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. To generate qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were used and the participants were sampled purposively. The research included seven student teachers that have experienced what it means to be a teacher. These participants were informed of their rights and given consent forms to fill in to ensure ethical standards are met. The participants were also

labelled A, B, C, D, F, G and H to ensure anonymity. Permission was also obtained from the university to include these students. The researcher coded the data generated, and formed four themes from them, and these themes are discussed alongside the literature in the next section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the data generated, four major themes emerged in the negotiation of teachers' professional identity by student teachers, that is, syllabus, lesson delivery, content and pedagogy. These four sub-themes are discussed below.

Syllabus

Smith et al. (2016) define the syllabus as a detailed outline of what students must learn in the course of studying a particular program or course. As such, the student teacher needs a thorough understanding of this for his or her negotiation of teachers' professional identity to be meaningful. The constant changes in the South African curriculum mean a constant change in the syllabus of every learning area. The participants of this study, who are third and fourth year students, have had to teach or experience what it means to be a teacher using both the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). This is a major barrier the student teacher has to deal with. Participant A propounded, *"Assuming the role of the teacher within these two policy documents is no easy task. The demands of both policy documents are somewhat different and the approaches are also different. The languages of both policy documents are also very different. After the curriculum was changed, I had no knowledge of what it meant. As such, when the time came for me to go practicing, I dived in with my ignorance and I was very embarrassed when my mentor in the school started asking me questions about the new curriculum. My first two weeks were a total failure. I only made progress from the third week."* Cross and Teruvinga (2012) argue that the constant change to the curriculum and the curriculum policy document has led to a constant change in syllabus, and what it represents in the classroom, and this has caused diverse problems in the teaching and learning process. More often than not, student teachers are not always fully equipped with knowledge of what transpires in schools, and the failure of teacher education to adequately prepare them to adapt to changes, as postulated by Cole (2004), makes it worse. For student teachers to efficiently negotiate teachers' professional identity, these challenges should be incorporated in their educational programs and adequate knowledge provided to them as to how they can solve such problems. Improved teacher education programs would produce better teachers who would be able to solve the education debacle in South Africa, expressed by Schwab (2012). Participant D corroborated participant A's experience by adding, *"Negotiating teachers' professional identity is not as easy as I thought it will be. Owing to the fact that I have gone out for teaching practice twice, I thought this time it will be very easy since I had gained some experience and had also grown in knowledge. The change in syllabus made everything very tedious and complicated. There were new speculations, which were not there before as such, much of my time was spent trying to familiarize myself with the new syllabus. Knowing what to teach as a teacher is therefore the first step towards success in teaching practice."*

Cross and Teruvinga (2012) argued that with the constant change in curriculum, most South African teachers were confused as to what was required of them in the classroom. As most of them strived to acquaint themselves with the curriculum in place, a new one was introduced and diverse changes were introduced into the curriculum. This has made mastering the syllabus a major challenge for teachers, especially student teachers, and this in turn affects the teaching and learning process. Assuming a teacher's role is problematic, if not impossible, when one does not know the syllabus. The student teacher needs a concrete knowledge of the syllabus and the curriculum to be able to fully assume the role of the teacher. To enable student teachers to fully negotiate teachers' professional identity, the knowledge of the school syllabus should therefore be inculcated into teacher education courses. Stenberg (2010) postulated that when student teachers are accorded the opportunity to ponder their experiences (of teachers' professional identity) and actions, and to expand their comprehension of concepts and approaches (through improved teacher education courses) then they stand a chance of

being better teachers tomorrow. Contrary to participant A and D's stories, participant B had a different experience. He opined, *"Before I went out to practice in school as a teacher, I made sure I acquainted myself with what was happening in schools thoroughly. My mother is a teacher, so she was able to help me with whatever information I needed. This made my stay in the school quite enjoying and my teaching quite simple. The expansion and details provided by CAPS made my preparation for teaching also easy. My mother provided me with the feedbacks she gave to the students she has mentored in the past and using it as a guideline, I was able to guard against the same errors they made. I left the school feeling very happy and improved looking forward to the next time I will have to teach."*

Lamote and Engels (2010) argue that teacher educators believe and know that they can help student teachers develop in ways that fit the contemporary teaching world, and can enable them to adapt to changes as they are being introduced. Since what it means to be a teacher keeps changing as changes are being made to the curriculum, they add that teacher education programs must train student teachers to adapt to change and help them deal with whatever challenges they encounter in the course of negotiating teachers' professional identity.

Lesson Delivery

Lesson delivery refers to teaching. It encompasses the teaching methods, strategies, skills and resources used by the teacher in the teaching and learning process (Nhlapo 2012). Without such methods and strategies, no lesson can be delivered effectively. Each teacher chooses the teaching method or strategy to use based on the lesson being taught and the resources available. Participant G states, *"In delivering my lesson, I used group work as my strategy and it was very exciting and illuminating at the same time. I saw my learners express themselves in their respective groups in ways that I had not seen before and the opposing ideas they brought and how they unanimously decided to stick to one particular idea was mind blowing. I learnt a lot from their presentations though they sometimes became too rowdy and difficult to control."* Group work is a very effective teaching method, as averred by Weiner and Torres (2016). It makes the teacher a facilitator in the teaching and learning process and encourages all learners to be active participants in the knowledge construction process. It also eases understanding for the learners as they get to listen, not only to their friends but also to the teacher. Strydom and Mentz (2010) concur with this as they argue that quality learning should involve students' contribution in the knowledge construction process and they should not be seen as dormant partners or receptors of knowledge from the all-knowing teacher. As such, teacher education programs should utilize these strategies, and drill them into student teachers so that they can accurately use these strategies, and know how to handle disorders when they arise. The more they get involved with such strategies (whether as students in a classroom or as student teachers teaching in a classroom), the easier they develop professionally since practice makes perfect.

To participant H, delivering her lesson was all about utilizing diverse strategies and doing a lot of repetition. She stated, *"Delivering my lessons was a very complicated part of my stay in the school. This was because my learners were quite diverse and I had to use quite a number of teaching strategies to help them understand the lesson. In some lessons, I had to use storytelling and questioning while in others I had to use demonstrations and discussions. I also had to do a lot of repetition when delivering the lessons because most of my learners were not following and this made it very tedious for me. Using a variety of teaching strategies eases understanding in the teaching and learning process"* (Stohlman 2009).

It is important for student teachers to utilize a variety of teaching strategies to ensure that every learner in the classroom gets an adequate understanding of the lessons. Cohen et al. (2011) posit that it is important to use a variety of teaching strategies in the classroom to cater for the different types of learners. As such, teacher education programs should endeavor to equip student teachers with more strategies, along with how to use them effectively, to make them better teachers tomorrow.

Content

The teacher's relation with the content involves the real content of teaching. Without content there is no learning, and the student

teacher needs a mastery of the content to fully function in the classroom. The way the teacher relates to his or her content determines the way his or her learners learn. Kansanen (2009) argued that content is the fundamental concept in the teaching and learning process and it is the cornerstone of the process. Being a teacher is about being an expert within a particular content area. As such, it is the teacher's duty to mediate and facilitate the learners' understanding of the content. In negotiating teachers' professional identity, the student teacher needs to demonstrate a mastery of the content. This content is imparted to the student teacher by teacher education programs but being well informed about a learning area at university does not translate to mastery of this subject in secondary schools. Participant F attested to this by stating, *"At the university we are exposed to a lot of content with deep meaning and this content is quite vast. Though it is the same learning area or subject that is studied at university, it is quite different from what is studied in the primary, secondary and high school. I teach Life Orientation and what I am being taught at the university, I cannot directly apply in the classroom. At the university I was merely exposed to different journal articles in the learning area but negotiating teachers' professional identity made me realize that the content of my study and the content I was to teach were quite different. I had to explore the content myself to have mastery of it."* Deng and Luke (2008) articulated, "The content knowledge of the academic disciplines is not completely related to the content knowledge of primary, secondary and high school education" (2008: 107). This therefore acts as a hindrance to negotiating teachers' professional identity. Since most student teachers concentrate on their personal learning and fail to realize that they have to study what they have to teach, teacher education needs to come in as a bridge to aid the process. Kansanen (2009) asserts that student teachers often study content from departments or schools of content knowledge such as School of Languages, School of Mathematics, School of Technology, and many others, but more often than not these studies are fragmented and bear no connection to teacher education (although sometimes they are connected). The teacher educator (the one who teaches the student teacher how to teach) is therefore not an expert in subject content, but

his or her ultimate responsibility is to teach the student teacher how to teach the content. As a result of this fragmentation and the nature of content mastered by the student teacher, negotiating teachers' professional identity becomes very difficult. Teacher education courses need to be improved therefore, by taking more consideration of the curriculum and its specifications. Once the student teacher has a mastery of content, his or her pedagogic skills are utilized to ensure meaningful learning.

Pedagogy

Cogill (2008) defines pedagogy as the art and science of how teaching is practiced or how it unfolds and how learners learn what is taught. She adds that pedagogy includes the manner in which teaching takes place, the teaching and learning approach, the diverse ways through which content is taught and what learners take home from the teaching and learning process.

It is therefore clear that pedagogy surpasses how teaching is done in the classroom to the more rigorous work of how it is learned and decision-making. Having acquired content knowledge, it follows that the student teacher needs an understanding of how to pass the content across and how the content will have to be learned by the learners. Pedagogy according to participant C is the most disturbing thing about teaching. He stated, *"Knowing what to teach is quite easy because you can study it in a few hours and you're ready to go to class. But determining how to teach is the most difficult part since you have to make sure that your learners perfectly comprehend what you are teaching. At times I ponder for days about what methods to use and how best my learners can learn that particular topic. But when I finally choose a method, my learners end up enjoying the lesson and grasping if not everything the essentials about the topic."* Ailbhe et al. (2015) posit that the essence of a teacher or teachers' professional identity is negotiated and renegotiated in the workplace, and it involves a relationship between the teacher and the teaching, and learning process. Pedagogy is what ensures the smooth functioning of the teaching and learning process if it incorporates clearly identified objectives and measurable and observable learning outcomes (Khoza 2014). Without a concrete knowledge of pedagogy, no meaningful learning can take place

since it deals with how learning takes place and how teaching should be done. Teacher education should therefore utilize student teachers' lesson plans and teaching practice feedbacks to determine their level of pedagogical expertise, and in turn, ensure that those lagging behind should be fully equipped with pedagogical tools with which they can function in the teaching and learning process while negotiating teachers' professional identity.

CONCLUSION

The teaching and learning process is a very complicated one both for the teacher and the learners and entails a lot of conscious and unconscious processes. From the findings of the study it is clear that what happens in or around a classroom can never be known with certainty. As such, teacher education should be expanded to span a variety of areas and equip the student teachers with the necessary tools with which they can navigate the teaching profession. Teacher educators and stakeholders should constantly consider the context in which the student teachers would be teaching so as to properly prepare them for the task. With the complicated demand that teaching places on the teacher, adequate preparation is required for the teacher to fully function in this role. Since the teacher has to function as a curriculum developer and lifelong learner, teacher education should inculcate such skills and attributes in teachers so that as they enter the teaching field, they will be practicing what they already know and are used to. Also, teacher education programs must monitor their student teachers carefully and provide them with information that is up to date and of a high standard such that they will be well schooled in every approach of teaching and become conversant with the actual material that is being taught in class.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the educational landscape is a changing one, as is what it means to be a teacher, this paper therefore makes several recommendations to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools. Student teachers experiences should be taken into consideration when planning or designing teacher education programs. This would ensure that their contextual as well as general challenges are taken into consideration. Student teachers also need vital support structures to effectively develop into professional teachers. Furthermore, since a teacher's professional identity is a fluid concept, which is negotiated and renegotiated over time, mentors and teacher educators must be assigned to individual student teachers to ensure their growth and professional development, as well as their understanding of their roles in the teaching and learning process. The researcher also recommends further research on a larger scale, or quantitative in nature, to be carried out on the subject to explore how student teachers negotiate teachers' professional identity within the country as a whole, since this research only considers one of the universities within the country.

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