

## **Impediments to the successful reconstruction of African immigrant teachers' professional identities in South African schools**

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The purpose of this study was to explore difficulties and challenges that confront African immigrant teachers as they attempt to reconstruct their professional identities in South African schools. The study was qualitative in nature and utilized narrative inquiry and the case study approach. Data-gathering techniques included a mix of semi-structured interviews, observations, focus group interviews, field notes and researcher journals. Data were analysed using grounded theory and content analysis methods. Findings of the study revealed that immigration status, employment status, attitudes of indigenous learners and holding on to former culture or way of knowing due to lack of induction or mentoring, were impediments to the successful reconstruction of African immigrant teachers' professional identities in South African schools.

**Keywords:** African immigrant teachers; communities of practice; professional identity; reconstruction; xenophobia

### **Introduction**

Recently there has been an unprecedented upsurge in the number of African immigrant teachers employed in South African schools. This trend emerged with the demise of apartheid in 1994, which formerly banned professional immigration from other African countries into South Africa. South Africa is regarded as a rich and stable country because the economy of the country is perceived as the most advanced in sub-Saharan Africa (Appleton, Morgan & Sives, 2006). Consequently, South Africa has become one of the countries that receive large numbers of illegal and legal immigrants (Weiner & Münz, 1997). It is believed that South Africa now serves as a host country for nationals from some hundred countries (Adepoju, 2003). The influx of immigrant teachers from other African countries has been accelerated by the social, economic and political challenges experienced by immigrant teachers in their home countries. According to Maharaj (2004) South Africa will continue to attract immigrants as long as there is a prevalence of widespread poverty and high levels of inequality in other parts of Africa. The majority of these immigrant teachers come from cultural, social and educational backgrounds that are very different from the host country. How do these

immigrant teachers make the transition from the educational context of their home country, to that of the host country? What are some of the professional challenges that they encounter? A review of the literature reveals that the process of transition of immigrant teachers is not as smooth as assumed or expected (Mawhinney & Xu, 1997; Phillion, 2003). Accordingly, this study seeks to explore impediments to the successful reconstruction of professional identities of African immigrant teachers in South African schools.

In this paper the argument is presented as follows. We briefly sketch the background context to situate the identified intellectual puzzle. We then explore the literature in an attempt to determine findings from major debates in this field of study. This is followed by a brief exposition of the theoretical frameworks and the research strategy that was utilised in this study. Findings are presented and subsequently analysed and discussed in an attempt to unpack impediments to the successful reconstruction of African immigrant teachers' professional identities in South African schools. A number of recommendations are made for future practice.

### Background context

The advent of democracy in South Africa witnessed the reincorporation of South Africa into the international arena and also the dissolution of South Africa's fortified borders which allowed more people and goods to enter the country effortlessly (Klotz, 2000). Before 1994 only white Europeans were allowed to enter South Africa as professionals while black Africans were restricted to the supply of unskilled labour such as farm labourers and mine workers (Adepoju, 2003). "During the apartheid era it was government policy to relentlessly limit black immigration and actively encourage white immigration" (Morris, 1998:1118). The relaxation of fortified borders particularly afforded immigrants from other African countries that were previously denied access, to now freely enter South Africa.

This easier access brought about challenges and opportunities for Black immigrants. First, it exposed many Black immigrants, especially those from African countries, to xenophobic violence (Sharp, 2008; Steinberg, 2008). One of the reasons for these attacks is that some South Africans, especially Black African South Africans<sup>1</sup> perceive immigrants from African countries as competitors for available jobs and resources (Stemmett, 2008; Hassim, Kupe & Worby, 2008). According to Morris (1998) African immigrants generally were blamed for the shortcomings of post-apartheid society, including the scarcity of employment opportunities. The general belief held by many South Africans is that more immigrants implies fewer resources for everyone, especially Black African South Africans who had hopes for a better future during democracy, but who now find themselves having to share their limited resources with Black immigrants. The act of singling out immigrants as scapegoats who can be blamed for society's ills is not only limited to South Africa. This tendency has been documented by many host or receiving countries (United States of America

(USA), United Kingdom (UK), and Canada) and in different contexts (Hudson, 1993). Foreign nationals in these countries are blamed for social ills such as crime, unemployment and the spread of diseases (Morris, 1998; Tshitereke, 1999). Various studies have suggested that the perception held by the majority group is that the minority (foreigners) pose a threat to accessing economic prosperity (Quillian, 1995).

Second, it provided an avenue for immigrant teachers to enter South African schools. In an attempt to counter the problem of a shortage of Mathematics and Science teachers in South African schools, the Council of Education Ministers recruited teachers from African countries such as Zimbabwe and Uganda (De Villiers, 2007). According to statistical records of the Gauteng Department of Education<sup>2</sup> (GDE, 2011) there are 137 African immigrant teachers officially employed in three educational districts of Tshwane. We assume that this number may be even higher considering that there are no statistics for those that are employed through other unofficial avenues such as School Governing Bodies (SGB).

These statistics clearly indicate an increase in the number of Black immigrant teachers in South African schools. What are the experiences of these immigrant teachers? How do they forge firstly their personal and then their professional identities in the host country? What are some of the challenges they experience in the South African education context? How does the educational context of the host country influence their professional identity? Accordingly, this study asks, what impediments prevent the successful reconstruction of African immigrant teachers' professional identities in South African schools?

### Review of the literature

In this study the definition of teachers' professional identity, as presented by Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2000), is considered appropriate. Professional identity is defined as how teachers perceive themselves, how teachers are perceived by others and what factors contribute to these perceptions. The importance of place in teaching has been eloquently presented in the literature (Elbaz-Luwish, 2004).

A review of the voluminous literature reveals that teachers who leave their countries of origin to teach in another country almost always encounter challenges, obstacles and difficulties in the process of reconstructing their professional identities (Phillion, 2003; Myles, Cheng & Wang, 2006; Bascia, 1996; Beynon, Ilieva & Dichupa, 2004; Remennick, 2002; Sabar, 2004). Several studies that were conducted in the UK, have found that some immigrant teachers find the experiences of teaching in the host country demanding, lonely and difficult (Sutherland & Rees, 1995; Miller, 2008a). These obstacles and hindrances, act as impediments to the reconstruction of immigrant professional identities. Some of the obstacles and hindrances are the following: re-certification and re-credentialing (Beynon et al., 2004), lack of employment (Phillion, 2003), professional and cultural marginalization (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2007; Pollock, 2010), professional and cultural isolation (Hutchison, 2006; Madsen &

Mabokela, 2000), and holding on to a former culture or way of knowing (Elbaz-Luwish, 2004).

Immigrant teachers are subjected to another round of re-certification or re-credentialing when they arrive in a new country. Re-certification is a process where previous qualifications and experiences of immigrant teachers are discounted and they are forced to redo or repeat some or all of their professional training (Beynon et al., 2004). The professional qualifications and experiences of immigrant teachers are disregarded as they were obtained in another country (Phillion, 2003). Walsh and Brigham (2007) argue that this process serves to undermine the professional identities of immigrant teachers.

Lack of employment in the host country was also identified as an obstacle to the reconstruction of immigrant teachers' professional identities. Phillion (2003) argues that teachers' sense of professional identity is negated when they have been unemployed for a certain period of time. Some immigrant teachers have resorted to volunteering in order to overcome the unemployment hurdle (Beynon et al., 2004) while others have decided to settle for jobs in the informal sector (Remennick, 2002). Volunteering or securing jobs at the lower end (semi or unskilled labour) is referred to as "downward mobility" and always results in a loss of professional identity for immigrant teachers (Taraban, 2004:1).

Immigrant teachers also suffer from professional and cultural marginalization (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2007; Pollock, 2010). Professional marginalization occurs when immigrant teachers are given fewer opportunities in decision-making forums or professional enrichment courses compared to their native counterparts (Michael, 2006). Some immigrant teachers also report that they are employed as substitute teachers or are given fewer classes to teach than they would have liked (Remennick, 2002). Immigrant teachers who are marginalized in a new environment experience problems with coping; their sense of professional identity is thus negated and affects their classroom performance (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind & Veddar, 2001; Cho, 2010).

Immigrant teachers experience professional and cultural isolation (Hutchison, 2006; Madsen & Mabokela, 2000). The feelings of isolation might be due to the fact that immigrant teachers are always in the minority (Peeler & Jane, 2003), often do not speak fluent English or speak English with a foreign accent (Phillion, 2003). Immigrant teachers may also feel isolated culturally when they live and work in communities that show little tolerance towards diversity and difference (Kamler, Santoro & Reid, 1998). Negative feelings, brought about by professional and cultural isolation, affect the reconstruction of immigrant teachers' professional identities (Hutchison, 2006; Madsen & Mabokela, 2000).

Another barrier that confronts immigrant teachers in the process of reconstructing their professional identities is that they still hold on to their former culture or way of knowing and doing things. They have not realized or accepted that they have left their former place, a situation described by Elbaz-Luwish (2004:395) as "longing for the

place they left behind". Immigrant teachers that are unprepared to forsake their former culture or way of knowing or to adopt the new culture have described the road to the reconstruction of their professional identities as slippery (Faez, 2010).

A review of the literature also reveals the positive development of immigrant teachers' identities and why that has happened. Countries such as the UK, Canada, USA, Australia and Israel have made conscious efforts to help immigrant teachers to confront the impediments that challenged their professional identities. One of the popular intervention strategies mentioned in the literature was mentorship – to mentor the immigrant teachers so that their transition into the new educational context will be successful (Peeler & Jane, 2003; 2005).

### Theoretical underpinning

Two theoretical underpinnings are used to frame the argument of this paper, namely, Social Identity Theory and Communities of Practice.

There are many theories on identity namely, (1) identity process theory, (2) social identity theory, and (3) place-identity theory. Identity theory (Burke, 1980; Turner, 1978) is a microsociological theory that sets out to explain individuals' role-related behaviours, while social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982) is a social psychological theory that sets out to explain group processes and intergroup relations. And, place identity (Hague & Jenkins, 2005) refers to the place wherein the identity manifests itself. Emphasises is on the multi-faceted and dynamic self that mediates the relationship between social structure, individual behaviours and place.

Of these theories, Social Identity Theory is the most applicable to this study as it is a person's sense of who they are, based on their group membership(s) (McLeod, 2008). Social identity theory focuses on "the group in the individual" (Hogg & Abrams, 1988:3) and assumes that one part of the self-concept is defined by our belonging to social groups. Groups give us a sense of social identity: a sense of belonging to the social world.

Proponents of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) argue that attitudes are shaped by individuals' memberships in social groups and the structural context within which those groups are situated. In order to increase our self-image we enhance the status of the group to which we belong (in-group) and discriminate and hold prejudiced views of the group we do not belong to (out-group). We divide the world into "them" and "us" based through a process of social categorization. We see the group to which we belong (the in-group) as being different from the others (the out-group), and members of the same group as being more similar than they are.

Three mental processes are involved in evaluating others as "us" or "them", namely, social categorization, social identification and social comparison (McLeod, 2008). First, *social categorization*, we categorize people (including ourselves) in order to understand the social environment. We define appropriate behavior by reference to

the norms of groups to which we belong. Second, *social identification*, we adopt the identity of the group to which we have categorized ourselves. And third, *social comparison*. Once we have categorized ourselves as part of a group and have identified with that group we then tend to compare that group with other groups. In order to maintain our self-esteem our group needs to compare favourably with other groups.

According to Wenger (1998) communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and who interact regularly to learn how to do that well. African immigrant teachers in this study are considered as newcomers because they are in a teaching environment different from the one in which they were educated and employed. The theory of communities of practice offers a useful framework with which to analyse the complexity of new teachers' experiences (Clarke, 2009). In order for immigrant teachers in this study to overcome social, cultural and systemic obstacles (Phillion, 2003) they have to become active participants in the community of practice. This participation will afford them the opportunity to learn the difficulties of the job, explore the meaning of their work and in the process as a worker, to develop a professional identity. Wenger (1998) has suggested that communities of practice is the ideal place for constructing professional identities, which indicates that identities are constructed through participation and through becoming a member of a professional community.

### **Research strategy**

The meta-theoretical paradigm used in this study was that of social constructivism. The methodological paradigm utilized was a qualitative case study and narrative inquiry. This study is an inquiry of understanding where a researcher develops a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants and conducts the study in a natural setting.

Five secondary schools located in three educational districts of Tshwane,<sup>3</sup> namely Tshwane North, Tshwane West and Tshwane South<sup>4</sup> in the Gauteng province of South Africa were used as research sites. Using maximum variation sampling research sites were selected based on the (pre 1994) classification of schools namely, a former white model C<sup>5</sup> school, a black township<sup>6</sup> school, a former Coloured<sup>7</sup> school, a former Indian<sup>8</sup> school and an inner city<sup>9</sup> school. The rationale for this choice was to explore whether the diverse socio-cultural context of these schools played a role in influencing the professional identities of immigrant teachers. In total five African immigrant teachers (three from Zimbabwe and two from Nigeria), five principals and five different focus groups consisting of six learners per group participated in this study. The learners that formed the focus group included learners from different social, economic, cultural and language backgrounds. In order to increase the richness of the data African immigrant teachers were also selected according to gender (three males and two females). Data for this study were obtained through semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, observations, researcher's journal and field notes. Semi-

structured interviews conducted with teachers and principals were 45 minutes to an hour in duration. The duration of the focus group interviews with learners was approximately 45 minutes. Follow-up interviews with teachers and principals (where necessary) were also between 45 to an hour in duration. Observations of teachers and learners occurred on the school premises and coincided with the interview period. Data were analysed using content analysis methods. This study adhered to the ethical code of conduct, by ensuring that ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the institution in which this project was registered. Permission was sought from all the relevant authorities and consent letters were signed by the relevant teachers, principals and parents of learners.

## **Findings**

Findings that emerged from this study were fourfold in nature, namely, immigration status, employment status, attitudes of indigenous learners towards them and holding on to former culture or way of knowing due to lack of induction or mentoring.

### **Immigration status of African immigrant teachers**

Immigrant teachers were not seen as having an identity, but were rather 'cast into a category with associated characteristics or features'. In terms of 'Othering' they were ascribed the group categorisation of 'makwerewere'.<sup>10</sup>

If you are a foreigner here, in everything you do you are a foreigner. You can hear some teachers they are talking about this makwerekweres; they call us makwerekweres (Ms Adebajji, Nigerian teacher).

To them a foreigner is a monster; they don't perceive you as a person. Sometimes some can even say it out to you. You go back to your place, who are you? This is not your place (Ms Tafadwa, Zimbabwean teacher).

They have that perception that we are a different set of people. They just see you as a different person; you are not one of them (Mr Weza, Nigerian teacher).

The above statements offer insights into immigrant teachers' encounters with South African teachers. There is resistance to recognize the human, the person and a selected focus on immigrant status by South African teachers.

For almost all learners on the other hand accent, unfamiliar surnames, pronunciation, culture and dress codes were clear indicators of the immigrant status of teachers. Accent enabled learners to easily identify the immigrant status of teachers.

Sometimes the accent counts...like it is different from the way South Africans talk. He is fluent in English but he pronounces some things differently from the way we pronounce it (Pravani, female, grade 10 learner).

First thing is the surname is strange, then for example, like our traditional names, the way he pronounces them (Sipho, male, grade 9 learner).

The way she talks. When Nigerians speak you hear their pronunciation, it is not really the way South Africans speak (Rian, male, grade 11 learner).

It is the accent, the way she dresses...it usually describes Nigeria the way she

dresses (Mpumi, female, grade 10 learner).

The culture is not the same. Like most South African culture they don't cover their body but Nigerians they wear these colourful dresses (Zama, female, grade 11 learner).

Furthermore, a clear marker of the immigration status of African immigrant teachers was the non-possession of a South African identity document; the main identification instrument used by South African authorities for identification purposes. The majority of African immigrant teachers in this study used their passports, indicating their country of origin, as the identification document. This disclosure of their country of origin denied African immigrant teachers educational, economic and social opportunities.

It was difficult to get into the system because they have to take South Africans first in any position before they consider a foreigner...looking at my Identity document (ID) born in Nigeria, my surname (Ms Adebajji, Nigerian teacher).

It is difficult to obtain approval for car loans and house bonds from financial institutions despite being gainfully employed as professional teachers (Ms Tafadwa, Zimbabwean teacher)

One of the cogent reasons for this disqualification by financial institutions was that they were immigrants without a South African identity document. African immigrant teachers perceived this act of disqualification as institutionalized discrimination, which scarred their professional integrity.

The immigration status of African immigrant teachers also have untold effects on their reunification with immediate family such as their wives and children. Some of the participants in this study revealed that one of the reasons they have not invited their wives and children to join them in South Africa was because of temporary status:

We are employed on temporary appointments because we are foreign nationals.

So as soon as they say I am on permanent appointment, then I have the hope of bringing my family (Ms Adebajji, Nigerian teacher).

In the event that their permits are not renewed, some immigrant teachers decided to leave their families in their home countries and established a business for them. This acts as a safety net so that these immigrant teachers could have something to fall back on in their home countries, should they have to return.

The principal of Greenfield Secondary school also revealed that the immigration status of African immigrant teachers has always been problematic and the lack of adequate documentation and proper permits affects the psyche of these teachers, thereby resulting in stress and discomfort.

There have been issues lately with our educators from Zimbabwe regarding papers and this has caused stress. In some situations the husband gets a permit and the wife will be told that she will not be able to stay in South Africa (Mr Gamedze, Zimbabwean teacher).

Forced separation of African immigrant teachers from loved ones and families (wife and children) due to systemic obstacles as presented above, brought about mainly by

temporary immigration status, can be seen as an impediment to the successful reconstruction of immigrant teachers' professional identities. The deeper problem is about how to get permanent residency. This would allay some of the fears and concerns of Black immigrant teachers and contribute towards developing a positive professional identity.

#### Employment status of African immigrant teachers

In South Africa there is a direct link between the possession of a South African identity document and employment, as this is the most important document required from an employee by any potential employer. Non possession of this vital document may indicate non-employment, except in certain cases where the services of the employee are indispensable. African immigrant teachers in South African schools complained that the temporary permits issued to them by the Department of Home Affairs prevented them from securing permanent appointments. All the participants in this study (except one) obtained South African citizenship through naturalization and are all on one year contract appointments, which are renewable annually. Immigrant teachers described this as an impediment to the successful reconstruction of their professional identities.

It will make a difference, however presently I am just putting in more effort. The difference will be that right now I am insecure. Anytime I may be out of employment because I am on a temporary basis, so if I am permanent [meaning permanently employed], I will know that I am now permanent on permanent basis. The job is mine and I will be able to put in more effort (Mr Tawanda, Zimbabwean teacher).

Furthermore, immigrant teachers claimed that indigenous teachers who were less qualified and had less experience were being offered permanent positions.

... They are, especially in the appointments, permanent appointments, it is very rare. And recently I heard that immigrant teachers that had been appointed recently their contracts have been terminated. I heard so. They don't consider what you know and what you had; they consider where you come from (Ms Tafadwa, Zimbabwean teacher).

Mr Kambule, the principal at one of the schools where an immigrant teacher was employed confirmed that African immigrant teachers were always apprehensive and disturbed when it was time to renew their contracts. Beside the fact that they had to waste valuable time visiting the Department of Home Affairs regularly for the renewal of their temporary permits, they were also unsure as to whether their contracts would be renewed or terminated. Mr Kambule was of the view that immigrant teachers were not discriminated against or marginalized based on their nationalities. However, he confirmed that the prolonged temporary employment of African immigrant teachers was an affront to their psyche and professional identities.

No, the only challenge I know is to be permanent in their job so that they can feel secure and that is all. The only challenge I know about them is that they will be

happier if their employment is permanent; they will not have to look behind them. It is affecting them greatly but it is not something that will necessary make them feel excluded in any way (Mr Kambule, Principal, inner city school).

Irrespective of the appellation used to describe temporary employment and conditions attached to it, immigrant teachers expressed their dislike of temporary employment and maintained that it had a negative effect on their professional identities. Yet, despite this temporary status, most of the principals and learners were in agreement that immigrant teachers were an asset to the school.

I have said the quality, they are dedicated, and they go the extra mile. So we have one of them who is helping with the timetables and with the computers. They are excellent, so they bring quality to the school (Ms Nkomo, Black township school). Yes, you know if you look at the work ethics of some of these educators, they do good work. And the fact that we renew their contracts year by year that means they deliver, that speaks volumes (Ms Van Tonder, former Model C school). Good work ethics, willingness and cooperation. I think they set examples by that (Mr Ismail, former Indian school). I think they are highly educated and raising standards (Mr Strydom, former Coloured school).

Statements made by learners in the focus group interviews corroborated the sentiments expressed by the principals. Learners expressed that:

... immigrant teachers, should definitely be allowed because this people they come with new ideas and experiences to South Africa (Amarie, female, grade 10 learner).

In South African schools it should be only foreigners teaching because to be honest mostly they are smarter. Their level is very high (Simpfiwe, male, grade 11 learner).

For me eish, she put you under pressure. She can give you three assignments in a week and she wants it by Friday (Nomsa, female, grade 10 learner).

Yes, afterall they are good teachers, more than South African teachers and they are hard workers. They are committed to their jobs (Gerrit, male, grade 11 learner).

They are the best. So like the way I see it they know Maths. And they can present their knowledge to other people (Moosa, male, grade 11 learner).

#### Attitudes of learners towards African immigrant teachers

All African immigrant teachers who participated in this study maintained that South African learners are disrespectful to their teachers. Learners were disrespectful to all teachers, not only to immigrant teachers. It was a general trend. Some learners however in addition to being disrespectful also displayed antagonism towards immigrant teachers by making statements such as “Go back to your country”. One of the yardsticks that immigrant teachers used in measuring the degree of disrespect was to compare the behaviour and the attitudes of South African learners to learners in their home countries.

They are very disrespectful. In my culture, we are very respectful people. So whenever I see learners who are disrespectful to me it hurts me, it makes me angry that I will even want to invite their parents to say this learner has done 1, 2, 3... . We have to talk to him or her and try to see how we can help this learner because he... I think he is going astray. It's not African culture to disrespect elders (Ms Adebajji, Nigerian teacher).

Ms Tawafda was able to judge the level of ill-discipline on the part of the learners in South Africa by comparing them with learners in his former school in Zimbabwe. He concluded that learners in Zimbabwean schools were well behaved and more disciplined than those in South African schools.

I dislike their ill-discipline. You see some of them just whistle at the corner. Some shout at the top of their voices in the corridors. Or they come in and take about five minutes trying to settle down. That means a lesson is 45 minutes, five minutes are taken to discipline. In terms of discipline that is what I dislike. It is not like that in Zimbabwe, no one can whistle, no one can shout on the school premises. When you are in class you are ready with your books waiting for the teachers. But here, the learners talk and talk until the teacher instructs them to take out their books (Mr Gamedze, Zimbabwean teacher).

Mr Weza, an immigrant teacher from Zimbabwe, supported his fellow countryman in terms of the poor discipline of South African learners. He even explained that in his opinion the reason for the lack of discipline was the Government and the school authority's insistence on human rights. Furthermore, he argued that even when learners scored low marks due to their lack of commitment to studies, the school authority would absolve the learners and apportion blame to teachers for the learners' non-performance. In order to appease the school administrators and create the impression that teachers were hardworking, learners were occasionally awarded undeserved marks and this act was considered as an insult to his identity as a professional teacher.

The general thing which I observed here which is totally different is learners generally here in South Africa. I have taught in different schools in South Africa, I have much experience. The learners are the same thing. They are not self-motivated. They need to be pushed every now and then. Some of them, they already know that if they failed, they will be given marks (Mr Weza, Zimbabwean teacher).

Mr Gamedze, a Zimbabwean teacher apportioned the bad attitude and behaviours of South African learners to two factors, namely, the moral fabric of the broader society and the heterogeneity of learners in terms of race, culture and customs. He expressed his distaste regarding what he termed "immoral activities" of indigenous students. He found it inappropriate for students to be dating at such a young age and to indulge in activities such as drinking, smoking, gambling and drugs.

The behaviour [of students] in this country...they have to be forced to study. In my country for a student to fall in love with another student and do other acts, the love acts, kissing and whatever you know. In our country it is not accepted, it is

not at all, it is an offence. Yes, there was a time, I think it is a year or two years ago, they even had sex in the class. That is not accepted in my country; that is a serious offence (Ms Tafadwa, Zimbabwean teacher).

I think it is because of the mixture of religion and culture in this school. The Indians will come they will bring their own acts, the Coloureds will come and bring their own acts, the black Africans will come and bring their own, so it is a conglomeration of several things. As a result what will come out there will be difficult to control (Mr Weza, Zimbabwean teacher).

Responses from learners in the focus group discussion also highlighted the ill-discipline of learners and some commented on the negative effect this had on their learning in class.

Like if you go into her class and you interrupt, she just says “go out, get out of my class”, even though you don’t, she just ignores you, and concentrates on those who are paying attention (Karabo, male, grade 9 learner).

...sometimes going to Maths class is a slow down, I hope you understand what I mean. Because of distractions that we get from those that are not interested, it makes the class to be chaotic. It is like half of us are listening, not actually half, a quarter or only seven of us are listening and the rest of the class are not paying attention (Lesedi, female, grade 10 learner).

Some learners do not respect her. They mock at her accent, because she is from another country. They do not listen to the teacher and do their own thing (Nyna, female, grade 10 learner).

A central thread running through almost all responses of the Black immigrant teachers and learners was that of the moral degeneration of indigenous Black students. Local Black students seemed to lack a sound guiding value system as evident from their immoral and unethical conduct. Observations, comments and perceptions of these immigrant teachers struck the very chords of the moral fibre of South African society and suggested that something is seriously amiss. Black immigrant teachers found indigenous students lazy, disrespectful, ill-disciplined and indulged in activities that they could not condone. Indigenous students seemed to project a culture of entitlement; they did not seem to understand the value of education and were constantly testing boundaries. Further, they claimed that indigenous students were culture-deficient; they too readily gave up their cultures to assimilate into Western cultures.

#### Holding on to a former culture or way of knowing

African immigrant teachers claimed that they had to make a paradigm shift regarding education in the host society. By implication this meant that immigrant teachers had to discard their preferred traditional way of teaching and to forsake what they know and learnt in their countries of origin. In so doing their professional identities were negatively affected. For example, Ms Adebajji (Nigerian teacher) rejected the use of portfolio as an assessment procedure. She regarded it as creating too much workload for teachers, cumbersome and a waste of time.

We are not really inculcating this knowledge to the learners. We are busy with paperwork, portfolio work; we are not really teaching these learners to be what they want to be in future. We are just giving them paperwork to do and most of the things they just copy it from the internet and submit for portfolio work which is not the same system back home in Nigeria (Ms Adebajji, Nigerian teacher).

One of the learners in the focus group interviews aptly summed up the general feeling of all learners when he expressed his views about the professionalism of the immigrant teacher, who taught him:

We like the way he teaches us. It is different from South African teachers by the way. He is very committed to his work; he always come to class every day; he doesn't miss a single class. He always makes corrections and he always explains to people who do not understand. He always repeats if we do not understand, for us to understand. And another thing he is not lazy to write on chalkboard (Tom, male, grade 11 learner).

The assessment policy of the South African curriculum was another issue of contention. All immigrant teachers criticized the pass mark of 30 percent for learners. They all agreed that 50 percent was an acceptable pass mark all over the world – including their countries of origin. Their experience was that the education system in their home countries was better than that of South Africa.

It is different, as I was saying the pass mark in South Africa is 30 percent. In Zimbabwe it is 50 percent. The pass mark is a bit low in South Africa and it allows those that are not supposed to be qualified, to qualify because it is just 30 percent (Mr Tawanda, Zimbabwean teacher).

Immigrant teachers were also concerned about the method of assessment used to assess learners in South Africa. This caused a shift in their professional identity. African immigrant teachers in this study were used to summative assessment as opposed to formative assessment that is part of the South African curriculum: In Zimbabwe we are not used to giving learners assignments and projects. We just give them test, test, test...only test and if you fail...you fail (Mr Weza, Zimbabwean teacher).

Immigrant teachers struggled to come to terms with the educational paradigm of the host country and felt that the educational system in their home countries was of a better standard. Resultantly they held onto their former way of knowing as they believed that it worked much better than what was currently being practiced in the host country.

### **Discussion and analysis of findings**

Findings in this study echoed some of the findings in the literature namely, immigrant and employment status, attitudes of learners and holding on to a former way of knowing. The negative experiences relating to immigration status and employment status of immigrant teachers mirrored that of immigrant teachers elsewhere in the world. Chassels (2010:9) found that a female immigrant had been in Canada for almost five years, “waiting in separation”, before she was granted a permit that was required to

sponsor her spouse's immigration to Canada. Many African immigrant teachers in South African schools, who only had temporary permits to teach, had to leave their families in their home countries and were also in a sense "waiting in separation" (Chassels, 2010:9) as without permanent employment they could not risk bringing their families to the host country. The temporary status of living between borders as it were was regarded by immigrant teachers as an affront to their personal identities and this led to a shift in their professional identities. The use of temporary permits by African immigrant teachers in South African schools also indirectly influenced the employment status of African immigrant teachers. This study found that all immigrant teachers who had temporary work permits were granted temporary or contractual employment. In the international context immigrant teachers were also given temporary appointments. Different appellations were used to describe these temporary appointments namely, substitute teachers, call teachers, occasional and relief teachers. Like their counterparts in South Africa, this group of international individuals also reported being frustrated as a result of the alienation and discrimination brought about by being perpetually fixed on temporary employment (Duggleby & Badali, 2007; Lunay & Lock, 2006).

It was apparent from this study that all African immigrant teachers came from cultural backgrounds where teachers had authority and were respected. This cultural background influenced the way in which African immigrant teachers perceived the attitudes of South African learners towards them. In general, all African immigrant teachers in this study believed that South African learners were lazy, lacked commitment to their studies and generally lacked respect for teachers. Similarly, findings in the literature revealed that immigrant teachers found classroom management to be a challenge due to the negative attitudes of the learners. These immigrant teachers complained about learners being too talkative and disrespectful in the class, and not completing the prescribed homework (Deters, 2008).

Immigrant teachers are known for crossing borders into host countries with their cultural baggage and this has created impediments on the way to the successful reconstruction of their professional identities (Elbaz-Luwish, 2004). Most immigrant teachers were comfortable with the way of teaching and assessment in their countries of origin and were not ready to embrace the new or acceptable way of teaching and assessment in the host country (Faez, 2010). Similarly, African immigrant teachers also found flaws in the way assessment and teaching was conducted in South African schools. African immigrant teachers who participated in this study preferred summative assessment to formative assessment. They maintained that formative assessment, as it is practised in the South African educational system, was too complex and resulted in wasteful man-hours.

This study however was silent in terms of some of the findings in the literature namely, re-certification or re-credentialing, lack of employment and professional and cultural isolation. These issues were not mentioned by participants in this study. The new insight that emerged from this study was that African immigrant teachers in South

African schools were considered desirable and indispensable partners by potential employers. This was in contrast to the general perceptions about immigrant teachers in the literature where fellow colleagues, administrators and learners regarded immigrant teachers as mere job-seekers, opportunists and desperate individuals who had nothing to contribute towards the development of education in the host country (Walsh & Brigham, 2007).

How do these findings engage with the theoretical framework of the study namely Social Identity Theory and Communities of Practice? As the data have revealed, attitudes towards immigrant teachers were shaped by individuals' memberships in social groups and the structural context within which those groups are situated (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). South African teachers enhanced the status of the group to which they belonged (in-group) and discriminated and held prejudiced views of immigrant teachers (out-group). The "schoolscape"<sup>11</sup> was divided into "them" and "us" based through a process of social categorization. Immigrant teachers were placed into a category and identified as, 'makwerekwere' to better understand the changing South African social environment. In order to maintain their self-esteem, South African teachers needed to compare favourably with other groups. However, from the statements made by principals and learners in this study, it would seem that this was not the case.

There is a profound connection between identity and practice. Developing such practice requires the formation of a community whose members can engage with one another and acknowledge each other as participants (Wenger, 1998). Identity and practice are mirror images of each other. In this study teachers of the host country, did not acknowledge immigrant teachers in their community of practice. This led to marginalisation and exclusion of immigrant teachers. Wenger (1998) argues that our identity is not equivalent only to our self-image or solely to what others think or say about us, but it is also our experience of being in the world. According to Wenger (1998:151) "an identity is a layering of events of participation and reification by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other". Challenges immigrant teachers encountered in their daily lives at schools prevented them from becoming active participants or full members of communities of practice. Societal and institutional structures labelled and projected immigrant teachers as outsiders operating outside the mainstream. Thus a lack of access to become active participants or full members of communities of practice constituted impediments to the successful reconstruction of professional identities of African immigrant teachers in South African schools.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

In this study, we have explored some of the challenges that African immigrant teachers encountered in South African schools. These challenges create impediments to the successful reconstruction of their professional identities. We also argued that these impediments kept them at the periphery and prevented them from becoming full

members of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). For any individual to change a system for the better it requires greater interest and participation. Lack of access may delay or hamper African immigrant teachers' positive contributions to the South African educational system.

The same negative experiences reported by African immigrant teachers also mirrored that of their counterparts elsewhere in the world; for example, in the UK (Miller, 2008b), Australia (Seah & Bishop, 2001), Canada (Pollock, 2010), Israel (Simon-Maeda, 2004) and the USA (Hutchison, 2006).

In the South African context there is a lack of professional support programmes especially designed to help immigrant teachers with successful acculturation or reconstruction of their professional identities. In some instances these immigrant teachers explained that they attended workshops and programmes on professional development arranged by the Department of Education. The African immigrant teacher participants in this study mentioned that they have not attended specially designed mentoring or induction programmes. The importance of an induction or mentoring programme that differs from that designed for beginner teachers cannot be over-emphasized. According to Peeler and Jane (2003) the needs of beginner teachers and immigrant teachers are different.

We recommend that all immigrant teachers in South Africa should attend a mentoring or induction programme before or while teaching in South African schools. Such mentoring programmes should not focus on content knowledge as most of the immigrant teachers are found to be adequate in that area, but the programmes should focus on pedagogy and knowledge of the South African educational landscape – including the different cultures of the South African rainbow nation. A mentoring programme might help to confront problems of a lack of understanding of the curriculum and to promote an understanding of learners' way of life resulting from different beliefs and values.

The Department of Home Affairs and the Department of Education should collaborate with each other in order to ensure that the immigration status of African immigrant teachers teaching in South African schools receive priority and attention. One of the reasons participants in this study are all on temporary employment, is because the Department of Home Affairs only granted them temporary permits that are renewable annually. As a result the Department of Education could not employ these teachers on a permanent basis as they were unsure whether the temporary permits granted by the Department of Home Affairs would be renewed or not. Therefore, we recommend a synergy and deeper collaboration between the Department of Home Affairs and the Department of Education regarding African immigrant teachers.

The South African Government should seriously consider appointing immigrant teachers on a permanent basis. Such an action may just contribute to injecting much needed quality back into the education system of South Africa, which is currently in a state of extreme crisis. Furthermore, such an initiative may just be the catalyst needed to offset the current lackadaisical and non-committal attitude of many South

African teachers, as it may provide a competitive edge and bargaining tool for the Government. Employment of teachers should be based on merit, qualifications, commitment, work ethic, culture of teaching and learning, a calling and most of all pedagogy of hope, love and compassion. Quality education of learners should not depend or be defined by the immigrant on nationality status of teachers.

## Notes

- 1 Black African South Africans: The terms Coloured, White, Indian and African derive from the apartheid racial classifications of the different peoples of South Africa. The use of these terms, although problematic, has continued through the post-apartheid era in the country. In the context of this paper, Black African South Africans refer to the group of people who are of African ancestry and who are classified as “black” in colour.
- 2 Gauteng Department of Education: Gauteng is one of the nine provinces of South Africa.
- 3 Tshwane: A number of old Pretoria municipalities as well as others that fell outside the greater Pretoria area were combined into one metropolitan area called The City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality.
- 4 Tshwane North, Tshwane West and Tshwane South: different geographically regions within Tshwane.
- 5 Model C schools: A government attempt to cut state costs by shifting some of the financing and control of white schools to parents.
- 6 Township schools: Schools situated in apartheid designated suburbs for black [African] communities.
- 7 Coloured: a term used in the apartheid South Africa to define citizens that have a biracial identity.
- 8 Indian: A school that formerly exclusively catered only for Indian students.
- 9 Inner city school: schools situated in the city centre.
- 10 Makwerekwere: is the derogatory term used by Black South Africans to describe non-South African blacks. It refers to Black immigrants from the rest of Africa.
- 11 Schoolscape: The concept “schoolscape” has evolved from the concept of a “scape” that was first proposed by Appadurai (1996:329) in his attempt to describe forces of globalisation and global cultural flows that are liquid and irregular in nature. He introduced terms such as “ethnoscape”, “technoscape”, “financescape”, “mediascape” and “ideoscape”, each of which emphasise a particular aspect of the world with the latter “ideoscape” embodying the “imagined worlds” produced through and intersection of all of the former scapes.

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