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Signposting Foundation Phase teachers' professional identities in selected Western Cape primary schools, South Africa

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The aim of this article is to report on the Foundation Phase (FP) teachers' professional identities in two primary schools in the Western Cape. This is meant to serve as a basis for understanding teachers' identities with regard to their teaching experience, qualifications, specialised knowledge base, and ongoing professional development. The article is based on data collected by means of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with the FP teachers in two township schools where isiXhosa is used as the medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase (Grades R to Three). We argue that while teacher identity research has received attention across the globe in the past four decades, little is known about the implications of teacher professional identity for literacy teaching in South African classrooms, especially where an African language is used as a language of learning and teaching. Our findings reveal the pluricentric nature of the FP teachers' qualifications and backgrounds. We conclude that FP teachers' professional identity (TPI) cannot be conceptualised in a simplistic and unidimensional way, but can be viewed as an intersectional construct that impacts on literacy instructional practices.

Keywords: early childhood; Foundation Phase; identity; isiXhosa; teacher professional identity

Introduction

The shortage of qualified teachers, and inadequate teacher quality are some of the challenges faced in Sub-Saharan Africa (Chisholm, 2004; Kanjee, Sayed & Rodriguez, 2010; Modisaotsile, 2012; Whitelaw, De Beer & Henning, 2008). In South Africa, the shortage of teachers has been associated with the low status of teaching as a profession, poor remuneration, learner discipline, and bureaucracy in schools (Kwenda & Robinson, 2010; Whitelaw et al., 2008). Although the government has tried to intervene by offering bursaries to prospective teachers, the supply and demand of teachers is still a challenge in South Africa. There is an even greater crisis in the supply of African language teachers, especially those who are competent to teach through the mother tongue in African languages in the Foundation Phase (Foley, 2010). As a result, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has embarked on projects that aim at strengthening Foundation Phase (Grades R to Three) teaching in higher education institutions across the country. This has resulted in an increase in the number of institutions that offer Foundation Phase (FP) programmes from 13 in 2012 to 25 in 2015 (Hofmeyr & Draper, 2015).

Despite this increase in FP programmes, there is limited research on FP teachers' professional identity in South Africa. At the same time, the recurring low levels of literacy and numeracy in many primary schools, particularly in the FP remain a grave concern (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2010, 2012, 2013; Howie, Venter & Van Staden, 2008; National Education Evaluation Development Unit [NEEDU], 2013; Reddy, Kanjee, Diedericks & Winnaar, 2006). This necessitates a look into who the FP teachers are and how they construct their identities with regard to literacy teaching. Whilst we do not suggest that there is a direct correlation between teachers' professional identities on the one hand, and learners' literacy performance on the other, we believe that it is valuable to uncover FP teachers' professional identities with regard to their training or qualifications, age, gender, professional development and teaching experiences, as these are some of the elements that shape teachers' identities (Ashby, Hobson, Tracey, Malderez, Tomlinson, Roper, Chambers & Healy, 2008; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Thus, the purpose of this article is to signpost FP teachers' professional identities and the implications of their identities for isiXhosa literacy teaching. The following research questions guided our investigation:

1. What are the Foundation Phase teachers' professional identities in selected schools in the Western Cape where isiXhosa is used as a Language of Learning and Teaching?
2. What are the implications of teachers' professional identities for literacy practice in the Foundation Phase?

As a point of departure, we provide a historical perspective of teacher training in South Africa in order to highlight the shifts that have occurred over the past five to six decades, particularly with regard to FP teaching. This is followed by a description of teacher identity intended to illuminate the fluidity and complexity of this concept as it applies in various domains, including education.

The Evolution of Teacher Training in South Africa

In the early 1950s, primary teacher education in South Africa was underpinned by the discriminatory policies of the Bantu Education Act, and there were few black teachers with adequate qualifications in schools (Gerard, 2011). During this period, women were preferred in primary education, as they were perceived as able to handle young children. As a result, young girls of 15 years of age were hired as teachers if they had at least Standard VI (equivalent to Grade Eight), and if they had been trained for one year for a Lower Primary Teachers' Certificate – LPTC (Gerard, 2011). By 1961, about 57% of teachers in black schools had LPTC. Another qualification was the Higher Primary Teachers' Certificate (HPTC), which was done over a period of two years to prepare teachers for higher primary school (Gerard, 2011).

The quality of these training programmes was questioned with regard to their academic and professional depth and rigour, especially since they continued to produce ill-prepared teachers for black schools under the apartheid education system while this was not the case for white schools. Gerard (2011) states that 96% of teachers in white schools were indeed qualified, whereas only 15% of teachers were adequately qualified and certified in black schools, particularly in schools which fell under the former Bantustan system of the 1960s and 1970s (Reddy et al., 2006). Additional constraints in black schools included overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, and lack of support for young teachers. These challenges exacerbated the poor quality of primary education in black schools throughout the apartheid education system (Gerard, 2011).

Before the 1990s, there were 105 teacher training colleges in South Africa, which trained primary school teachers. These colleges were racially segregated according to former homelands (Green, Adendorff & Mathebula, 2014; Kwenda & Robinson, 2010). Of the 105 teacher training colleges, 93 provided pre-service teacher training and 14 offered diplomas through in-service training programmes (Reddy et al., 2006). Of the 93 colleges, 85 catered for black students; and two thirds were in rural areas (Reddy et al., 2006). Before 2002 the majority of colleges offered a three-year qualification for primary school teachers. As a result, there were differences or variations with regard to the ethos and culture of teaching, the design of programmes and the structure of courses (Gerard, 2011; Green et al., 2014).

The 1990s marked the beginning of transformation in South African education (Gerard, 2011). In 1994, among the changes instituted to break down racial barriers were the introduction of a new qualifications framework, and curriculum requirements underpinned by equity and social

justice (Kwenda & Robinson, 2010). With the closure of teacher training colleges and the relocation of teacher education to universities in the early 2000s, a four-year Bachelor's degree for prospective teachers was introduced to replace teacher training previously offered by colleges of education (Kwenda & Robinson, 2010). This change was helpful in terms of rationalising initial teacher education programmes in the country. However, what remains at the centre of the debate in education in post-apartheid South Africa are the number and quality of teachers emerging from these institutions (Kanjee et al., 2010).

While there have been some efforts to attract teachers through the awarding of Funza Lushaka bursaries (from 2005), these have not been without challenge. The number of students who take bursaries to teach in African languages in the Foundation Phase is low, and some graduates do not take up teaching positions in rural areas (Reddy et al., 2006). As a result, in black schools, the shortage of teachers for the FP classes persists. This is especially the case where teaching is required through the medium of African languages.

In the light of this, it is worth uncovering the profile of FP teachers to understand whether the transformative education policies have yielded any shifts with regard to teacher training and teaching qualifications in post-apartheid South Africa. To investigate the matter we have framed our discussion within the complex and fluid construct, namely, the concept of identity (Lerseth, 2013).

The Complexity of Teacher Identity

Identity forms a diverse area of research with its more recent origins in the fields of sociology and psychology of the mid-20th century. While identity was at first treated as a singular and unproblematic concept (Olsen, 2008; Søreide, 2007), over time the concept came to be framed by social psychologists as a situated, ongoing and dynamic process (Lerseth, 2013; Olsen, 2008). According to Gee (2001, cited in Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014:1991) identity refers to "people's concept of who they are, of what sort of people they are and how they are related to others." In relation to this definition, Moje and Luke (2009) define identity on the basis of five overlapping metaphors: (i) identity as difference; (ii) identity as sense of self and subjectivity; (iii) identity as mind or consciousness; (iv) identity as a narrative; and (v) identity as position. The metaphor of identity-as-difference describes how people differ from one another in terms of their group membership, while identity-as-self refers to an individual's beliefs, values, origin, age, sex, cultural norms, abilities etc., which have to be understood within a particular context (Moje & Luke, 2009). The mind metaphor depicts the dialectal relationship between individuals' activities and their consciousness, which shape each

other in identity construction, while the narrative metaphor denotes that identities are constructed through the stories told by people about themselves. Finally, the position metaphor highlights subjectivities in identity construction across space and time, and how people take up or resist these positions (Moje & Luke, 2009). These metaphors portray identity as a complex, socially situated, fluid and dynamic entity (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Moje & Luke, 2009), with different dimensions, namely social identity, professional identity and local identity (Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014).

In the domain of teaching, teacher identity has become a focus of research in diverse areas that include student teacher development (i.e. the personal and professional aspects of becoming a teacher), as well as the teaching of the subject matter in the last decade (Søreide, 2007). Teacher identity highlights the individual characteristics of a teacher, which are integrated in the content and methods of teaching within a specific teaching context (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Research on teacher identity is multifaceted and has focused on individual teachers and their experiences, as well as on their socio-cultural, cognitive and affective perspectives (Cardelle-Elawar & Sanz de Acdeo Lizarraga, 2010; Olsen, 2008; Søreide, 2007). Hence a teacher's identity can never be a single shot, static and unitary construct, but a social and professional construct (Oruç, 2013; Rus, Tomşa, Rebege & Apostol, 2013).

Teacher identity can be understood in relation to professional identity, which has been accorded priority since the 1970s (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Oruç, 2013; Rus et al., 2013; Tateo, 2012). According to Beijaard et al. (2004) professional identity involves the integration of personal and professional identities, which are influenced by what teachers prioritise in their professional work, based on their experiences in practice and their personal backgrounds. Komba, Anangisye and Katabaro (2013) assert that in the teaching context, professional identity is characterised by: (a) expertise in one's area of specialisation; (b) moral integrity; and (c) expertise in didactical terms. It involves a number of knowledge sources and it is influenced by factors such as the immediate family, significant others, apprenticeship, policy context, teaching traditions, etc. (Beijaard et al., 2004).

In this article, we use the concept of teacher identity synonymously with teacher professional identity (TPI), which is central to the teaching profession (Oruç, 2013). TPI is about how teachers define their professional roles and how they see themselves as teachers, and what it means to be a teacher (Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014; Zhou, Chye, Koh & Chia, 2013). It comprises the teacher's personal and professional identities, which are

shaped by the teaching context, curriculum expertise (i.e., what teachers know) and the pedagogy they use to translate their knowledge into practice in a given teaching context (Cardelle-Elawar & Sanz de Acdeo Lizarraga, 2010; Pennington & Richards, 2016). It is influenced by factors inside and outside the classroom and it is underpinned by various views, namely the psychological, discursive, narrative, and dialogic views (Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014). These views reflect the growth and development of the teacher as a professional (psychological), as well as how the teacher's past, present, and future affect TPI formation (discursive). Additionally, they reflect how teachers define the different roles they play in different situations (narrative) and how teachers' roles change according to interactional situations (dialogic) e.g., with learners, parents, peers, administrators and the wider community, as well as the working environment (Smit & Fritz, 2008; Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014; Zhou et al., 2013). Thus, TPI is not a fixed entity, but it is a dynamic and contextual construct that is negotiated through experience (Clarke, Hyde & Drennan, 2013; Coldron & Smith, 1999; Oruç, 2013; Pennington & Richards, 2016; Tateo, 2012; Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014).

There is a relationship between teacher identity and language and literacy development and competence (Moje & Luke, 2009; Pennington & Richards, 2016). Both literacy and identity are socially constructed, and have multiple meanings (Moje & Luke, 2009). As socio-cultural constructs, they take into consideration one's social context in meaning-making. For example, the ideological view of literacy (Lea & Street, 2006), like the narrative view of identity (Moje & Luke, 2009; Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014) takes into consideration the local literacy practices that differ from one context to another. Literacy and identity are enacted or performed and can be used to "stereotype, privilege, or marginalize [*sic*] readers and writers as struggling or proficient" (Moje & Luke, 2009:416). In literacy teaching, a learner can be labelled as a good or poor reader, or as literate or illiterate, depending on both the teacher's pedagogical practices and the context of interaction which reflect his/her professional identity. In other words, in one context a person may be literate, while the same person can be illiterate in other contexts (Lea & Street, 2006). Therefore, learner and teacher identities influence literacy teaching and learning, and they also shape or develop each other (Moje & Luke, 2009). In this article, we sketch the TPI of FP teachers and its implications for isiXhosa literacy teaching and learning.

Methodology

We have used a qualitative research approach in the belief that it is particularly appropriate for ex-

ploring personal and professional identities of a sample of teachers. Specifically, an exploratory interpretive research paradigm was utilised. In keeping with the primary focus of the paper, we decided to use a sample of 26 FP teachers, who were conveniently selected from two primary schools (Schools A and B) in one district of the Western Cape. Our choice aligns with what Teddlie and Yu (2007) have observed regarding convenient sampling, where these authors are of the view that convenient sampling involves drawing samples that are both easily accessible and willing to participate in a study. In this regard, the researchers contacted principals and teachers who showed an interest in our research, who were willing to participate by completing questionnaires, and further, who gave us permission to interview them.

In both schools, the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) was isiXhosa. The Western Cape Department of Education granted us ethical clearance to ensure that the participants were both not to be harmed, and their privacy was to be protected. This facilitated acquiring informed consent from the teachers. Questionnaires were administered to 26 teachers and interviews were conducted with 10 teachers who gave us permission to interview them. Six teachers were interviewed in School A, and four teachers were selected in School B. The semi-structured individual interviews were conducted in isiXhosa, as all the teachers were isiXhosa Home Language speakers, and these lasted between 20–25 minutes. The interviews were conducted over five days, after the administration of the questionnaire as a means of triangulation.

The survey questions elicited information relating to teachers' biographies, their qualifications and teaching experience, while the interview questions focused on how they saw themselves as FP teachers, and how their qualifications, roles and teaching experiences impacted on literacy teaching and learning. To establish credibility and trustworthiness of the data, participants were permitted to revisit the instruments and to add further information where necessary. This we believed would ensure accuracy of information. The protocols were read again to ensure that objectivity was maintained and that there was no loss of information due to the process of translation.

We analysed the data thematically in order to relate them to the five aspects of TPI that emerged from the analysed data, namely gender, age, teaching experience, qualifications and continuing professional development courses attended. We are aware that there are additionally other aspects of TPI (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Smit & Fritz, 2008; Tateo, 2012; Zhou et al., 2013) as discussed above, but the above-mentioned aspects align with the data and research questions addressed in this

article. The findings we present here and the analysis that follows relate only to the questionnaire and a representative sampling of teacher interviews.

Findings

In describing their professional identities, teachers defined their professional identities according to the subjects they taught, their age, their gender, their relationship with learners and curriculum advisors, their previous literacy results, and their pedagogical experiences. Their professional self-image was also defined in relation to what they studied during pre-service training, curriculum expectations, social interaction with learners, and curriculum advisors.

Concerning the gender of the teachers the results of the study showed that all teachers ($n = 26$) who teach the FP isiXhosa Home Language in the research sites were females. This finding is familiar, as many research studies indicate that traditionally the teaching of young children has been perceived as a gendered activity (Oruç, 2013:209) or a "woman's job" (Drury, 2008 in Mashiya, 2014:27). Additionally, teachers themselves often define themselves through their "dual roles as mothers and teachers" (Oruç, 2013:209). In South Africa, FP teaching is populated by female teachers (Mashiya, 2014). This finding resonates with the notion that females are caring and nurturing people, as well as fluidity of the concept of identity (Glenn, Chang & Forcey, 1994; Moje & Luke, 2009; Tateo, 2012). In support of this view, one of the teachers had this to say:

Ndiqaphela ukuba andikwazi ukuzahlula. Ndiba ngumama ebantwaneni bam, kuphinde kulindeleke ukuba ndibe nguitshala nomama esikolweni.

[I observe that I cannot distinguish who I am. I become a mother to my children, and it is expected that I become a teacher and mother at school] (Interview with Teacher X, School A).

The interview data also reveals that some FP teachers find it difficult to perform the dual roles in the FP, and wish to teach older children who are less demanding in terms of care.

Akwaba bendinokunikwa abantwana abadala ukuze ndibe nguitshala qha esikolweni, endlwini yam ndibe ngumama.

[I wish I could be allocated older children so that I can be a teacher only at school, and be a mother at home] (Interview with Teacher X, School A).

One teacher from school B had this to say about dual role played by the FP teachers:

Abafazi banikwa uFoundation Phase kwesi sikolo kuba kulindeleka ukuba ube ngumama- titshala. Andiyigxeki kakhulu loo nto kuba abanye abantwana abazange baye ekhrishi. Xa befika kumntu ofana nonina noko abanxunguphali kakhulu. Yenza ke ukubafundisa oonobumba namagama kungabinzima kakhulu.

[In this school female teachers are allocated to the Foundation Phase, because they are expected to be teachers and mothers. I do not condemn that

because some children never attended the crèche. When they can identify with a mother figure, they do not become very anxious. That makes it less difficult to teach them phonics and words]. (Interview with Teacher U, School B)

The above excerpts show not only gendered roles in schools, but also reveal the way in which the teachers define their personal and professional identities in the work they are doing. They also indicate how teachers' professional identities intersect with literacy teaching (e.g. Teacher U). They can be understood in terms of identity-as-position (Moje & Luke, 2009) in the manner in which the teachers position themselves across different spaces i.e., inside and outside the classroom. They resonate with identity-as-self (Moje & Luke, 2009) in the sense that the teacher constructs the "self" in relation to her interaction with learners and the dual role she has to play in the classroom, as well as shifting identities in school and at home. They also link with the narrative and dialogical views of TPI, which acknowledges the way in which teachers construct their identities through the different roles they take in different interactional situations e.g., becoming a mother at home, a teacher in the class, etc. (Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014).

While the gendered roles of teachers are frequently legitimated or defended, the notion that caring and nurturing are female characteristics needs to be problematised, especially in South Africa, where male involvement in early childhood education has been stigmatised as being unnatural or abnormal (Hofmeyr & Draper, 2015; Mashiya, 2014). This has the potential to perpetuate gender prejudice and stereotyping in schooling and to deprive young learners of access to male figures who could be good role models. While Mashiya's (2014) study on FP student teachers illustrates that male students displayed enthusiasm and dedication in working with young children, and children enjoyed being taught by male students, the findings of this study indicate that the cultural and societal bias and stereotypes associated with female roles inside and outside the school still persist.

Regarding the participants' ages, it is interesting to note that the majority of the teachers (65,4%) were aged 40 and older. Of the total number of participants 34.6% were below the age of 40. This finding seems to align with the statistics of Hofmeyr and Draper (2015), which indicate that the highest number of teachers in South Africa is to be found in the age range of between 45 and 49. While the age profile of teachers is described in terms of supply and demand in South African schools across phase levels (Hofmeyr & Draper, 2015), it has also come to be regarded as an educational advantage as the majority of teachers in this category are perceived to be professionally mature, with good teaching experience.

However, age may not be the sole determiner of effectiveness in teaching (Horner, Murray & Rushton, 1989). In this regard, the FP teachers' age profile highlights a need for young teachers in the early childhood education sector, which is often perceived as an area for older teachers, as observed by one of the interviewees:

Ndidiniwe ngoku kukutitsha. Sendilinde nje ukuba ndipenshine. Oku kutshintsha-tshintsha kwekharityhulam kuyandibulala mma [...] sekumelwe kuqeshwe ootitshala abatsha ...

[I am tired of teaching now. I am waiting to retire. The curriculum changes are killing me [...] new teachers have to be appointed] (Interview with Teacher Z, School B).

A similar sentiment was shared by Teacher T from School A in the following interview excerpt:

Njengokuba undibona ndiyashixiza. Andinakuba safunda imethod ezintsha ngoku zokufundisa isiXhosa [...]. Kaloku thina sasifunda uSteward readers kwaye wayeyright. Andiyazi le nto ngoku. Ndifunyenwe ntombi kakuhle ngucurriculum advisor ngokuba umanyoko akumlandeli kakuhle uCAPS. Ndiyavuma abantwana bam banokusilela kwezinye izakhono kuba ndifundisa umntu lo ukubhala amagama nokufunda qha.

[As you can see, I am old. I cannot learn new isiXhosa teaching methods now ... During our time we read Steward readers and they were right. The curriculum advisor is on my case because I do not understand CAPS. I agree that my learners lag behind in other skills because I just teach them reading and writing only]. (Interview with Teacher T, School A)

The broader literature indicates that teacher identity is shaped by teacher attitudes, beliefs, job demands and societal pressures and conditions (Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014). From the above excerpt, it can be deduced that the teachers' attitudes have changed towards their roles as teachers over time. This is due to their old age and constant changes to the curriculum. Teacher Z feels that there is a need to employ young teachers who will cope better with the curriculum changes and pressure. This finding resonates with both the replacement and curriculum expansion demands, which entail an intake of new teachers against the loss of teachers through retirement or resignation (Green et al., 2014). At the moment, the attrition rate is at 3%, and it is projected that 48,598 FP teachers will be lost by 2020 (Green et al., 2014).

Both teachers position themselves as having less significant roles in teaching due to their age. Of interest is that Teacher T seems to resist her roles as a FP teacher in that she "cannot learn new isiXhosa teaching methods now." This can be seen in light of identity-as-position which allows people to "tell stories about themselves, [...] and also shift and tell new stories" (Moje & Luke, 2009:431). It also shows lack of secure identity by Teacher T as a literacy teacher, and also shows her traditional view of literacy as reading and writing only (Lea &

Street, 2006). This traditional understanding of literacy (reading and writing) can be regarded as a limitation for the development of literacy.

Interestingly, one participant from the same school, on the one hand, perceived her old age and experience positively. She defined herself as an asset and expert in teaching reading and writing in the Foundation Phase.

Mna ke nokuba ndimdala ndibathanda kakhulu abantwana abancinci. Andizincomi ndiyaziwa abam abantwana bafunda gromomo kwaye bayakwazi ukubhala neleta. Kaloku kudala ndasifundisa isiXhosa. Inyathi ibuza kwa-baphambili.

[Although I'm old, I love children very much. I am not blowing my own horn; I have good reputation in teaching reading and my learners read very well and are able to write letters. I have been teaching isiXhosa for a long time. Experience is the best teacher]. (Interview with Teacher N, School A)

Regarding teachers' qualifications, it is worth noting that the analysed questionnaire and interview data does not illustrate any early childhood education specialisation in the undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications held by the teachers. In other words, while teachers are adequately qualified with degrees, the analysed data point to the scarcity of early childhood specialists in the Foundation Phase. The findings show that the majority of participants had gone through tertiary education as 17 of the teachers (65.4%) of the total number ($n = 26$) held undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in education, but with no specialisation in the FP. For example, 11 teachers (42.3%) had specialised Senior Phase teaching, while six of them (23.1%) trained to teach in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase. Seven of the teachers (27%) held diplomas in education, and two (4%) had a wide range of certificates in early childhood. The certificates ranged from the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE), the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Level 4 Unit Standards and Level 5 Early Childhood Certificates. While tertiary qualifications may be regarded as one of the strengths of a professional, if the specialisation is not appropriate to the phase, it may actually pose further challenges, by creating knowledge gaps in the teaching of learners in the FP. The teachers' responses showed how their lack of specialisation in FP teaching impacted literacy teaching. One teacher had this to say about her fields of specialisation and limited proficiency in isiXhosa:

Mna andikxange nditreyinelwe abantwana base-Foundation Phase. Imajor subject yam yayiyi-English neLife Orientation Yingxaki kakhulu loo nto kuba andibazi ukuba bafundiswa njani izandi nokufunda. Eworse yeyokuba nesiXhosa sam sophukile.

[I was not trained for Foundation Phase learners. My majors were English and Life Orientation. This is a problem, because I struggle to teach them

phonics and reading. The worse part of it is that I am not proficient in isiXhosa]. (Interview with Teacher Q, School A)

Similar sentiments were expressed by Teacher N in School A regarding subject specialisation and literacy instruction:

Mna kaloku zange ndiqeqeshelwe ukufundisa ilanguage. Ndiqeqeshelwe ukutitsha iHistory ne Geography kwiSenior Phase. Akululanga shame kodwa ndiyazama. Ngamanye amaxesha ndiziva ngathi ndenza into ewrongo ngokuvuma ukufundisa uFoundation Phase. Bayasokola shame ekufundeni nasekubhaleni abantwana bam.

[I was not trained to teach languages. I specialise in Geography and History. It is not easy, sometimes I feel like I was not supposed to accept Foundation Phase Post. My learners are really struggling to read and write] (Interview with Teacher N, School A).

Pennington and Richards (2016) emphasise the importance of disciplinary identity, which entails specific knowledge of the subject acquired through formal education and experience. In the above excerpts, teachers display resentment and lack of confidence in teaching FP literacy, which could constrain learners' literacy learning. Limited proficiency in isiXhosa is a concern as language identity is one of the key characteristics required of a language teacher (Pennington & Richards, 2016).

The study findings also show that the majority of teachers had many years of teaching experience: 40% of the participants had up to 10 years' teaching experience and 60% had 15 years' teaching experience and more. These findings offer positive insights for teaching in the FP. However, Day (2012) and Day and Gu (2007) found that teachers' honing and sustaining of their capacities, commitment, and passion to teach relate to their professional life phase. These authors claim that as teaching experience increases, due to many factors, older teachers' commitment and passion to teach are likely to decrease relative to younger teachers in their early and middle years (Day & Gu, 2007).

As we analysed the interview data, one main finding became apparent. All the participants ($n = 26$) appeared to be lifelong learners, who had gone through continuing professional development training. The findings, however, showed a variation of in-service training courses attended by participants over time. Of the 26 teachers, 57% had attended orientation sessions on the South African Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS), and a course in Foundation Phase isiXhosa Home Language. The same number had attended an English First Additional Language in-service training course. A small number of teachers (7%) indicated that they attended training sessions on the Balanced Language Approach, while 3% attended a reading course. According to Geijsel, Slegers, Stoel and Krüger (2009) participating in a variety of professional activities within the school stimulates teachers' own professional development

and it improves teaching and learning. This view is supported by the following interview data gathered from FP teachers:

Ndancedwa kukuya kwi-workshop eyandibonisa indlela yokwenza i-Baseline nokuchonga ii-barriers.

[I was helped by attending the workshop which showed me how to do the Baseline (assessment) and identify the barriers] (Interview with Teacher V, School B).

Similar sentiments were expressed by Teacher W with regard to the benefits of continuous teacher development workshops. She had this to say:

Ndandingayazi i-CAPS nendlela enokusetyenziswa ngayo. I-workshop, andifuni nokuxoka, yandinceda. Ngoku ndiyakwazi ukufundisa ngendlela elindelekileyo.

[I didn't know CAPS and how it could be used. The workshop, I don't want to lie, it helped me. Now I can teach in the expected way] (Interview with Teacher W, School A).

The participants also perceived lack of formalised continuous professional development as the limitation in the development of their professional identities. They believed that teachers who were exposed to the new curriculum and teaching approaches were more successful in teaching literacy. Some, however, acknowledged that collaboration and interaction with their peers was very useful. They valued the need to play an active role in their professional development process.

UCAPS mtsha kwaye ufuna umntu ohamba ezi workshops. Bayachebeleza ke abayayo eCTLI. Bathi bafunda kwezinye iititshala zezinye izikolo bakope indlela ezilula nezintsha. Kulo nyaka uzayo nam ndifuna ukukhe ndiye nam. Ndiziva ndingaphelanga xa ndingenalo ulwazi olwaneleyo.

[CAPS is new and it requires teachers to attend these workshops. Those who go to the Cape Teaching and Leadership Institute (CTLI) do not experience difficulties. They say they learn from other teachers and copy new and easy teaching strategies. I want to attend next year. I feel incomplete with limited knowledge] (Interview with Teacher R, School B).

One of the teachers showed how her attitude and practice improved over time through interaction with other teachers and learners, particularly with regard to literacy teaching.

Kunyaka wokuqala ndifundisa abantwana iliteracy ndandirongo kakhulu, ndingazazi nokuba ndenzani eklasini. Ndandizibona ndiyifailure kuba ndandingakwazi ukufundisa izandi. Kunyaka olandelayo ndafunda kwabanye ootitshala nalapha ebantwaneni endibafundisayo. Noko ngoku iresults zam zintle, ndingatsho ukuba ndinguye utitshala weliteracy.

[In the first year of teaching literacy I was very unhappy, I didn't know what I was doing in class. I saw myself as a failure because I could not teach phonics. In the following year I learnt from other teachers and from the learners I taught. At least my results are good, I can now define myself as a

literacy teacher]. (Interview with Teacher S, School B)

The teachers' (R and S) responses above indicate their self-awareness regarding their knowledge and competence in literacy teaching which influences the manner in which they constructed their identity and positioned themselves in literacy teaching. Self-knowledge and awareness are the key elements of teacher professional identity formation. They reveal teachers' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in literacy teaching. Self-awareness forms part of reflective practice, which incorporates one's personal qualities, values and narratives of their experience (Moje & Luke, 2009; Pennington & Richards, 2016).

The above excerpts also highlight that teachers' professional identities develop within an interactive community of practice (Pennington & Richards, 2016), where teachers share knowledge and values to deepen their knowledge through collaboration. This finding also shows that TPI construction is an ongoing process that involves various knowledge sources that affect teaching and subject matter knowledge (Beijaard et al., 2004). It also reflects the relationship between teachers' identity construction and literacy development (Moje & Luke, 2009).

Discussion

Our findings alert us to pertinent issues and insights that appear to be consistent with the issues underpinning TPI construction as illustrated in the works of various scholars discussed earlier (Moje & Luke, 2009; Oruç, 2013; Pennington & Richards, 2016; Tateo, 2012; Zhou et al., 2013). They illuminate the pluricentric nature of the TPI with regard to FP teachers' qualifications, age, gender and continuous professional development. Within the TPI framework (Moje & Luke, 2009; Pennington & Richards, 2016; Rus et al., 2013; Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014) we outlined earlier, we are able to argue that the varying qualifications and age of the FP teachers should be seen as a uniquely diversifying impetus rather than as a feature of a deficit model.

Teachers ought to be confident in their ability to teach as this determines how they facilitate learning (Pennington & Richards, 2016). The findings of our study show that some teachers lacked confidence in teaching literacy as they were not FP specialists, and had insufficient disciplinary knowledge of FP literacy. Lack of specialisation by FP teachers raises concerns as early childhood education is a specialised field with regard to content and pedagogical knowledge (Pretorius & Machet, 2004). Given the learners' low literacy performance in many South African schools, it is crucial that well qualified teachers be placed in the FP classrooms.

Some teachers constructed negative professional identities due to their age and lack of disciplinary knowledge, which impacted on their confidence and performance as FP teachers. The manner in which teachers constructed their identities seemed to have an influence on their pedagogical approaches in literacy teaching. For example, one of the teachers identified herself as a “failure,” while the other identified herself as an “expert” in literacy teaching. Interestingly, the teacher who had a negative self-concept experienced poor learners’ literacy results, while the one who constructed herself as an asset, had good literacy performance in her class. Teachers revealed their personal and professional identities as they reflected on their literacy practice. This supported the view that identity construction and literacy are both mediated through social interaction, and they shape each other (Moje & Luke, 2009).

Additionally, the issue of gender assumes particular significance in our research. In the findings we noticed a predominance of females in the FP. Our data shows that females are expected to be more caring and nurturing in their teaching roles, but we find it strange that male teachers are often not characterised in the same way in certain communities in South Africa. Further, we are aware that the cultural stereotypes that operate in certain communities in South Africa perpetuate this kind of perception, which is meant to project male teachers as people who should not be engaged in early childhood teaching. In this regard, Mashiyi’s (2014) research findings bring a fresh perspective on how male FP pre-service training students are perceived and the educational benefits they bring in their interaction with young learners (e.g., through play, sport, discipline, stimulating children’s curiosity, being father figures, etc.). Therefore, with the prevalence and promotion of TPI, every attempt should be made to assign equal importance to the potential and promise that male teachers can bring to the ecology of early childhood education in South Africa. Such an initiative could both mitigate against the unwholesome influence of gender stereotypes, and bring about salutary constructive social change in the educational domains of the country.

The findings have also shown that through continuous development workshops, teachers were able to interact in communities of practice and acquire new knowledge and skills. In this way, they could (re)construct their professional identities and position themselves differently in interactional spaces. This resonates with the psychological and dialogical views of TPI, which entail the academic growth and development of the “self” over time, and how teachers define their roles according to interactional situations (Moje & Luke, 2009; Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014). For example, two teachers

developed high self-esteem and confidence in literacy teaching through interaction with other experienced teachers in communities of practice (Pennington & Richards, 2016).

Finally, the findings also highlight the narrative and psychological views of identity, which reflected teachers’ self-perceptions, their perceptions of government policies, and their social standing in relation to others in the teaching profession (Zare-ee & Ghasedi, 2014). Thus TPI construction varies according to teacher experiences and interactional situations.

Conclusion

This article has shown that a plurality of dimensions constitutes the FP teachers’ experience, and that this shapes their professional identities. However, we acknowledge that the findings presented in this article cannot be generalisable due to the small sample used in the study. Still, they remain valuable as they shed light on the TPI of the Foundation Phase teachers in the selected schools. Such information is useful in understanding the teachers’ professional trajectories and aspirations.

In conclusion, we are inclined to state that the varying personal and professional attributes of teachers complexify the understanding of TPI. This is to say that TPI cannot be conceptualised in a simplistic way, but should be viewed as an intersectional construct rather than as one that is unidimensional. We hope that this will be further researched in relation to literacy and numeracy instruction – a recurring challenge in many South African primary schools.

Note

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