
Exploring the professional identities of pre-service teachers' studying at the University of Ghana

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Abstract: The success of any educational system depends on how it is organised and the extent to which the stakeholders especially teachers accept and own it. The purpose of this study was to investigate pre-service teachers' (N = 58) professional identities using a qualitative approach where teachers were asked to produce a pen portrait of the perceived identities using open-ended questionnaires and drawings. The result from this study shows that the individual teacher's personal characteristics are paramount in shaping his/her personal identity. Teachers in our study generally described themselves as teachers who are working hard to help learners understand themselves and provide effective learning opportunities for students to excel and develop inherent capabilities. It is a great asset to have teachers who see themselves as agents of change rather than custodians of knowledge. It is important to have reflective dialogues with teachers to understand these personal characteristics that shape their identities.

Keywords: teacher; identity; professional; quality; reflective practitioners; development; reflective dialogue; education; pre-service; dialogues.

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1 Introduction and purpose

The history of state-organised education in Ghana can be traced back to the early 14th century when European merchants established castle schools (Davis and Ampiah, 2005). Ghana like many other African countries has undertaken a series of educational reforms since independence. The educational system currently practised by Ghana is structured into five levels. This educational system provides for a two-year early grade education, six years of primary education, commencing at the age of six years old, three years of junior secondary education, three years of senior secondary and an average of four years of tertiary education (Akyeampong and Furlong, 2000). Quality education at all levels

has become the hallmark of every educational system for which Ghana is not an exception. It is for this reason that Ghana's school curricula like in many other countries keep undergoing a series of changes and restructuring. In addition to this, there has been a rising level of expectation among various stakeholders in the education sector for an improved workforce. This has become eminent in a time that teaching staffs are expected to meet the challenges of the fast-changing society driven by the advancements in science and technology in an increasingly globalised economy (Bakah et al., 2012).

It is an undeniable fact that different things come together to help improve the quality of education. However, the booming of education cannot go without teachers' professional development which is closely intrinsically connected to their professional identity, and this, in turn, provides teacher quality. As highlighted by McKinsey and McKinsey (2007), "the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers" (p.16). It is therefore not surprising that many educational policymakers and stakeholders are of the view that investing in the professional development of teachers is of greater importance as their enhanced capacities will have a direct impact on the knowledge, skills and competencies of their students (Whitchurch and Gordon, 2010).

Equally important in improving the quality of teaching and learning is how teachers perceive themselves and their profession as well as attitudes reflected in their practice, which in turn affect the quality of their teaching and students' achievements. There is enough literature on the direct and indirect benefits of understanding the teacher's professional identity. For example, according to Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) "gaining a complete understanding of identity generally and teacher identity, in particular, could enhance how teacher education programs are conceived" (p.176). Hattie (2012) also indicated that one of the remarkable features of teachers' professional identity on students learning occurs when "teachers become learners of their teaching, and when students become their teachers" (p.18). Day and Gu (2010) also argued that teacher quality had become one of the challenges of many educational systems and one way of addressing this challenge is through the development of positive professional teacher identity.

To understand the complex nature of teaching and how teachers teach or help students to learn, teacher professional identity has become an emerging research field which is attracting much research attention (Akkerman and Meijer, 2011). According to Canrinus et al. (2012), professional identity is not a static process, but a dynamic one, and it describes "how teachers see themselves as teachers based on their continuing interaction with their context" (p.116). Teacher professional identity is examined in terms of the individual teacher's perceptions of themselves as a teacher, and as the teacher, they wish to become (Beijaard, 2009).

As highlighted above the advantages associated with the understanding of teachers professional identity and its impact on their performance as they train the younger generation cannot be underestimated. It is therefore not surprising that researching into teacher identity has become one of the major areas of concern across different educational systems. In Ghana, the analysis of teacher professional identity has been examined from different dimensions. For example, Abogzuah (2018) in examining teachers' perceptions of their professional identity did so by critically examining teachers' experiences about the contextual dimension of their work (i.e., the school environment, community and district education management). Abogzuah was of the view that contextual factors play a critical role in shaping the identities of teachers as compared to any other related factors. Anamuah-Mensah (2011) also examined teacher professional development in Ghana and reiterate the point that teacher professional

development in Ghana like in most African countries cannot be fully understood without a critical review of teacher identity. He was of the view that teacher identity “is not much talked about in teacher professional education programs in sub-Saharan Africa and that development of teacher identity comes as a by-product and not the planned focus of teacher development programmes” (p.44).

Similarly, Botha and Onwu (2012) in their study of “beginning teachers’ professional identity formation in early science and mathematics teaching” in South Africa also argued that over the years high levels of attrition surrounding beginner teachers worldwide and in South Africa precisely has called for critical examination and analysis of teacher professional identity. That is, it is these identities that shape the work of teachers and not “until teachers reflect on their practice and make use of their experiences to influence their teaching, achieving improved student performance can be elusive” [Asare and Nti, (2014), p.7].

In our quest for improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools, the issue of teacher quality has become one of the major issues of concern and different measures have been proposed to help improve teacher quality in Ghana. However, as highlighted by Akyeampong (2003), understanding the issue of teacher quality, in Ghana and for that matter in most African countries revolves around the concepts of teacher career expectations and identity. People enter different professions with different career expectations and these motivations can either be intrinsic or extrinsic. Akyeampong (2003, p.45) has iterated the point that deeper reasons for most Ghanaian teachers accepting teacher training have to do with the opportunity it offered to pursue further education at little or no cost to the teacher and because of the possible reward of being able to teach at secondary school. He further argued that a critical analysis of the views of many Ghanaian teachers over the years has shown that perhaps without these incentives fewer would have opted for an initial career in primary teaching and to become teachers in general. That is, the career trajectory of teachers has been influenced by the desire to use their acquired knowledge and certificate to progress in the teaching field to teach at higher levels or to look for different and more ‘*lucrative*’ jobs.

These career expectations and aspirations may have a great influence on the kind of identities developed by these teachers, which in turn position them professionally in the teaching field. It is therefore not surprising that teacher identity has received much attention of the past decade as a means of improving teacher quality. However, in Ghana very little is known when it comes to teacher’s professional identity more specifically, teachers understanding of themselves as teachers, how teachers position themselves, students and resources in the classroom; and the factors capable of shaping teachers’ professional identity. This study explores the professional identities of pre-service teachers enrolled in a master’s degree in education at the University of Ghana to understand how they see themselves as teachers and the kind of teachers they wish to become (Canrinus et al., 2012). The purpose of this current study, therefore, is in two folds. Firstly, to gain an understanding of pre-service teachers’ perceptions of their identity as teachers and their philosophy of teaching and secondly, to examine the factors that shape the professional identities of these teachers. As a result, this study is guided by the following research question;

- 1 How do teachers understand themselves as teachers?
- 2 How do teachers position themselves, students and resources in their classrooms?

- 3 Which factors do teachers perceive as capable of shaping their professional identities?

2 Conceptualising professional identity of teaching professionals

2.1 Teacher professional identity

One of the major challenges of understanding identity is resolving from a definition that fit, as a variety of issues surface whenever one wants to understand and define the identity of a person, the teacher in this case [Beauchamp and Thomas, (2009), p.176]. The term identity has been defined differently by different authors. Personal identity is not something that we find by looking at ourselves in the mirror, nor is it given to us by the efforts and opinions of others. As highlighted by Palmer (1998) identity is a “moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make who I am, converging in the irreducible mystery of being human” (p.13).

Identity is constructed from the way others see us and this influence the way we behave and see ourselves (Smith, 2006). Teacher identity is construed as a multidisciplinary concept and has been investigated by different researchers from different fields of study. For example, in philosophy, Noonan (2007) has done extensive research, in sociology, the works of Bernstein and Olsen (2009) on identity are well documented, and in developmental psychology, Bosma and Kunnen (2008) have done some extensive research on the identity of the individual and how developmental factors shape identity. Noonan (2007) basing his argument to the work of Lewis (1986) argued that identity is utterly simple and unproblematic, and everything is identical to itself; and that nothing is ever identical to anything else except itself. He reiterated the uniqueness of individuals in all dimension of life. This assertion presupposes that people develop their identities differently and different but interrelated factors could shape these identities. Bernstein and Olsen (2009) also viewed identity from the perspective of social movement and organisational strategy and added that emotional displays, music and ritual may facilitate identity deployment.

According to Gee (2001) identity of a person and for that matter the teacher, suggests a “kind of person within a particular context; while one might have a core identity, there are multiple forms of these identities as one operates across different contexts” (p.99). Gee’s definition of identity attests to the complex nature of the identity of the teacher as the individual teacher’s identity is context-bound and can change from one place to another. Also, Olsen (2008) provided a fascinating meaning of the concept by bringing together the research and pedagogical purposes of teacher identity where he explained that;

“Teacher identity is a useful research frame because it treats teachers as whole persons in and across social contexts who continually reconstruct their views of themselves about others, workplace characteristics, professional purposes, and cultures of teaching. It is also a pedagogical tool that can be used by teacher educators and professional development specialists to make visible various holistic, situated framings of teacher development in practice.” (p.5)

The identity of the teacher has generally been approached from the perspective of what constitutes both the visible and invisible domains of the work and lives of teachers. The visible domain includes the teacher’s classroom interaction, assessment and, material

design, whereas the invisible involves the individual teacher's beliefs, expectations, emotions and personal phenomenon (Castañeda, 2013). An investigation into teacher's identity can, therefore, be fully understood if emphasis is placed on these two domains as they provide a holistic understanding of the complex nature of teacher's identity and their teaching practices. However, it is also important to note that these visible and invisible characteristics are influenced in one way or the other by some factors, such as personal, resources, contextual as discussed in the ensuing section.

2.2 Factors influencing teacher identity

An important strategy in understanding teachers' identity is to learn and examine the factors that influence their self-efficacy, motivation and effectiveness in the classroom as these factors predict their motivation and also have a great influence on how their identities are shaped [Cardelle-Elawar et al., (2007), p.567]. Burns (2009) identified certain factors that influence the individual teacher's identity, and distinguishable among them are personal, gender, age, culture, working conditions, school and classroom culture. However, a synthesis of extant of the literature has shown that these factors can be put into two main categories: personal factors and contextual factors. Personal/internal factors are the individuals' attributes that influence the way they see themselves, whereas the contextual factors are the external factors that shape the individual's identity. It is an undeniable fact that the individual teacher's personal beliefs, emotions and experiences shape their identity. As pointed out by Marciniak (2004, p.114)

“Your beliefs and feelings mould your perceptions and continuously broadcast a frequency of energy, either repelling or attracting life's events. Sometimes an event is dismissed as if you were shooing away a fly, yet it is still indelibly imprinted with invisible ink in your subconscious mind. Some events you never forget because you have a flashbulb-like memory of the experience. Whether you consciously remember an event or not, the situation and your projected beliefs concerning it are faithfully stored in your memory banks according to your perceptions.”

It is important to understand that how you see yourself is influenced by your emotions and your understanding of yourself. Factors such as emotions and personal understanding of oneself have a greater effect on understanding one's identity. However, despite the important role the individual teachers' internal factors play in shaping their identity, the effect of the contextual or external factors cannot be underestimated. According to Avalos and De Los Rios (2013), the identity of the teacher is considered as “a co-construction involving one teacher and other significant agents, or teachers and the broader society to which they belong” (p.156). That is, despite the important role that the individual teacher's personal factors play in shaping their identity, the school environment, the nature of the learner population, school administrators, the school environment may have a negative or positive impact on the identity of the teacher (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009).

These two contrasting but interrelated factors come together to shape the identity of the teacher, and this has been attested by many researchers. For example, Roberts (1998) established that “a teaching identity develops through exchange between our personal theories and self-concept on the one hand, and the demands of our social and occupational context on the other” (p.22). Similarly, Day and Kington (2008) in their study also concluded that the individual teacher's identity is constructed not only from

technical and emotional aspects of teaching and teachers' personal lives, but also from interactions between personal experiences and the social, cultural, and institutional environment.

According to Van-Veen (2008), the contextual factors of the teacher have a far-reaching impact on their identities. Van-Veen established that no matter the internal factors of the individual teacher, teachers who experience more autonomy at their workplace are more satisfied, more motivated and competent. Similarly, according to Hargreaves (2000), the ever changing education systems across the world where rules and regulations are imposed on teachers does not only affect their levels of autonomy but also does not aid professionalism and development of a good identity about themselves.

The exploration of professional identity among pre-service teachers has been mainly qualitative using interviews, observations and open-ended questionnaires to elicit information regarding teachers' perceptions of their identities. Also, researchers like Brand and Dolloff (2002) have used drawings to examine the visible and invisible domains of teachers' identity. From the ongoing, there is no gainsaying that a lot of research has been conducted across the globe with regards to the phenomenon under scrutiny. However, the same cannot be recorded for the context within which this study is being undertaken. Hence, it has become necessary to undertake this study to fill the methodological gap by using pen portraits as data collection techniques to explore the professional identities of pre-service teachers in Ghana.

3 Research design and methods

Analysis of professional identity studies shows that a number of these studies (e.g., Abogzuah, 2018; Botha and Onwu, 2012) have used just narratives from teachers and other professionals in examining their professional identities. However, as highlighted by Punch (2009), the research question(s) for a study will lead to the choice of appropriate research design which determines the type of data to be collected to answer the research question(s). Based on this assertion, the qualitative phenomenological research design was deemed fit for this kind of study as it enabled us to bracket our own biases as teachers to present the perceptions, feelings and written narratives of the participants of this study. In the view of some researchers, the phenomenological design may be termed *soft science*, but we subscribe to the assertion by Streubert and Carpenter (2002) that it is rigorous, critical and at the same time systematic. Hence, we were very critical with the kind of questions we asked and tried to understand their identities from different perspectives (through their written responses and pictures of their classrooms). Also, the researchers engaged with the data severally before thematising and putting it in the report.

In all, 58 schoolteachers were purposively selected across two cohorts of students who were either studying for their master's in education or master's in educational leadership at the University of Ghana in the 2018/19 academic year. The selection of the participants was based on their experience as teachers for at least one year. There were different categories of students; those who have no teaching experience at all and those with some teaching experience and the more experienced ones, and those who have

taught at the basic level, secondary level, rural and urban contexts. Despite the importance of these dynamics, the researchers were interested in understanding the professional identities of these teachers irrespective of these differences. The researchers could have hypothesised for a comparative analysis of varying dynamics and use the results to provide a broader picture of the situation under consideration. However, since the study was to explore the professional identities of teachers, we have tried to summarise these varying perspectives, which can then be used as the basis for further studies.

The participants encompassed 37 males and 21 females, 13 were between 21 to 35 years, whereas 45 were 36 years or older. In terms of their years of teaching, the least was two, and the one with the longest duration of service spanned 29 years. With regards to the levels at which participants teach, 25 are in the primary, 24 are in the junior high school, and the remaining nine are in senior high schools. All participants were in their final semester of study, which leveraged their understanding of the issues under discussion.

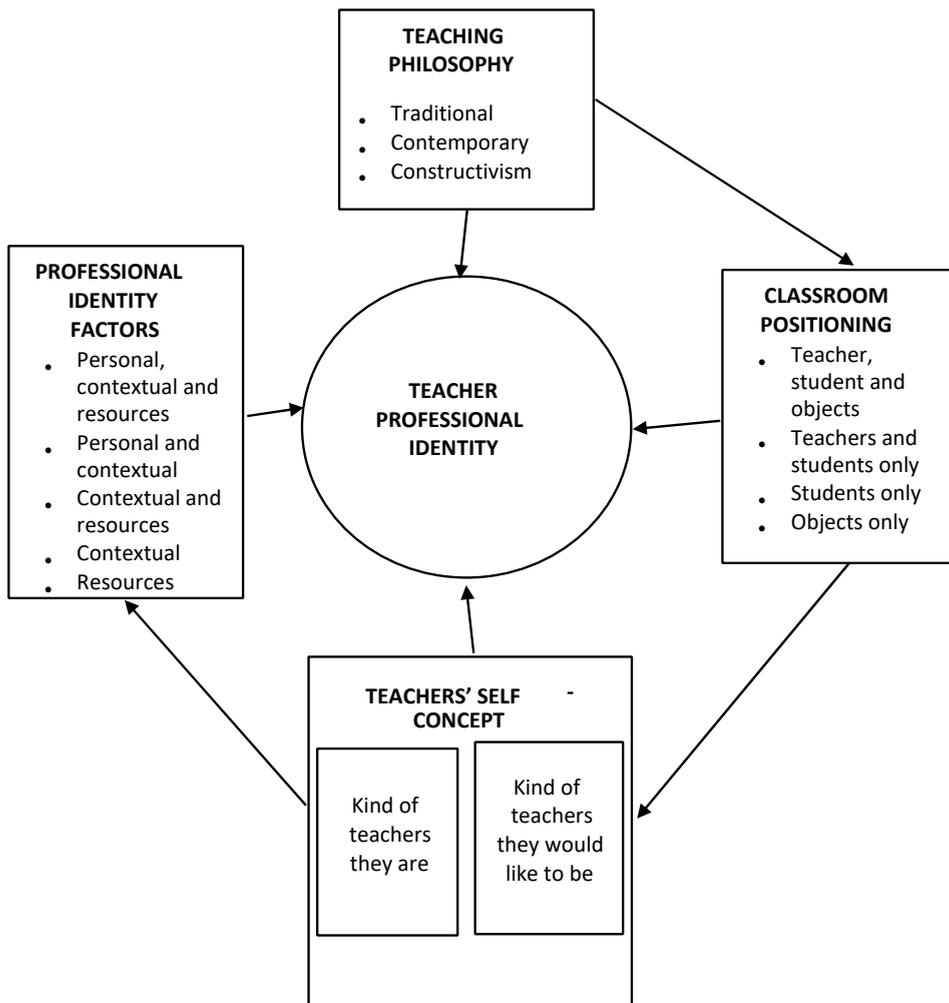
The teachers' professional identity questionnaire (which had two parts- open-ended questions and a pen portrait or picture of how their classroom looks like and how they want their classroom look like) designed by the researchers. Sixty-two questionnaires were returned out of which four were rejected. The rejection was based because they were not classroom teachers before enrolling on the master's program but have organised some classes for students.

The instrument consisted of 10 items, and the work informed this of Freer and Bennett (2012). The first five items were used to collect information about the individual teacher's background. The last five items included questions which asked teachers to provide their visible and invisible identities by indicating their teaching philosophies, describing their classrooms, the kind of teacher they are, the kind of teacher they would like to be and the factors they perceive to shape their professional identity.

In analysing the data collected for this study, we agree with Parse et al.'s (1985) a statement that the researchers "dwell with the subjects' descriptions in quiet contemplation" (p.5) to uncover themes. To fulfil this, we engaged with the data individually for a while and met to agree on the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the written narratives of the participants. The researchers adopted the thematic analysis procedure in analysing the data collected, where themes were developed individually from all the questionnaires after which the individual themes were integrated to provide a clearer picture of the situation. Also, the factors that teachers perceived to affect their professional identity were tabulated and quantified. After the analysis, four themes were developed: *teaching philosophies*; *classroom positioning*; *teachers' self-concept* and *professional identity factors*.

4 Findings

Results from the analysis of data are presented here in four sections based on the themes and subthemes derived. The results of the analysis are depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Elements of teacher professional identity

4.1 Teaching philosophies

A teaching philosophy is an important aspect of teacher calling. As defined by Kenny (2008), a teaching philosophy statement is “a clear and logical statement that communicates what your fundamental values and beliefs are about teaching and learning, why you hold these values and beliefs and how you translate these values and beliefs into your everyday teaching and learning experiences” (p.6). Based on this definition, we embarked on a journey to identify the teaching philosophies of the participants. In answering this question, most of the respondents indicated that their teaching philosophy is underpinned constructivism. This resonated in some assertions such as “I use learner-centred approaches in my teaching” and “I am proactive and do my best while allowing students to influence the way I do things in my classroom.”

Closely connected to the participants' philosophy of constructivism is what they termed *contemporary philosophy*. By way of explanation, a participant narrated how he has improved upon his teaching by adopting 21st-century tools available to him to make teaching and learning more meaningful. Another participant expressed "I am always finding examples that reflect contemporary times so my students will be able to appreciate and transfer what we learn to real-life situations."

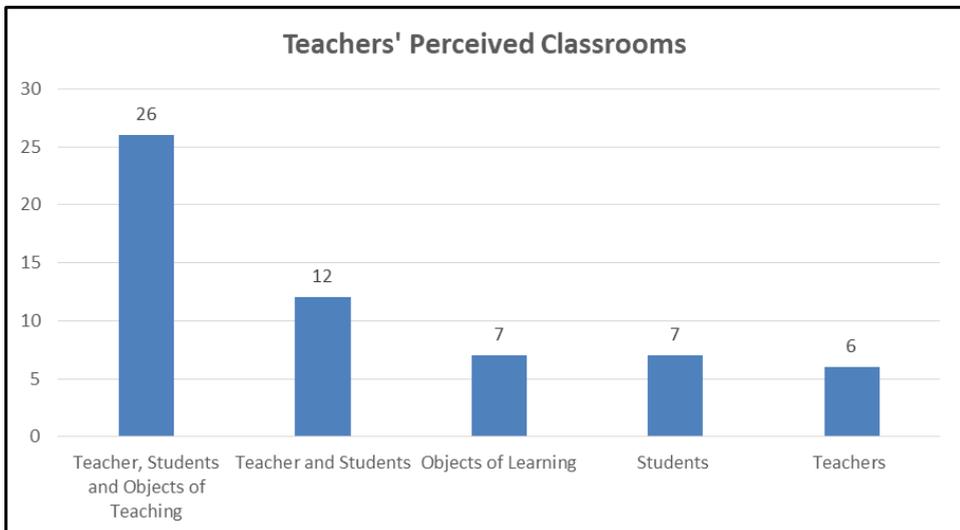
Sticking to the constructive and contemporary philosophies may be deemed ideal in the current global economy, but there was a flip side that emerged. A few of the participants identified with the traditional philosophies of teaching. Under such circumstance, learners were reduced to recipients of knowledge where the teacher acts as the sage on the stage for most parts of the teaching and learning engagement. However, even though the teaching philosophies of most of the participants were of constructivism and contemporary nature, they still believed there is the need to do more to help all students excel in academics. A situation where the true tenets of their perceived philosophies may be missing.

Since Kenny (2008) has articulated that the teaching philosophy is a translation of one's values and beliefs as a teacher into practice, it is in this light that we believe that the teaching philosophies of the participants informed how they position or describe their classrooms. This is discussed in more elaborate terms in the ensuing section.

4.2 Classroom positioning

The main purpose of this research question was to ascertain how the teachers see themselves classrooms taking into consideration the main agents (teacher, students and resources). To answer this research question, individual respondents were asked to do a written narrative of their classrooms.

Figure 2 Teachers' perceived classroom (see online version for colours)



From Figure 2, it is conclusive that most of the participants ascribed to the fact that they cannot do the work alone and for that matter, before teaching can be done effectively, learners should be available, and there is the need for resources for teaching and learning materials that will help facilitate the process. In this light, one respondent shared “My typical classroom is made up of myself, my students and all available resources.”

It was, however, interesting to note that some of the respondents were of the view that the teacher and the students are the most important people when it comes to teaching and learning. It was also worth noting that some of the participants only depicted the students or the teacher or the objects of learning as what constitutes a classroom. From this, it can be argued that the identity of the teacher is quite complex to explain as they all have different ways of describing their classrooms. Teachers who consider the teacher the students and objects of learning as important components of the teaching and learning process are more likely to make good use of the available resources to help students appreciate the utilitarian value of the phenomenon under consideration.

Our duty is far from passing judgement on which of the schools of thought, with regards to classroom positioning is the most important as whole new research would not be enough to appreciate that. However, we agree with Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) assertion that the environment within which teachers operate can impact positively or negatively on their work, and for that matter, their identity. However, it also needs to be appreciated that the identity of the teachers would emanate from their self-concept. Hence, the section that follows delves into an understanding of the teachers of themselves.

4.3 Teachers self-concept

To explore teachers understanding of themselves as teachers, the respondents were asked to describe the kind of teacher they are and the kind of teacher they will like to be. This was based on the notion by Akkerman and Meijer (2011) that nature of teaching, how teachers help their students and teacher’s professional identity is a complex mix bag that has attracted a lot of research attention.

The analysis of the results revealed that almost all the respondents described themselves as supportive teachers whose heartbeat is to see their students excel. For example, one of the respondents indicated that “I am a teacher with one passion for seeing students rejoice as they always learn new things from me. I always look out for students who have a slow pace in catching up with new knowledge to help them out.” Another respondent with a similar view indicated that “I am a teacher who motivates and guides learners towards excellence in both their academic and moral lives. I encourage learners towards assertiveness.”

It is clear at this point that the teachers’ self-concept of their present status made them supportive in ways they inspired and motivated their students. Closely tied to that, other respondents intimated that they are co-learners. For instance, one reflected “A teacher who always has his students around him. I am also someone who believes in the individual uniqueness of every student and ready to tap knowledge from them.” The view of another respondent following is not very different “I believe that the teacher does not know everything. When I receive contributions from my students. It helps me understand their level of thought and understanding.”

In close relation to the ongoing, it also resonated that the respondents needed parental love to be able to exhibit the characteristics they have described in the above. In this light, a respondent retorted “I am the type of teacher who always allows my children to share their problems with me.” Another respondent, who is an epitome of a parent shared “A father to the children I teach. A teacher who will make my pupils achieve their aims in life.” It became apparent that all the teachers involved in this study were interested in seeing their learners achieve their goals at the end of the day. With that insight, the teachers were striving for success.

Nonetheless, it became obvious that not exhibit the same flexibility as those whose views have already been shared. A typical response from one of such respondents is “I am a disciplined, firm and free teacher who makes sure that children do their work well and neatly.” A very similar response was provided by another respondent that “I am strict and at the same time very approachable. I make sure children complete any task set for them.”

It was interesting noting that in describing themselves the teachers didn’t place emphases on their qualifications, subject knowledge and what they can do better, rather their interest in supporting students to achieve their best was paramount. This led to an analysis of data for the second question on the type of teachers they would like to be. It, thus, punned out that many of the teachers anticipated being altruistic in their future endeavours. This is reflected in a participant’s response “A teacher who always loves pupils and cares for them.” This response may seem too simplistic and doubtful, but another participant extends it and gives it a deeper insight to bring to light a perfect example of what altruistic teachers can do. He reflected

“A teacher of substance who would not only impart knowledge, inculcate discipline in learners and love them as my own but also be able to sponsor needy ones financially. ... A teacher who will be an example to all of the highest level but still be at the basic level to give the children the best foundation.”

Other participants saw themselves as future mentors. One of such respondents stated, “The best teacher that students would like to emulate my thoughts and deeds”. Similarly, a respondent added “A teacher who will always be a reference to students as a mentor kind of teacher. I hope to become a kind of teacher whose impact grows with my students. This has led me to keep maximum attention on the content I feed my students with.” From the responses of these two participants gives a clue that the teachers cared for their students’ well-being and future. This cannot be attained without providing a classroom environment of equity. In this regard, some respondents narrated how they would, in the future, accommodate learners with special needs. A participant reported, “I want to be a teacher specialised in helping students with special learning needs.” Another responded with a similar desire shared “I will like to be a teacher who can quickly identify students with special needs and have the capacity to address those needs.”

As beautiful as it is to see the kind of future the participants in this study are anticipating for themselves, it needs to be understood that they can achieve next to nothing if they do not make attempts to keep learning the art of altruism, being a mentor and the skills in attending to special needs learners. It was, therefore, interesting to see that some of the participants expressed their desire to remain lifelong learners. In a typical case, a participant Retorted “I would also like to gain more insight into the art of teaching so as to become more resourceful in the teaching profession and thereby enable

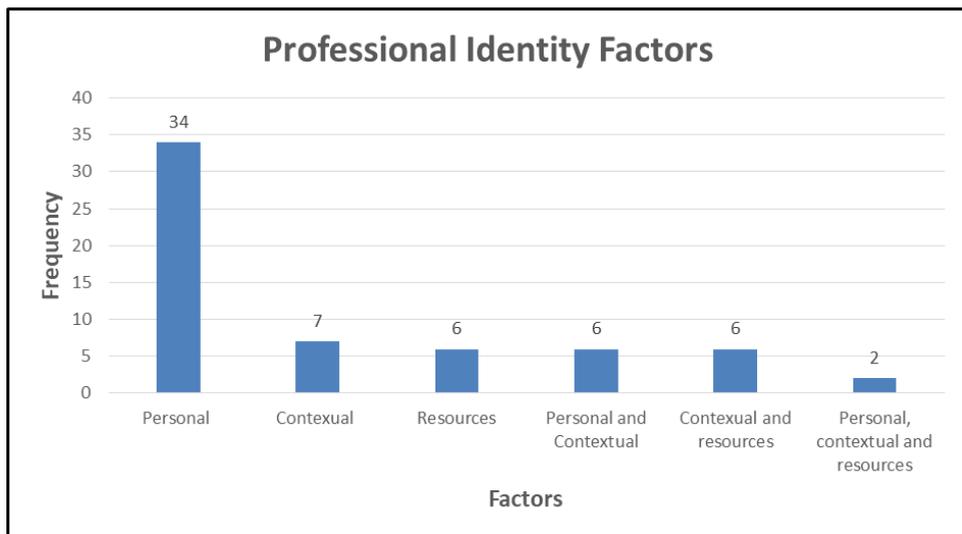
me to get over various challenges in life.” Another respondent having similar aspiration stated “I continue to study both to upgrade myself as well as understand the profession better. I wish to be a role model for both my students and co-teachers.”

One participant was more concerned with his personal needs in the future. He defined his future as a “successful teacher who at most has all the needs of life...and be able to care for your family and extended family.” These teachers had the urge to succeed, mostly per what their learners can achieve. A participant’s submission about the kind of teacher she would like to be in the future summarises this section. She wrote, “Principled, loving, mastery over the subject matter.” From the kind of teachers, the participants think they are and the kind of teachers they would like to be, factors that determine their professional identity becomes the last necessary step to establish, and this follows presently.

4.4 Professional identity factors

We lastly analysed data to establish the factors teachers perceive to influence their professional identity. Cardelle-Elawar et al. (2007) have established that attempting to establish teachers’ identity helps arrive at factors that motivate them and make them effective in their work. Results from this study established that several factors influence a teacher’s professional identity. Responses from the participants were grouped into three main categories: personal, contextual and resources, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Professional identity factors (see online version for colours)



Most of the participants subscribed to the idea that personal factors constitute their individual teacher’s characteristics, which are both visible and invisible attributes. Others also subscribed to contextual factors which have to do with factors within the environment that the teacher operates. Another cohort of participants believed resource factors describe their professional identity. They explained that with the availability or otherwise of these resources can make the teacher work effectively or ineffectively.

Hence, their professional identity hinges on the resources needed for teaching and learning.

Apart from the above in which teachers see their identity to be hinged on individual factors, the other participants recognised a combination of factors determining their professional identity. For instance, some were of the view that their professional identity is influenced predominately by the individual teacher's personal and contextual factors, others stated contextual and resource factors while two out of the lot indicated all three factors (personal, contextual and resource) as a combination of factors that determine their professional identity. In summary, in trying to understand the factors that determine teachers' professional identity one needs to be open-minded to arrive at the specific or a combination of factors so they can be well understood, predicted and motivated.

5 Discussion

Researchers in the field of education have underscored the need to have a good teaching philosophy (Bakah et al., 2012; Kenny, 2008). It is, therefore, refreshing recognising that all the teachers who participated in this current study subscribed to teaching philosophy. It also came out that few of the participants' teaching philosophies were skewed towards traditional approaches to teaching, which contradicts contemporary pedagogical standards of learner-centredness and inclusivity in the classroom. It is also in contravention of the argument by Bakah et al. (2012) that the fast-changing technologically driven society demands an improved workforce. This, we believe the traditional ways of teaching will not help to achieve. Despite the argument we are raising, it is of interest to share that even the teachers who subscribe to constructivist and contemporary philosophies believe that learners need to be helped a lot; hence, it is not feasible to remain in their philosophies at all times. This may be due to contextual or resource factors that need to be assessed and remedied.

In positioning themselves, their students and resources in their classrooms the teachers had varied views. While some described their classrooms as made up of all the three elements others only saw a combination of two of them or a single element. As noted in the findings section, we are not judging of what best describes a classroom and this study is guided by a phenomenological design suggest that the narratives of the participants are supreme. In this respect, we agree with Smith's (2006) statement that identity is constructed from the way people see themselves. Hence, the participants' identity of their typical classrooms is respected. Besides, Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) assertion that factors, among other things, the school environment may have a negative or positive impact on the identity of the teacher is confirmed by the responses from the participants in this study. The factors that impact their work mostly are a representation of their classrooms.

Supporting students to develop conceptual understanding of the different skills and concepts that they are introduced to in school is the duty of the teacher. However, as highlighted by Tanisli and Kose, (2013), the various structures of knowledge that teachers possess about their students reveal the kind of teachers they might be. Teachers in our study generally perceived or described themselves as supportive teachers who are working hard to help learners understand themselves and provide effective learning opportunities for their students to excel and develop their inherent capabilities. It is a great asset to have teachers who see themselves as agents of change (co-learners and

exhume parental love) rather than custodians of knowledge. It is also interesting to note that those who described themselves as rule-bounded still seek the welfare of their learners.

With regards to the type of teacher's participants would like to be, their narrative found meaning in Olsen's (2008) expression that... "Teacher identity is a useful research frame because it treats teachers as whole persons...who continually reconstruct their views of themselves... (p.5). The participants are upbeat on becoming altruistic, mentors, acquire skills to help special needs learners and engage in lifelong learning in order to achieve their goals as teachers. It is important to establish that the current self-concepts of the participants and their future self-concepts are critical for the development and establishment of conducive learning environments effective teaching and learning.

Policymakers and other researchers often assume that favourable training and contextual factors will provide better opportunities for teachers in developing their personal identity and becoming creative and innovative in performing their duties. For example, a review of the literature suggests that contextual factors play a critical role when it comes to issues about teacher professional identity as highlighted by Van-Veen (2008) and Beauchamp and Thomas (2009). However, findings from this study revealed that the individual teacher's personal characteristics are paramount in shaping his/her identity. It is critical to understand that other factors also define teachers' professional identity, though not as strong as the personal factors, we need to make sense of what McKinsey and McKinsey (2007) established that "the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers" (p.16). It, therefore, imperative for education authorities and other stakeholders in the Ghanaian education sector to develop strategies and frameworks for helping teachers to develop their professional identities in line with the underlining principles of the purpose of education and school since the quality of any educational system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.

6 Conclusions and implications

In this study, it has been established that the professional identity of the 58 teachers is shaped by four key elements (captured as themes). These four elements are the teachers' teaching philosophy, their concept about themselves as teachers, how they position or describe their classrooms and their professional identity. Within each of these elements are sub-categories that define each of the main elements and that each element is intrinsically connected to the next one while they all come together to create the identity of the teacher (see Figure 1).

One important thing worth noting is that the individual teacher's visible and invisible characteristics were paramount in shaping their professional identities as compared to contextual and other related factors. These insights are not only useful for understanding the professional identities of Ghanaian teachers, but they are also useful for prospective teachers as part of their training and orientation towards becoming teachers who understand the demands and aspirations of our current society.

This also suggests that the individual teacher's invisible domain which is made up of the individual's personal phenomena such as beliefs, expectations and emotions cannot be underestimated in our quest to understand teacher's professional identities. The professional identity of the Ghanaian teacher could be explained better by understanding

the invisible dimension of their identity. Understanding this invisible dimension of their identity will provide some clearer understanding of how teachers teach the way they do.

In addition to this, our findings may also be of use for introducing innovations in our college of education and schools where individual teachers' reflective practices are tailored towards how to support students understanding and promote effective learning and social cohesion among students. It can be concluded that due to the nature of the role that teachers play in the country's desire for improving the quality of teaching and learning in our schools, teachers' professional identity and its construction should continue to be in the top of the research agenda.

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