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Relation to their Experiences in Two Deprived Rural
Districts of Northern Ghana**

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Teachers' Perceptions of their Professional Identity in Relation to their Experiences in Two Deprived Rural Districts of Northern Ghana

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Abstract

This paper presents findings in my PhD study, which is work in progress. The main aim of this study is to understand how public basic school teachers in two deprived rural districts of Northern Ghana perceive their professional identity based on interpretation of their experiences. Thus, the conceptual framework is based on teachers' experiences in relation to the contextual dimension of their work (i.e. the school environment, community and district education management); the professional dimension and the personal dimension. Data collection was carried out in Ghana from December 2016 to February 2017. Seven teachers were purposively selected across the Bongo and Nabdam Districts to serve as focus teachers for the study. Data collection utilised semi-structured interviews and participant observations, while analysis involved exploring themes inherent in the data. The findings revealed that teachers' perceptions of their professional identity were influenced not only by their personal values of making a difference in the lives of children, but also by their experiences in their schools, community, District Education Offices and policy environment. Consequently, there emerged opposing dimensions of teachers' perceptions of professional identity as they were torn between sustaining their commitment to fulfilling their personal values in teaching and coping with constraints imposed by their work environment. Teachers still demonstrated commitment. However, their sense of commitment was under threat as they were prone to burnout. The findings have implications for policy and practice which include the need to create more opportunities for teachers to participate in the policy decision making processes. Districts education authority, school heads and parents also need to find ways of empathising with teachers, showing appreciation through praise and respecting teachers' professional knowledge and expertise.

Keywords: Professional identity; Focus Teachers; Recognition; Voice; Perceptions

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Introduction

The important role of teachers' perceptions of their professional identity in their professional practice has been documented extensively in the literature. In his book *“Teachers’ Worlds and Work: Understanding Complexity, Building Quality”*, Day (2017), for example, argues that professional identity is key to teachers' sense of effectiveness. It is the drive that keeps them in their work and allows them to exercise discretionary judgement in their individual classrooms, what Hargreaves & Fullan (2012) refer to as “decisional capital” (p.88) in their teaching. Drawing on her research on the formation and mediation of teacher professional identity, Mockler (2011) seems to support this view by arguing that;

The articulation of one's identity is a first step towards theorising professional practice through the explicit linking of ‘what I do’ with ‘why I am here’, and in this we find a rationale for exploring teacher professional identity in the first place (p. 522).

A search in the literature revealed that teacher professional identity is not a new area of research in the field of education and teacher education. Extensive research has been conducted to identify how teachers perceive their professional identity and the issues that influence their perceptions (e.g. Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Flores & Day, 2006; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). However, these research studies involved teachers largely in developed and high-income countries. Research in this area has not been given enough consideration in developing countries, which differ both economically and materially from developed and high-income countries. Worthwhile questions to ask, which this study hopes to contribute in answering are: *“How do teachers in developing countries including Ghana, which differ both economically and materially from developed countries, perceive their professional identity?”* and *“What issues influence their perceptions?”*

In Ghana, specifically Northern Ghana, no research has been carried out exploring public basic school teachers' perceptions of professional identity. Most of the research tend to focus on teacher motivation, since the working and living conditions of teachers in this part of the country are challenging (e.g. see Akuoku, Dwumah & Baba, 2012; Attiah, 2013; Tanaka, 2010). While acknowledging that motivation is an important part of the work of teachers, for teachers to be motivated, it “requires them to have a positive sense of identity that fuels, builds and sustains their motivation” (Day, 2017, p. 156). This informed the two overarching research questions in this study: *“How do basic school teachers in Bongo and Nabdam Districts perceive their professional identity?”* and *“What issues influence their perceptions?”* It is hoped that findings in this study would contribute to providing an understanding of how best to support teachers in these areas in order to release their positive energy as a “creative, essential and indispensable resource” in the education of children (VSO, 2003, p. 9).

Literature Review

This section reviews the concept of teacher professional identity and explains how teacher professional identity was conceptualised for this study.

The Concept of Teacher Professional Identity

There are different views regarding the meaning of the concept of teacher professional identity, maybe because of the complex nature of the concept (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013; Tran & Nguyen, 2013). In an effort to gain a better understanding of the different perspectives regarding the concept, Beijaard, et al. (2004) reviewed 22 studies in the research literature on teacher identity from the period 1988 to 2000. This period is deemed the era that the concept emerged strongly as a research area. They noted a lack of a clear definition of the concept and in some studies, the absence of a definition of it. Lawn (1989) in an earlier study seems to share in this view by positing that seeking a single conceptualisation of teacher professional identity is difficult. Because of this difficulty, this study focuses on examining the characteristics of the concept in the literature rather than seeking a single meaning of it.

Teacher professional identity is often regarded as continually changing, evolving, constructed and reconstructed as teachers develop over time in their career (Barrett, 2008; Day, Stobart, Sammons & Kington, 2006; Pillen, Beijaard, & den Brok, 2013). Viewing teacher professional identity this way, implies that teachers' perception of who they are is not fixed or stable. In her research on teachers' identity, Maclure (1993) found that teachers' identity was often, "less stable, less convergent and less coherent" (p. 320). Later, Barrett (2008) drawing on findings from her comparative study on "Teacher identity in context: A comparison of Tanzanian with English primary school teachers", appears to agree with Maclure (1993). According to her, teachers constantly created and recreated their identity throughout their career.

The processes that teachers undergo in constructing and reconstructing their identity usually involve the interaction between the teacher as a person and the teacher as a professional operating in a particular context (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Thus, for each teacher, identity will take different forms at a time and over time in line with the contextual factors. For example, a teacher may identify himself or herself in a particular way of being a primary school teacher. However, this perception may vary when he or she moves to teach at a higher level (Osborn, 2008). This reinforces the notion that teacher identity may be "more, or less, stable and more or less fragmented at different times and in different ways according to the impact of personal, professional and situational factors" (Day & Kington, 2008, p.21). This also suggests that teachers' interactions with the contexts do not always create positive experience, as they may experience identity crisis where the teacher is not sure about his or her identity and may question who he or she is in that particular situation (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Such crisis may be influenced by feedback from others, changes in context or constraints which require rethinking values and changing behaviours. This may explain why Maclure (1993) holds the view that identity is a "continuing site of struggle" (p. 313). Avalos (2010) claims that new teachers may experience this identity struggle while entering the profession since they need to address new and demanding tasks. On the other hand, experienced teachers may also experience identity conflict as educational reforms may require them to modify familiar practices, values and beliefs.

It is also argued that because teacher identity is context-dependent, teachers may have multiple identities (Beijaard, et al., 2004). That is, although teachers may possess a core identity as "teachers" that holds uniformly for them across contexts, they may also have other identities connected to this core identity. Thus, a teacher can identify himself or herself not only as a teacher in his or her subject area but also as a teacher in his or her school, district, country, and

even with all teachers in the world (Wenger, 1998). These sub-identities are fundamental to the whole identity of the teacher and must be kept in balance to avoid tensions across them as argued already (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

Conceptualising Teachers Professional Identity for this Study

As seen, no single definition of teacher professional identity can capture the different perspectives associated with the concept. However, what the various perspectives appear to have in common is that teacher professional identity is not a fixed attribute but a shifting, continual, changing and dynamic phenomenon which is subject to interpretation and reinterpretation of teachers' experiences. Teachers' professional identity is also influenced not only by teachers' own personal attributes, but also by factors associated with their workplace and external policy environments (Mockler, 2011). Thus, the way teachers perceive themselves as teachers is based on interpretations of their continuing interaction with their work environment (Beijaard, et al., 2004).

This study aligns itself with these perspectives and conceptualises teacher professional identity as the way teachers perceive themselves as teachers based on interpretation of their experiences. Drawing upon the literature and more specifically adapting Day & Kington's (2008) framework for understanding teacher identity, this study explored teachers' experiences from three interconnected dimensions: The contextual; professional; and personal dimensions. The contextual dimension related to teachers' experiences in the school environment, community and district education offices, while the professional dimension was associated with teachers' experiences regarding their participation in educational policy decisions. Although the study focused on teachers' experiences, the inseparable interrelationship between the teacher as a person and the teacher as a professional implies that the personal attributes of teachers cannot be overlooked when exploring their perceptions of professional identity (Bullough, 2011). That is why the personal dimension of teachers' experiences, which is associated with teachers' attributes such as values, emotions and beliefs are also key to understanding their perceptions of professional identity (Hargreaves, 2001). In this study, the dimension of teachers' personal experiences explored were teachers' personal values such as their reasons for entering the teaching profession. However, it is important to point out that the study did not explore teachers' experiences in relation to the contextual, professional and personal dimensions as separate units. Rather, the study was positioned in-between them in order to explore teachers' perceptions broadly.

Research Methodology

Study Design

The broad area of the study is the work of teachers, their perceptions, experiences and feelings about their lives and work. However, the specific aim is to understand how teachers perceive their professional identity in relation to their experiences. The qualitative research approach located within the interpretivist paradigm was considered most appropriate for this study as it enabled me to go beyond the surface of participants' subjective experiences to

interpreting their experiences in order to gain a better understanding of their perceptions of professional identity.

Data for the study was generated by means of case study. Yin (2009) defines case study in terms of the research process. According to him, it is an empirical inquiry that explores a phenomenon within its real-life or natural environment. Thus, this approach is recommended when the researcher considers that the context of the phenomenon under exploration has an impact on the phenomenon. Simons (2009) also explains the usefulness of case study approach. According to her, exploring individuals' experiences in a specific context is important because it helps to understand how environmental, social and personal conditions influence their views. As explained earlier, the purpose of this study is to explore teachers' perceptions of their professional identity within a specific context, which was teachers in deprived rural areas. Thus, the case study approach was considered most appropriate. I was aware that, the skill and competence of the researcher gives trustworthiness to the case being studied. Therefore, it is important that researchers take advantage of their expert knowledge of the case to advance the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Yin, 2009). Here, my professional experience as a former basic school teacher who taught in the Northern part of the country, together with my familiarity with and knowledge of the policies, practices and operations of the Ghana Education System was relevant in exploring and interpreting teachers' experiences. Throughout my years of teaching in the field, I have gained an understanding of how things work in the education sector, and why, and what will occur under certain situations. Taking this knowledge and experience into the study helped me to understand events and actions seen and heard more quickly than if I did not bring this background into the study.

Participants

Seven public basic school teachers were purposively selected across the Bongo and Nabdam Districts to serve as focus teachers for this study, although in line with the data collection method I interacted with many other teachers during observation of the focus teachers in their schools. Basic education in the Ghana Education Service comprises three different levels of education for children. That is, Kindergarten, Primary School and Junior High School. Therefore, I use basic school teachers in this study to refer to teachers at all these three different levels and participants were selected across all these levels as explained later in this section. The decision to focus on only seven teachers was for some reasons. First, a sample does not need to be large to support issues of prevalence, since this is not the focus of qualitative research (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003). Besides, the aim of this study was not to generalise the findings at a statistical level but to examine teachers' perceptions in detail. Therefore, it was better to focus on depth of coverage of issues rather than breadth in terms of sample size (Thomas, 2016).

Teachers of different biographical and professional profiles in terms of gender, qualification, teaching experience and levels of teaching were selected. Four of the focus teachers were males while three were females. Teachers of varying professional qualifications were also selected. The minimum entry requirement for basic school teaching in the Ghana Education Service is a diploma qualification. Four out of the seven teachers had a Diploma, while two had a First Degree. Only one teacher possessed a Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSCE) qualification. However, at the time of my data collection this teacher was pursuing his Diploma programme through distance learning in the Jasikan College of Education in Ghana. Participants of different teaching experience ranging from five to 11 years were also selected. This implies

that all participants had sufficient experiences in the teaching profession to share in this study. As basic education comprises Kindergarten, Primary School and Junior High School, participants were also selected across all these three different levels (see Table 1 below). In effect, the purposive selection of participants with different profiles was done to ensure that the findings could reflect basic school teachers, although not generalisable across all basic school teachers in the country. To ensure confidentiality of information shared by participants, pseudonyms are used to represent the names of participants and the districts.

Table 1. *Focus Teachers' Profiles*

Participant	Gender	Qualification	Teaching Experience(in years)	Level of Teaching	District
Focus Teacher 1	Male	First Degree	11	Primary	Talema
Focus Teacher 2	Female	Diploma	6	Kindergarten	Zolema
Focus Teacher 3	Male	SSSCE	5	Primary	Zolema
Focus Teacher 4	Male	Diploma	11	Primary	Talema
Focus Teacher 5	Female	Diploma	5	Kindergarten	Zolema
Focus Teacher 6	Male	First Degree	9	Junior High	Zolema
Focus Teacher 7	Female	Diploma	5	Kindergarten	Talema

Source: Field data, December 2016

Data Collection Methods

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and participant observations.

Semi-Structured Interviews

There were two stages of interviews in this study. The first stage involved interviews with four teachers, while the second stage involved interviews with the seven focus teachers for the study. The first stage interviews were used to try out my interview guide, determine questions that needed prompts and clarifications and the time required to conduct the interviews. Issues arising from the first stage interviews were taken into consideration and modifications were made in the second stage. For instance, three of the interviews in the first stage lasted more than the approximated time of one hour with each interviewee. This appeared to impact negatively on interviewees as they seemed exhausted although they were willing to continue with the interviews after the one-hour duration. Taking this into consideration, I modified the second stage interviews by conducting two series of interviews on different days with focus teachers. The first series of interviews focused on participants' background information, how they became teachers and why they chose teaching as a profession. Questions relating to their experiences in their schools, communities and districts were also asked. The second series of interviews focused on participants' feelings about being basic school teachers in these deprived rural areas, how their family, friends and other members of community think about them as basic school teachers. The second series of interviews were also used to clarify issues in the first series of interviews.

Although there was an interview guide, questions were worded in such a manner that allowed interviewees to share their views broadly rather than responding to “yes” and “no” questions. I also probed deeply into comments like; “*just do anything to represent*”. Probing such comments was important in guaranteeing the accuracy of the interpretation of the data (Mears, 2009). All interviews were tape recorded with the permission of participants and transcribed verbatim.

Participant Observations

Case study is an interactive social process. Thus, it is only by taking a practical observation of events that one can obtain a comprehensive understanding of the case being studied (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004; Simons, 2009). As Cohen, Manion & Morriison (2010) argue, observation affords researchers the opportunity to see things that might otherwise be unconsciously missed and to discover things that participants might not freely talk about in interviews. Observing participants in their natural environment is also useful in discovering whether participants do what they say they do or behave in the way they claim to behave (Bell, 2005).

Different techniques of observations including participant observation and non-participant observation are applied in qualitative research. In this study, inspiration was drawn from the participant observation technique in observing focus teachers in their schools as it allowed me to observe more freely the physical school environment, lessons, school norms and practices, pupils and teachers’ daily routines and interact with them in their everyday settings (Bogdan & Biklen 2003). I was aware that being a participant-observer goes beyond just hanging with participants in their environment to developing a trusting relationship with them (Mercer, 1991; Silverman, 2011). Because of this, I entered the field and endeavoured to become an active member of it by not refraining from activities in participants’ schools. I participated in school activities such as games, morning and afternoon assemblies. I also assumed the role of an “interested guest” who was seeking an opportunity to learn and who appreciates the role of the participants who possessed the experiences I needed (Mears, 2009, p. 101). Doing this was a crucial step towards building trust with participants so that they could feel comfortable to share their experiences with me.

I was not restricted as to how long, in terms of the number of days, I could stay with each focus teacher in his or her school. However, I decided to spend approximately one week with each teacher since my PhD study was time bound. All observations were hand-written. Where it was appropriate, I wrote down my observations as soon as possible. I was also aware of the implications on participants’ behaviour if they noted that I was writing down my observations, including conversations they considered as private. Thus, I kept some of the issues I heard and saw in memory and wrote them down later.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was done thematically. This began with a full transcription of all the voice recordings of interviews. These interview transcripts together with the observation notes were coded manually by searching for common patterns or themes across the data. Coding the data manually was considered most appropriate as it enhanced my familiarity with the data. It also made it easier to make connections between the themes as they emerged (Robson and McCartan, 2016).

The emergent themes were reviewed, reanalysed and reconsidered in the light of the research questions and the entire data set. In searching for themes, I was flexible in my approach. As this is a qualitative study and does not aim to make generalisation of findings at a statistical level, important consideration was not attached to what proportion of my data set required to provide evidence for it to be regarded as a theme. Rather the “keyness” of a theme was based on whether it captured something important in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.10).

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues were treated as an important component of the entire study process. First, to make potential participants understand and agree to participate in this study without any duress, a participant information sheet was given to them (Heath, Charles, Crow & Wiles, 2007). This sheet contained information about the nature and purpose of the study, how the data would be used, what participation and how much time was required of them. I was mindful that participants do not have to feel that they are compelled to participate in a research (Silverman, 2011). As result, it was stated in the sheet that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving any reasons. Participants were reminded of this throughout the fieldwork.

Due to the nature of the study, it was also important that the identities of participants, and anyone they talked about remain undisclosed to the public. Therefore, both hard and soft copy documents gathered during my fieldwork were also kept securely. I also avoided making references to specific locations such as school location or community, district or anything else that had the potential to compromise the confidentiality of information shared by participants. Confidentiality was also respected during presentation of data at conferences and seminars as participants’ names were represented by pseudonyms.

Ensuring the safety and well-being of participants such as their emotional and psychological well-being was also a priority in this study. Because there was a possibility of harming or ‘injuring’ participants emotionally and psychologically, sensitive questions on private matters, including issues of teachers’ salary, were constructed broadly to allow them more choices to discuss them with me (Silverman, 2011).

Findings and Discussion

The presentation of the findings and discussion is organised in two main parts. The first part provides evidence of participants’ experiences, while the second part discusses the implications of participants’ experiences for their perceptions of professional identity.

Evidence of Participants’ Experiences

The conceptual framework informed the dimension of data collection. As such, the structure used to present participants’ experiences relates to evidence covering all dimensions of the framework. As explained earlier, these dimensions were the contextual, professional and personal aspects of teachers’ experiences.

The Contextual Dimension of Participants' Experiences

Three key themes emerged from the analysis of the data in relation to the contextual dimension: *"Recognition"*; *"Respect and Regard"*; and *"Support for Daily Tasks of Teaching"*.

Recognition

This theme captured teachers' concerns for their efforts to be appreciated in the form of financial and material incentives as well as in kind through praise and concerns for their daily struggles in these deprived rural areas by authority and parents. Participants had to contend with overcrowded classrooms in their schools. A clear impact observed was the workload on participants as they had to spend more energy and time in preparing, teaching and assessing pupils, sometimes outside normal class hours, not to mention the emotional drain of teaching in such classes. In Focus Teacher 3 class, the class size was 69. He bemoaned the situation in his class as he claimed that *"as at now in my class they are getting to 70 for one teacher. So, when you are teaching and how to mark exercises is always difficult because of how the number is great"*.

In Focus Teacher 6 school, the situation was no different. The school had classrooms for both kindergarten one and kindergarten two classes. However, she was the only teacher in the school. Overseeing the two classes alone, she always combined the two classes, with a total enrolment of 76, for teaching. Participants' experiences in the classroom, not only arose from dealing with overcrowded classrooms, but they had to deal with children with poor academic backgrounds and different age levels in the same classroom because some of the children started formal schooling late. This meant that teachers had to put in extra time and efforts in their preparation and teaching. Most schools did not also have all the relevant resources to support them in their teaching, compelling some teachers to look for their own materials to teach their pupils which included travelling to relatively better resourced schools within and outside their districts to borrow materials from their colleagues. Some teachers also resorted to photocopying and buying materials with their own money. Teachers were doing this sometimes to their own detriment, what Noddings (2013) describes as 'motivational displacement' (p.205). She argued that, like parents responding to the needs of their children, teachers often respond to the situation of their pupils as if it were their own. They do so by denying themselves of attention to their own situation for the moment.

Making references to their experiences, participants claimed that while teachers were making efforts to helping pupils in their learning, their sacrifices and efforts were not *"rewarded"*. A profession that is often deemed to be unselfish, teachers were often told their *'reward is in heaven'*, said Focus Teacher 2. She, however, appeared not to be excited by this notion as she felt that *"though it's in heaven but what do we also have to depend on earth? You can't just be working and say my reward is in heaven. We [teachers] also want to achieve something on earth"*. Focus Teacher 4 made similar remarks that there is *'lack of appreciation for the amount of work we are doing here'* as teachers' efforts *"did not reflect in their salary"*. What he meant was that teachers needed to receive salary commensurate with their efforts there. A common phrase that was used by teachers during my observations and interactions with them was that they were in these deprived rural schools *"trying to make the impossible possible"*, yet their efforts were not appreciated.

Teachers were not necessarily looking for financial or material reward as claimed by Focus Teacher 7 that *"it is not the matter of giving only physical money...if they try and give you some*

kind of reward and you also use that one as appreciation...” In one of my conversation with Focus Teacher 2 during my observation, she shared similar views that “...we are not asking for something big but anything so that we will feel that they’re seeing what we are doing here”. Some of them wanted the good works of teachers to be recognised in kind through praise.

Respect and Regard

This theme captured teachers’ concerns for the need for teachers and the basic school teaching profession to be treated with dignity. Participants concerns were in relation to their relationship with the communities and the district education management. While the relationship between participants and their pupils and colleagues in their schools was cordial, it appeared that there was a lack and or loss of respect for teachers from the communities and officials at the district education offices. As in the view of Focus Teacher 3, the respect that teachers enjoyed in society in the past “*is depreciating, is coming down*”. Some participants did not have an idea as to why they were not respected. However, others seemed to attribute it to people’s mind-sets that they possessed low certificates and that they were not qualified to be professionals as seen in the excerpt below;

Since I was appointed as a teacher, that was in 2012 up to now I have faced many problems with community members...You see that as a basic school teacher, at times some of the parents they walk in and they say things by heart to you... At times, they come to insult ...Currently, one parent last came here because of the daughter and just opened the mouth and said ‘what do you know? If you claim to know go to the Senior High School and teach and stop disturbing our children’ [Focus Teacher 2]

The situation was no different in terms of their relationship with officials at the district education offices. As Focus Teacher 1 shared his experience;

“I don’t know whether because we are dealing with the chalk, they see us to be secondary officers. Because when you get to the office... at times the way they treat us is nothing to write home about... Simply because you’re a teacher. And they look at themselves once they are in the office, they are horses. And once you are there handling chalk, they look at you to be a secondary human being and that has not been good with us...”

Participants’ sentiments suggest that they wanted their professional expertise and knowledge to be respected after all they possessed the knowledge and qualification to teach. They also wanted to be regarded as important stakeholders in the education of children and the human resource development of the country. As Focus Teacher 2 claimed, “*it is the teacher who will train the doctors and bankers that they [society] are rather respecting*”.

Support for Daily Task of Teaching

Regarding support for teachers in their daily tasks of teaching, it emerged that participants received little support, in terms of teaching and learning resources, from both authority and parents. Comments from participants suggest that this was a major hindrance to their quest of helping pupils. Some teachers felt helpless in what they could do to support pupils in their learning as contained in this excerpt;

“We have some subjects that we are supposed to teach but there are no textbooks and there are no syllabuses. So how do you teach? Sometimes either there will be only the syllabus but no textbook or there will be textbook and no syllabus. So you teach ‘burukaburuka” [translated as ‘anyhow’] [Focus Teacher 4].

Observing teachers in their schools, a situation I noticed was the teaching of the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) subject. In all schools, there was no single computer for practical lessons. While some teachers skipped practical lessons entirely, some teachers I observed improvised their own ways of teaching the practical aspect of the subject. A typical example was Focus Teacher 2 during a lesson in ICT on the uses of a computer. He used his personal mobile phone to demonstrate to his pupils how a computer works in similar ways such as for typing, saving and retrieving information, listening to music, watching videos and playing games. He remarked after my observation of his lesson that *“half a loaf is better than none”*, implying that it was better to improvise with the phone for pupils to see than teaching them in abstract, although he preferred that there were computers for practical lessons.

The Professional Dimension of Participants’ Experiences

The theme that emerged from the data in relation to the professional dimension was *“voice”*. This theme captured participants’ views regarding their participation in educational decisions and policies both at the national and local levels. As teachers are the stakeholders in daily contact with children, they have a better understanding of the issues that impact on their work (Ingersoll, 2007). As a result, their input in educational policy decisions matters most to them and their work. Yet, participants in this study felt that they were often left out in policy formulation and curriculum reforms. As claimed by Focus Teacher 2;

“We will always be there and then at an instance they [school authorities and policy makers] will tell us that we are changing the syllabus or we are changing this. They always meet at the top level there and rather bring it to us to implement or to use it...”

Focus Teacher 5 made similar claims that from his experience;

“I have never seen like they want to do something and they will go round and talk to teachers that ‘oh this is what we want to do. So, what do you think?’ Or talk to you to know whether what they going to do is good or bad. Before we know, they have changed this or they have added and rather ask us to implement”.

In an interaction with the head teacher of Focus Teacher 5 school, he shared similar opinion. He has taught in different schools in two different districts within the region. He claimed that even head teachers of schools were often left out in policy decisions and reforms. He recounted his experiences regarding the 2007 Educational reforms which introduced subjects such as ICT, Basic Design and Technology and Creative Art into the curriculum. According to him, the reforms were done without engagement with teachers. He claimed that if teachers were consulted, particularly those in rural areas, they would not have recommended the introduction of ICT as a subject into the curriculum without first proposing that electricity, computers and computer laboratories be made available in schools. He indicated that schools in rural areas were

struggling to implement aspects of the reform as teachers did not seem to be prepared to implement such policies but were “forced to implement them”. He expressed, “look at ICT, no light [electricity], no computer. How will it work?...They think every policy is good for all of us”.

The Personal Dimension of Teachers’ Experiences

The personal dimension of teachers’ experiences explored in this study were participants’ personal values for choosing teaching as a profession. The analysis of the data showed that teachers entered the teaching profession for four key reasons: “Like Working with Children”; “Love Teaching”; “Influence of Former Teachers”; and “Influence of Family Members”. These themes are presented in Table 2 below and illustrated using excerpts from the data.

Table 2.*Focus Teachers’ Personal Values for Entering Teaching*

Participants’ Personal Values	Excerpts
Like Working with Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “My interest in teaching started when I was a Sunday school teacher in my church. Teaching children in the church was just something that I normally enjoyed doing....that’s why I chose teaching so that I will continue to work with children”
Love Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Growing up, I just made up my mind that I wanted to become a teacher simply because of their work. I always see it to be good” • “After secondary school, there were other career options, but I chose to be a teacher. I love it”
Influence of Former Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “...when I was in Primary Four, we were taught by one teacher...the way he was handling us, I was touched. I saw him not only to be a teacher but he was a guard, a parent and a leader. So from that point, I realised that there is a lot of joy in the teaching profession... Since then, I was wishing that if chance opens one day, I would be a role model like him. So that prompted me to enter into teaching”
Influence of Family Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I was not ready for the teaching profession. I wanted immigration, but it was my parents and sister. They asked me to join teaching. That’s why I went into teaching”

As this study is about teachers’ perceptions of their professional identity in relation to their experiences, the next section discusses the implications of participants’ experiences in relation to the three dimensions for their perceptions of professional identity.

Implications of Participants’ Experiences for their Perceptions of Professional Identity

The analysis of both the personal values of participants and their contextual and professional experiences in this study suggests that there were a set of opposing forces influencing their perceptions of professional identity, which are summarised into Table 3 below. Consequently, teachers were expressing disjointed perceptions of professional identity as they were riven between commitments to their personal values and dealing with external constraints emanating from their workplace and policy environment.

Table 3. *Opposing Forces Influencing Teachers’ Perceptions of Professional Identity*

Positive Forces		Negative Forces
Sense of calling or vocation	↔	Being undervalued
Sense of satisfaction in helping pupils	↔	Limited support
Passion to take initiatives on behalf of pupils	↔	Limited participation in policy decisions

Sense of Calling or Vocation Vs Being Undervalued

Participants had clear values for entering the teaching profession. As seen in Table 2, some of them entered teaching because they love the profession and wanted to engage in it. For other teachers, the passion to work with children and help them in their learning was the main reason that attracted them to the profession. What this means is that, the teaching profession was a calling or vocation for these teachers (Seligman, 2002). This was fundamental to their perceptions of professional identity in this study as they expressed enormous pride as being teachers who were strongly committed to achieving this ambition of making a social contribution as illustrated by the expression of Focus Teacher 4 that;

“There is no city or town that was born a city or town. They were all rural areas that developed from rural areas to urban areas. One day this place may not be a rural area. It is we the teachers here who will change it. Who will teach the children and the children will grow up and also develop it to an urban area... If we all go away, that means the place will continue to be a rural area...”

Focus Teacher 6 made similar comments. He recounted the numerous challenges he faced as a teacher in his district. He was, however, of the view that;

“If every teacher says they want to go to the cities to teach, who will come and teach those innocent children in the rural areas. A president can come from a rural area. A doctor can come from a rural area. So, that’s why some of us are here so that we can help the children”.

In many instances, it was interesting to observe that, expressing these views during both interviews and normal conversations were accompanied by bodily gestures and facial expressions that demonstrated teachers’ strong desire in helping their pupils.

Looking back at the personal dimension of the conceptual framework of this study, participants’ sense of commitment in this study here concurs with the notion that teaching is an emotional work (Day & Kington, 2008; Hargreaves, 2001); and that most teachers “enter the profession for the noblest of reasons” which are to help other people and also contribute to society (Nieto, 2003, p.7). While this dimension of teachers’ perceptions of their professional identity was positive, there emerged an opposing dimension which suggests that these teachers could be smiling outside and feeling proud as teachers who were committed to making a difference in the lives of children and making a social contribution, while at the same time

feeling disillusioned and dissatisfied on the inside. This emanated from their perceptions that their efforts were not recognised. As teachers who perceived themselves as committed to their work, recognition for their efforts was important to them. However, accounts of their experiences in these deprived rural areas show that they were dissatisfied with the level of recognition for their efforts. They felt sense of disaffection and frustration at a system which they thought did not value their commitment. They could not reconcile their sense of commitment with the recognition received for such efforts as some teachers began to wonder whether it was worth continuing to invest their time, energy and resources into their practice. As Rauno and Heikkinen (2004) argued, teachers see their work as a process of giving and receiving recognition and this lies at the heart of teaching. Thus, when this important element is lacking, it can have serious negative implications on how they feel about as teachers as seen in the situation of teachers in this study.

A related issue was their relationships with colleagues, children, parents, the community and authority at the District Education Offices. As the findings show, the relationships between participants and parents and authority at the District Education Offices was not cordial. Through their perceptions about the lack and or loss of respect for them, they seemed to form a picture of themselves as teachers who were being regarded as worthless. Perceiving themselves this way also made them feel they were distrusted to do a good professional job. This may explain why Focus Teacher 1 began to question herself whether it was because parents felt teachers could not teach well or were doing the wrong thing that was why they were not respected. She lamented that, *“sometimes, you will be questioning yourself, ‘Is it that I can’t teach well? Or Is it that I’m doing the wrong thing that is why parents don’t respect me?’”* Such experiences were beginning to erode teachers’ sense of pride as committed teachers.

Sense of Satisfaction in helping Pupils Vs Limited Support

In this study, the main source of fulfilment for teachers in their work in these deprived rural areas centred on the children they taught. Teachers found most satisfaction in issues related to the affective dimension of their work such as improving the understanding, performances as well as achievements of pupils. This was exemplified in some teachers’ desire to devise creative ways to facilitate teaching and learning in their classrooms amid the limited resources. This strong desire could also explain why some teachers travelled to relatively better resourced schools to borrow materials and photocopy books and even in some occasions purchased materials using their own money. Fullan (1993) describes this as the moral mission of teaching, which is at the heart of teachers. As he argued, ‘scratch a good teacher’ (p.21) and you will always find in him or her a desire to help and inspire pupils as well as care about their learning and career progress. Thus, teachers will feel a sense of satisfaction in their job when their moral purpose is fulfilled.

What can be inferred from these arguments is that when teachers are restricted in their efforts to achieving their moral purpose, they may feel enormous sense of frustration and demoralisation in their job (Johnson & Kardos, 2008; Nias, 1989). That is, when the things that teachers value, which are core parts of their professional identity, diverge from their experiences in their classrooms, there is the potential for those identities to be challenged, resulting in potential changes in those identities (Cross and Hong, 2009). Under such situations, as Hargreaves (1998) claimed, erosion in their passion for teaching and loss of sense of purpose are likely to be the consequences. As teachers in this study derived their satisfaction through the difference they could make in the lives of pupils, there was the need for them to have the resources and facilities to enable them to fulfil such a mission. However, it was difficult for

teachers to achieve such a satisfaction in this study as they struggled to find the resources and facilities they needed in order to meet the learning needs of children. They felt that although situations in their schools were critical, enough attention was not given to them. Not only did this make teachers feel a sense of neglect by authority and parents, but also some teachers felt that they could not achieve a sense of identity that aligned with their personal drive to do their best in helping pupils in their learning and career progress.

Passion to take initiatives on behalf of Pupils Vs Limited participation in policy decisions

Teachers in this study felt that they possessed informed understanding, expertise and knowledge about their practices and issues in their schools than anyone else as expressed by Focus Teacher 2 that “...*we are with the children and being with the children, we know what is good for us or the children or what we need*”. Not only did this make them have the desire but also, they felt that they had the ability to take initiatives on behalf of their pupils through their involvement in the decision-making processes. However, this was not the case according to the views of teachers as their voice was marginalised at the policy decisions. Decisions regarding policies, reforms and logistics were made at the top and passed down to teachers, thereby giving limited chances for them to contribute to decisions. Yet, there is evidence that involving teachers in decisions has positive effect on their perceptions of professional identity. Besides making teachers feel valued in their job (Durrant & Holden, 2006); giving voice to them boosts their sense of ownership of the outcomes of policy decisions (Bangs & Frost, 2012). The lack of voice for teachers in this study impacted negatively on their perceptions of their role identity as they felt that they were seen as ‘just implementers’ of policies. That is, they perceived that their role in the education of children was limited to only classroom activities. Hence, policy makers did not see the need to consider their input into policies. The sentiments of teachers here resonate with Furlong’s (2005) claim that when decisions such as curriculum design and how teachers should do their work are decided at the top without involving teachers themselves, it leads to a shift from viewing teachers as critical players in the education of children; what Whitty (2008) terms as a de-professionalisation of teachers.

In sum, the findings suggest that teachers in this study viewed themselves as committed teachers. As a result, they seemed to be determined to helping pupils in their learning and career pursuits as well as making a social contribution. Teachers’ ability to fulfil this appeared to be a key source of satisfaction for them in their work. However, limited support with resources and limited participation in policy decisions made it difficult for them to realise a situated identity that was consistent with their determination to helping their pupils and contributing to society. The lack of recognition also made them feel that they were being undervalued for their contributions to children’s’ learning and development of society. The findings align with previous research claims that teachers’ perceptions of professional identity are influenced by both their personal attributes and external influences (Avalos, 2010; Day and Kington, 2008; Mockler, 2011; Rodgers and Scott, 2008). As stated earlier, until now, no research has explored teachers’ perceptions of their professional identity in Northern Ghana, a rural context for that matter. This study, therefore, contributes to literature with respect to teachers’ perceptions of professional identity in rural contexts by pointing out, specifically, how recognition for teachers’ efforts and contributions, respect for teachers and regard for the profession, support, voice and teachers’ own personal values in teaching interact to influence their perceptions of professional identity.

Conclusion

It is often difficult to make definite conclusions on teachers' perceptions of their professional identity. As substantial research evidence in the literature shows, the way teachers perceive their identity is not fixed and stable but changes continually as teachers progress in their career (Barrett, 2008; Pillen, Beijaard, & den Brok, 2013). This means that there is no assurance that teachers' perceptions of professional identity once formed will remain the same over time and context. Notwithstanding this, it can be suggested that teachers' perceptions of their professional identity in this study give reasons for both hope and worry for education delivery in the country. There is hope because teachers' accounts show that despite their feeling of disaffection and disillusion, they were still committed to their professional responsibilities. On the other hand, it is a worry because these teachers were at risk of losing their sense of commitment and could leave these deprived rural areas. It is also possible that some of them could remain in these areas but with lower levels of commitment, what Focus Teacher 4 termed as "*just do anything to represent anything*". This is a major concern because, when this happens, pupils in these areas will pay the price in terms of reduced time on task with teachers. This could have a rippling effect on children's chances of progressing in their education beyond the basic level to fulfilling their career ambitions.

It is, therefore, important to pay attention to the aspirations of teachers in these deprived rural areas. As the findings show, teachers did not want their efforts and contributions to be recognised in financial or material terms only but also through praise and concern by both authorities and parents for teachers' daily struggles in those areas. They also wanted their professional knowledge, skills and expertise to be valued and opportunities to make their input into policy decisions. While I am circumspect in my claim considering that their aspirations could change over time, what this suggests about teachers in this study is that, better remuneration, appreciation of their efforts and contributions in the form of praise and empathy with them, creating opportunities for them to contribute to the policy decision making processes and support with instructional materials would be promising in enhancing their perceptions of professional identity in these deprived rural areas.

Recommendations for further Studies

There were some limitations in this study which have implications for further studies. First, because teachers continually construct and reconstruct their professional identity, it is important to extend this current study longitudinally in order to continue investigating how the perceptions of teachers in this study about their professional identity evolve over time.

The study also focused on only teachers in deprived rural areas. It is recommended that further studies are conducted involving teachers in urban areas also. With this, comparison can be made as to how teachers in different contexts perceive their professional identity.

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