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EXPLORING BASIC SCHOOL TEACHERS' COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVES ON PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN THE GHANAIAN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Hansen Akoto-Baako [1*], Ntokozo Dennis Ndwandwe[1]
[1]University of South Africa, PO Box 392, UNISA, Pretoria 0003, South Africa

[*]Correspondence E-Mail: akobah@unisa.ac.za
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the cognitive perspectives shaping professional identity development among pre-service teachers in Ghana, addressing the limited integration of cognitive, social, and reflective perspectives in research on teacher identity within under-resourced educational contexts. Using a qualitative design, the study analysed semi-structured interviews with six pre-service teachers from Jasikan College of Education through thematic analysis. The findings identified six interconnected dimensions of professional identity development: reflective practice, social recognition, contextual influences, emotional engagement, personal–professional value alignment, and role clarity. These dimensions illustrate how pre-service teachers interpret their experiences, negotiate sociocultural expectations, and construct professional self-concepts in response to educational challenges. The study's novelty lies in integrating Social Cognitive Theory, Identity Negotiation Theory, and Reflective Practice Theory to conceptualise professional identity as a dynamic process involving personal agency, social negotiation, and reflective engagement. The findings suggest that teacher education programmes should strengthen reflective learning, contextualised pedagogical preparation, structured mentoring, and support for teachers' emotional and ethical development. The study concludes that professional identity development requires approaches that address not only pedagogical competencies but also the cognitive and sociocultural processes through which pre-service teachers understand and negotiate their professional roles. Further research across multiple teacher education institutions and over time is recommended to examine how these dimensions evolve during the transition into professional teaching.

Keywords: *Professional Identity, Cognitive Perspectives, Ghana, Pre-Service Teachers, Qualitative Study*

INTRODUCTION

Quality education is a central goal of educational systems worldwide, including Ghana, where curriculum reforms and growing societal expectations require teachers to continuously develop their professional competencies (Ampadu et al., 2021). However, improving educational quality requires more than curriculum reform; it also depends on teachers' professional development and the formation of their professional identities. Professional identity shapes teachers' beliefs, instructional practices, and commitment to the profession (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Simon, 2024; Steinert et al., 2019). In Ghana, where only 58% of primary school

teachers reportedly meet national proficiency standards (Annan, 2020; Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2024), understanding how teachers develop and sustain their professional identities is particularly important.

Teacher professional identity is a dynamic process shaped by personal experiences, social expectations, and institutional demands (Solari et al., 2022; Vähäsantanen, 2015). It influences instructional decision-making, professional resilience, and career sustainability (Bagga, 2023; Ó Gallchóir et al., 2018; Rushton et al., 2023). Previous studies in Ghana have examined teacher identity, including the influence of personal characteristics on the professional identity of pre-service teachers (Ampadu et al., 2021; Ayinselya, 2020; Butakor et al., 2021). However, less attention has been paid to the cognitive processes through which pre-service teachers interpret their experiences, negotiate competing expectations, and construct a sense of professional self. This gap is particularly significant during initial teacher education, when individuals transition from theoretical preparation to the realities of classroom practice and encounter tensions between personal beliefs, institutional expectations, and professional responsibilities (Agudo, 2024; Huang & Wang, 2024).

Cognitive processes are central to understanding this development. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) explains how personal beliefs, behaviour, and environmental conditions interact in shaping professional agency and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001). Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) further illuminates how individuals reconcile their self-conceptions with external expectations, particularly when professional roles conflict with personal values (Swann, 2005). Meanwhile, Reflective Practice Theory (RPT) highlights how reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action enable individuals to reassess their experiences and develop professional understanding (Schön, 1983). Research has linked reflective practice to teacher identity formation, pedagogical development, and professional self-awareness (Cañabate et al., 2019; McKay, 2021; Penn-Edward et al., 2016; Zhao & Zhang, 2017). Similarly, self-efficacy and observational learning contribute to the development of teachers' professional identities (Byram et al., 2022; Yuan & Lee, 2015). Nevertheless, these cognitive, interpersonal, and reflective dimensions are rarely examined together in research on Ghanaian pre-service teachers.

The limited integration of these perspectives is important because teacher identity develops within specific sociocultural and institutional contexts. Ghanaian pre-service teachers may encounter inadequate teaching resources, competing pedagogical expectations, limited professional recognition, and uncertainty about their future roles. Such experiences can influence how they perceive their capabilities, respond to professional challenges, and reconcile personal aspirations with societal expectations. Although existing research has examined teacher motivation, educational reforms, and professional preparation, further investigation is needed into how cognitive interpretation, identity negotiation, and reflective processes interact during professional identity development. A context-sensitive understanding is therefore necessary to explain how pre-service teachers construct and sustain their emerging professional identities within Ghana's educational system.

To address this gap, this study integrates SCT, INT, and RPT into a theoretical framework for examining the cognitive dimensions of teacher professional identity development. The integration conceptualises identity formation as a dynamic process in which self-efficacy and environmental interaction shape professional agency, identity negotiation mediates tensions between personal and external expectations, and reflective practice enables the reinterpretation of professional experiences. Rather than treating these perspectives as separate explanations, the study examines their complementary contributions to understanding how Ghanaian pre-service teachers construct their professional identities. Accordingly, the study is guided by two research questions:

RQ1: What are the key cognitive perspectives on the professional identity of Ghanaian pre-service teachers?

RQ2: How do these cognitive perspectives shape the professional identity development of Ghanaian pre-service teachers?

This study contributes to teacher identity scholarship by bringing cognitive, social, and reflective perspectives into a context-specific analysis of initial teacher education in Ghana. Its findings may inform teacher education programmes by identifying opportunities to strengthen reflective learning, self-efficacy, professional mentoring, and the negotiation of competing expectations. By foregrounding pre-service teachers' experiences, the study also provides insights into how teacher education institutions can support the development of coherent and resilient professional identities. Ultimately, it conceptualises professional identity development not merely as an outcome of teacher training but as an ongoing process of cognitive interpretation, social negotiation, and reflective engagement with professional experience.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the cognitive perspectives shaping the professional identity development of pre-service teachers in Ghana. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six participants selected from Jasikan College of Education. Participants were recruited based on their involvement in teaching practice and willingness to share their professional experiences. The sample comprised individuals specialising in Early Childhood Education (n = 1), Primary Education (n = 2), and Junior High School Education (n = 3).

Data were collected between March and April 2025 through interviews conducted in English at participants' local areas or teaching practice schools. With participants' informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymised using pseudonyms. The data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarisation, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. The analysis identified recurring patterns concerning reflective practice, social recognition, contextual influences, emotional engagement, value alignment, and role clarity. These themes

were interpreted through Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001), Identity Negotiation Theory (Swann, 2005), and Reflective Practice Theory (Schön, 1983).

Regarding the ethical considerations of this study, institutional approval was obtained from Jasikan College of Education. Participants provided informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities and maintain confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis identified six interconnected dimensions of professional identity development among the six participants: reflective practice, social recognition, contextual influences, emotional engagement, personal–professional value alignment, and role clarity. These themes address the two research questions by illustrating both the cognitive perspectives through which participants understood their professional identities and the ways these perspectives shaped their emerging professional commitments.

Reflective Practice as a Foundation of Professional Identity

The findings indicate that reflection enabled participants to evaluate their beliefs, teaching practices, and developing professional selves. PST1 described teaching as an ongoing process of self-examination:

> "Teaching is a continuous process of self-examination. Each day in the classroom, I ask myself what kind of teacher I am becoming. This reflection drives me to evaluate my beliefs and practices critically, ensuring that my professional identity grows in meaningful ways relevant to the needs of my students and the Ghanaian context."

This account suggests that professional identity develops through continuous self-assessment rather than through the acquisition of pedagogical knowledge alone. By questioning their practices and considering students' needs, pre-service teachers can reassess their professional beliefs and adjust their understanding of the teacher's role.

This finding is consistent with Schön's (1983) Reflective Practice Theory, particularly the concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. It also complements previous studies highlighting the contribution of reflective practice to teacher identity development (McKay, 2021; Zhao & Zhang, 2017). In the present study, reflection appears to function as a mechanism through which professional experiences are interpreted and incorporated into an evolving sense of self. Teacher education programmes could therefore strengthen identity development by incorporating reflective journals, guided discussions, and structured opportunities to evaluate teaching experiences.

Social Recognition and Identity Negotiation

Social perceptions also influenced how participants understood and sustained their professional identities. PST2 explained the tension between personal motivation and external recognition:

> "I chose this profession out of a strong desire to impact society positively, yet I recognize that sometimes the public views us with skepticism. I consciously negotiate these social perceptions against my own standards of teaching excellence. This mental negotiation strengthens my resolve and shapes an identity grounded in care, integrity, and professionalism despite external doubts."

The account illustrates how professional identity is negotiated between internal aspirations and perceived social expectations. Rather than simply accepting external judgements, the participant evaluated them against personal standards and a commitment to teaching. This process suggests that professional identity depends partly on how individuals interpret and respond to social recognition.

Identity Negotiation Theory (Swann, 2005) provides a useful framework for interpreting this finding. PST2's account demonstrates an attempt to maintain a coherent professional self-concept despite perceived social scepticism. The finding also complements research suggesting that teachers' identities are shaped by the interaction between personal beliefs and social expectations (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

However, the evidence represents an individual participant's perception and should not be interpreted as establishing that all Ghanaian communities undervalue teaching. It nevertheless highlights the importance of supportive institutional environments, professional mentoring, and public recognition in helping pre-service teachers negotiate tensions between their professional aspirations and external expectations.

Contextual Influences and Adaptive Professional Identity

Participants also described professional identity as inseparable from the educational environment in which teaching takes place. PST3 reflected on the influence of institutional constraints and cultural expectations:

> "My professional identity is inseparable from the realities of Ghana's education system. I constantly think about how limited resources and cultural expectations affect how I teach and who I am as a teacher. Attending workshops reshapes my understanding of my role as an agent of change in this specific context."

This narrative indicates that participants did not perceive professional identity as an entirely individual construction. Instead, they interpreted their roles through the practical conditions, cultural expectations, and learning opportunities surrounding them. Professional development activities, such as workshops, could also reshape their understanding of their responsibilities and potential contributions.

Bandura's (2001) Social Cognitive Theory helps explain this relationship through the reciprocal interaction between personal factors, behaviour, and environmental conditions. From this perspective, contextual constraints may influence professional self-perceptions, while learning opportunities can support the development of new strategies and a stronger sense of agency.

The finding extends the discussion of teacher identity by emphasising the importance of

contextual adaptation. Rather than assuming that professional identity develops uniformly across educational settings, teacher education institutions should prepare pre-service teachers to critically engage with the actual conditions of their future workplaces. Contextual case studies, collaborative problem-solving, and practice-based learning may help them develop realistic yet constructive professional self-concepts

Emotional Engagement and Professional Commitment

Emotional experiences constituted another dimension of professional identity development. PST4 emphasised the relationship between students' experiences and their own professional self-understanding:

> "My identity goes beyond skills; it is deeply tied to emotional investment. Witnessing my students succeed or struggle affects how I view myself professionally. These emotional experiences are a vital part of my teacher self and inspire a deeper commitment to my work."

The participant's account suggests that professional identity is shaped not only by cognitive evaluation but also by emotional responses to teaching experiences. Students' progress and difficulties appeared to influence how the participant assessed their professional role and commitment.

This finding complements Hargreaves's (2001) discussion of the emotional dimensions of teaching. It also broadens the interpretation of Social Cognitive Theory by drawing attention to how emotionally meaningful experiences may contribute to teachers' perceptions of their professional capabilities and responsibilities.

Nevertheless, emotional engagement should not automatically be equated with professional resilience. While meaningful relationships with students may reinforce commitment, sustained emotional demands may also become burdensome. Teacher education programmes should therefore recognise the emotional dimensions of professional learning and provide opportunities for supportive reflection, peer discussion, and mentoring.

Personal and Professional Value Alignment

The findings further suggest that participants constructed their professional identities by relating personal beliefs to professional ethics and cultural values. PST5 explained:

> "My professional identity is the product of aligning my personal beliefs with the ethical standards of teaching. It is important I feel that my work reflects Ghanaian values while upholding universal educational principles. This cognitive alignment gives my teaching meaningfulness and sustains my dedication."

This account indicates that a coherent professional identity involves more than understanding occupational duties. It also requires participants to interpret professional expectations in relation to their personal convictions and ethical commitments. The participant's emphasis on Ghanaian values alongside broader educational principles suggests an effort to reconcile cultural belonging with professional responsibilities.

This finding can be understood through Identity Negotiation Theory, as professional

identity involves reconciling personal self-understanding with socially and institutionally defined expectations. It also complements Kelchtermans's (2009) account of teachers' personal interpretative frameworks, through which professional experiences are understood in relation to individual beliefs and values.

The implications concern the development of culturally responsive teacher education. Opportunities to discuss professional ethics, cultural expectations, and educational responsibilities may help pre-service teachers identify potential tensions and develop more coherent professional commitments. However, value alignment should not be understood as requiring complete agreement between personal beliefs and institutional expectations; critical reflection remains important when these values conflict

Role Clarity and the Development of a Coherent Professional Self

Finally, participants emphasised the importance of understanding professional responsibilities and boundaries. PST6 stated:

> "Achieving a clear understanding of my duties and boundaries has helped me confidently step into my professional identity. When I know what is expected and what I bring uniquely to the role, my sense of self as a teacher becomes stronger and better defined."

The account suggests that role clarity helps pre-service teachers understand both institutional expectations and their own contributions to teaching. When responsibilities are clearly understood, individuals may find it easier to connect their professional actions with an emerging sense of identity.

This finding contributes to research on professional identity and the interpretation of occupational roles. It also has practical implications for teacher education, particularly during the transition from training to classroom practice. Structured mentoring, supervised teaching practice, and induction programmes may help pre-service teachers clarify role expectations, address uncertainties, and develop confidence in their professional roles.

However, the present data capture participants' perceptions rather than directly demonstrating the effectiveness of specific mentoring or induction interventions. These interventions should therefore be understood as practical implications arising from the findings, rather than outcomes empirically tested by this study.

Integrating Cognitive, Social, and Reflective Dimensions of Professional Identity

Taken together, the six themes suggest that professional identity development involves interconnected cognitive, social, contextual, emotional, and ethical processes. Reflection enables participants to reassess their experiences; social negotiation helps them respond to external expectations; contextual interpretation shapes their understanding of professional possibilities; emotional engagement informs their commitment; value alignment supports a coherent professional self-concept; and role clarity strengthens their understanding of professional responsibilities.

The integration of Social Cognitive Theory, Identity Negotiation Theory, and Reflective Practice Theory provides a complementary explanation of these processes. Social Cognitive

Theory illuminates the interaction between personal agency and environmental conditions, Identity Negotiation Theory explains how participants reconcile their self-concepts with external expectations, and Reflective Practice Theory explains how professional experiences become opportunities for learning and identity development.

The findings therefore support an understanding of teacher professional identity as an evolving process rather than a fixed outcome of formal training. Importantly, the six themes should not be interpreted as independent or sequential stages. Instead, they represent related dimensions through which participants described their emerging professional selves.

For teacher education institutions in Ghana, the findings point to the value of integrating reflective learning, contextualised teaching experiences, ethical discussion, emotional support, and structured mentoring into pre-service programmes. Such approaches may help prospective teachers develop professional identities that are responsive to educational realities while remaining grounded in personal agency and professional responsibility.

These conclusions should be interpreted in light of the study's qualitative design and small sample of six participants from one institution. The findings offer contextual insights into participants' experiences rather than statistically generalisable conclusions about all Ghanaian pre-service teachers. Further research involving multiple institutions and longitudinal data could examine how these identity dimensions evolve as pre-service teachers transition into full-time professional practice.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the cognitive perspectives that shape the professional identity development of Ghanaian pre-service teachers. It investigated how reflective practice, social recognition, contextual adaptation, emotional engagement, and role clarity influence their self-concept as educators. Based on social cognitive, identity negotiation, and reflective practice theories, the findings reveal how personal agency, sociocultural expectations, and institutional constraints interact to shape teacher identity within Ghana's educational landscape. The study contributes to our understanding of professional identity as a negotiated process, mediated by cognitive reflection, emotional resilience, and contextual problem solving. The findings emphasise the importance of integrating reflective pedagogies, mentorship, and culturally responsive training models into teacher education programmes. However, this study had some limitations. The small sample size from a single College of Education limits the generalisability of the findings, suggesting that future studies should employ larger samples across multiple institutions. The reliance on self-reported interview data introduces the possibility of response bias, which could be mitigated by triangulating with classroom observations. The cross-sectional design only captures identity development at one stage; a longitudinal approach would provide a clearer picture of identity shifts across career phases. Future research should examine the long-term development of teacher identities and the influence of workplace conditions on identity

consolidation. Comparative studies across different African educational contexts could reveal how systemic variations influence identity formation. Furthermore, investigating digital reflection tools could provide innovative approaches to identity development in settings with limited resources.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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