

# Teacher Identity: Influence of Emerging Trends

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**Abstract:** Using a qualitative research method, the study aims to analyze the teacher identity and how such an identity is being influenced by current technology trends in educational practice. Sample of the study was composed of five teachers, with teaching experiences of 8 to 10 years. The interview technique was used as the data collection instrument. The recorded interviews were transcribed and analysis was carried out on this dataset. The result showed that teachers form their professional identity based on the expectations and conditions after they take up appointment as teachers, identities continue to change and develop along practice, societal recognitions, as well as life experiences. Further, findings of the study are discussed as reflection of teachers' work environment and development.

**Keywords:** Teachers' identity; teachers' professional development; technology, ICT.

## 1. Introduction

Teachers in the 21st century are different from years gone by. The forceful growth of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in education redirects the focus of teaching and learning. The emergence of technology in the classroom has opened up a whole new world of investigation into the issue of effective teaching (Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2011). ICT plays a significant role in facilitating educational change reforms, teachers therefore have become the agents of change. As agents of change, if teacher become ICT literate, they would make a lot of positive attitude to computer use and information technologies (Kpai, Joe-Kinane, & Ekeleme, 2012). Beijard, Verloop, & Vermunt (2000), maintains that teachers' perceptions of their own professional identity affect their efficacy and professional development as well as their ability and willingness to cope with educational change and to implement innovations in their own practice about teaching. One major rationale behind the ICT's failure in teaching is teacher resistance to ICT. Carnoy (2014) argues that difficulties are the consequences of the lack of training, as many teachers feel uncomfortable because they do not have both the necessary ICT abilities and the specific training to use the new resources in the classroom environment.

Research studies have repeatedly put forward the question as to what variables determine the integration of ICT in teaching and learning (Jo Tondeur, Keer, Braak, & Valcke 2010). A number of studies have shown that teacher factors play a key role towards ICT integration in schools, research in ICT integration have failed to focus on the teacher identity building and teacher resilience in the face of change. Changing teaching practice is a challenging and laborious process that involves changing teachers' existing beliefs and individual disciplines, in teaching and learning as well as reshaping their professional identity (Schutz, Cross, Hong & Osbon, 2007). Emerging new ways often involves teachers' transition from traditional –"talk and chalk", teacher-centered approach to student-centered and inquiry based instructions. Teachers have a key responsibility for their professional development, for they must realise that self-motivation and interest are the underlying factors for success in professionalism. This is especially important in areas of rapid change such as the educational application of ICT and the use of networks and other ICT innovations to support the flow of knowledge that is crucial in enhancing teaching capabilities (Albion, Tondeur, Forkosh-Baruch & Peeraer, 2015).

Therefore, Leask and Younie (2013) question then, if teacher quality is accepted as a critical factor in educational outcomes, why is there so little attention paid to improving the quality

of teachers' professional knowledge for ICT integration. In view of the rapid changes occurring in ICT and the relative lack of related transformation in education, the need for effective Teacher Professional Development (TPD) in relation to ICT is apparent but it is less clear what TPD would be most beneficial and how it should be most effectively delivered (Albion, Tondeur, Forkosh-Baruch, & Peeraer, 2015). Gaps in usage and outcomes have been identified globally. Some of these gaps may be explained in terms of teachers' digital competence and ICT acceptance. Learning and developing a craft of teaching is an ongoing process throughout a teachers' teaching career. With the fast pace of technology changes globally, one area of development employers expect to see in teachers' practices is an up to date use and knowledge of ICT tools in teaching and learning, an expectation teachers need to address throughout their practicing career. The study aims to explore two key research questions:

- i. How does teacher professional identity affect ICT Integration?
- ii. What influences a teachers' resilience?

## **2. Teacher Identity**

Teacher identity is conceptualized generally as complex, dynamic, evolving, and emergent (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Trent (2014) views that teacher identities are created and recreated over time and influenced by an array of factors. Teachers are confronted with multi-faceted, constantly shifting, and unstable definitions of themselves. Pillen, den Brok, and Beijaard, (2013) further explains that the process of identity creation takes place throughout a working life, it is in pre-service and early-career stages where identities are most volatile, tensions experienced in teacher education commonly continue into early-service practice. The processes of reconciliation of the personal and professional dimensions of what it means to be a teacher are conflicts that can have consequences not only for current learning but also longer term career (Henry, 2016). Teacher "identities refer to the different views that individuals have about themselves as teachers in general, and how this view changes over time and in different contexts" (Dworet, 1996, p.67). Beijaard Verloop and Vermunt (2000) propose an idea where teachers' professional identity is a framework established and maintained through the interaction in social situations, and negotiation of roles within the particular context. Cross and Hong (2009) explain that, the way teachers perceive themselves influences their choice of action and judgment, thereby making identity a critical factor in understanding teachers' classroom behaviors.

For teachers, their professional identities embody how teachers view themselves in their instructional role and how they represent themselves to their students and colleagues. These mental representations of themselves are intimately intertwined with emotions. What teachers believe constitute knowledge and the process through which students obtain this knowledge informs the ways they manipulate learning in the classroom and their responsibilities in the teaching learning process. The teacher's professional identity is an essential element in understanding teachers' behavior, judgment, and subsequent emotional experiences in the classroom. Implementing reform policies and practices ultimately ask teachers to reshape their professional identities by adopting different roles and perspectives. Several studies have noted this procedure, and emphasized teachers' professional identity as one of the most important factors for successful implementation of a reform agenda (Cross & Hong, 2009). The importance of teacher identity, the experiences of individual teachers, how they go about their work and how this influences their professional practice will be investigated in this study.

### **2.1. Teachers' Resilience**

Resilience is understood as dealing with a process (Bobek, 2002; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990), a capacity or ability to resist and overcome challenges (Sammons, Day, Kington, Gu, Stobart, & Smees, 2007). The definition of resilience is multidimensional and complex. There is no universally accepted definition of resilience, but there are some defining and determining features such as bouncing back, overcoming adversity, adapting oneself. It is resilience that represents the capacity of teachers to rebound and understand the necessity for change and adaptation despite being through difficulty. Teacher resilience has three components; first, is the

individual teacher's capacity to harness not only personal or psychological resources but also physical, social, and cultural resources. Second, is the process whereby characteristics of individual teachers and of their personal and professional contexts interact over time. Thirdly, resilience is evident in the outcome of a teacher who, despite facing challenges, experiences professional commitment, growth, wellbeing, and a "strong sense of vocation, self-efficacy and motivation to teach" (Resilience Research Centre, 2014; Mansfield et al., 2014; Sammons et al., 2007, p. 694). Henderson and Milstein (2003) in their study defines a resilient teacher as one who gives of self in service to others and /or a cause, uses life skills, including good decision making, assertiveness, impulse control, and problem solving, and one who has the ability to be a friend, ability to form positive relationships, sense of humor, self-discipline, independence, positive view of personal future, flexibility, capacity for and connection to learning, personal competence (is good at something), self-motivation, and feelings of self-worth and self-confidence.

Earlier studies revealed that resilience developed through the rebounding qualities of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and support systems (Richardson, 2002). Day and Gu, (2007) view resilience as the ability to withstand difficulty and bounce back. Teachers with characteristics of resiliency are far more likely to persevere in adverse situations, they are far less likely to consider quitting the profession, and find it easier to adapt to change. This study therefore, attempts to add to the literature by providing empirical evidence on teacher resilience and examining beliefs, and perceptions of teachers with the aim of building a supportive professional development settings conducive for technology inclusion to make both teaching and learning more effortless. The study in doing so takes on the views of five teachers at different stages of their careers to explore the interaction between teachers' professional and personal identities and their management of these interaction which they experiences in each professional life phase. Teachers' capacity to manage such interplay is a challenging process which contributes strongly to the relative strength of their resilience in ICT emerging trends. Studies have revealed a range of challenges that may constrain teacher resilience in the classrooms (Beltman, Mansfield & Harris, 2016). Teachers may need to cater for students with difficult behaviour or individual learning needs, schools in low socio-economic status (SES) areas can be demanding and difficult to staff due to the presence of students with behavioural problems, low achievement, and multilingual backgrounds (Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010). Schools located in disadvantaged areas with limited resources and ICT facilities also add to the challenge. These challenges may force teachers in areas of low SES to stay on as teachers for a short period of time and such schools are likely to employ untrained teachers as staff members (Riddell, 2013). Unsupportive school leaders or lack of resources, problematic relationships with students' and parents, heavy workloads and externally imposed regulations from school boards can also be a challenge (Ebersohn, 2012; Beltman et al., 2016).

### **3. Methods**

To allow for a detailed examination of the relationship and interaction between teachers' professional, personal identities and relative strength of their resilience in technology emerging trends, the author used a case study approach (Yin, 2009). The research questions required participants who were interested in making changes in their professional development and were willing to share and be open in speaking about both positive and negative experiences related to their teaching experience. Because such experiences might be difficult to talk about with a stranger, the author recruited participating teachers who had previous working relationship with the author in a professional development institute. Three out of five of the teachers, referred to in this paper as Stella, Julie and Sly, agreed to participate and speak freely. All teachers allowed me to inquire extensively into their experiences as they tried to enact changes, sharing their successes and their challenges and continuous struggles as teaching becomes redirected towards ICT integration. As such, these cases provided a suitable context for investigating the aforesaid research questions which also includes whether experiences played any role in these struggles. I see the case selection criteria as similar to that described by Lloyd (2008), whose case study subject was chosen "in light of his willingness to share his experiences, on one hand, and the interesting qualities of his experiences, on the other" (p. 167).

Semi-structured interview protocols were designed based on the research questions and participants' stage in the teaching. Two paired (Evens & Houssart, 2007) and two individual interviews were administered and were also audio-taped. Core questions were pre-developed to explore participants' perceptions and probes were used based on their answers. Pre-developed interview questions were guided by the main research questions, and sample interview questions included "How do you describe yourself as a teacher?" and "How do you view ICT as a tool in teaching?" The interviews were conducted over the course of a semester. Conducting the paired interview was like conducting a focus group interview, Julie and Sly were paired as they are in the same department. This was also to elicit more open and candid responses (Hatch, 2010). In such situations the participants assume a level of control in the conversation that will allow a good flexibility in the direction of the interview (Byers & Wilcox, 1991). The interview allowed the teachers to evaluate themselves and sort strategies they planned to follow in the integration of ICT in teaching and learning.

### *3.1. Participants*

Stella, Julie and Sly, teach at the same teacher college in a suburban area near a state capital in the south part of Nigeria and also graduated from the same university in the city. Julie has 10 full years of teaching experience, while Stella and Sly have taught for eight years. The school enrolled approximately 2000 students in the first year level and has more females (65%) than male student population (35%). About 5% of students in the school have learning disabilities. All teachers have courses they have taught repeatedly over each school year as this has become a method for improving teaching practice and resilience.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

In this research two major issues stood out for the teachers. Firstly, teachers responded positively to reforms, because they believed that the very nature of the reform and their professional development places them on the path of success of technology integration. Even as studies suggest teachers interpret reforms to mean that their current performance is unsatisfactory and thus needs to be modified in order to increase achievement levels as they are ineffective in their jobs (Cross & Hong, 2009). Sly considers himself to be a successful teacher and the teaching profession quite rewarding. He responded quite favorably when asked about ICT integration in his class, but has his reservation of "its practicality, it can't work with my class size,...this talk has been around for a while, too many reforms all in paperwork, it will be best for everybody, me, students, other teachers if they come to terms with how technology will be placed in the class, I sometimes think this people are not serious". Sly considers himself as having good pedagogical skills and associates his student's success with his skills. These skills, from his point of view he developed through professional training which included reform-based practices associated with science teaching and ICT devices, he has not used and has to improvise, he perceives the reform clamour from outside of the school community to mean that he was not an competent teacher, an assessment that poses a threat to both his teacher identity and efficacy and so elicited unpleasant feelings for a situation he didn't cause. He wasn't taught in his school days with ICT tools but accepted the new learning approach. He concludes "I am very frustrated and just angry with the whole process, I want to give my best but in the present circumstance what do I do?" When teachers experience unpleasant emotions in the process of implementing their classroom goals, the result may be emotion-induced action or inaction, feelings of frustration may lead teachers to be less creative and innovative in seeking solutions and developing alternative teaching strategies to meet the goal (Cross & Hong, 2009). It is believed that education managers and administrators can also enable teacher resilience in a number of ways. By taking up this critical role they can support teacher through developing collaborative and supportive school communities, teachers need recognition and affirmation (Day & Gu, 2014). Hong, (2012) posit that such communities can have a positive impact on teachers' efficacy and job satisfaction. Administrators can enable teachers to exercise autonomy, teachers' enthusiasm and persistence improve (Taylor, 2013). To facilitate the development of resilience 'that is essential if teachers are to thrive in the profession' (Buchanan, Prescott, Schuck, Aubusson,

& Burke, 2013, p. 126). Building positive relationships with teaching colleagues and both formal and informal mentors can also support teachers (Cameron & Lovett, 2015).

Dahiya (2004) views teaching as a social phenomenon, involving a series of actions, actions held together and formed to uplift an individual by enabling him/her to acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Teaching is a profession or service of a community or group of individuals known as teachers. Maphalala, (2014) stresses various professional components like competence, professional motivation, work stress, accessibility, dedication, enthusiasm, professional conduct, as greatly influencing the teaching profession. The second issue in the findings was teacher identity formation, answering the question how do you view yourself as a teacher? For Stella and Julie, both did not set out to be teachers but found themselves in the profession out of “nothing else to do”, and had no prior professional training as teachers. Questioning her choice of career, Julie responded, “I think I am a lot more secured now. She tells how, initially arriving home each day, I felt so tired and dejected. I will ask myself “how did I end up with this job?” and “do I really want to do be a teacher?” she says, “I felt hopeless.” Stella’s challenge is on focusing and embracing the job, “I have had a lot of thoughts about whether the teaching profession suits me eight years on and I am still not sure I want to be here”. In the midst of identity conflicts, Stella is concerned about performing her teacher duties in the way that she wants to. It may appear as though her lack of interest in the profession has little to do with the ICT integration and classroom practice. But Stella says, ‘I tried desperately to focus on my course preparation because I did not want my work performance to decline in any way due to me’. “I am struggling to hold it in”, “Then I have to work with technology and the training is so tasking”

The interview has revealed a lot about Stella’s identity experiences of becoming a teacher. Ms. Stella has still not recognized herself as a teacher in her terms even though this is the identity that she tries to maintain while in and out of the school. In line with Carter and Doyle (1996) who suggest that “the process of learning to teach, the act of teaching and teachers’ experiences and choices are deeply personal matters inexorably linked to their identity and life story” (p. 120). They further suggest that becoming a teacher means (a) transforming an identity, (b) adapting personal understandings and ideals to institutional realities, and (c) deciding how to express one’s self in classroom activity” (p. 139). Individuals who bring themselves into the classroom have to become aware of and understand their professional identities because doing so has implications for their practice (Farrell, 2015).

## **5. Conclusion**

The insights generated by this study have wider implications for teacher professional development. The present study fills an important gap by focusing on identities that are articulated in inter-personal dialogue and which reveal personal transformations of individuals for technology integration. For the participants it is a shift from who they were onto who they have to be, building and developing an identity of self and societal expectations, working under set regulations and conformity, also revealing how experiences of being a teacher and the emotions connected with such experiences can easily change. Findings from Buchanan et al., 2013 have demonstrated the importance of reflection, responsiveness and resourcefulness for teacher retention, in 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom. The development of skills for ICT integration and handling of identity experiences can have a similarly positive effect.

In Henry’s (2016) view, when individual teachers ask personal questions such that will allow them make connections between who they are and what they do in their classrooms, schools, and beyond, then may be it would not be a destabilizing and emotionally charged experience, but a focus of building a professional identity alongside emerging new technology in teaching and learning.

### **5.1. Limitation**

This study is limited by a small sample size and single point of data collection. A study of five teacher’s identity transformations is not a representation in views of teachers in the whole country,

or other individuals in other settings. Therefore, if the insights generated by the study are to be of wider value in teacher identity and ICT integration, further case study research is required.

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