UNRAVELLING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: A NARRATIVE EXPLORATION OF EARLY CAREER ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN A RURAL SETTING

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the intricate process of how early career English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers construct their professional identities (PI). By qualitatively examining the role of teaching experiences within the ESL classroom, we seek to understand how these educators shape their professional selves. Our study involves four ESL teachers, each with a maximum of three years of teaching experience, all of whom received their education from South African universities. Employing a narrative research design, we provided these teachers with a platform to share their individual stories and experiences during interview-based data collection. The study's findings reveal a noteworthy development in the way these teachers perceive and shape their PI. Through meaningful reflection, the participants began to see themselves primarily as professionals in the field of ESL education. This reflection led us to draw three key conclusions regarding the PI of early career ESL teachers. First, the personal and professional experiences of these educators play a pivotal role in shaping their understanding of professional identity. Second, this conceptualisation holds significant potential to influence their classroom effectiveness and teaching abilities. Lastly, the utilisation of a storytelling approach in our research has proven to be a valuable method for comprehending the PI of early career ESL teachers.

KEYWORDS: Professional Identity, Early Career Teachers, ESL Education, Narrative Research, Teacher Training

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Researchers in the field of Teacher Professional Identity (TPI) (see, for example, Goodson & Cole, 1994; Volkmann & Anderson, 1998; Samuel & Stephens, 2000; Steenekamp, van der Merwe & Mehmedova, 2018) define this concept as a continuous process in which the *personal* and *professional* selves of teachers are gradually merged into one self that results in the *becoming* and *being* of a teacher. However, some, such as Gaziel (1995), Moore and Hoffman (1988) and Beitar, Verloop and Vermunt (2000) view TPI simply as the way in which teachers describe themselves as an occupational group, or how they perceive the roles they play, or the characteristics of their profession. Others in this field, notably, Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Tateo, 2012; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2013; regard TPI as comprising many sub-identities that come alive as teachers narrate the story of their lives to make sense of their personal and professional selves.

Two definitions have relevance to the present study. Clandinin and Connelly in 1996 viewed PI in terms of a combination of professional as well as personal sub-identities, but Beijaard *et al*., (2000), subsequently, brought the focus onto the professional elements - roles and characteristics. The first definition notes that when teachers are trying to make sense of their personal and professional selves, they regard their PI as made up of various identities that can be revealed during the process of storytelling. The second definition concerns the way in which teachers describe the roles they play and the characteristics of their profession as leading to their professional identity (PI). It includes the roles they play as well as the characteristics of their profession. The first definition covers the pertinent issue of how teachers describe the roles they play and the characteristics of their profession as leading to their PI. Following the popularisation of the second definition, research on PI in education began to be viewed as vitally important and was considered a great concern for educators, educational leaders, decision-makers and researchers alike.

The reason why identity research has become so prominent and crucial in education is that the nature of schools and students keeps changing (Keiler, 2018). Indeed, identity research has gained paramount importance in the South African education landscape due to the dynamic nature of schools and students. South Africa's historical legacy of apartheid has left an indelible mark on the identities of various racial and ethnic groups (Madida, 2023). Hence, Madida (2023:51) mentions that identity research is instrumental in comprehending and addressing the enduring effects of apartheid, fostering inclusivity and equity in the educational system. The country's diversity, characterised by multiple languages, cultures, and traditions, plays a significant role in shaping students' identities. Identity research has emphasised the importance of acknowledging and respecting this diversity in the classroom, promoting inclusive teaching practices that consider students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In South Africa, changing demographics, driven by migration, urbanisation, and shifting population patterns, have led to a more heterogeneous student body (Hoelscher, Dorward, Fox, Lawanson, Paller, & Phillips, (2023). Identity research assists educational institutions (in this case schools) in adapting to these transformations by providing insights into how students from diverse backgrounds navigate their identities and educational experiences (Sung, 2022).

Evolving educational policies and shifts in the curriculum have been prevalent since the end of apartheid. Identity research evaluates the impact of these policy changes on students' self-identities and their overall educational experiences. Furthermore, globalisation, the post-Covid 19 era and technological innovations introduce new dimensions to identity research as students confront issues related to digital identities, online interactions, and global influences that shape their self-concept (Charoensap-Kelly & Punyanunt-Carter, 2022). In essence, the ever-changing nature of South African schools and students deepen the critical role of identity research in fostering inclusive, equitable, and effective educational practices. This research is essential for adapting to the evolving educational landscape and addressing the unique challenges and opportunities it presents.

Another factor motivating identity research in education is the realisation of the necessity to obtain data on issues that can help in decision-making processes. For instance, a school district may conduct identity research to gather data on the academic performance and well-being of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, informing decisions related to resource allocation and support programs. Similarly, a university might engage in identity research to assess what would be the best approaches and methods to adopt for teaching and learning. In addressing this matter, Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005: 38) assert that gaining insights into the nature of teaching and learning necessitates an exploration of diverse avenues for uncovering educators' PI. They contend that to truly understand educators, one must

construct a vivid portrait of their multifaceted identities, encompassing not only their roles and responsibilities but also the significant individuals in their lives, their perceptions of students, their self-concept as professionals, the values they hold dear in the realm of education, and the critical self-reflections they engage in throughout their careers. This holistic approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of educators, shedding light on the intricate tapestry of their PI.

Our study assumes significance in the context of comprehending how educators adapt to and manage the evolving rural educational landscape and how these adaptations influence their self-concept. In addition to addressing aspects of TPI, the unique contribution of our research lies in accentuating the professional responses of educators to the dynamic educational milieu as pivotal in shaping their teacher identities. The present study bases its exploration on the above two interconnected definitions, recognising that responses to change constitute a fundamental dimension of TPI, particularly in the case of ECTs.

The exploration of TPI entails two noteworthy considerations. On one hand, Atkinson (2004: 386) cautions that "many ECTs engaged in the instruction of ESL encounter their initial teaching years as particularly challenging, as they grapple with their evolving self-perceptions as effective educators". Consequently, she emphasises the need to provide support for these educators in shaping a new identity that aligns with the specific context and the environment where English is taught as a second language. This emphasises the pertinence of the present study, as it seeks to unravel how the contextual experiences within classrooms and the instructional environment impact the conceptualisation of TPI.

Furthermore, Ochs (2008: 304) asserts that "identity-related concerns associated with the acquisition of a new or foreign language represent a significant issue that ECTs may encounter, whether consciously or unconsciously." He elucidates that "as long as ECTs grapple with such formidable challenges, their capacity to impart knowledge to learners remains arduous and, in fact, exasperating." This, in turn, implies that ESL students under the tutelage of such educators may encounter difficulties in advancing their proficiency in the English language. Consequently, it becomes apparent that the conceptualisation of identity within the realm of ESL teaching is multifaceted, not a static or stable attribute of the individual.

This research endeavour was undertaken with the primary objective of comprehending the manner in which a select group of early career ESL teachers construe their TPIs within the framework of contextual classroom experiences, also referred to as life experiences, and guided by relevant literature. To address this aim, the study followed an exploratory investigation through which we addressed three distinct research inquiries: Firstly, it examined the developmental trajectory of professional identities among the four ECTs included in the research. Secondly, it delineated the specific nature of the professional identities possessed by these teachers, who were situated within the rural environment of a Local Municipality in Mpumalanga Province. Lastly, the study conducted a comparative analysis, contrasting the PIs of the ECTs with those of established ESL teachers as documented in the existing academic literature.

The chosen method for this research can be justified as an exploratory investigation for several reasons, with the potential for significant future directions in the realm of defining TPI and assisting ECTs in understanding their roles and formulating their own TPIs, both at this early stage in their careers and as they evolve over time, in response to changes in the world and the practice of education.

The choice of a rural context for the study signifies a deliberate and meaningful decision with several implications related to the selection of participants. We agree with Howley and Howley (2014: 10-16) that the rural context is a valuable setting for our research for a variety of reasons.

For instance, rural areas are often underrepresented in educational research, which tends to focus more on urban or metropolitan settings. By selecting participants from a rural context, the study addresses this gap and provides a voice to a group of teachers whose experiences and challenges may differ significantly from their urban counterparts. In addition, rural communities often have tight-knit social structures. Teachers in these areas may form strong relationships with students, parents, and community members, which can influence their professional identity. Understanding the role of community relationships in TPI development is an important aspect of the research. It is also important to note that challenges and opportunities faced by ECTs in rural areas can inform education policies and practices. The research can highlight areas where additional support or tailored professional development is needed. It can also reveal successful strategies that may be transferable to other rural settings. Hence, by selecting participants from a rural schooling context, the study captures a diverse range of perspectives. These teachers may have different motivations, values, and career aspirations compared to their urban counterparts. This diversity enriches the understanding of TPI within the broader teaching profession.

In a nutshell, the forgoing paragraph suggests that while rural contexts have their unique characteristics, the insights gained from this study can be generalised to a certain extent. The findings may provide valuable insights applicable to rural teaching contexts worldwide, while informing discussions on TPI development in diverse educational settings.

An exploratory investigation was well-justified for this research since it provided valuable insights into the complex and evolving nature of TPI among ECTs. Moreover, the potential for future research directions lies in understanding how ECTs develop their TPIs, adapt to changes in education, and derive a sense of self as educators, thereby contributing to the enhancement of teacher education and professional development practices.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employed grounded theory (GT) in accordance with the framework set forth by Glaser and Strauss (1976) and Glaser (1978). The rationale for our selection of this theoretical approach as both a guiding perspective and a methodological strategy is rooted in the belief that grounded theory is uniquely oriented toward enhancing our insights into individuals' interpretations of various phenomena (Suddaby, 2006). This theory distinguishes itself by prioritizing a data-driven understanding, in contrast to interpretations that may rely on preconceived assumptions. Grounded theory places a premium on the adoption of open coding, a process through which data is dissected into meaningful units of analysis, which can range from individual words to phrases or complete sentences (Mavetera & Kroeze, 2009). Consequently, our data analysis approach encompassed a multistep process, commencing with open coding as the initial phase. Subsequently, we employed axial coding to restructure the data in innovative ways, with the aim of discerning meaningful associations among the codes that had been derived during the open coding phase. Following this, the extracted categories underwent a selective coding procedure, wherein we systematically compared codes pertaining to the same facet of each participant's TPI across the interview transcripts. This methodological sequence facilitated a comprehensive exploration of each participant's cognitive process in shaping their TPI.

To ensure the robustness and quality of our study, we adhered to a well-established protocol, meticulously upholding the attributes of rigor and quality (Cohen Miller, Saban, & Bayeta, 2022). We also integrated recommended best practices relevant to qualitative research design at every stage, including the formulation, execution, and reporting of our qualitative research endeavour.

Utilising GT as our analytical framework, our research endeavours revolved around the exploration of how the four ECTs engaged in the interpretation and construction of meaning from their personal and professional experiences. Additionally, GT played an instrumental role in elucidating the processes by which these ECTs interpreted said experiences to construct their TPI.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the principal investigator, with a strict adherence to retaining the original content of the participants' statements without any editorial modifications or refinements. Subsequently, the entire research team collaboratively engaged in the process of reviewing the interview recordings to validate the fidelity of the transcribed content. This comprehensive approach, wherein transcription, auditory validation, and data authentication were undertaken collectively by the research team, carried a twofold significance. It not only assured the meticulous preservation of the participants' verbatim statements but also safeguarded the imperative of maintaining participants' data anonymity, in accordance with the established study protocol.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative exploratory interview-based study was conducted in the Mpumalanga Province of South Africa in a rural village within the Nkomazi Municipality.

Participants

The participants were four educators teaching ESL in four different schools located within the local municipality. Although we intended to select two male and two female participants, there were insufficient female ESL ECTs, so the research was conducted with three men and one woman.

The participant selection process followed a structured procedure, initiated by the distribution of a project description to school principals within the Local Municipality. This communication outlined specific criteria for participant selection, which included the following: (1) willingness and interest in participating in the study, (2) a maximum of three years of teaching experience, (3) diverse educational backgrounds from different South African universities, and most significantly, (4) expertise as teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL).

Upon receiving recommendations from the school principals, a total of six potential participants were put forth: three from School A, two from School B, and one from School C. School A represented a combined educational institution, School B was a secondary school, and School C was a primary school. To establish initial rapport and ascertain their willingness to participate, the principal investigator conducted brief five-minute interviews with each teacher.

Subsequently, based on an assessment of the strengths and suitability of each teacher as a participant, it was decided to enroll all six teachers in the study. Following the completion of interviews, a selection process was undertaken, opting to utilise recordings from the four

participants whose contributions were deemed most pertinent for the study. The exclusion of the remaining two participants was due to most of their responses being unrelated to the study's objectives. Additionally, the participant from the primary school context possessed a notably distinct professional experience compared to the others, leading to a deliberate focus on educators from secondary school settings.

The four teachers whose interviews were chosen for analysis had received their training from four different higher education institutions. All were newly appointed teachers with limited ESL teaching experience, ranging from one to three years. At the time of the study, three teachers held bachelor's degrees in education, while the fourth had a primary degree in communication (media studies) in addition to a postgraduate certificate in education. All participants received formal instruction in English during their primary and high school education.

The research team operated on the premise that participants had, in part, shaped their Professional Identities (PI) through social learning. This social learning was facilitated by various environmental factors such as peer groups, teachers, and classmates, aligning with August's perspective (2021). Notably, the interviews focused on the interactions between the teachers and their students, as opposed to examining interactions with friends or colleagues. This unique focus on the student-teacher dynamic represents a novel aspect of this study, as it appears to be absent from existing PI or TPI literature, thereby signifying a distinctive contribution of this research.

Data collection

The data collection methodology employed in this study involved semi-structured interviews and the solicitation of participants' personal reflections. Semi-structured interviews, as advocated by Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003), were chosen due to their effectiveness in eliciting in-depth narratives from participants. The questions posed during these interviews were carefully worded to encourage participants to provide comprehensive insights.

All interviews were conducted in September 2019, prior to the school recess, and were meticulously recorded in audio format. To accommodate participants more comfortably, interviews were conducted in both English and SiSwati, which is the native language of the primary author and the participants. This linguistic flexibility allowed participants to express themselves more freely and authentically, as per their linguistic preferences.

The interview guide commenced with a courteous introduction and an elucidation of the research's objectives. Participants were unequivocally assured of their right to decline participation or withdraw from the interview if they felt any discomfort. Following the establishment of consent, the interview proceeded to explore diverse facets, including personal information, educational background, teaching experiences, challenges, and strengths encountered. The interview also delved into the participants' interpretation of their professional identities, encompassing both their roles as educators in general and as English teachers. The sessions culminated with an inquiry regarding the perceived influence of English as a Second Language (ESL) training on the formation of TPI. In essence, the interview guide adhered to a structured and respectful format, tailored to elicit relevant and substantive data for the research study.

Approval to access the research field.

The research study received approval from the Higher Degrees Committee within the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Limpopo. Furthermore, ethical clearance was duly secured from the Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC/39/2015:PG). Subsequently, necessary permissions were sought and obtained from the Mpumalanga Department of Education and the respective school principals to initiate and conduct the study.

Approaching the participants

Following the requisite approvals, the research team initiated contact with the identified participants, providing them with an overview of the study. This entailed a comprehensive explanation of the study's objectives, significance, and the rationale for its execution. In an effort to ensure the participants' comfort and understanding, a detailed account of what to anticipate during the interview process was elucidated.

Participants were given the autonomy to select the most convenient time and location for the interview, and their consent was sought for the use of voice recorders to capture verbatim narratives. Participants were also informed of the option to express themselves in either SiSwati or English or to transition between languages during the interview.

Following the interviews, participants were provided with an opportunity to review the audio recordings of their sessions. This allowed them to supplement the information presented, offer new insights, and confirm or challenge the information they had conveyed during the interview process.

Procedure

The in-person interviews with each of the ESL teachers were structured to examine the manner in which ECTs construct their TPIs within the framework of their contextual experiences. As previously detailed in the introductory section, it is noteworthy that the primary author conducted all the interviews, ensuring a formal introduction and a clear reiteration of the study's objectives when deemed necessary. Each interview was conducted within a time frame ranging from 15 to 30 minutes. To encapsulate the essential background information of each participant, Table 1 offers a comprehensive summary.

Table 1: Participants' backgrounds

Names (*Pseudonyms*)		Mngoni*	Bongiwe*	Mlungisi*	Khisimusi*
Key factors					
	1. Educational level	B.Ed.	B.Ed.	B.Admin. PGCE	B.Ed.
	2. Gender	Male	Female	Male	Male
	3. Teaching experience (years)	2	3	2	3
	4. Grade taught	12	11	10	12
	5. School type	Rural public school	Rural public school	Rural public school	Rural public school
	6. Type of University	Historically disadvantaged university of technology, urban location	Historical disadvantaged-comprehensive university, rural location	Historical disadvantaged-comprehensive university, rural location	Historical disadvantaged-comprehensive university, rural location

DATA ANALYSIS

Our data analysis process commenced with open coding as a fundamental step in managing the dataset. Subsequently, we executed axial coding, allowing for the reconfiguration of data in innovative ways, thereby unveiling meaningful relationships among the codes initially derived through open coding. This was followed by a selective coding procedure, during which we systematically compared codes associated with the same facets of each participant's TPI across the entirety of the interview corpus. This systematic approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of each participant's cognitive journey in shaping their TPI.

To maintain the quality and rigor of the study, we adhered to a well-established protocol, which delineated the intricacies of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This methodology aligns with established practices in studies related to TPI, thus ensuring the robustness and reliability of our analytical process and ensuring richness and depth as well as consistency and trustworthiness. This is particularly crucial in studies of TPI where accurate and dependable insights are paramount (Monrouxe, 2009).

FINDINGS

Open coding

Table 2 presents the thematic content extracted from each interview, specifically pertaining to the participants' construction of their TPI. The narrative summaries situated below the table are

drawn from the open coding process, serving as foundational insights into each participant's perspectives.

Table 2: Themes or factors from participants' narratives (from first to current year of teaching)

Participant's name	Mngoni	Bongiwe	Mlungisi	Khisimusi
Themes or factors	Low self-esteem	Excitement	Difficulty	Difficulty
	Fun	Positive response to students' commitment	Passion for music	Dedication and commitment
	Dedication and commitment	Dedication and commitment	Dedication and commitment	Hard work
	Hard work	Hard work	Positive response to students' commitment	Role model
	Environmental influence and good communication skills	Hybridity	Teacher as a manager and leader	Communication skills
	Teacher as a manager and leader	Role model		Influence from the media

Mngoni

During his inaugural year as an ESL teacher, Mngoni encountered challenges in establishing rapport with his students upon his arrival at the school as a novice educator. When queried about the necessity for self-improvement and the potential avenues to achieve it, he responded with a smile, stating,

> *Not improve myself specifically but both me and my learners. What I have decided to do is try by all means to gather books from lower grades for them to read because the language used there is easier, and this paves way for them to gradually understand and improve their English. In this way, they will be able to respond to questions. Therefore, as their teacher, I feel good.*

Based on what Mngoni said, if a teacher is dedicated and committed in helping his or her students learn best, this affects how the teacher views him or herself professionally.

Mngoni's statement highlights a fundamental aspect of a TPI, emphasising the significant influence of dedication and commitment in fostering effective learning environments for students. When teachers are devoted to their students' academic progress and exhibit a strong commitment to their educational journey, it can engender a profound impact on their self-perception within the professional context. This perspective aligns with the notion that a teacher's self-concept is closely interlinked with their dedication to facilitating student learning (Davies, 2013). Therefore, it implies that teachers who prioritise their students' success may be

more likely to develop a positive and empowered professional identity, driven by their commitment to fostering educational growth. This insight highlights the intricate relationship between pedagogical commitment and the construction of one's TPI, warranting further exploration and consideration within the realm of ESL research.

Bongiwe

Bongiwe described her initial year of teaching as much better than her current year. She believed that the core reason that she enjoyed teaching in her first year was that the students were excited that they had a new teacher, and their responses were very positive. She explained:

> *I think learners have an impact on our strengths and weaknesses because with language, one has to teach one thing over and over from the beginning of the year until the end of the year but still these learners show no or very little improvement, and for this reason you end up not knowing which strategy to use because you change from one to the other but still there are no improvements.*

She believed that if students do not show a positive response to the lessons, the chances of the teacher enjoying teaching that particular lesson are low. So, this is in direct contrast to the previous teacher. Bongiwe also tried things, but she also observed the learners and saw that they made little progress. This affected her TPI.

This viewpoint expressed by Bongiwe suggests an intriguing perspective on the symbiotic relationship between students' responsiveness to lessons and a teacher's personal enjoyment of the subject matter (Tsai, Kunter, Lüdtke, Trautwein, & Ryan, 2008). According to Tsai, *et. al.,* (2008), this perspective introduces the idea that a teacher's professional identity can be influenced not only by their commitment and efforts but also by the feedback and progress of their students. When students exhibit limited enthusiasm or make slow progress in response to a teacher's methods, it can impact the teacher's professional identity. This phenomenon reveals the intricate interplay between pedagogical effectiveness and a teacher's perception of their professional self.

The contrast drawn with the previous teacher, who seemingly approached the situation differently, raises questions about the varied strategies employed by educators and their resulting effects on professional identity. It prompts a critical examination of the diverse factors that contribute to the formation of TPI, shedding light on the dynamic nature of this construct. The relationship between teaching methods, student response, and TPI warrants further investigation within the realm of educational research, particularly as it pertains to ESL teachers in rural areas.

Mlungisi

Mlungisi explained his initial experience in the field of work as being not as easy as he had previously anticipated. Specifically, he said:

> *Adapting to a new environment was difficult; you get to the workplace and question yourself, "Who am I? Is what I learnt from varsity different from what I got in the field?" There was no sense of willingness from the learners; one has to follow these learners using the same syllabi and keep on doing more extra work.*

For him, an ESL teacher is defined by his or her students. The kinds of students that a teacher produces will speak volumes about that teacher. He believed that a teacher who is a leader and a good manager would be able to build a generation of students who reflect well on the teacher. Mlungisi was certain that each and every teacher (through their teaching and classroom

management) moulds the students to be like the teacher, knowingly or unknowingly. In other words, in his view, students play a major role in building up or destroying a teacher.

The perspective presented by Mlungisi indicates a profound belief in the formative role of students in shaping the identity of an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. According to his viewpoint, an ESL teacher's identity is intricately tied to the character and progress of their students. Mlungisi's emphasis on the teacher as a leader and proficient manager implies that the effectiveness of a teacher extends beyond imparting subject matter; it encompasses the capacity to nurture a generation of students who, in turn, serve as reflections of their teacher. This viewpoint suggests that teachers, consciously or otherwise, influence their students' development, making them mirror the qualities and attributes of the teacher.

Furthermore, the assertion that students hold a pivotal role in either bolstering or diminishing a teacher's professional identity introduces an interesting dynamic in the context of teacher-student interactions. It prompts a critical inquiry into the reciprocal relationship between teachers and students, highlighting the potential impact of student engagement, discipline, and learning outcomes on the teacher's self-concept. This perspective shows the complexity of TPI and the significance of student-teacher dynamics in its construction and evolution. It offers a stimulating foundation for future research in the field of education.

Khisimusi

Khisimusi had difficulties adapting, especially to the students; he recalled that for the first few weeks, he felt lost. The students were using shorthand writing and slang language (which can be defined as informal language and is sometimes offensive). That, to him, presented a major challenge because he wanted to achieve the best grades in his class; thus, he realised that a great deal of work still needed to be done about this situation. He believed that teachers could improve themselves and their students through dedication and the willingness to reflect, correct and learn again. He stressed that.

> *A best teacher of ESL is the one that learns a new thing every day. We cannot regard ourselves as perfect but rather aim to improve everything on a daily basis. I, for instance, need new strategies each and every year to improve the way I teach the whole context of ESL.*

A dedicated and committed teacher also works very hard, he added. One of the strategies he was currently using was giving the students more work: "I give them plenty of work to check their state of readiness and if they understand the lesson as they claim to". His PI is a bit like the first teacher in that it focused on what HE does.

The assertion made by the teacher projects the pivotal role of dedication and commitment in the profession. The statement emphasises that 'a dedicated and committed teacher invests significant effort in their teaching practice' (Tran & Moskovsky, 2022). In this context, the teacher reveals a strategy employed to gauge the students' preparedness and comprehension of the lessons: assigning additional work as an evaluative measure.

This strategy, which involves assessing students through additional assignments, is indicative of the teacher's desire to ensure effective learning outcomes. It reflects a proactive approach aimed at fostering student engagement and knowledge retention. The teacher's emphasis on the work he does is consistent with the perspective of the first teacher (Mngoni) mentioned above, indicating a focus on the teacher's actions and instructional strategies in shaping their PI.

The foregoing analysis here centres on the dynamic between teacher actions and the resultant construction of their PI. It highlights the educator's role as an active agent in shaping their professional identity through pedagogical choices. This perspective raises questions about the impact of various teaching strategies and the extent to which they contribute to a teacher's self-concept. It suggests that teachers play a significant role in defining their professional identity by their teaching methods and approaches, which warrants further exploration within the field of education.

Axial coding

Axial coding in grounded theory is the second step of coding that follows open coding. In contrast to open coding where you break the data into discrete parts, with axial coding you begin to draw connections between codes (Belgrave & Seide, 2019). Table 3 presents common themes and their codes, which were discovered during the open coding.

Table 3: Key themes that emerged during the process of axial coding.

Themes	Frequency	Theme codes
1. **Difficulty**	2	Diff
2. **Dedication and commitment**	4	D&C
3. **Hard work**	3	HW
4. **Role model**	2	RM
5. **Communication skills**	2	CS
6. **Manager and leader**	2	M&L

Difficulties (Diff)

The recurrence of this particular code in the open coding section, as evident in both Mlungisi's and Khisimusi's interviews, reveals a pattern related to the participants' initial workplace experiences and the formation of their professional identities. In response to inquiries about their early career experiences and the evolution of their identities, both participants shared common struggles, which revolved around difficulties in adaptation. These experiences manifested as self-doubt and a lack of confidence, indicative of a pervasive sense of uncertainty. Consequently, it is discernible that these participants grappled with an identity characterised by instability, marked by their ongoing quest for self-definition.

Mlungisi's reference to having a mentor prior to becoming a qualified teacher suggests that his transitional phase may have been particularly challenging. This transition possibly generated doubts about his abilities and prompted introspective questions regarding his own identity, such as "Who am I?". Nevertheless, his proactive response to the situation projects the notion that personal and professional growth often necessitates overcoming discomfort and uncertainty, according to Tran and Moskovsky (2022).

Similarly, Khisimusi's sense of feeling "lost" indicates a potential loss of personal, professional, or even social identity, which, in the context of working with students with a strong educational foundation, may have posed a significant challenge. However, it is noteworthy that Khisimusi's self-identification as a social individual appeared to play a constructive role in his adaptation and self-reconstruction. According to Fan and de Jong (2022), this adaptive process emphasises the malleability and resilience of professional identity in response to external factors and personal attributes.

This recurring theme not only emphasises the dynamic nature of TPI but also accentuates the pivotal role of self-reflection, adaptation, and the influence of external factors in the construction of PI. These narratives evoke considerations regarding the formative experiences and challenges that early career teachers encounter and how they navigate the complexities of self-identity within the professional teaching context. The study's findings suggest that the evolving nature of TPI, particularly during the initial career stages, may significantly influence one's sense of self and pedagogical development, warranting further investigation in the realm of educational research.

Dedication and commitment (D&C)

The recurrent appearance of this particular code, with responses from all four participants, indicates the pervasive influence and significance of dedication and commitment (D&C) as a central theme in their discourse. Mngoni's perspective highlights the realisation that personal improvement, coupled with the enhancement of students' understanding, is an intertwined process. His commitment to adapting his teaching methods and the provision of additional reading materials from lower grade levels exemplifies his proactive approach, not only to improve his students' language proficiency but also to align his pedagogy with his professional identity. This approach emphasises the interplay between teacher development and the construction of ESL TPI (Fan & de Jong, 2022).

Bongiwe's contribution highlights the vital role of 'dedication and commitment in empowering ESL teachers to navigate subject matter with confidence' (Fan and de Jong, 2022), enabling them to respond effectively to questions and engage in meaningful interactions. Her observation that confidence is linked to self-definition highlights the notion that professional identity is intimately connected to one's confidence and mastery in the field.

Mlungisi's pursuit to enhance his own language skills in addition to his primary role as an ESL teacher suggests a proactive attempt to shape his PI. By striving for competence, Mlungisi reveals a commitment to continuous self-improvement, aligning with Lee & Jang's (2023: 103981) notion that 'a teacher's strengths and weaknesses should be balanced to attain the desired outcome in terms of student development'.

Khisimusi's resounding affirmation of the importance of dedication and commitment reinforces the unanimous sentiment among the participants. His assertion that a dedicated and committed teacher possesses the capacity to handle challenges and continually seek self-improvement aligns with the view that professional identity is not a static construct but an evolving one. His commitment to exploring new strategies annually emphasises the ongoing nature of PI construction and reconstruction.

Although the shared responses of all four participants to the question about areas for improvement have several implications, it can be suggested that the common thread among them is that dedicated and committed teachers are more likely to engage in a process of self-enhancement in various domains. This is highlighted by Khisimusi's belief in perpetual self-improvement, which aligns with the understanding that professional identity is a dynamic construct that adapts over time, emphasising the continuous nature of its development.

This thematic pattern not only highlights the centrality of dedication and commitment in the construction of TPI but also the dynamic and evolving nature of TPI. The participants' unanimous perspective suggests that a commitment to continuous improvement is a key driver in shaping and reshaping TPI. This insight has profound implications for teacher development and the need for educators to actively engage in the ongoing construction of their professional identity. Future research in the field of education can further explore the mechanisms through which dedication and commitment influence TPI development and its impact on teaching effectiveness.

Hard work (HW)

Khisimusi's perspective not only emphasises dedication and commitment. It also points out the value of hard work in an ESL teacher's professional identity. He mentions that a dedicated and committed ESL teacher should be hard-working, highlighting the interrelatedness of these qualities. Khisimusi's sense of self-definition as an ESL teacher is intricately linked to the outcomes of his remedial strategies, particularly the practice of gauging students' readiness by assigning additional work. This approach suggests that Khisimusi perceives his professional identity as 'being contingent on the effectiveness of his pedagogical efforts, underscoring the instrumental role of hard work in shaping his teacher identity' (Yazan, 2018)

Bongiwe concurs with the significance of hard work, articulating it as a central element of her remedial strategies when faced with personal deficiencies. Her succinct affirmation, "Hard work, nothing beats hard work, my dear," accentuates the pivotal role of industriousness in her teaching approach. Bongiwe's assertion that hard work by both the teacher and students leads to a sense of fulfilment showcases her conviction that teacher diligence and student commitment are interconnected, which, in turn, informs her professional identity.

Mngoni also emphasises the role of hard work in shaping his professional identity as an ESL teacher. His approach involves reinforcing lessons until they become ingrained habits for his students, reflecting a rigorous commitment to ensuring their comprehension and proficiency. Mngoni's perspective implies that his sense of professional identity is closely tied to the thoroughness of his teaching practices.

The recurring theme of hard work across these responses is noteworthy, as it stresses the fundamental role of industriousness in TPI construction (Yazan, 2018). These educators' consensus on the significance of hard work in their remedial strategies and their alignment with their professional identities highlights the intrinsic link between diligence, effective teaching, and the sense of fulfillment within the role of an ESL teacher. This thematic pattern suggests that 'hard work is a driving force in the development and shaping of TPI. Further research in the field of education can delve deeper into the mechanisms through which hard work influences the construction and evolution of TPI, shedding light on the dynamics of teacher identity in the classroom.

Role model (RM)

The concept of a role model (RM) emerges as a crucial facet in the construction of TPI within the narratives of Bongiwe and Khisimusi. Both participants posit that an ESL teacher should serve as a role model for their students, and they associate the qualities of role modelling with the ability to produce outstanding students. They argue that an individual's personality and the image they project to others and society are defining factors that influence their role as a role model, which, in turn, shapes their professional identity. Bongiwe's aspiration for her students to navigate the world with confidence in their ESL abilities signifies the importance she places on laying a robust foundation for her ESL students, a goal intimately linked to her sense of professional identity.

Khisimusi concurs with this perspective and expands on it, asserting that an ESL teacher who functions as a role model is not only ahead in their profession but also represents their profession in a positive light. His claim that his students look up to him as a role model and how this has positively impacted on his self-concept within the realm of language teaching is testament to the reciprocal relationship between role modelling, TPI development, and teaching effectiveness. This perspective suggests that being a role model has provided him with a source of identity and fulfillment, in contrast to the challenges he may have faced in his earlier experiences.

The intriguing aspect here is that, contrary to expectations, the participants focus on the role of ESL teachers as role models for their students rather than on their own need for role models, especially considering their early career teacher status. This thematic pattern suggests that being a role model for students plays a pivotal role in how these teachers define their professional identity. The construction of TPI is essentially linked to their ability to influence and inspire their students, which, in turn, shapes their sense of self within the teaching profession.

This narrative deepens the broader concept of the teacher's role in students' lives, encompassing not only academic instruction but also the modeling of desirable qualities, behaviors, and values. This perspective raises questions about the reciprocal relationship between being a role model and the development of TPI, as well as the impact of this role on student outcomes. Further research in the field of education can explore the multifaceted dynamics of role modeling within the teacher-student relationship and its implications for both teachers and learners in shaping professional identity and educational experiences.

Communication skills (CS)

Khisimusi's perspective points to the significance of vocabulary and the precise use of words in shaping the PI of ESL teachers. He posits that the ability to distinguish an ESL teacher from a group of teachers is predicated on their conversational style, which he characterizes as more talkative compared to other educators. This observation hints at the communicative role of language in teachers' PI, suggesting that linguistic prowess contributes to the differentiation of ESL teachers from their peers.

Mngoni's addition to this discourse centres on the distinctive characteristics of ESL teachers in their responses to questions. He suggests that ESL teachers engage in debate, which, intriguingly, is marked by formal language rather than political discourse. The emphasis on formal language and the engagement in trending topics as a hallmark of ESL teachers implies

a strong connection between language proficiency and professional identity. The notion that ESL teachers actively participate in contemporary discussions to enhance their vocabulary highlights the dynamic nature of their professional identity, which evolves through continuous learning and engagement with evolving language trends.

These perspectives collectively indicate the salient role of language, vocabulary, and conversational style in the construction of ESL teachers' professional identities. The ability to communicate effectively, engage in debate, and participate in current discussions not only distinguishes ESL teachers but also contributes to their growth and development within the field. The thematic pattern suggests that language proficiency and communication skills are pivotal elements in the delineation and evolution of TPI.

The discourse surrounding trending topics and their encouragement of reading and vocabulary enhancement provides insight into how ESL teachers maintain a commitment to ongoing self-improvement and intellectual engagement. This initiative-taking approach aligns with the view that TPI is not a static construct but a continually evolving one, shaped by active involvement in language-related activities.

Further research in the realm of education can delve deeper into the interplay between language proficiency, conversational style, and the development of TPI, shedding light on the linguistic dimensions of teacher identity. Additionally, examining the role of trending topics and contemporary language trends in TPI construction can offer valuable insights into the pedagogical practices of ESL educators.

Manager and leader (M&L)

Mlungisi's perspective on the role of an ESL teacher is intriguing, as he posits that a teacher's identity is intricately linked to the attitudes and responses of their students towards language learning. He suggests that the quality of a teacher is reflected in the behaviour and receptiveness of their students. This viewpoint presents an interesting dimension in understanding the construction of a TPI.

Mlungisi's argument implies a reciprocal relationship between teacher and student, where students serve as mirrors reflecting the attributes and qualities of their teacher' (Cirocki & Widodo, 2019). Hence, this is agreement with Cirocki and Widodo (2019), who maintain that if students exhibit positive leadership skills, good behaviour, and responsibility, it is seen as a testament to the teacher's influence. This concept raises the question of whether the teacher actively shapes these attributes in students or if students are born with them. Mlungisi's assertion that ESL teachers are inherently equipped with leadership skills adds depth to this argument.

Mngoni's acknowledgment of the prominence of management and leadership skills among ESL teachers further reinforces the idea that these qualities are central to their professional identity. He viewed ESL teachers at his school as exemplars of management and leadership, which motivated him to develop these skills himself. This suggests that, in the realm of ESL teaching, mastering management and leadership skills is a critical component of professional identity.

Overall, Mlungisi and Mngoni's perspectives shed light on the complex interplay between ESL teachers, their students, and the development of their professional identity. This interpretation suggests that a teacher's identity may not be complete until they have honed their management

and leadership skills, raising questions about the active role of teachers in cultivating these attributes in their students. Further research could delve into the practical implications of this perspective in ESL teaching and its impact on student outcomes and teacher development.

Selective coding

The thematic analysis of the interviews yielded a recurrent and noteworthy pattern among the participants, highlighting the pivotal role of teachers' commitment in shaping their TPI. This observation points to a significant dimension in the construction of TPI, where the commitment displayed by students serves as a profound affirmation of the teachers' efficacy and impact. Figure 1 provides a hierarchical representation of the various codes associated with this dominant factor: the students.

The prominence of students' commitment in the educators' discourse reflects the reciprocal nature of the teacher-student relationship. In this context, students' dedication and engagement and achievement serve not only as indicators of effective teaching but also as sources of validation for the teachers' professional identity. This interdependence highlights the influence of students' behaviors and attitudes on how teachers perceive themselves within their roles.

The hierarchical representation of codes in Figure 1 suggests that students' commitment is a foundational element in TPI construction, with various sub-codes delineating the multifaceted ways in which this commitment manifests. The recognition of students' commitment as a key factor in the hierarchy emphasises its significance as a central determinant of TPI.

This thematic pattern invites further exploration into the mechanisms through which students' commitment influences the development of TPI, including its impact on teacher motivation, self-concept, and pedagogical practices. Additionally, it prompts inquiry into the reciprocal effects of TPI on student commitment and learning outcomes. Overall, this observation contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics within the teacher-student relationship and its role in shaping professional identity in the field of education.
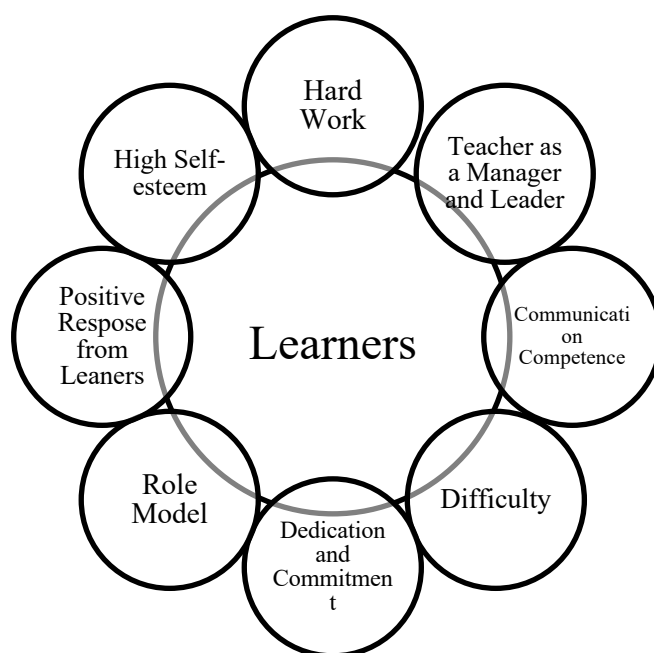

Figure 1: The connection of the codes to the students as key influencing factors.

DISCUSSION

The insights provided by the four ESL teachers offer valuable perspectives on the intricate process of constructing TPIs within the context of early career ESL teaching. These educators, despite their unique backgrounds and experiences, collectively underscore the profound impact of dedication and commitment as fundamental drivers in shaping their PIs. Their commitment to their students' academic progress, coupled with their willingness to adapt and engage in reflective practices, emerges as a recurring theme in their narratives.

It is evident that students play a significant role in the construction of TPIs for these ECTs. Their daily interactions with students establish a strong and enduring connection that significantly influence their PIs. The findings underscore the inseparable link between the teachers' identities and the responses they receive from their students, underscoring the indispensable role of students in shaping these teachers' TPIs. Moreover, students act as catalysts for self-reflection and identity reconstruction, particularly in the face of challenging situations. For example, Khisimusi's annual self-assessment and quest for new strategies illustrate the dynamic nature of TPI development and the continuous commitment to self-improvement.

The recurring theme of dedication and commitment among these educators reveals their deep-rooted belief that self-improvement is intricately tied to student improvement. Their commitment translates into a commitment to enhance their students' learning experiences, and their success as teachers is intrinsically linked to the progress of their students. This condition also significantly shapes their professional self-concept. Bongiwe highlights the notion that teacher dedication and commitment are pivotal in mastering subject knowledge, indicating the mutual benefits that emanate from these qualities. Mlungisi further emphasises that the students a teacher produces reflect on the teacher, highlighting the teachers' unwavering focus on their learners as vital contributors to their PIs.

The concept of hard work within this group of teachers is similarly anchored in their commitment to students' improvement. Their diligence is rooted in their aspiration to support their students' advancement. The fulfillment derived from positive student outcomes and their eagerness to learn further emphasise the symbiotic relationship between teacher and student commitment. Bongiwe's perspective that her dedication inspires her students to work diligently emphasises the mutual influence of teacher and student effort.

The recurrent theme of being a role model reinforces the teachers' dedication to their students. They believe that by setting a positive example, they can contribute to the development of outstanding students. This perspective accentuates the teachers' central focus on their students, illustrating the mutual influence of teacher-student relationships on the construction and reconstruction of TPIs.

The theme of being a manager and leader, as introduced by Mlungisi, emphasises that an ESL teacher's identity is intrinsically tied to the attitudes and responses of their students. These educators view their students as mirrors that not only reflect their attributes but also their mistakes, enabling them to engage in reflective practices. The remarkable influence of students in shaping teachers' identities is apparent, even when these educators may not be entirely conscious of it.

In summary, the study reveals that early career ESL teachers employ various approaches to construct their TPIs. However, the recurrent influence of students is a common thread that runs

through these approaches, whether overt or subtle. While the study stresses the significant role of students in the continual development of early career ESL TPIs., it also raises questions about the underplayed role of mentorship in this process. The absence of a sense of community among teachers from different schools and limited interactions with colleagues suggests that professional identities may be excessively dependent on students, potentially warranting further exploration into the influence of the wider professional context. The integration of personal, social, and role identities, as noted by Reid (1996), suggests that these facets are interconnected, further emphasising the complexity of TPI development. Burke and Stets (2009: 351) propose that the position within one's interactions with students plays a significant role in shaping identity, prompting consideration of the broader professional ecosystem's impact on TPI construction. Therefore, this study's findings, while insightful, also invite a deeper critical examination of the multifaceted factors influencing the development of TPIs among early career ESL teachers.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to explore the construction of TPIs among ECTs in the ESL Language domain. It introduced and delved into the concept of identity within the realm of education, specifically focusing on classroom life contexts as instrumental in shaping these identities. Employing a narrative design, the research delved into the classroom experiences of the ESL teachers through semi-structured interviews, a method that facilitated in-depth information collection and allowed for probing to extract further insights. Grounded theory was applied to analyse the data, offering valuable insights into how the participating teachers interpreted and constructed their professional identities.

One of the noteworthy findings of this study is the significance of the relationships between the ESL teachers and their students. The study reveals that these relationships mutually benefit both the teacher and the student. It is evident that participants frequently incorporated their students into their responses, emphasising the impact of student-teacher interactions, whether positive or negative. They expressed a commitment to self-improvement driven by the desire to enhance their students' learning experiences. What is intriguing is that while they were dedicated to their own development, they seemed unaware of the profound influence that their students exerted on their own identity transformation, ultimately benefiting the students.

This research highlights the dynamic nature of identity, suggesting that ECTs should continually develop strategies for ongoing identity development. While it may be assumed that the identities of ECRs share commonalities with those of established teachers in various global contexts, as indicated in the literature (e.g., Wang & Lam, 2023; Lee & Jang, 2023; Mehdizadeh, Pourhaji & Derakhshan, 2023), it clearly reveals the need for context-specific investigations. The South African rural context, in particular, emerges as an area of interest, prompting the recommendation for further research on the professional identities and teaching adaptation strategies of experienced rural teachers. This suggestion is pivotal in understanding the unique factors that shape TPIs in specific educational contexts and the potential insights it may offer for teacher development and support.

In summary, this study contributes to the field of education by shedding light on the intricacies of TPI construction among ESL ECTs, emphasising the fundamental role of classroom life contexts. While existing literature provides a foundation for understanding teacher identities in diverse settings, the study calls for context-specific examinations, such as those in rural South Africa, to enrich our understanding of the dynamic process of identity construction among teachers in this context. The study serves as a reminder of the intricate relationship between

teachers and their students in shaping professional identities and highlights the necessity for continuous identity development in the teaching profession.

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