

## **Narratives of Teachers With Long Years of Experience: What Does It Mean to Be a Teacher in Ethiopia?**

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### ***Abstract***

*This study aimed to understand the overall pattern of the development of the professional identity of teachers in Ethiopia based on the lives of those teachers with long years of experience. A narrative research design was employed to uncover the lives of these teachers and draw implications. The participant teachers were purposely selected because they have devoted their entire lives to and seem to enjoy the profession within unfavorable conditions of Addis Ababa in particular and Ethiopia in general, where the rate of turnover and quit intention has been alarmingly rising. The data from the interview were transcribed and examined using narrative analysis. It was found that the poor understanding and consideration of the very nature of teaching made the majority of the novice teachers lack the desire for professional identity and distracted at the early years of their teaching career by the schools' micro politics, social judgments and reactions. This implies that the very nature of the profession needs to be explicitly addressed in teacher education, induction and continuous professional development so that prospective teachers develop the desired professional identity.*

**Keywords:** *Teaching, teachers, professional identity, self-understanding, job motivation, commitment, satisfaction and retention.*

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## **Introduction**

### **Background of the study**

The concept of teaching has been subjected to a wide range of philosophical and psychological arguments for which it is being conceptualized, theorized and practiced. It has been represented and found in literature as a job or work (Goodson, 2014), profession (Goodson, 2014; Huberman, Grounauer & Marti, 1993; Kelchtermans, 2008; 1999), professional life (Bullough; 2008; Goodson, 2014; Kelchtermans, 2017; 1999), work life (Bullough; 2008; Goodson, 2014; Kelchtermans, 2008), professional identity (Kelchtermans, 2017), and career (Huberman et al., 1993; Kelchtermans, 2017). The most common metaphors of teaching, however, are profession and career. Each of these metaphors has its own implication on its aspect, scope and purpose. Hence, teachers' life can accordingly be dealt with as a professional or career life (Bullough; 2008; Goodson, 2014; Kelchtermans, 2017; 2008).

The teachers' perspective of teaching in particular, and education, in general, started to win researchers' attention five decades ago. In this epoch, it has been subjected and passed through some epistemological paradigms. At first, it was informed by a more technical, unproblematic and unchanged view of teachers which aims at examining teachers' life as a set of routine machine tasks. Survey-type research had been intensively employed in which teachers' thinking and actions are represented in numerical aggregates (Goodson, 2014).

A significant shift of worldview was then observed as qualitative case studies of teachers' life have been started in the 1960s in the United States and Great Britain and continued to be widely employed in other countries in the 1970s (Goodson, 2014; Kelchtermans, 2008). During this period, the mechanistic view of considering teachers was replaced by a more humanistic approach where teachers were considered as vulnerable and victims of the system. As a result, the decades of 1970s and 1980s were recognized as the golden age of research into teachers' lives. This period of researching teachers' lives through a narrative approach

became prominent. The target of these studies ranged from a life story or biography of a single teacher up to the lives of all teachers within a pre-defined site. Teachers' lives and under-lying commitments were started to be honored as a result of these studies (Hobsbawm, 1994; Lortie, 1975, as cited in Goodson, 2014).

However, researchers had not confronted the complexity of the school teacher as an active agent in making their history and treated them as interchangeable types and unchanged by circumstance or time. As a result, new biographical perspectives that emphasized the value of the teacher's story started to be advocated (Goodson, 2014; Kelchtermans, 2008). However, though such studies of teachers' lives and careers began to be more generally promoted by the educational research community, political and economic changes were against such attempts. As a result, many such initiatives were overshadowed in the 1980s and 1990s, even in civilized countries such as New Zealand and Britain and continued to the 21st century in some other countries (Goodson, 2014). Such contradictions and conflicts, however, led to a broader scope, purpose and approach of research, including autobiography, life history and biographical studies, collaborative biography, professional identity and micro-political knowledge, action research and a wide range of interesting and innovative feminist works (Bosse & Törner, 2015; Goodson, 2014; Kelchtermans, 1996). Hence, studies of teachers' lives started to be advocated and promoted with a more academic purpose in most Western co20th and in the 20th and 21st centuries, from which numerous teacher-friendly reforms took place. As a result, teachers' lives in these periods were studied as either professional identity or self-understanding (Bosse & Törner, 2015; Bullough; 2008; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Roeser, Marachi & Gehlbach, 2002). The theories underlying these studies are of two perspectives: sociocultural and post-structural. The first one corresponds to studies involving relational self-understanding within a given sociocultural context. On the other hand, the second perspective is concerned with institutional and political aspects. The sociocultural perspective is rooted in Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, Wenger's Theory of Community of Practice and other schools of Sociocultural Constructivism. On the other hand,

the post-structural perspective is rooted in Foucault's Theory of Power and Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction (Bosse & Törner, 2015; Grootenboer, Lowrie & Smith, 2006). In addition, the sociocultural perspective was widely employed in several narratives and phenomenological inquiries (Bosse & Törner, 2015; Goodson, 2014; Kelchtermans, 1996).

However, both are similar in considering identity as a dynamic process and its study as an inquiry involving the individual's past, present and future perspectives of professional life within specific physical, social, institutional and affective contexts (Bosse & Törner, 2015). Studies of both perspectives revealed that teachers' professional identity or self-understanding arises and develops over time due to teaching experience. Studying teachers' lives in terms of their identity or self-understanding was also found to enhance the desired professional development of the participant-teachers and the effectiveness of one's teacher education and induction programs. It has also been found that teachers with a better professional identity are better in their commitment, motivation, and quality of professional practice, being satisfied with and staying in the profession (Bosse & Törner, 2015; Goodson, 2014; Grootenboer et al., 2006; Roeser et al., 2002).narratives

As a result, teachers' lives have been widely studied in several European and Asian countries from which informative reforms were proposed and implemented to enhance the quality of classroom practice as well as maintaining teachers' retention (Bosse & Törner, 2015; Bullough; 2008; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Roeser et al., 2002). In countries like Ethiopia, researching teachers' lives in general fails to go beyond few surveys in which status and determinants of job motivation, satisfaction, commitment, quality of classroom practice, quit intention and turnover were examined (Aklilu, 1967; Aweke, 2015; Elleni, 2017; Hilina, 2011; Manna & Tesfaye, 2000).

### **Statement of the problem**

Education in Ethiopia has been in state-of-crisis since its very beginning (Tekeste, 2006). Some of its problems have then been addressed gradually due to the educational reforms

made so far. Most of the problems, however, have been persistent and not well-addressed. Expansion of the education sector, lack of competent leadership, irrelevant curricula, civil war and continued shortage of competent and qualified teachers are among typical characteristics of the education system (Manna & Tesfaye, 2000; MoE, 2009; Tekeste, 2006). The issues of having qualified, competent and committed teachers is becoming the most potential source of the others, and, in turn, is found to be aggravated by alarming decline of students' interest to join the profession, increase in the rate of turnover and quit intention, lack of clear and consistent system and practice of teacher education (Manna & Tesfaye, 2000).

Challenging and poor working conditions, low social status and claimed salary scale are among the commonly reported factors associated with the diagnosed decline in teachers' motivation, commitments to stay in the profession as well as working towards the desired quality of education (Elleni, 2017; Hilina, 2011; Manna & Tesfaye, 2000; Mulugeta, 2012). Furthermore, the socio-political reactions of the communities towards such poor conditions and achievement worsened the issue. They made the teaching profession enter a demoralizing state of affairs, which led to an extra turnover and quit intention and put the entire education system in crisis. As a result, turnover and quit intention have been alarmingly rising (Aklilu, 1967; Manna & Tesfaye, 2000). Moreover, the diagnosed rise in turnover and quit intentions are even worst in Addis Ababa, the capital city, in which up to 20% of the new graduates were found to leave the profession in the first six months (Aweke, 2015; Elleni, 2017; Hilina, 2011; Mulugeta, 2012). However, there are still teachers who devote their entire lives to the profession in the same city, although they need to be well-paid and well-respected for what they have done and are doing. According to the social perspective of teachers' professional identity or self-understanding, this could have an important thing to do with the nature of the professional identity that the teacher developed in their educational and professional race (Roeser et al., 2002). Therefore, studying the professional lives of those teachers in terms of the process and development of their professional identity is very important to understand the dynamics of teachers and to teach in general ahead of any reform. Besides, the theoretical and

empirical literature shows that critical interpretations and reflections of such studies support the participant-teachers in developing the desired professional identity or self-understanding (Bosse & Törner, 2015; Grootenboer et al., 2006). Therefore, this narrative inquiry aimed at studying these teachers' lives and drawing implications for maintaining teachers' job satisfaction and retention.

### **Research questions**

The following three overarching questions were developed as per the purpose of the study.

- a) What does it mean to live a teacher's life in Ethiopia?
- b) How do teachers make sense of staying in, becoming successful and getting satisfied in or leaving the teaching profession based on their own and others' professional identity (thinking and action)?
- c) How could the general pattern of teachers' lives be manifested in terms of their professional identity so as to maintain teachers' job satisfaction and retention?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Overview of related theories**

Under the background section, four common theoretical approaches to studying teachers' professional lives have already been addressed. These are psychological-developmental, social-cultural, post-structural and narrative approaches. The first three consider such lived experiences as identity. Thus, the issue of teachers' professional lives is studied in the form of identity in studies inspired by these three theoretical perspectives (Bosse & Törner, 2015). From the perspective of the narrative approach, teachers' lives, on the other hand, are examined and represented in a relatively narrower form called self-understanding (Kelchtermans, 2017).

We believe that teachers' thinking and action are generally the function of both intrinsic (personal) and extrinsic (institutional, political and socio-cultural) attributes. Besides, teachers feel, react and respond subjectively to all the phenomena they encounter in their professional lives. Theories with psychological foundations are more of quantitative and, therefore, cannot be applied under such pluralistic circumstances (Finster, 2013; Manna & Tesfaye, 2000). The socio-cultural and narrative perspectives are the approaches that fit this stance (Bosse & Törner, 2015). The socio-cultural perspective treats teachers' lives as a complex dynamic process that we found infeasible and unmanageable with the resource and time we had at the time and the continued dynamic changes. Hence, we decided to employ the narrative approach that prescribes the examination of teachers' self-understanding as an issue under study. Two specific theories are found in the literature of such narrative studies. These are the theory of interactive sense-making and the subjective educational theory. The subjective educational theory centers on the knowledge and beliefs behind teachers' decision on what to do in a particular situation and their corresponding actions. It cannot, therefore, be informative for our inquiry as it focuses on critical interpretation and reflection on all aspects of teachers' lives. For this reason, the theory of interactive sense-making was employed as a personal interpretative framework with little amendment to make room for reflection on others' sense-making and the overall pattern of teaching in the country as a professional life (Bullough; 2008; Kelchtermans, 2017).

### **The theory of interactive sense-making**

The sense of self is a central concept of this theory which can be manifested in terms of reflection on one's own personal thinking and action. It refers to the understanding one has of one's 'self' at a certain moment, the ongoing process of making sense of his/her experiences and their impacts on his/her professional identity as well as the overall pattern of the profession. Researching teachers' lives, thus, involves sense-making and interpretation of critical self-reflection on one's thinking and action in terms of five core components which

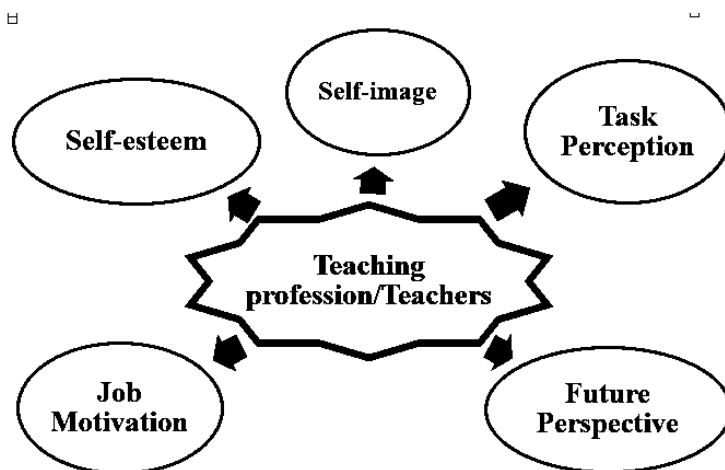
together make up teachers' self-understanding: self-image, self-esteem, job motivation, task perception and future perspective (Kelchtermans, 2017).

Self-image is descriptive in nature and concerned with how teachers characterise themselves (Dickinson, 2012). It is influenced by self-perception and, to a large degree, by what others, including students, parents, colleagues and principals, mirror back to the teachers. This also holds for self-esteem, which is very closely linked to self-image. Self-esteem refers to the teacher's appreciation of their actual job performance.

The feedback from others is important for, and it needs to be filtered and interpreted (Kelchtermans, 2017). Self-esteem is very much dependent on the social recognition from others. Self-esteem in a teacher's self-understanding also reflects that emotions matter greatly in teaching and teacher development. Positive self-esteem contributes to the development of one's sense of job satisfaction in teaching and being a teacher. The problem, however, is that social recognition can be withdrawn anytime. In such cases, it can have a devastating emotional impact on teachers. So, positive self-evaluations are fragile, fluctuate in time and must be re-established repeatedly. This makes teaching and teachers very vulnerable to numerous negative public judgments (Kelchtermans, 1999, 1996). The other component, which is normative and intertwined with self-esteem, is task perception. It refers to the teacher's idea of what constitutes their professional program, tasks, and duties to do a good job. According to Kelchtermans (1999), it concerns issues such as what and why a teacher must and must not do in a given situation to be a proper teacher. Task perception encompasses deeply held beliefs about what constitutes a good education and one's moral duties and responsibilities to do justice to students. When these deeply held beliefs are questioned, teachers' self-esteem will be threatened.



Any change or reform that contradicts teachers' task perception will potentially threaten teachers' self-esteem and job satisfaction. The emotional impact is very strong because teachers feel that their moral integrity, both as a person and a professional, is being questioned (Kelchtermans, 1999).



*Figure 1: Pillars of the interpretative framework of teachers' self-understanding*

On the other hand, job motivation refers to the motives that make people choose to become a teacher, to stay in teaching or to give it up for another career (Bullough; 2008). The task perception and the working conditions that allow a teacher to work and act according to that personal normative program are crucial determinants of job motivation (McKay, 2008). The other one is a time-related component called the future perspective. It is concerned with a teacher's expectations about their future in the job and how they do see him/herself as a teacher in the years to come. It manifests the dynamic character of self-understanding by showing how temporality pervades self-understanding because the person as a teacher is always somebody at some particular moment in their life, with a particular past and future (Bosse & Törner, 2015).

Besides, teachers' sense-making and reflection alone cannot, and shouldn't, be about just themselves (Bullough; 2008; Kelchtermans, 2008; McKay, 2008). Critically examining, making sense of and reflecting on their lives demands doing the same on other teachers and existing components of the socio-environment context as their specific thinking and action both influenced and were influenced by it. That is exactly what McKay's axiom of 'The Story of One: The Story of Many' enunciates. We, therefore, extended the scope of the personal interpretative framework of Kelchtermans (2017) and the underlying theory to allow the participant teachers to undergo and reflect on other teachers' lives in general terms as the general pattern of teachers' lives in the country and how it contributed to the current image of the teaching profession.

## **Methodology**

### **Research design**

Teachers' sense-making, interpretation and reflection on their own and others' thinking and action in particular situations of their professional lives are the sole emphases of this study. We needed the framework of our study to be informed by the proper stance with which we look at such aspects of both their and others' lives. Our assumption in this regard was that people are born at some point and live during a particular period. They are human beings who possess their own sets and settings of values, morals, feelings, beliefs, emotions and limits of capability.

As a result, they react towards critical incidents of their professional discourse that positively or negatively influence the extent and quality of classroom practice positively or negatively and are influenced by the personal, social and material environment. This indicates that the pattern of their thinking and action is dynamic. Therefore, they shouldn't be represented and treated as, like they were represented in survey studies by numerical aggregates, something with an unproblematic role and unchanging nature (Goodson, 2014). They are gifted with the capacity to make sense of and reflect on past experiences for which their interpretations,

thoughts, and actions in the present are influenced by their experiences from the past and expectations for the future (Kelchtermans, 2017). Such interpretations and reflections are worthy and credible and should be studied and utilized. We, to this end, employed the qualitative method and adapted the theory of interactive sense-making by extending its scope and purpose to develop an extended personal interpretive framework as our very narrative stance (Kelchtermans, 1999).

Contrary to those analogous qualitative studies such as grounded theory and case study, which employ multiple instruments, data sources and types, such studies of teachers' lives employ just narratives of stories. It is claimed that the analysis of narratives gives the most credible evidence since it involves critical interpretation and reflection without being influenced by the existing socio-political settings. There is nothing to be deliberately covered, misinterpreted or worrisome as such reflections are like confession (Bullough, 2008).

Our research framework, therefore, involves reflection on both self-understanding and reflection in terms of thinking (self-image, self-esteem, job motivation, task perception and future perspective) and actions (practice, commitment and emotion) as well as reflection on others' thinking and actions under the socio-environmental settings (Bullough, 2008; McKay, 2008). For this reason, the study goes beyond separate meaning-making and interpretation of teachers' self-thinking and action as it aimed to figure out how such thinking and actions interact with each other as well as the existing settings to offer reflective generalization on the general pattern of teachers' lives nexus quality of professional performance, commitment and satisfaction in particular, and teachers' retention in general (Bullough, 2008; Kelchtermans, 2008; 1996).

### **Participants**

The participants of the study were five teachers from Addis Ababa who devoted their entire life to the profession, including those who had and refused some opportunities to leave the profession, and seemed to feel great about working with children for their entire life. We tried

to find and engage a few more teachers in the city. Though we successfully located some of them, we didn't make it because we could not win their trust and convince them to share their lives with us. Due to this and other resource limitations (finance, logistics and time), we were forced to be limited to five participants. All of them have more than 30 years of experience in teaching ranging from 31 to 41. According to their current qualification and specialisation each has a Master's degree; three are mathematics, one is chemistry, and one is a physics teacher. One of the Mathematics teachers was recently retired and serves in a private school established by teachers and their partners. The remaining four are all serving at different preparatory schools in Addis Ababa. Four served as principals in different schools for different periods, ranging from two to six years. The other one served as a school principal, deputy and head of Woreda Education Office for two, three and four years, respectively.

They initially attended a one-year teacher training and graduated with a certificate in the late 1980s and early 1990s (GC). They taught different subjects, including Amharic, Basic Science, Economics and subjects of their current qualification at primary, secondary and preparatory schools in different parts of the country, from which they finally got transferred to the capital, Addis Ababa. In addition to their current qualification in teaching, two earned Bachelor of art degrees in Educational Planning and Leadership through distance education. In contrast, one earned a Bachelor's degree in Economics in an evening program at one of the private colleges in Addis Ababa.

### **Instruments**

An interview is the major data-gathering instrument in such narrative inquiries (Chase, 2005). In this study, a semi-structured interview with leading questions was employed. An interview took about four hours, from which extensive information was gathered on those teachers' lives. Besides, available artifacts or evidence such as teachers' professional documents, diaries, photographs and memos were used to initiate teachers' memories (Creswell, 2007). The leading questions were employed separately during the interview to address each

overarching question. In this regard, the leading question underlying the first research question concerned how the teachers make sense of and reflect on their own and others' lives as teachers in Ethiopia.

The second overarching question was concerned with making sense of current-state-of-affair of teachers' satisfaction in their profession and the rationale behind what forced them to live in or leave the profession. Therefore, the basic leading questions of the interview included a) why did the teachers devote their entire life to the profession? b) what does it mean for the teachers to stay in or leave the teaching profession? c) how do the teachers make sense of staying in, becoming successful and getting satisfied in or leaving the teaching profession based on their own and others' thinking and action?

Teachers' self- and others' sense of the influence of their thinking and action over other teachers and existing settings, as well as the influence other teachers and existing settings, had over their thought and action were given principal emphasis in the case of attempting to address the third research question. The leading questions employed to address this issue were a) how and to what extent did the teachers influence other teachers and existing settings at the key incidents of their professional discourse? b) how and to what extent were the teachers influenced by other teachers and existing settings at the key incidents of their professional discourse? c) what implications do the teachers' professional lives have for maintaining teachers' commitment, quality of professional performance, satisfaction and retention in general in the country?

### **Data gathering, analysis and representation**

The data were gathered through an interview in the form of narratives. All interviews were audio-recorded. Audio records were then transcribed verbatim. From the sub-types of narrative designs, analysis of narratives was employed for analyzing the transcripts. In the analysis of narrative-type research, paradigm beliefs are used to extract descriptions of themes that hold across the stories (Creswell, 2007). Hence, stories of the teachers were examined

based on the themes obtained from the literature and those that emerged from the analysis. Most importantly, the transcripts were carefully and intensively heard and read again and again to have clear understanding of the context of the individual teachers' lives. These particular stories capture their experiences and uncover and go beyond the multi-layered life of the teachers.

These common themes and interpretations of the more significant meaning obtained from the data analyses were used to outline the data representation in which orientations and connections among the themes are discussed, including exceptional particulars. Participants' stories were not presented and re-storied in the data representation. Instead, interpretations of the stories and their more significant meaning were discussed with our reflection as insiders. Thus, the findings were presented focusing on processes, patterns, commons and unique features of the lived experience so that a detailed picture of an individual teacher's life and the overall pattern was uncovered.

Active collaboration among the teachers was maintained before starting the interview. We used our good relationship and reached a consensus with the teachers to win their trust. This made the task of communicating terms and conditions, ensuring that they understood one of the study's aims was to honor their commitment and devotion and win their sense of ownership. We also emphasized some hidden personal and political alignments of the teachers, which may overshadow the real images of their own and others' thinking and action. Besides, administering, organizing and analyzing the interview were carried out to maintain confidentiality and honour in the teachers' professional lives.

### **Results and Discussion**

The data from the interview were organized and processed following the three research questions of the study. The resulting findings are organized into two categories and discussed in the following section to address the research questions. The former section was concerned

with the first and second research questions, and the latter aimed to address the third research question.

### **Teachers' sense of teaching**

Many expected and few emerging themes, which appeared to be interesting in addressing our research questions, were first identified in accordance with the teachers' sense of self and others. Self-esteem, self-disrespect, hopelessness, powerlessness, insecurity, success, frustration, pride, guilt, regret, demotivation, disappointment, burnout and resistance were among the themes identified at this stage. The transcripts were then re-examined by each of us, from which major themes were identified. Finally, the remaining minor themes were classified under each major theme. As a result, two major themes were formulated under which the five components of teachers' identity or self-understanding are classified. These are self-image and moral integrity.

Therefore, the five components of professional identity or self-understanding were re-organized into two major categories. For example, the pattern of interest observed in association with self-esteem, task perception, and job motivation was the same. As a result, the three components were organized and discussed under moral integrity. Similarly, the major themes underlying self-image, job motivation and future perspective (self-image) were the same. Hence, these three components are discussed under this major theme, while job motivation is addressed under both major themes.

### **Distorted Self-image**

Teachers' professional identity, in association with the theme of self-image, is of two forms. These are identities from the lived experiences and future expectations of the teachers. Two contradicting sub-themes of self-image were identified from the teachers' reflections of others and their own lived professional lives. At the beginning of their career, teachers' self-characterization was more or less academically competent, economically secured and

professionally autonomous. The distortion continues throughout one's professional life by further influencing job satisfaction and the future perspective of their identities, forcing many novices to get frustrated. The professional race of the teachers shows, in general, that most teachers, except those included in this study and their types, ended up academically faded, economically vulnerable and professionally powerless. Unexpectedly, seeing oneself as a university professor was also an emerging theme that some teachers wanted to be. This self-expectation of being a university professor is such an emerging sub-theme that implies even those teachers with desired prior self-understanding think all their challenges and professional threats cease to appear at the higher education level of our education system.

It was noted from this analysis that the distorted self-image held by teachers in Ethiopia, in general, is further aggravated by the vulnerability of the profession, the schools' micro politics and social judgments leading to significant rates of turnover and quit intention. In general, teachers' failure to understand its unavoidable nature is becoming the cause of frustration, powerlessness, helplessness, guilt, de-motivation, disappointment, burnout and regret in a professional course of many teachers.

The retired mathematics teacher, for example, recalled how a beginner teacher felt very awful and got distracted by the students' talking about him that he heard outside the classroom.

*"I was a vice principal in one of the preparatory school here in Addis. I remember, I was in my office working on revising the timetable. A teacher entered into my office. He is a newly assigned mathematics teacher . . . graduated with great distinction. I did also know that the students loved him even more than their previous grade 12-year experienced mathematics teacher. But, he thought the opposite as if they don't respect him; they don't like him . . . He thought so, because of few 'unpleasant' talks about students' failure in his first test."*

This teacher complemented his own first-two-years experiences and a state-of-helplessness he had at that time as follows.



*“I was teaching grade 9 mathematics at one of the high schools in a zonal town of south-west Ethiopia. It was my first career as a high school teacher right after my upgrading from diploma to a bachelor degree. I was very close to students; very enthusiastic to help them; devoted myself to really make a difference in their academic achievement. The students were so cooperative; they were always telling me that I made them like mathematics. Unfortunately, they are of poor background from their primary education; and my dream of ‘making difference’ just remained to be a dream. Throughout that and the next year I felt awful; regretful of being a teacher and started to consider leaving for good for the first time. It just took me years to figure out there are lots of things in teaching on which I have no control as a teacher and which obviously influence students’ and my own performance. Yes, there are lots of things in teaching that are beyond our control.”*

### **Moral Integrity**

This broader theme shows the pattern in teachers’ self-understanding in terms of three of the five components mentioned. These components are self-esteem, task perception and job motivation. These are all normative components in nature. Most interestingly, this moral perspective of the teachers’ reflection illustrates how much the components are interrelated and difficult to address them separately. Especially the three (self-esteem, task perception and job motivation) were strongly associated with and influenced by the experiences the teachers had in terms of making value-laden choices and corresponding judgments from students, colleagues, subordinates, parents and the community.

The introduction and practice of a self-content teaching system in lower primary schools, for example, was reflected in the narrative of the teachers as so offensive. This was found to threaten their self-esteem, negatively influencing their task perception, job motivation, commitment and readiness. Moreover, the classroom teaching informed by such state-of-affair by itself led to further negative judgments from the students and other members of the

school community. Such judgments, again, forced the teachers to feel that their moral integrity was being questioned. Such interrelated and multi-lateral patterns of teachers' behavior and action viciously contributed to the alarmingly inclining quit intention and turnover.

Different attempts at politicizing education made such intensifications even worse, which made the rate of quit intention and turnover exponential. Teachers are overloaded with non-academic responsibilities with which their professional efficiency is judged. Assuming administrative position based on political loyalty, putting the mandate of primary schools administration under local administrations - who even themselves are not educated in the case of rural schools, exclusive prioritization of a one-to-five political manipulation in the form of a pseudo reform towards cooperative learning strategy, the spontaneous practice of rewarding political loyalty and advocacy of superficiality are among the incidents that accounted for the extra-ordinary politicization of education in the professional lives of the teachers. Helplessness, frustration, disappointment, resistance, demotivation and dissatisfaction are among the explanatory sub-themes found to complement the moral degradation of teachers and in association with the current state of this aspect of the professional identity of the teachers.

The overall cause-and-effect pattern of such a state of the professional affair can be better illustrated in the form of the school micro politics and social status of teaching and teachers.

### **Micropolitics**

Micropolitics is another phenomenon that arises from the nature of interaction within teaching. In fact, it is one aspect of vulnerability that makes teachers and teaching susceptible to unsafe and job insecurity as a result of criticisms from concerned bodies of administrative power. Especially, beginner teachers at trial period were found to suffer much from and get distracted with until their permanent employment is guaranteed. In our case, political coordinators, principals and political party officials of nearby office are the most influential

actors of school micropolitics. Despite the formal power structure of schooling, students as a whole and their representatives act with a very superior role that ranges from cancellation of an already made decision to the extent of re-assignment of teachers. This led teachers to a state of powerlessness and act of unprofessionalism, and superficiality in the lived experience of many of them. Fear and automatic acceptance of mass complaint by educational and political administration is among the potential incident that made micropolitics a matter of survival in the 'teachers' professional lives. The potential problem is that both teachers and other concerned bodies consider vulnerability as a flaw or weakness, and, therefore, fail to realize that enacting the teaching profession requires not only expertise-knowledge, skills, and competencies, but also ethical and moral commitment as a person. Reflections of the participants on others, especially beginner teachers revealed in this regard that such failures have been leading teachers to emotional reactions, frustration, demotivation and disappointment. Lack of such understanding by the other members of the community has also been leading to the decline in the social respect or status of the profession.

As a result of this lack of understanding, teachers are subjected to undesired emotional reactions starting from their students and spread widely to parents, administrative sectors and different coalitions of the community. These reactions reach back to the teachers creating further frustration and exacerbating the decline with the social status of the profession in the country, which, in turn, leads to extra turnover and quit intention.

The following narrative of a Chemistry teacher with 31 years of teaching [and few years of administrative] experience potentially illustrates how many teachers got so distracted for good and few teachers survived it during the first years of their teaching career. According to his narrative, his survival of this very first challenge of his teaching career made him feel good about both the profession and who he is.

*“It was terrible. I had good theoretical background of what I need to do as a teacher. But, everything done in the school was against the science our educators taught us in*

*TTC. I did a lot; spent a lot of time planning and preparing. I had many innovative activities for teaching science for fifth and sixth graders. But, it's just because I wanted to do things differently, the principals and colleague teachers complained a lot; discouraged me a lot. Even, students and parents were complaining about my 'making students busy'. At first, no creativity allowed. Nothing, just do as you're told. After couple of years, I started to get appreciation from parents for bringing real change in students' behavior. In the following years, everything seemed to be going my way. I became a role model for whom I got an opportunity to be selected and placed as school principal at another primary school."*

### **Social Status**

Lived experiences of the teachers indicate that teaching was such a noble profession during the early era of modern education in Ethiopia. However, according to their narratives, it has been losing its status gradually and ended up being something that a teacher is ashamed of mentioning to others whenever he/she is asked. Recruitment of unqualified individuals and their under-performance, high working load, unsuitable working conditions, intensification of non-curricular burdens, continued mismatch between expected and actual salary scale, the politicization of teachers' thinking and action, and assigning unqualified local political administrations as an autonomous administrative body of schools are the incidents which threatened the socio-economic status of teachers in the particular and social status of the profession in general.

Besides, the aforementioned pattern of teachers' thinking and actions (immorality, frustration, demotivation, disappointment, burnout and resistance), which resulted from a poor understanding of the nature of teaching as well as external factors, teachers developed an extra sense of disrespect both by the broader community and teachers themselves. The chemistry teacher with 36 years of teaching experience said worryingly that;

*“ . . . it after all become, due to not only the unsuitable working conditions and politicization of teachers’ work but also all the unprofessional and superficial acts that teachers are doing, that a teacher is someone least preferred to be a lover, life companion, friend, father or mother, mother- or father-in-law; someone not to rely on for life.”*

This implies that it has been not only the external factors which threatened the social status of teachers and the teaching profession but also the unprofessional and superficial acts of the teachers which have been preferred by teachers as a reaction towards the politicization of education and teachers’ tasks and decline in their social respect that is worsening the overall social status of teachers and the teaching profession. Hence, the scenario behind teachers’ lives in Ethiopia became very complicated, in which teachers are socially and economically unsecured.

### **The current pattern of teachers’ lives and implications for retention**

The teachers devoted their entire life to the profession and are happy about it despite all the unfavorable working conditions and socio-economic susceptibility. They are also proud of not leaving the profession for good when they had. They had opportunities multiple times and tried other careers at different times. However, they did not stay long. They got back to teaching though they said they were guaranteed to stay. They then happened to enjoy teaching. The different photographs, certificates of recognition, acknowledgement and gifts with and from their former students, which we witnessed at the time of the interview, also show that the teachers have a special place in the heart of their former students.

Under such demoralizing circumstances, their unique sense of courage, pride, commitment and effort made us wonder and look back to the narratives of their multi-layered told lives. In this regard, it was obvious that all the external professional settings are more or less similar for at least all teachers of the same city, age, level and qualification. Under these settings, these teachers served to the best of their commitment, effort, effectiveness and satisfaction while many others left the profession for good. However, looking closely at the epiphanies of

their narratives, we traced that what matters is the extent of teachers' internal understanding of the nature of the profession itself and their emotional reaction towards underlying incidents and interactions.

In general, the current pattern of teachers' lives can be better understood from the substantial model illustrated by figure 2 to maintain teachers' job satisfaction and retention. As commonly acknowledged in all the theoretical approaches of similar studies, teachers' professional lives, in this model, are considered a dynamic process of making sense of one's experiences and their impact on one's current and expected future identity. Though we are well aware of their difference, we deliberately used identity and self-understanding interchangeably in this and other sections of this paper. We are willing that readers of both perspectives catch up easily with what we are referring to.

Teachers with a better understanding of the nature of teaching were found to possess a better sense of readiness, less ambitious expectations, dynamic state of thinking, still state of emotion and proactive reaction (upper part of figure 2). On the contrary, those with poor understanding were relatively over-ambitious, emotionally unstable, ever-reacting and easily destructible by the corresponding incidents and interactions (lower part of figure 2). Despite the similar socio-economic claims and unfavorable working conditions, it was therefore found that teachers with a poor understanding of the very nature of the profession are destructed by its vulnerability and micro-politics for which they have been found in a state of self-disrespect, hopelessness, powerlessness, helplessness, defenselessness, frustration, regret and guiltiness.

Such states of thinking and action have even been manifested in not only their professional life but also their overall personal life. As a result, most teachers in the country either left the profession or ended up fading. This, in general, implies that teachers' self-understanding or professional identity plays a crucial role in the alarming developing inclination of quit intention, turnover, and poor quality of professional practice. Furthermore, the professional

race of the majority of the teachers in Addis Ababa, in particular, and in Ethiopia in general, was diagnosed to correspond to the bottom way of figure 2, implying that all teacher education, induction and continuous professional development initiatives have not been equipping teachers with the desired professional identity.

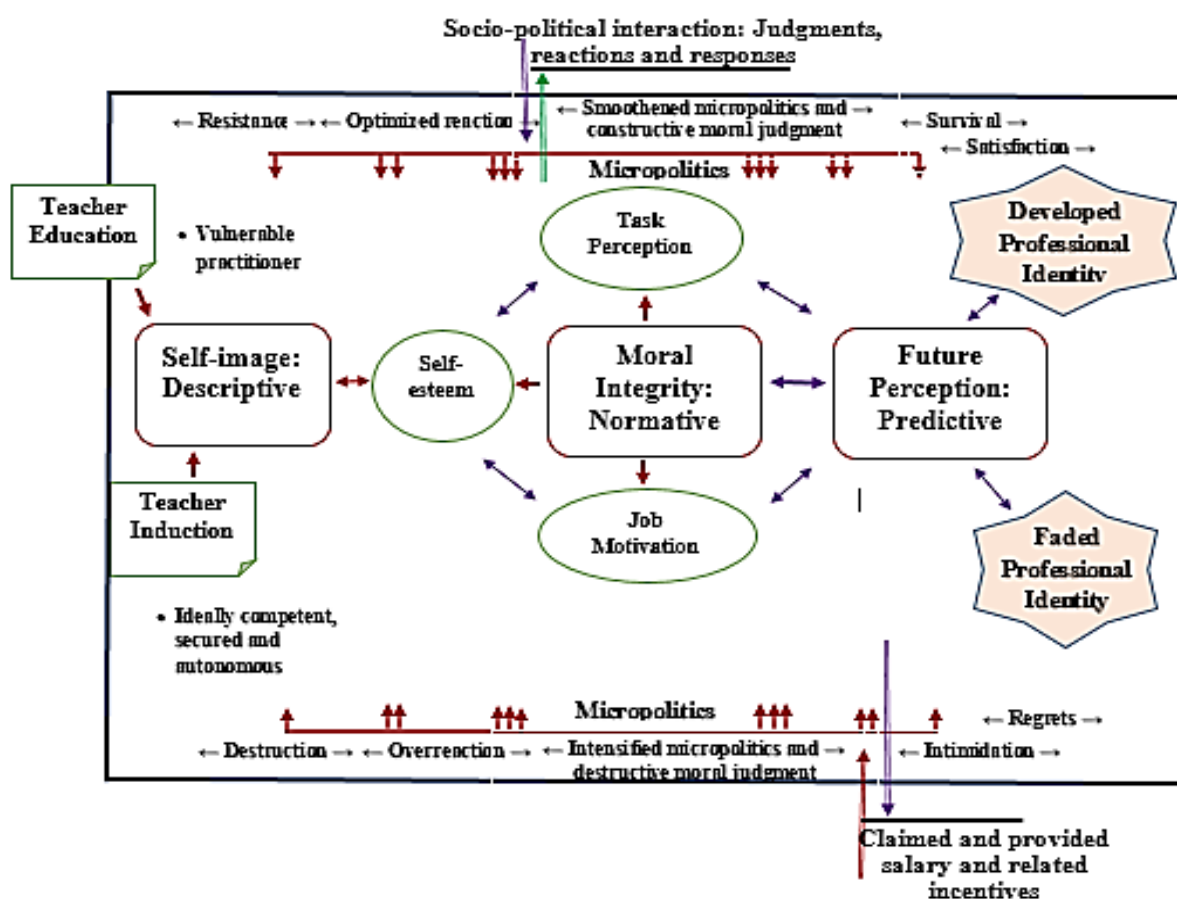


Figure 2: The Proposed Model of the Pattern of Teachers' Lives

Generally, this pattern of teachers' lives in Ethiopia shows that the race of development of professional identity, or self-understanding in the narrative sense, became very complicated in which teachers are both socially and economically unsecured. As a result of the diagnosed teachers' lack of understanding of the nature of teaching and being a teacher, teachers are subjected to undesired emotional reactions starting from their students and spread widely to parents, administrative sectors and different coalitions of the community. These reactions reach back to the teachers creating further frustration in one hand and exacerbating the decline with the social status of the profession in the country on the other hand which, in turn, leads to extra turnover and quit intention.

Unlike those quantitative studies which reported extrinsic factors as attributes of the alarming incline in quit intention and turnover in the country (Elleni, 2017; Hilina, 2011; Mulugeta, 2012), this study therefore shows that teachers' understanding of the very nature of their profession and their underlying identity are the major attributes with multi-directional and vicious associations. The findings of this narrative are, however, similar with that of the aforementioned studies as critical interpretation and reflection of the teachers was found to also acknowledge the influence of the external factors such as poor working conditions, working overload and claimed low salary scale.

These findings, on the other hand, do agree with the findings of the qualitative studies carried out in other countries such as United States of America (Dickinson, 2012; Hsieh, 2010; Titu, 2019), Canada (Vokatisa & Zhang, 2016), Britain, United Kingdom, New Zealand and other European countries (Bullough, 2008; Goodson, 2014; Huberman et al., 1993; Kelchtermaare, 2017; McKay, 2008). Especially, the findings of this narrative is very much similar with those studies carried out by Bullough (2008), Dickinson (2012), Goodson (2014) and Hsieh (2010) in showing the complex and dynamic nature of teaching, development process of professional identity and its influence on teachers' job satisfaction, quit intention and turnover.



## **Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **Summary**

From the narratives, we found that teachers' understanding of and reaction towards the very nature of teaching has a multi-fold contribution to the current state of affairs of the profession and its practice. First, it makes teachers of poor understanding to be frustrated with and destructed by the professional vulnerability and micropolitics within the schools. This threatens the teachers' readiness, organization, motivation, effort, commitment, effectiveness and satisfaction. Such a low state of motivation, commitment and efficiency create a sense of disappointment within the educational community.

This disappointment, together with corresponding reactions, leads to the development of poor social status and respect towards teachers and what they do. Second, professional vulnerability, micropolitics and underlying interactions are taken, by the designated bodies and the community in general, as weaknesses of teachers. For this reason, the community, in general, starts to question the competence and commitment of the teachers. This, again, further threatens the social status of the profession as well as respect towards teachers. Moreover, the politicization of education in general, teachers' thinking and action in particular, and underlying power difference made teachers politically vulnerable. Many have been forced to either leave or plan to leave the profession.

### **Conclusion**

The teachers with these long years of teaching experience were found to stand still with pride without being distracted by professional vulnerability and the micropolitics of the schools. They, however, are not feeling good about where we are heading as a nation with such failures to respect teaching and teachers, not for the sake of teachers but for the sake of the well-being of the upcoming generations. There is this deep worry in their reflection of the entire orientation of the profession in general and the disappearance of students' respect towards teachers' efforts to meet their professional morals.

Our conclusion from this study is that teachers in the capital city, in particular, and Ethiopia, in general, do not have the desired understanding of the nature of the teaching profession as well as the corresponding self-image or identity needed to survive the intimidating impact the professional vulnerability, micropolitics and negative social judgment. This implies that the teacher education and induction programs are not equipping the teachers with the desired understanding and identity of the profession. Besides, it can also be concluded that the teachers are not equivalently influenced within such intimidating circumstances of professional vulnerability, micropolitics and negative social judgment of their profession.

Studies indicated, to this end, that all teachers are not equally distracted by such intertwined interactions of vulnerability and micropolitics (Bullough, 2008; Huberman et al., 1993; Kelchtermans, 1996). A theoretical synthesis made from a series analyses of teachers' professional lives stresses that some teachers are intuitive enough to realize the very nature of the profession and act accordingly with the minimum distraction of its vulnerability and micropolitics (Huberman et al., 1993). Kelchtermans, in his series of papers, also claimed that such teachers are relatively more satisfied with their profession just for meeting the virtue of their moral and professional responsibility. Besides, they were found to be less concerned with extra-curricular issues, consistent with their internal philosophy and essence of being a teacher (Bullough, 2008).

### **Recommendations**

First of all, we, at this level, urge all the concerned bodies (teacher education institutions, ministries, regional education bureaus and non-governmental partners) that teaching and teachers' lives need to be intensively examined to come up with a detailed understanding of such a potential determinant of quality education. The findings can then be used for making informative decisions and planning for the desired intervening reforms or initiatives. Hence, the professional lives honouder teachers with such long years of experience, devotion and commitment should be studied and honored in a way that inspires beginner teachers and does

justice for teachers' voices. Furthermore, such studies of teachers' lives can also enhance the desired development of the participant teachers' professional identity by providing opportunities for them to examine, interpret and reflect on their teaching experiences critically.

We also believe that the vulnerability of teaching and micropolitics within the schools must be re-considered and incorporated into teacher education, certification and induction. It also needs to be made sure that the educational community understands this very nature of the profession and acts accordingly in any suitable way. Findings, implied suggestions and recommendations of these studies need to be shared with the community through research conferences, journals, books of abstracts and mainstream or social media platforms. Universities, colleges of teacher education, the two ministries and regional education bureaus need to take initiatives for sustainable, regular and periodical dissemination of the research findings, implied suggestions and recommendations. Besides, teacher-educators, researchers, policymakers and experts need to be provided with refreshment training to refresh knowledge and skill gaps.

Despite the strength, type and magnitude of suggestions given or yet to be given in this respect, it should be clear that respecting teachers and working on their lives does not mean just caring for teachers. It does mean caring for education, the community, upcoming generations or our loved children. It is beyond the over-amplified salary increment. It rather should be about establishing a system in which teachers need not worry about their basic needs, including transportation and health care. It should rather be about making school conditions as conducive as possible, making the teaching load as low as possible by increasing the number of recruits, and establishing a multi-level appraisal mechanism. We realize that our recommendation may not sound rational from the economic feasibility point of view. Many believe that the country cannot afford to recruit as many teachers as possible and work on educational infrastructure. Our response to this claim is that it would not be that expensive compared to the overall societal loss at the expense of the crisis in our education.

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