Understanding teacher identity from a symbolic interactionist perspective: two ethnographic narratives

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In this ethnographic inquiry we portray two teacher narratives reflecting educational change in the context of two South African schools. The study was conducted as part of a larger inquiry into ten schools in urban South Africa.[1] A decade of democracy begs some attention to educational progress and reform, from the viewpoint of teachers and with the culture of their schools as the inquiry's landscape. We present two ethnographic narratives, crafted of a typical 'township/rural' school, and an established Afrikaans school, with two teachers as the main social actors. Data were sourced from passive observations, interviews, informal conversations, and journal data. These field texts were analysed for content and narrative using, as methodological frame, the 'Clandininian' "metaphorical three-dimensional inquiry space". Three data themes, teacher authority, commitment to the profession in terms of staying or leaving, and multitasking are theorised from a symbolic interactionist framework, using constructs such as situational, social and personal identity. The major finding of this inquiry speaks to the power of the working context, the educational landscape, which appears to be a much stronger force in the development of teacher identity than national educational policies.

Keywords: educational change; ethnography; narrative inquiry; symbolic interactionism; teacher identity

Introducing the inquiry

In this article we address the concern of teacher identity in the context of educational change. As is commonly known, teachers play a critical role in educating the youth and advancing the social collective good for all citizens. The way teachers see themselves as professionals and how they compose their identities in schools is the focus of this ethnographic inquiry. This study formed part of a larger research project involving 10 schools, an inquiry into teacher identity, and the culture of schools. The purpose of this particular inquiry was to portray two teacher narratives[2] of teacher identity. The guiding research question, both for the project and this particular inquiry, was:

> What constitutes the identity of the teacher and how does the establishment of identity interface with the ethnographic characteristics of the school in which the teachers work?

Data were analysed for content and narrative. Themes such as teacher authority, leaving the profession, and multitasking point to situational, social and personal identity. We begin by explaining the theoretical framework, then we describe the research design and methodology, and thereafter we describe and interpret data themes.

Theoretical framework: symbolic interactionism
The framework, which we chose for this inquiry, is symbolic interactionism
(SI) (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003), a sociological perspective that exa-
mines how individuals interact, focusing on the creation of personal identity
through interaction with others. SI traces its roots in the pragmatic philo-
sophies of Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, William James and George
Herbert Mead (Crotty, 2003:73-75). Blumer (cited by Crotty, 2003:72) deve-
loped Mead's ideas and first coined the term symbolic interactionism, with
three core principles of this theory, meaning, language and thought. Meaning
is central to human behaviour in the sense that humans act toward people
and things based on the meaning that they have attributed to those people or
things. Language gives humans a means by which to negotiate meaning
through symbols. Thought then modifies the interpretation of these symbols,
using language in conversations and discussions. Contemporary thinkers,
such as Norman Denzin, Kathy Charmaz, and Adele Clarke have broadened
the horizons of SI, and included new ideas into the framework, such as iden-
tity development, interpretive interactionism, and meso analysis (Schwandt,
1994:123-124; Olesen, 1994:162).

Within this frame, the focus is on the subjective experience of an indivi-
dual (the social actor) as the basis for understanding and studying society, or
a system of society, such as the education system. People (including teachers)
interact socially and adjust behaviour in response to the actions of one
another. As people interpret actions of others, so they adjust their own actions
and behaviour. People socialise as active beings, not passive objects and
engage actively as they construct their social world, hence creating their own
social reality. Social reality and human behaviour from the SI perspective are
conceptualised as symbolic, communicated and subjective (Blumer & Kuhn,
1991:391).

Basic assumptions of SI embrace a belief that humans act towards
objects and people in their environment on the basis of meanings these ob-
jects and people have for them. Meaning is created through social interaction
between and among people and meanings can be modified through an
interpretive process. According to Jones and Somekh (2006:138-139), SI
assumes that

> behaviour is constructed though interaction between individuals and
> groups, and that much of it is strongly patterned, or 'routinized', a kind
> of symbolic action-response performance, the observer will be looking for
> — and thus is likely to see — 'patterns' of behaviour.

The teachers we observed, in matters such as the self, their learners and
classroom interactions, school context and the broader social environment,
revealed patterned behaviour in their teaching. Data sourced and analysed
from these observations, interviews and other strategies helped in under-
standing their meaning, of being a teacher. It was in understanding their
meaning, as evidenced in their daily actions and narratives that their iden-
tities as teachers emerged.

Literature review

Stone (cited by Vryan, Adler & Adler, 2003:367) offers an appropriate working definition of identity: "… identity establishes *what* and *where* the person is in social terms …. when one has identity, one is *situated*". Based on the work of Stone (1962), Vryan *et al.* (2003) developed the notion of identity using concepts such as situational, social and personal identity. *Situational* identity emerges from collective behaviour and meaning-making, mostly during face-to-face communications; people are sometimes students, or tourists, or motorists. Put differently, "identity is seen as a process, a matter of external negotiations between oneself and the people around …" (Craib, 1998:27). *Social* identity is shaped and forged with socially constructed categories of people (teachers), or the position within a social structure, such as a school environment. This identity 'stays' as long as positions in socially structured relationships remain stable.

> We define ourselves and others in the light of our social identities across many of the different kinds of contexts in which we find ourselves, thus providing continuity even as we step in and out of various situational identities (Vryan *et al.*, 2003:371).

People depend on mutual recognition by others and sometimes they manifest social identities in their situational enactments. The notion of role as part of the social identity is remarkable, in that roles are attached to certain positions or tasks, with which a person may or may not identify. Identities are shaped by so-called internalised role expectation (Vryan *et al.*, 2003:368). The remaining construct, *personal* identity, involves the uniqueness of an individual, such as personal name, personal history and personality. Personal identity is constructed via narratives of self, choosing and framing information, either selecting or deselecting information (*ibid.,* 372). This implies that people will reveal what they choose to reveal of their personal identity depending on who the audience is.

Based on previous research of policy implementation (Smit, 2001) and current research on teacher identity and culture (Henning, Moloi, Nduna, Smit, Mabelane, Phasha, Sedebi & Pather, 2006), successful enactment of professional identity of teachers appears to involve a range of complex identifications with learners, peers, supervisors, administrators, and community, including theoretical issues as well as practical experiences, all in response to a changing and shifting educational landscape. Also, society looks to teachers to not only heal the educational wounds of the past, but to accelerate the learning and development of learners. Research in teacher knowledge, practice, and identity, such as the Lewin, Samuel and Sayed (2003) led project, shows distressing signs of teacher breakdown, suggesting a fragmentation of identity. Mattson and Harley (2003) give a glimpse of how teachers in rural parts of South Africa cope with change, and challenge and conclude that they mimic the ideal teacher as prescribed by policy, without skills and knowledge to 'do the real thing' (Henning & Gravett, 2006). "The real thing" is however a misnomer, considering that a teacher can only strive to be an

effective teacher based on insight of how identity is shaped by the personal, professional and situational narrative. If one were to consider that thoughts modify the symbols the teacher encounters, that language reflects the thoughts and therefore provides meaning, which is negotiated through symbols upon which the teacher acts, it stands to reason that greater insight into the thoughts behind the personal, situational and social identity could result in a behaviour change.

Research methodology: design type, participants, data collection and analysis
The design type (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004) of this inquiry is a hybrid of ethnography (Brewer, 2002; Delamont, 2001; Carspecken, 1996) and narrative, (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999; 2000; Cortazzi, 1993; Riessman, 1993) in the constructivist-interpretive paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: 22-27). The school culture is ethnographically portrayed, and teacher identity is captured in narrative portraits, looking specifically at their personal, social and situational identity, as reflected in the language and behaviour. As part of the larger project, these two schools were purposively sampled, distinctively in terms of their differences; one school is a site in a township-rural type area and the other is an established white Afrikaans school. We selected these two sites precisely for their diversity and dissimilarities of contexts to enable a comparative analysis of teacher identity.

These two distinct sites formed the workplace of two teachers and as such were the educational landscapes in which the research was conducted. Within these contexts, two teachers presented as the main social actors. We also purposively selected two teacher participants, one at each school, whom we identified as most suitable for this inquiry, in terms of their background and teaching experience. Both teachers were highly experienced and had been in teaching for over 20 years. Ethnographic descriptions depicting the characteristics of the schools, descriptions of teaching practices (social identity) and narrating teacher stories indicate how these two teachers make identificational meaning of their professional lives (personal, situational and professional identity). Significantly as well, these teachers were also part of the community, township-rural and urban context (social identity), which influences their lives, particularly the pandemic of HIV/AIDS, violence and poverty within the broader landscape of South African political and societal change.

The data speak to field notes and field texts collected from January 2005 to June 2006, covering a variety of methods, such as non-participant observations (Carspecken, 1996), informal conversations with teachers, narrative interviews (Wengraf, 2001), and artefacts from the schools, such as the vision and mission statements, newsletters, and journal entries. We visited the schools regularly, approximately twice per month, and spent the days in the schools casually interacting, observing classes and staffroom meetings, making field notes, and transcribing tape recorded interviews. Data were analysed for ethnographic content (Brewer, 2002, Delamont, 2001), and narrative, using as a methodological frame, the 'Clandininian' "metaphorical

three-dimensional inquiry space" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to write up thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of the schools and narratives of teacher identity. We portray our data narratively, using the Clandininian metaphorical three-dimensional space as the methodological frame, often citing verbatim from our field texts. This frame appropriately analyses interaction in terms of the personal and the social, together with issues of temporality as well as situation analysis of the context. This methodological frame is closely aligned with the theoretical perspective of SI. At times these field texts speak for themselves; at other times we offer an interpretation of *possible* meanings. Appropriately, Carspecken (1996) eloquently writes that as researchers we can only offer some *possibilities* to reconstruct meaning. To this end, data 'themes' were theorised from the symbolic interactionist framework, using constructs such as situational, social and personal identity (Blumer & Kuhn, 1991). This enabled a discursive analysis of identity, to elucidate how teachers forged identity in their work environment, which shifts beyond the boundaries of what is normally known as 'school'. The immediate environment, and far beyond, shapes the teachers' perceptions, meanings, work ethics, commitment, compassion, enthusiasm or apathy in their daily engagement with the learners and practice of teaching. The following section illustrates two identity portraits of Naledi and Coral (pseudonyms). Each author portrays one teacher; for that reason we speak in 'I-mode'.

Identity portrait: Naledi
Naledi is in her mid-forties, divorced and a single mother of four children. She has been in teaching for over 20 years, and teaches Grade 12 Biology. She has also been the Head of Department for Biology for 6 years. She graduated from a township High School and attended a Teachers College of Education, where she received her Secondary Teacher Diploma in 1985, majoring in Biology and IsiZulu. Later, she obtained the Advanced Certificate in Management from a University in 2003. Naledi speaks SiSwati, as well as English, Afrikaans, and IsiZulu. Naledi talks with great confidence about her teaching career. She exudes powerful confidence in her teaching and is proud of the fact that she teaches other teachers in the district in Biology, her subject of specialisation. She describes herself as the *best Biology teacher in the district* — in fact — *I am an old horse at this*, she exclaims with great pride. However she often feels frustrated with teaching: *there is seldom a thank-you at this school.* Teaching Biology to Grade 12 learners is Naledi's forte. She reads mainly from 'auxiliary notes' and writes some of these notes onto the chalk board, sentence by sentence and talks quite fast. She teaches in lecturing style and only moves between the front desks and the chalk board. She is neatly dressed in a black sweater with a coloured skirt and flat shoes. The children are quiet. Some learners have handouts; there are no textbooks and only a few exercise books. Naledi teaches with continuous interjections such as, *if the examiner asks* and *they will ask you.* She speaks with authority, not only as a Biology teacher, but also as an experienced examiner. Not all learners pay attention; in fact,

many are disconnected and do not take down notes from the chalk board. There is little learner activity or participation in the classroom, and no group work.

Naledi bears testimony to the efforts of the South African government to address the skills dearth in the area. She is one of the 30 recipients of the first phase of a bold move aimed at advancing 150 women teachers over five years. Through the Women Empowerment Project funded by a Department of Education, Naledi and her counterparts now hold Diplomas in Public Management. Naledi sees this diploma as a stepping stone towards a bigger dream — a management position. She tells me:

> *Honestly, I feel that I should be given a chance to implement the skills I have learned because I have learned so much and can be useful to my school, particularly when it comes to implementing projects. I have always had an interest in management issues, and the opportunity to gain skills in financial management, project management and people management came at the right time for me.*

Naledi teaches in a school, which is located in a very poor area, combining mostly rural elements with typical township elements, including informal settlements and long term squatting areas. Children attending this school come from extremely poor households, often having very little or nothing to eat, and are not in a position to pay school fees. The learner enrolment of 1 900 (2005) exceeds the physical capacity of the school, which results in overcrowded classrooms. The area is also plagued with the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the local hospice bears testimony to this. Learners, who are in an advanced stage of AIDS, are admitted to this hospice for care and hospitalisation. Naledi regularly attends funerals on Saturdays, performs teaching duties in the district, and attends church and community gatherings. There is little time for a personal life.

During the investigation, Naledi left the school to take up a promotion post, as deputy headmaster in another province. On receiving this notice of appointment, Naledi showed little emotion, only to say that *it's time.* She acknowledges she has been pruned for this new position and tells me, *it is like in the time of old Moses … the baby in the basket now needs to be let 'down the river' … I must be the light … think about God's work and forget that we are teachers …* I am reminded of the *old horse* and wish her well on her new journey.

Identity portrait: Coral

Coral is a fifty-four year old white Afrikaans speaking teacher who initially grew up in the Cape Province and started her teaching career in eastern Gauteng. She grew up as a single child with a mother who was responsible for the household and a father who worked for the government. Growing up, she was exposed to numerous family members on her father's side, who were teachers and she has a vivid recollection of visiting her aunt, standing in the hall looking at all the books lined up on the shelves and retreating to a corner

where she immersed herself in a book. Whilst growing up, she often found herself the liaison figure between her father and mother, witnessing her mother's struggle with depression and her father's intolerance towards her mother. This resulted in a conscious choice made by Coral to never succumb to the lethargy and low energy drive associated with her mother's depression. For this reason, she decided to "do" as opposed to waiting for something to be done — thus her identity started developing as a "doer".

She has been married for more than 30 years and indicates that if a teacher is to succeed in the profession of teaching, spouses and family members need to be involved in the school as well. She tells how her husband assists her in the completion of school responsibilities, helping her to paint her class, photocopying lessons for the learners and assisting her with her extra-mural activities. She has no children of her own, although she is the godmother to her friend's children and has been highly involved in their upbringing. She cannot understand how parents have children and are not prepared to spend time with them and accept responsibility for their upbringing. She plays an active role in her church and is very involved in the community in which she lives. Her religious belief is evident in the statement that *tomorrow is a better day* and that *God will provide.* She also believes that the church is the basis for support, especially in families that are challenged by socio-economic decline. Her roots are firmly established in the community in which she has been living and teaching for more than 30 years. She is well respected in the community. In fact she has witnessed children growing up, who now send their children in turn to attend her Grade 1 class.

Coral has been a Grade 1 teacher for more than 30 years at one of the two Afrikaans primary schools in the community, previously subsidised by the government and now only partially subsidised. Subsequently the school faces financial burdens and struggles to survive. She talks with pride of her school, which has been in existence since 1936, initially starting off as two separate schools and integrating into one school in 1983. She started teaching in 1976 and has been with the school since the integration in 1983. The staff comprises 22 members and is seen as *one big family. Here I can shout for help* and she knows most of the stories of the nearly 700 children, having experienced one sibling followed by the next as the years go by. She has seen the decline in the area, as the mines closed down and blue collar workers lost their jobs, as squatter camps arose, petty crime increased and unemployment prevailed. To her it seems as if the Afrikaner nation is deteriorating, with parents paying less attention to the educational needs of their children and presenting themselves as unmotivated and uncaring, placing more and more responsibility on the teacher to raise their children. The norms and values she grew up with seem to be ignored by the new generation of Afrikaners. One of her main concerns is the

> *increase of absenteeism and the amount of work children lose by not coming to school. It is a battle to get them to catch up lost work and the whole class is then disadvantaged. The parents do not seem to accept responsibility.*

Coral tells of an incident where a parent challenged her about a request she had made to the parent to assist with homework. The parent simply reacted that she as the teacher was getting paid for this; hence it was her responsibility and not the parent's to assist with the homework.

Coral presents as full of energy, carrying countless responsibilities which include co-ordinating the foundation phase (seven teachers and 242 learners) since 1993, serving on the Governing body, coaching netball and athletics, organising and marketing the Grade 1 and Grade R open days, coaching children for the art competition and organising it, providing parental guidance during parents' evenings, managing the newspaper, serving on the day management and conducting the assembly. In her own words *a teacher must be adaptable, flexible, and versatile and function well within a team*. As such, she fulfils numerous roles in one day, most importantly seeing herself as mother for the learners in her class, as well as a nurse and a disciplinarian. She is respected within her school community and held in high regard by the principal, who knows that he can trust her to organise, manage, and delegate. She is annoyed with the Educational Department which shows little respect for teachers. The department fails *to communicate properly with the school about school visits and then fails to honour their planned visit. They clearly cannot keep their appointments*. When her principal informs her of reports that need to be prepared based on an announcement received by the Department at short notice, she immediately jumps to work, requesting from colleagues the necessary documentation, developing a time schedule in her mind as to how she will complete the task over the week-end in her private time. As a researcher I was amazed at all she accomplished in a day.

Findings and implications for teacher identity

The theoretical constructs of situational, social and personal identity serve as a theoretical lens to construct possible meanings from situational, social and personal narratives as field texts. Situational and social challenges, in and out of the classroom, in the educational landscape that is located in a township or urban community, shape the identity of our teachers. Teaching has become so difficult, simply because of the circumstances teachers face, which are way out of their control, particularly way out of *personal* control: drugs, poverty, parental disengagement, pregnancies, hunger, HIV/AIDS, initiation schools and social and cultural systems impact the micro system in the education system. Loss of situational control inevitably influences personal and social identity, as teachers lose face and faith in the system. *This job is not about academic work … it is something else. We overcompensate by doing more tasks not necessarily related to the practice of teaching and learning.*

Personal, situational and social narratives, appropriated in the core principles of language, thought and meaning, shed light on how teacher identity is forged (Figure 1). Coral and Naledi's identities emerged when we learnt about their personal, situational and social narratives during our numerous discussions through the language they used, which allowed us a glimpse into their own understanding, thoughts and meaning related to themselves as tea-
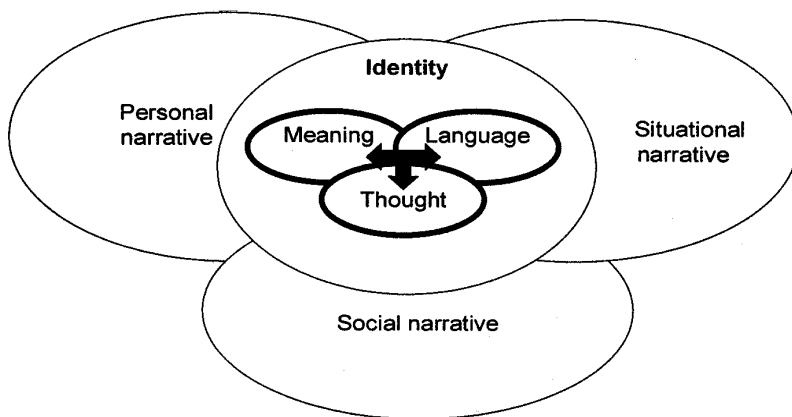
Figure 1 Diagram of teacher identity

chers. Their thoughts became visible in activities and interactions. As is commonly known, teachers' identity is forged by the problems and daily challenges they face. What this inquiry has taught us is that, in addition to daily problems and challenges, as part of situational identity forging, social and personal identity impact on how teachers will respond and react to situational and contextual challenges. Also, teachers do not have a dominant narrative that shapes their identity, instead they have three: the situational, social, and personal narrative. For this reason, any professional workshop targeted at effective teaching and policy implementation, needs to consider these different narratives of identity. Our understanding is that these narratives inform, shape, and influence one another and can contribute towards an identity that lies on a spectrum of integration versus disintegration, which is evident in the teacher's behaviour. Such narratives reveal how teachers cope, view themselves as professionals in their interaction with their learners and the school community at large. It would appear that external pressures, emanating from society and situational contexts in conjunction with the personal identity, impact teacher identity. This can subsequently result in emotionally drained and highly stressed teachers or teachers who do more in an attempt to remain in control within a system that is perceived as unstructured and chaotic. Teachers are required to respond to the challenges, often related to trauma, confronting them in their context of teacher practice, but are not always equipped to support learners, either on a professional or a personal level. Teachers do not necessarily possess counselling skills or opportunities to debrief their own emotional experiences and are therefore at risk of being traumatised themselves if they already have personal experiences of trauma. *Everyday we are faced with poverty and academic work cannot be productive*

in such contexts. We feel helpless and disempowered; we cannot help all the children. The expectations confronting teachers exceed those of teaching and learning and indicate that emotional requirements can therefore be experienced as too demanding. This is perturbing, and it speaks for itself that learners do not want to become teachers; they see for themselves what teachers are confronted with. External pressures, such as policy upon policy changes, administrative demands often perceived as irrelevant, family disintegration, poverty and the associated results such as hunger, emotionally and physically neglected children and limited appreciation of the teaching profession, challenge teacher identity.

Exploring and explaining how teachers make meaning of their professional lives, and how they forge identity in their educational landscape adds epistemological value to understanding how educational change manifests in South African schools. The significance herein lies in the in-depth and longitudinal engagement we had in the field. It is only because of the extended time in the field that we were able to draw a conclusion of how identity was shaped and forged during educational change in a landscape of countless challenges and complexities. The main conclusion we can draw is that teachers forge professional identities that reflect their place of work (social identity) *more so* than their education or level of qualification (personal identity). And finally, as professionals, teachers seek acknowledgement, recognition and also fiscal rewards that are competitive. Professional teacher identity can therefore only be addressed with consideration for the personal, social, and situational needs and experiences of the teacher. Education will not improve with financial efforts or the provision of workshops addressing policies, teaching practice, and management unless teacher identity receives prominence. More studies are required focusing on what enables versus disables teachers and how this relates to their respective identities, how teachers deal with trauma on a daily basis and how personal, social, and situational identities drive effective teaching practices. The reality is that the power of the working environment, coupled with the personal and social identity, is a much stronger force in the development of teacher identity than national education policies.

Notes
1.   SANPAD South Africa Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development: Teacher Identity and the Culture of Schooling (TICS)
2.   Each author/researcher reports on one teacher narrative — therefore the data are discussed in I-mode and not in we-mode.

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