# Exploring Preservice Teachers' Identity in Lesotho: Formation and Effects

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**Abstract**

*Teacher identity is one of the important issues in the systems of education today around the globe. Studies have shown that teaching has failed to attract and retain committed and talented teachers due to decreased motivation. Although studies on the identities of preservice teachers have been reviewed, the formation and impact of teacher identity in the Lesotho context about preservice teachers is still lacking. Hence, this study explores teachers' perspectives about their identities and factors that have shaped their status and how these affect their competencies in the classroom. This qualitative study used open-ended questionnaires to examine six teachers' opinions about teacher identity. The results of the study revealed that teacher placement, teachers' beliefs, unfavourable environment and short teaching practice period contribute new teachers' identity. It is also revealed that poor teacher education contributes to ineffective teaching and learning. If these factors are not taken into consideration, preservice teachers will all have low self-efficacy.*

**Keywords:** *Teacher Education, Pedagogical Knowledge, Teaching Practice, Professional Development, Effective Teaching*

## INTRODUCTION

Teacher identity is one of the most important issues in the systems of education around the world due to its bearing on preservice and in-service teachers' performance and quality (Golzar, 2020). Studies show that it is central to the teaching profession because it is attached to the teaching roles and informs how the world views them (van Lankveld, Schoonenboom, Volman, Croiset & Beishuizen (2017). This implies that real teachers are interpreted from their workplace doing their job. Several studies are concerned with its development in higher education context while others are concerned with it at lower levels. Some stress the social and cultural nature of identity, whereas others focus on its discursive and narrative nature (Kavrayicik, 2020). Some believe in aspects of teacher identity development for university lecturers since they have to combine the teaching role with other roles such as that of researcher or practitioner. It is also an ongoing process of interpretation of who one considers oneself and what he or she wants to become in the future (Hahl & Mikulec, 2018). Hence teacher identity is considered not to be stable and fixed but rather shifting and flexible because teachers are recognized as such in a given context.

As a result of the declining status of the teaching profession, teaching has failed to attract and retain committed and talented teachers who can mentor beginning teachers because of the role of the teacher which significantly changed to meet the demands and expectations of the community and schools (Thompson, 2021). The blame can be put on those responsible for offering teacher education and its quality if it does not meet the expectations of the society about teachers (Graham & Phelps, 2002). Although studies on the identities of teachers in primary and secondary education have been reviewed, the formation and impact of teacher identity in the Lesotho context on preservice teachers is still lacking. Hence, it is quite crucial to explore their perspectives about the kind of teachers they are, and factors that have shaped their status during the early years of teaching, and how these (perspectives) affect their competencies in the classroom. In general, the study sought to find when teachers feel like teachers and how that feeling affects their classroom practices today, looking at factors that form teacher identity.

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## Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the self-efficacy theory advocated by Albert Bandura (1977) which he associated with learning. Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as a dynamic self-schema related to one's view of oneself acting competently in the world which includes a set of memories such as one's beliefs and experiences. This theory assumes that people should engage in certain activities to the extent that they perceive themselves as being competent in those activities (Bandura 1977). It also assumes that beliefs and classroom practices are interrelated as they tend to shape the nature of teachers' instructional practices. Since it is a theory about the beliefs that one holds about her or himself, it determines the capabilities of performing certain tasks successfully (Iroegbu, 2015). Self-efficacy was adopted to determine factors that teachers believe shaped their identity. There are personal and environmental factors associated with the formation of teacher identity which can be referred to as sources of self-efficacy in this theory. Those factors include but are not limited to: mastery of experiences (which explains how teachers can accomplish their tasks; vicarious experience(which is gained when mastering difficult tasks from watching other people performing similar tasks) (Sharp, Brandt, Tuft & Jay, 2016); verbal persuasion or feedback that is given by the qualified others to enlighten the prospective teachers in their areas where they are weak and strong (Sharp et al., 2016). Finally, verbal and social persuasion can also include prospective teachers' reflections on their identity. Social persuasion takes place when one receives feedback or listens to words from others, especially from those whose opinions are respected. This feedback can cause stress, anxiety, and other negative states that can lead to negative judgments of teachers' abilities and skills (Iroegbu, 2015). This theory is relevant to the study because teacher identity is based upon the core beliefs that one has about teaching and being a teacher which are constantly changing and evolving based upon personal and professional experiences. For the researcher, this theory includes beliefs about what teachers are or are not that is, relations between teachers and students and the function of schools in society. By reflecting on their own classroom actions, teachers will be able to gauge their teacher-hood role which help them define whom they are and what other people perceive them.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Various studies have the common connotation or idea that identity is not a fixed attribute of a person, but a relational phenomenon that differs from one person to another (Smith 2015). Some interpret teacher identity as something that one does not possesses rather as a continuous process shaped by several factors (Buendía-Arias, André-Arenas & Rosado-Mendinueta, 2020). Beijaard (2019) argues that it is formed within multiple contexts that involves relationships and emotions and allowing construction of emotions, relationships and roles of a teacher. He also argued that teacher identity is a concept regarded as core of teaching profession developed in a complex and rich set of classroom practices and relations. It helps in maintaining the framework that helps teachers construct their own interpretation of what they are, how they teach and understand themselves. This implies that teachers are the only people who can convey who they are by what they are doing. Knowing and understanding oneself helps teachers understanding their work as teachers at school. Literature further shows that teacher identity plays a vital role when future teachers experience the transition from initial teacher education into the teaching profession (Castañed, 2011).

As it is unstable and dynamic entity that varies according to the context and environment in which teachers are engaged, Khalid (2015) believes it starts earlier than actual teaching and keeps on evolving throughout lives of teachers in the teaching profession. Since it is linked to one's sense of belonging to a profession, it is associated with the image of a teacher which eventually relates to how a teacher teaches and develops. In other words, a teacher's professional identity can be linked to whom and what a teacher does in the teaching profession. In the similar vein, Beijaard (2019) views it as the beliefs, values and commitments that allow a teacher to be identified both as a teacher and as being a particular type of a person in an environment she or he lives in.

### Factors That Shape Up Teacher Identity

It can be inferred from the literature that the concept of teacher identity is an umbrella term that is influenced by so many factors (Kavrayicik, 2020). Teacher identity is formed by many factors and conditions inside and outside the educational environment that include teacher education and workplace. For this study only two

components that shape up teacher identity are considered: the personal and professional (on-the-job) experiences which can potentially make a significant contribution towards development of teacher identity. It is also argued by Hahl & Mikulec (2018) that knowing one's teacher identity is cognizant in helping a teacher set clear goals and better know how to achieve them.

*Professional experiences*

As teacher identity stands at the core of the teaching profession, it is crucial to explore and understand teachers' sense of their professional identity. Understanding this would help in knowing what makes a good and a bad teacher. According to Day (2002) teacher identity manifests itself in job satisfaction, occupational commitment, self-efficacy and changes in their levels of motivation which reveal what actually teacher identity means to these teachers. Inevitably, it focuses on policies and social expectations of what a teacher is and educational ideals of teachers because the world views them as key change agents by bringing about transformation (Naidoo 2012). Literature further shows another factor that shapes up teacher identity as lack of staff-support at work. Staff support makes teachers feel part of the group they are working with, that is, part of professional community as it helps in gaining confidence especially sharing practices with close colleagues (van Lankveld, Thampsy, Cantillon, Horsburg & Kluijtmans 2020). This is considered crucial in building up teacher identity because it increases the spirit of collaboration and commitment on curriculum and instruction when paired with other knowledgeable or old colleagues. It can also be argued to allow sharing and development of new ideas for classroom practices as a way of showing professional growth. If they are not supported, they may feel isolated from their colleagues, receiving limited guidance and mentoring and virtually no useful feedback about their developing skills and abilities (Boakye & Ampiah, 2017).

Experienced colleagues play an important role in this respect, since they act as role models for the new colleagues and modelled desired practices for them (van Lankveld et al., 2020). Moreover, they contribute to the formation of teacher identity for pre-service teachers as they learn the work of teaching from them and begin to develop professional identities. Furthermore, Buendía-Ariaset al., (2020) indicate that teacher identity is formed from professional knowledge. They attest that for teachers to be competent in what they teach, they must possess content, pedagogical and subject knowledge and strategies alike in teaching their own subjects. This is because a teacher is not considered competent if he or she does not possess pedagogical knowledge about the subject they teach as well as knowledge about dealing with students (Nind, 2020). Pedagogical knowledge helps in selecting appropriate teaching methods as well as the content for situation. In some situations, the new teachers are not able to implement the innovative classroom practices, and they are too isolated to try the challenging tasks if not coached (Boakye & Ampiah, 2017).

On the other hand, literature further shows that some teachers feel isolated if they are not supported at the beginning of their teaching and these experiences trigger negative emotions in preservice teachers to adjust and re-adjust in order to cope with difficulties in diverse schools (Buendía-Ariaset.al., 2020). The roles of teachers in the classroom include ensuring that learning objectives are met when teaching and learning activities are implemented. Therefore, support can be a crucial aspect in building teacher identity because it increases the spirit of collaboration and commitment on curriculum and instruction when paired with other old colleagues. It also allows sharing and developing new ideas for classroom practices as a way of showing professional growth (Jones & Kessler, 2020).

*Personal experiences*

On the other hand, teacher identity is formed from personal qualities, values, roles, interests and physical characteristics of an individual (Buendía-Ariaset.al., 2020). A teacher has personal experiences outside and inside school that affect their identity. Several literature reviews on teacher identity have emphasize personal experiences and histories as major influences on teacher identities. It shows that teacher identity is highly affected by personal characteristics as love for children and teaching passion because they are considered prominent in developing and affecting teacher identity (Kavrayici, 2020). This implies that only those teachers who are committed to doing their job effectively and dedicated to the students and their learning are the ones who can influence teaching and learning because they are always ready to learn new things about their job. These characteristics show patience and tolerance teaching pleasure that a teacher has as well as communication

skills needed in an effective teaching. This factor is seen as increasing performance of teachers and encourages them to be more student oriented (Serin, 2017). Since there is a link between teaching and learning all pedagogical approaches can fail if passion is not created in the classroom.

Alternatively, Bukor (2015) stated that personal expectations and experiences, assumptions and beliefs are also important factors that shape teacher identity. Teacher identity is recognized and interpreted as constituted by emotions, classroom management experiences, beliefs and attitudes during the process of preservice teacher education (Kavrayici & Agaoglu, 2020). Therefore, these ones will always view themselves as incompetent compared to teachers in resources places. Boakye & Ampiah (2017) further show that they fail to use the learner-centred methods as a result of the difficulty of balancing their teaching responsibilities and their personal lives. According to Nur'Aini (2018) personal qualifications and interests are considered a significant contribution to teacher identity development. This is because personal dimension focuses on skills and abilities required for the profession. Furthermore, literature shows that other factors that are highly influential to the formation of teacher identity are beliefs, values and commitment that teachers hold in references to theory and classroom practice of other teachers (Lutovac, 2020). Committed teachers are motivated to do their roles because they believe in themselves. Lutovac (2020) also contends that personal factors include personal failure. He argues that failure shapes pre-service teachers' future-oriented identities that is, possible selves in various ways, such as their traits and instructional strategies as future teachers, their views of students' strategies for dealing with failure and pre-service teachers' self- development. In addition, failing teaching practice and how resilient they are with respect to becoming a teacher.

## External Factors

As it was indicated earlier, teacher identity develops as early as during teacher education programmes which a place which is supposed to put more emphasis teacher identity in order to prepare future teachers for the complexities of the teaching profession. Teacher identity also develops during teacher education. At this stage, teachers are introduced to values, beliefs, social norms and role characteristics of the teaching profession in their early course-work and later during their teaching practice (TP) (Mathe & Hapazari, 2019).It is at this stage that they are provided with pedagogical and subject matter knowledge as well as classroom experience which are all considered essential factors in performing the teacher's role (Mathe & Hapazari, 2019). Though real classroom experience (TP) comes in the final year as the stage of the course, it is the stage when teachers understand as the true meaning of teaching that forms part of their professional identity. At this stage, teacher identity is also identified as learning to teach and fundamentally formed from teachers' experience, skills, subject and pedagogical knowledge, classroom practice as well as professional development. During this process a student-teacher either builds a sense of affiliation with teaching profession or gives it up (Castañeda, 2011).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study using open-ended questionnaires that allowed teachers express their opinions about the subject matter, teacher identity (Jason & Glenwick, 2016). Knowing that reality is subjective, open-ended questions are meant to get meanings from teachers themselves because they are the ones who teach and can know factors that influence their identity (Jason & Glenwick, 2016). Six teachers were sampled because they are eligible and meet the criteria for selection of individuals from the population (Creswell, 2014). The selected group of teachers are individuals or group of people who meet the eligible criteria from the population and can produce the findings that present the population entirely. These teachers were purposively selected also because they were within the easy reach of the researcher, and this means they were selected based on convenience of the researcher (van Wyk, 2015). They are also believed to have a knowledge and expertise regarding the formation of identity as preservice teachers. Because it was not statistical, the sample was used to collect comprehensive and rich data of the selected not representativeness (Leavy, 2017). Responses were arranged and codes that formed coherent categories about the formation of identity of the preservice teachers were grouped together. Themes were formed from these codes and given certain descriptive labels for further refinement. The identified themes were connected to interpret the findings of the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section reflects the perceptions of Lesotho preservice teachers' perceptions about the factors that shape their identity. The findings of the study revealed that teacher placement is one of the factors that shaped up who they are, as some are placed in the rural areas with insufficient latest resources that help teaching and learning process to be effective. They also voiced out that in these areas there is limited access to internet which is mostly needed currently as the teaching resource. This demotivates teachers and decreases their commitment to play their roles when resources do not allow their abilities. It concurs with Lutovac (2020) that personal factors such as commitment, beliefs and values are highly influential to shape their identity. Teachers will not master their experiences when there are no teaching resources to effect teaching and learning according to the theory of self-efficacy. Placing teachers with insufficient resources, especially teaching resources, weaken teaching and learning and this results in teachers believing in themselves as incapable of teaching like other teachers and this is how they perceive themselves, that is, not being able to achieve. If resources such as time, money and facilities, battery problems and unreliable networks are not restructured and maintained teachers will always fail to perform their roles well. Even their students will be underperforming which constitutes to teachers' beliefs or values.

Meanwhile teacher education is an important factor in the formation of teacher identity, it should address and help them to understand themselves and beliefs about teaching. Hence, it should expose them to new knowledge and skills relating to what and how to teach. The findings revealed that the poor quality of teacher education influences teacher identity as teachers are compelled to take courses which are ancillary to their teaching just to complete their programmes. Taking courses in different faculties result in teachers lacking pedagogical knowledge which stands at core of the teaching profession. These courses are just meant to add to required credit hours that make up a complete programme rather than their relevance to teaching subjects. This concurs with Mathe and Hapazari (2019) that a teacher identity emerges during teacher education because this is where they learn how to teach and gain teachers' experience, skills, subject and pedagogical knowledge as classroom practice builds up professional development. That is the time when a teacher can give up in his or her capabilities as teacher or gain.

Findings further showed that teachers' identities are drawn by unfavourable attitudes of older colleagues which do not cooperate with them, showing negative support towards them (as preservice teachers). These attitudes can influence culture of working alone, making them to avoid group work which is factor that is deemed leading to failure. When teachers fail as a result of the ill treatment of the old ones, they feel isolated and not supported. It agrees with Buendia et al. (2020) that when teachers are not given relevant support especially by older and experienced teachers, they will focus on what they think is relevant and would help in the teaching and learning process in trying to build up their confidence in the classrooms. Instead of copying good behaviour of the old ones, teachers become bitter and unable to teach effectively. It also concurs with vicious experience of Bandura (1977) which states that preservice teachers can gain confidence by observing others and assessing their capabilities. This causes these teachers to become emotional even towards students that they have to manage which was shown by Kavrayici & Agaoglu (2020) from literature.

It was also found that preservice teachers are burdened with a lot of activities by Heads of Departments which limits them from having sufficient time to plan their activities for students as more time is spent in other irrelevant activities which do not influence motivation. This concurs with Alt (2018) on self-efficacy which he believed is another factor that shape up teacher identity to conduct teaching and learning process under the confidence and motivation they possess. This means that teachers have low self-efficacy which influences no motivation at all. Low self-efficacy implies incapability, which denotes less knowledgeable. When new teachers are burdened with many activities which do not allow them sufficient time for playing their roles especially classroom roles, teaching and learning is negatively affected because much time is not spent on it. It also goes with Boakye & Ampiah (2017) these teachers may fail even to use the learner-centred methods as a result of the difficulty of balancing their teaching responsibilities and their personal lives. This is in accord with Türkoğlu et al (2017) that when teachers are highly motivated self-efficacy increases and they can perform tasks that they are allocated. Their efficacy also increases when they are allowed to observe the old ones teaching and consequently teach alike.

Findings further reveal that teacher identity develops during teacher education especially during teaching practice when they are given opportunity to put theory they have learnt in practice (real situation). This when these teachers start teaching from which a teacher reflects teacher characteristics each possesses. It is the time when reflect whether they have rightfully chosen the profession or not. This coincides with (Palaigeorgiou & Grammatikopoulou, 2016) that classroom practice is another element that determines teacher identity as curriculum and instruction are intertwined in the commitments that teachers have to perform in the classroom. This is where their identity develops because it is where they professionally grow as beginning teachers because teaching practice intersects with these elements. So, the longer the teaching practice the better teachers become experienced in teaching. It was also found that teachers are not given sufficient opportunities to participate in activities related to what they teach. As it was indicated earlier, there is a lot of difference between theory and practice and if teachers are not allowed to undergo adequate training that prepares or informs them about relevant content and materials to what they teach, teaching and learning process will be effective and they will be seen as incompetent.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that teacher identity is a complex process of how one becomes a professional teacher. It reflects that there are several factors that shape up the identity. It reflects that it is a process that starts from as far as teacher education where they learn about pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge about children so that that their teaching becomes effective. It is also found that teachers are treated like outsiders, just because they are new in the teaching profession, and this impede them from being effective. In all cases teachers have to understand whom they are and the beliefs and commitments that shape up their identity as some factors form the basis for their identity. As seen in the above examples, some preservice teachers might feel that failure affects who they are as teachers as there are external expectations to succeed imposed on them, others, however, do not feel personally affected by failure, but they find that failure may influence and change the relations and interaction with their students.

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