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Teacher Professional Identity as a Construct of Community Perceptions: A Case Study of Teachers in Public Primary Schools in Uganda

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Abstract:

This article analyses teacher professional identity among public primary school teachers in Uganda as a construct of the community's perceptions. The study followed a quantitative approach requiring 127 teachers working with various public primary schools in both rural and semi-urban sub-counties of Mpigi District - Uganda to rate their opinions on how community (family, friends and peers) perceptions help them construct their professional identity. Findings showed that teachers think their families, friends, and peers were positive about them being part of the teaching profession. The study also, established that the community holds the teaching profession with high regard. Further, the study showed that despite believing the status of the teaching profession in the country is high, teachers think the community felt the status of the teaching profession in the country is low. The study recommends the need to institutionalize teacher professional development programs crafted towards helping teachers to reconstruct their identity as teaching professionals. Further, the study recommends the need to raise entry points for entrants into teacher training institutions in Uganda.

Keywords: *Teacher professional identity, family and friends, community perceptions*

1. Introduction

Developing an identity as a teacher is an important part of securing teachers' commitment to their work and adherence to professional norms (Hammerness, et al., 2005). Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) ascertain that teacher identity (TI) is complex and a variety of issues are considered in an attempt to define it. According to Beijjaard, et al., (2004) TI involves both a person and a context: within a context, teachers learn professional characteristics that are adopted by individuals in unique ways. Within a teacher's professional identity are sub-identities, which may be more or less central to the overall identity and must be balanced to avoid conflict across them. Professional identity comprises the notion of agency or the active pursuit of professional development and learning under a teacher's goals. Sachs (2005) asserts that teacher professional identity provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. The identities teachers develop shape their dispositions, where they place their effort, whether and how they seek professional development opportunities, and what obligations they see as intrinsic to their role (Hammerness, et al., 2005; Olsen, 2008).

The UNESCO-ILO recommendation on the status of teachers adopted in 1966 has served as a standard for the teaching profession, their rights, and status (Education International, 2015). The teaching profession significance has been recognized by designating October 5th, the day of its signing, as World Teachers' Day. As a result, Education International (2015) recommends that teachers should be given a high professional status in society commensurate with their professional responsibilities, qualifications and skills, and the contribution which their profession makes to develop society. However, to maintain such high status, Canrinus et al., (2011a) while citing Day (2006) explains that the nature of the teaching profession requires an interplay of three dimensions: a personal dimension (teachers' life outside the

school), a professional dimension (social and policy expectations of what a good teacher is and teachers own educational ideals) and a situational dimension (the direct working environment of the teacher). The way these dimensions interact determines the formation of different teacher professional identities (Canrinus et al., 2011a). So, teacher professional identity is a construct of various factors that include among others the teachers' school external environment where he or she works and lives hence a need for the researchers to establish how teacher professional identity is a construct of the community expectations of the teachers' work and the status they accord to the profession.

2. Theoretical Orientation to Researching Teacher Identity

Kelly (1995)'s Personal Construct Theory guided this study. Kelly's (1955) theory in (Bukor, 2015) claims individuals are engaged in making sense of their experience based on their interconnected construct systems. Man creates his own ways of seeing the world in which he lives; that is to say, the world does not create them for him. However, man can enslave himself with his own ideas and then win his freedom again by reconstructing his life. Roberts (1994) in Bukor (2015) claims you create your experience through your beliefs about yourself and the nature of reality. Your beliefs can be like fences that surround you.' Lipton (2008) in Bukor (2015) refers to this relationship as the belief effect 'to stress that our perceptions, whether they are accurate or inaccurate, impact our behavior and our bodies.' Kelly's theory, therefore, provided key insights into our understanding of the power and influence of teachers' own perceptions and beliefs about the community's expectations of the teaching profession.

2.1. Context of the Study

Like in many other countries, teacher identity in Uganda has been characterized by ups and downs. Ssekamwa (2000) notes that from the time missionaries produced teachers in Uganda, teachers have held a reputable status in society as opinion leaders, serving as an example to the rest of the people in all walks of life. However, from 1940s through the post-independence era, teachers experienced financial discomfort arising from constant world inflation. Attempts to unionize and fight for their welfare met stiff resistance from missionaries and later governments (Ssekamwa, 2000). The TISSA (2014) indicates that 78% of primary school teachers in Uganda are dissatisfied with their job and 59% would change the profession if given an opportunity. The report further discloses that professional recognition (which is related to teacher identity) was the 3rd most important factor in determining a teacher's job satisfaction after salary and opportunities for professional growth. This implies that the identity of primary school teachers in Uganda is questionable and this study wanted to establish the extent to which teacher professional identity depends on community perceptions of the teaching profession in Uganda.

2.2. Problem Statement

Teachers are entrusted with ensuring children's intellectual growth is realized and preparing each new generation to meet the challenges of the future (Hargreaves, 2009). An individual(s) who is accorded a high degree of respect and status in a community should perform such a noble obligation. However, due to poor remuneration, unattractive working conditions and low teacher training entry requirements among others, the teaching profession in Uganda like in many other developing countries has lagged behind other professions and many young people join teaching as the last resort (Kane and Mallon, 2006). This is believed to be having a negative impact on teachers' morale and motivation to deliver in their classrooms and shaping the character for the future generations. This necessitated a study to look at how teachers perceive their profession because of the opinions that the community holds on them.

3. Literature Review on Community Expectations and Teacher Professional Identity

Hansen (2001) asserts that the social identity of the teacher is formed based on the broader community's view of the profession while Kamper and Steyn (2013) believe the opinions that people have about teachers and the profession have implications for the professional identity of the teachers. The school external environment or the community where teachers work from shapes teacher professional identity through influencing changes in policy agendas, education reforms, and commercial logic of the market in which educational institutions operate (Hall & McGinity, 2015; Canrinus et al., 2011b). Some reforms that have impacted teacher professional identity include the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) teaching approach that required content to be taught through a second or foreign language in Belgium yet Belgian teachers are trained as content or language experts only (Mesmaeker & Lochtman, 2014). Teacher Professional Identity is also linked to expectations from family and friends. Often family and friends become sources of tension for the individual's sense of identity (Day & Kington, 2008, cited in Chong et al., 2011). The demands put on the teaching profession by family and friends translates into an accepted social image of who a teacher is and social expectations of those in the teaching profession even when against their personal desires and wishes (Beijaard et al., 2004 in Schepens, 2009). This has resulted in a misalignment between the teacher's views of their professional identity against the available educational mandates (Kuster et al., 2014). In a study about professional identity among Arts teachers, one participant confirms that family has an influence on the teacher's participation in extracurricular activities at school as she reported that when she gave birth at 27 years, her active involvement in school activities was affected (Kuster et al., 2014). In the same study, Kuster et al., (2014) established that teachers' morale to continue working depended on how best school administrators and community valued their work.

Obenchain et al., (2016) in their study, established that teachers continue to work and be committed to their profession due to the sense of responsibility they have towards their community. The participants in this study defined their roles as teachers not because of the society expectation but were guided by the drive to give back to the community

and where possible improve the communities where they grew from or where they are working. They, therefore, punctuate their teaching with activities that have direct relevance to their communities. In the same study, one participant revealed that her professional identity was due to the need to teach the history of her community in a different dimension.

3.1. Research Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative research design where data were collected through survey research involving 127 randomly selected public primary school teachers from rural and semi-urban locations of Mpigi District in Uganda. It issued self-administered questionnaires on teachers' views about the communities' perceptions to teachers. It analyzed data using SPSS to describe the teachers' view of the communities' expectations of the teaching profession

3.2. Ethical Considerations

To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, taking part teachers provided informed consent. Further, Questionnaire identification numbers were used for the participants in place of their names or schools where they work.

4. Findings

4.1. Participants' Background Variables

There were 127 participants in this study. Among these, 67 were male while 60 were female. Besides gender, participants were also analyzed in line with the number of years in the teaching service 44 had served between sixteen to twenty-one years while 63 had been in the teaching service for a period between five to fifteen years. Only sixteen participants had served for less than five years. The results were, therefore, drawn from experienced teachers who to a large extent had been able to form their professional identity because of their interaction with the community members. Participants' levels of education were sought, and it was found that 78 of the participants were holders of a grade three teacher's certificate, while 35 were holders of a diploma in education (grade five teachers' certificate), and fourteen were holders of a bachelor in Education attained through upgrading from grade three through grade five.

4.2. Teachers' Perceptions of How the Community Perceives the Teaching Profession

Findings in this section are in response to the research question of; 'What are the teachers' perceptions of how the community conceives the teaching profession in Uganda?' This research question was interested in establishing the extent to which teacher identity is a construct of community perception of the teaching profession in Uganda. To achieve this objective, researchers further categorized community perceptions into three variables (community perceptions) to which participants were supposed to show teachers' perceptions about how the community looks at the teaching profession. The results are presented and discussed below;

In this study, 55.4% of the participants believed the community holds the teaching profession with high regard. This is connected with the way society takes teachers as an important factor in human resource development. Research into teacher satisfaction shows that intrinsic rewards of teaching, centered on student achievement, personal growth and relationships with colleagues, still provide teachers with a great deal of satisfaction (Rice, 2005). Teachers are regarded as important figures in imparting moral values into the society and double up as society's educational foundation. Teachers build the nation by shaping the individuals who live in these communities. To imagine a community without teachers is impossible. In the same study, 46.6% of the participants characterize teaching as a profession with a low esteem and this is based on the view that traditionally, teacher's college entrants had much lower academic credentials and abilities as compared to students entering law school, engineering, and or medicine. Societal bias and 'ignorance' about teaching has maintained this kind of stereotype and further supported by the human tendency to believe something that is "familiar" is easy to do (Chireshe and Shumba, 2011). Teachers' negative perceptions of their status are so strong that many are reluctant to admit that they are teachers in social settings, and a large number discourage their own students or offspring from entering the profession (Rice, 2005).

Second, 70.3% of the participants believed the community will always see teaching as a low-status job. This perception could be attributed to the tendency by teacher training institutions to keep entry requirements low. This situation is amplified by the government phasing out of primary teacher colleges (PTCs) and the resultant proliferation of private (PTCs) whose survival depends on generating fees through big students' numbers hence, compromising entry standards. These researchers further attribute the participants' perception to poor welfare conditions that have for long characterized the teaching profession forcing teachers to engage in other petty jobs to supplement their little salary, for example, sand mining, Boda Boda riding. The community considers sand mining and Boda Boda riding as activities to be engaged in by people that have never gone to school. Hence, teachers engaged in such activities reduce the respect given for the profession making the community regard teaching as a low-status job. Further, the teaching profession is seen as a low-status job because teachers have sometimes become a disgrace to society as seen where teachers run away with students' registration fees, engage into sexual immorality with students and other bad practices.

Third, when participants were asked about whether their families, parents, and friends were happy with the teaching profession, 97.6% of the participant responded that their families and friends were either fairly or extremely positive. Researchers attribute this overwhelming support to the changing image of the teaching profession, gradual salary increment, job assurance and security with public service in Uganda. Further, it is also most likely that the decision for one to join the teaching profession is in most cases dictated by family members

4.5. Teachers' Level of Satisfaction in the Profession

Researchers inquired whether participants were satisfied being teachers given the way their families and the rest of the community at large look at their profession. In response, it was established that 61.4% of the participants indicated some contentment in the teaching profession and this may be attributed to respect and clout the society attaches to this profession in terms of monetary and non-monetary rewards compared to the rest of the citizens in the rural setting. This interpretation is further strengthened because 36.2% of the participants felt extremely positive about being teachers. However, 2.4% of the participants felt negative about being teachers. This could be, attributed to the unfavorable working conditions that characterize public primary schools in Uganda. This is supported by Rice (2005)'s assertion that there is a general consensus, amongst teachers, that their status is poor, their work undervalued and their contribution to the future prosperity and well-being of any society underestimated.

4.6. Teachers' Perception on the Status of the Teaching Profession

It was established that 62.4% of the participants believe the teaching profession is a high status job in the country. The situation can be explained because majority participants (87.4) in the study have been in the teaching profession for over 10 years. This has enabled them to witness an improvement in teacher welfare as seen in the improved salaries. This is compared to 27.2% who think the teaching profession in the country is of low status compared to other available occupations and professions. The former perception can be attributed to the rural setting where the study was carried out and the levels of education of the citizens in the rural districts of Uganda. Teachers' possible lack of adequate comparison with other professions in the rural parts of Uganda might have contributed to the community's higher perception about the teaching profession.

5. Conclusion

The community holds the teaching profession with high regard. Further, despite believing the status of the teaching profession in the country is high; teachers believed the community felt the status of the teaching profession in the country is low.

6. Recommendations

There is a need to institutionalize teacher professional development programs crafted towards helping teachers to reconstruct their identity as teacher professionals either through seminars, workshops or retreats. There is also a need to raise entry points for entrants into teacher training institutions in Uganda. Equally important, the government ought to further improve the working and welfare conditions to match the expectations of teachers thereby improving the community's perception of the teaching profession.

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