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A teacher's identity trajectory within a context of change

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This article examines the effects of political, socio-economic and educational change on a South African teacher's identity trajectory. Our research was conducted at a primary school in a historically disadvantaged community in the Western Cape Province, South Africa. We applied a cultural-historical activity theoretical (CHAT) lens to explore the identity trajectory of one of the teachers. Our findings suggest that a teacher's identity is a social product, drawn from social history, actively internalized and re-authored in response to new circumstances. This was especially evident during the transformation at the macro-political, educational and institutional levels in South Africa since 1994.

Key words: agency; CHAT; disadvantaged context; emerging economy; identity trajectory; practical activity; primary school; teacher; transformation

Introduction

In this article, we report on an attempt to make sense of the effects of political, socio-economic and educational change in South Africa on a teacher's identity trajectory. The data was generated during a university-school research partnership that focused on teachers' situated practices of care and support. The majority of the participants had worked as teachers for an extended period, and lived through most of the many decisive changes in South Africa over the last few decades. The findings showed that the narratives of their care and support practices were intertwined with their general experiences as teachers. Their stories highlighted the different ways they made sense of the multitude of changes in the political and social spheres, and how these affected their lives and career trajectories.

In particular, we examined the effects of such changes on the identity of one of these teachers, whom we will call Iris, to ensure her anonymity. Iris was articulate, a strong voice in the school, eager to share her experiences and willing to collaborate with us in making sense of her career as a teacher during a time of change.

For our theoretical framework, we chose CHAT. When taking a CHAT approach, the researcher needs to take into account the impact of history's large footprint on a subject's private and public life. A person can only be understood in terms of his or her own context and history. Gutiérrez (2002:319) claims that "the strategic use of social categories can be productive". In order to make meaning of Iris's identity trajectory we needed to return to those social categories legislated during the apartheid regime.

Iris is a member of the so-called 'coloured' population in South Africa. This group had its origins in the intermixing between slave groups, indigenous groups, and white settlers in the Western Cape from the 1650s onwards. By imposing the label 'coloured' on this group, the all-white Nationalist government deprived them of political status - 'coloureds' were officially neither black nor white. The 'coloured' community was thus subordinated to the dominant white community and excluded from many socio-economic, political and educational privileges (Sonn & Fischer, 1996).

The race-based inequalities that were created resulted in the population being fragmented along racial lines. Certain communities - despite, or perhaps even because of segregation - found innovative ways and alternative activity systems through which they survived and maintained their cultures and identities. Sonn and Fischer (1998) claim that literature and research on group responses to oppressive systems tend to emphasise negative outcomes, and the victim status of these groups, without considering the element of community resilience. They argue that community membership is an essential source of wellbeing, can act as an antidote to oppression, exclusion and psychological hardship, and can be integral to the survival of valued cultures and identities. It can also offer a sense of historical continuity.

Apartheid acted as "a powerful allocator of identity" and frequently "suppressed identity through centralizing [sic] race and ethnicity at the expense of other markers of identity" (Singh, 1997:120). Its abolition brought South Africans the opportunity to transcend and reshape new identities, to fashion new understandings of who they were and what they considered fundamental to themselves (Singh, 1997). Thus, dramatic socio-cultural changes have occurred in South Africa since 1994 (Moloi & Henning, 2006). Since the inauguration of the new democratic dispensation and the newfound freedom, all the race groups have needed to reconcile themselves to a redefinition of their previously-held identities. In many cases, they have also needed to reconsider their positioning in society. This has resulted in the resurgence of issues of identity (Francis & Le Roux, 2011). Despite the initial elation with which the historically marginalised groups welcomed their newfound freedoms, the radical nature and extent of the transformation nevertheless caused considerable stress for them and everybody else in South Africa (Van Niekerk & Prins, 2009).

The race-based inequalities in South Africa reverberated in the economic sector, and overlapped with the change to democracy. While poverty was virtually non-existent among whites, at least 58% of all South Africans in general – and 68% of the black population in particular – were living in poverty in 1995. These inequalities pervaded education, health and basic infrastructure (Ozler & Hoogeveen, 2005). Currently, South Africa is recognised as an emerging economy, characterised by a rapid pace of economic development and a substantial effort to liberalise the economy (Meyer, Estrin, Bhaumik & Peng, 2009). Despite substantial progress since 1994, several critical challenges are still impeding the achievement of South Africa's considerable potential (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2013). In 2012, the Gini coefficient for South Africa was about 0.60 (Landman, Bhorat, Van der Berg & Van Aardt, 2003), one of the most unequal income distributions in the world. Today it is estimated that about 45% of the population still live in poverty (Landman et al., 2003), with almost all of the poor belonging to the black or coloured groups (Van der Berg, Burger, Burger, Louw & Yu, 2006). South Africa's unemployment rate is one of the highest in the world, while poverty, especially extreme poverty, has not been alleviated (Ozler & Hoogeveen, 2005).

The OECD Economic Survey of South Africa (2013) identified education as another of the country's key problems. The report claims that the poor quality of education in South Africa acts as a serious impediment to economic growth. A distinguishing feature of the education system remains the very high degree of inequality between schools. This legacy of apartheid is one that the present government is finding hard to address. Although there is one overarching Department of Basic Education for all schools, there are still massive inequalities between the formerly advantaged schools (for white learners) and formerly disadvantaged schools (for the rest). This is especially evident in many rural areas – including the community in which Iris taught – where poverty in all its manifestations is the principal feature (Engelbrecht, 2006; Taylor, 2007). According to Bloch (2009:25), “education as it stands today continues to reproduce inequalities in society, inequalities that threaten the stability and comforts of young people.”

A report issued by Wits Education Policy Unit (2005) claims that before 1994, South African teachers were repressed, with very limited professional autonomy. The education of teachers was underpinned by a conservative pedagogy, which instilled passivity and obedience to authority. Critical or independent thinking were not valued. Their work was strictly controlled through a system

of inspection, which undermined their autonomy. They came to rely on the agency of the state to direct them in doing their work. A loss of self-confidence and self-reliance resulted.

Teaching philosophies have changed radically since 1994. Approaches and practices are now based on democratic, inclusive and participative relationships, reflective practice, experimentation and risk-taking. Teachers have been called on to learn new theory and to implement new practices in their classrooms (Oswald, 2010). Moreover, in an effort to accelerate the transformation process, they have been subjected to a flurry of policy initiatives in a top-down fashion. They have had to attend numerous workshops and been subjected to extreme answerability and accountability measures. In the years since 1994, they have gradually lost confidence in the education authorities and have begun to blame them for the many challenges they are forced to face in schools and classrooms, without the necessary assistance and support (Perold, Oswald & Swart, 2012).

To compound matters, the teachers themselves have received negative media publicity and are frequently blamed for the failure of educational innovations, reflected in the underperformance of South African learners (Perold et al., 2012). Comparative international studies, such as the Trends in Mathematical and Science Study (TIMSS), the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and national criteria such as the Department of Basic Education's Annual National Assessments (ANA), confirm that South African learners underperform. This is particularly evident in schools in vulnerable communities, such as the farm school where Iris taught. Despite the negativity surrounding education and teachers, in particular, the strategic importance of teachers in the South African education system cannot be denied. In a time of change, they are expected to act as agents of change and have a key role in ensuring that quality education is delivered to all children.

The above forms the backdrop to the question that directed our research: *How does Iris's identity trajectory illuminate the impact of apartheid on the self of a person less privileged by a particular social and political regime, as well as the complex changes that have occurred on macro-social and educational levels in South Africa since the inauguration of the new democratic dispensation in 1994?*

In the next sections, we present our chosen theoretical framework and Iris's identity trajectory as a teacher. We conclude with a brief discussion.

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as Framework for the Study

CHAT departs from essentialist or context-independent notions of identity, instead viewing the self as embedded and intrinsically interwoven with

socio-cultural and historical processes. Researchers in CHAT accept the challenge of “rendering an account of the self as a profoundly social phenomenon, yet at the same time as real, agentive and unique” (Stetsenko & Arieivitch, 2004:476).

Vygotsky’s work is fundamental to all contemporary variants of CHAT, but was further refined in the seminal work of Leontiev. Stetsenko and Arieivitch (2004) and Stetsenko (2005) articulate human subjectivity (as derived from the work of Leontiev) as originating from and existing within activity processes. This eliminates the dichotomy between individuals and the world. Practical, social and purposeful (object-related) activity is the principal form of human life (Stetsenko, 2005). In CHAT, therefore, analysis of the agency of human subjectivity and inter-subjectivity needs to keep in view their ultimate origin in material processes of human activity.

Stetsenko and Arieivitch (2004:476) expand Leontiev’s work on object-related human activity by conceiving of CHAT as having an “ontological unity of inter-individual and intra-individual processes”, as accounted for in “transitions between the self and broader sociocultural processes”. This implies that an individual, such as Iris in this study, is simultaneously formed by society and informs society; that she is created by history but that she also creates her own history, and that she is the “author and actor of her own drama” (Marx, 1955, in Stetsenko, 2005:85).

These possibilities for agency make identity and identity processes important in the working life of a teacher such as Iris. In the words of Holland and Lachicotte (2007:134-135), Iris is “inhabited by [the world], and yet is able to co-construct the social and cultural world” in which she exists. Phrased differently using the metaphor of residence, this means that although Iris inhabits the social structures and spaces that have been created by the collective society, she nevertheless can produce a self which inhabits these structures and constructs in creative and even subversive ways. This particular argument is significant in the context of this article, and will be extended in our discussion of Iris’s identity work.

Method

Our active engagement at the research school spanned a period of three years from 2008 to 2010. We employed an ethnographic design for the project. The principal and the staff were approached, and once they had indicated their willingness to take part in the research, ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the relevant university. The project was further approved by the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) before being launched at the school.

This primary school is situated in a rural area in the Western Cape, where the majority still suffer harsh conditions of poverty, adult illiteracy, social breakdown and disease. Despair, a sense of hopelessness and a fatalistic worldview are frequently the result. At the time of our engagement with the school, it was small, with 12 teachers and 380 learners. The teachers were not members of the community the school served, but travelled daily from more affluent areas, thereby creating a socio-economic and geographical distance between themselves and the school community. Besides their teaching roles, they were often the main source of care in the immediate environment (Perold et al., 2012). Like teachers elsewhere in historically disadvantaged schools, those in Iris’s school struggled to address the manifold and diverse needs of their learners, especially given the lack of resources.

We employed a qualitative methodology and data was generated through three group discussions with the staff, two focus group interviews with four teachers, an individual interview with Iris (pseudonym) and open-ended questionnaires completed by all the teachers. A narrative style of respectful curiosity (Madigan, 2011) was utilised in interactions with all the research participants throughout the gathering of data, aiming to elicit their knowledge and experience of their teaching and support practices. The conversations we had with all the participants and Iris were aimed at providing them with opportunities “to generate identity conclusions informed by non-structuralist categories of identity - intentions and purposes, values and beliefs, hopes, dreams and visions, commitments to ways of living, and so on” (White, pers. comm., 1992, in Madigan, 2011). To answer our specific research question, we set out to capture Iris’s experiences of her career trajectory, since she began working in education. For some time, she had kept a diary to help her to make meaning of her experiences. She agreed to share relevant extracts from this in a life-line format. The data obtained from the life-line exercise was analysed and served to inform further questions which we posed in a further individual interview with her. We revisited our first data set, obtained as part of the original project, as secondary data, adding richness to the more recently generated primary data.

CHAT usually views data analysis as an abductive process, which implies a movement between an inductive and deductive process of knowledge creation (Foley, 2002; Rautkorpi, n.d.). During the first phase of data analysis, we approached the primary and secondary data from an inductive stance, taking a tentative position. Global analysis, a tool used “for thematic, networked analyses” (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004:109-114), was considered appropriate for

interpreting our data sources. Such analysis can include a whole range of analytic procedures sharing the characteristic that data is read for broad patterns and themes, which can be meaningfully linked into an integrated whole (Henning et al., 2004).

The end-product of the first phase of data analysis revealed broad themes and patterns in Iris's experiences, both as a teacher and as a person. The deductive facet of the abductive process was invoked by positioning the themes and patterns derived from the raw data within the more recent literature in the CHAT tradition. As the data was generated in Afrikaans, Iris's home language, we translated the direct quotes reported in the article into English after the analysis.

The following ethical considerations, as suggested by Babbie and Mouton (2001), Henning et al. (2004) and Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006), were upheld during the research study and in particular in our engagement with Iris: care was taken to acknowledge her privacy and to address her with sensitivity; her right to anonymity, confidentiality and voluntary participation was respected, and our interviews with her and other research activities in which she took part were conducted within a relationship of collaboration, trust and transparency after she signed a consent form.

The next section explores Iris's identity trajectory as embedded in CHAT, against the backdrop of the many changes that have taken place in South Africa, especially since 1994.

Iris's Identity Trajectory as a Teacher

The following description of Iris's identity trajectory as a teacher is based on the themes identified in the different data sets, presented chronologically and superimposed on CHAT. As we have noted, this theory views identity not as static and coherent, but as variable, multi-vocal, interactive and mutable across contexts and over time (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998, in Daniels, 2007).

The dramatic rupture in the political dispensation in South Africa since 1994 and the possibilities that this has generated for change in all walks of life has made the relearning of identity inevitable (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005; Singh, 1997). Historical factors and changes in the socio-cultural domain play a pivotal role in Iris's work as a teacher and straddle her public and private lives. We traced her identity trajectory in a narrative format, following themes which specifically emerged from the data: her childhood experiences up to the time of leaving school, her years of studying to become a teacher, the early years of her teaching career, the 29 years (as at 2013) at her current school, and her role as a mother.

Iris was her parents' eldest child. Her earliest memories are of how her family initially lived in servants' quarters, moved temporarily to the centre of the town where she grew up, and were forcibly moved to a rented house in an area designated for the 'coloured group' on the outskirts of the town. Through the practiced segregation from the white community, given higher social standing, they experienced instability and felt displaced.

Although these forced removals had a detrimental effect on the identity of this particular 'coloured' community, a strong and cohesive alternative community eventually developed (Sonn & Fisher, 1998). This occurred at two levels: the externally constructed, imposed and negative label of the community as 'coloured', and an internal construction mediating activity systems, which imbued its members with "security, stability, belongingness and psychological relatedness" (Sonn & Fischer, 1998:466). Throughout Iris's life she was nurtured by strong communal support reminiscent of Sonn and Fischer's (1998) second level community.

Despite considerable financial hardship, Iris's father managed to procure a plot in the designated area, where he built a house which gave his family a standing in the community. He also inspired the young Iris to study hard and to equip herself with an education that could lend her some agency in a country ruled by the apartheid ideology. Iris failed her grade during her first year in the new school, as she relates: "*in the first year many, many learners failed. I also failed.*" She further related that her experience of 'not making the grade' was directly linked to her family's displacement and forced relocation to a new area. This highlights the interrelatedness of the self and the social: the social inhabits the self, which manifests in the individual's actions and experiences (Stetsenko, 2005). Iris's position as a child living in a 'coloured' community before 1994 made her particularly vulnerable to forces outside her control, affecting her actions and agentive possibilities.

Iris's father died suddenly when she was 13. He was a strong influence in her life and the unexpected tragedy brought new changes and challenges. Her mother, a strong woman and an exemplary role model for Iris, took over and helped Iris to counteract the negative effects of their circumstances. Iris *learned to adapt* and to make alternate plans. She left school after Grade 10. This was contrary to her father's dreams for her, but was unavoidable given the family's financial constraints. However, she managed to enrol in a teacher training college in a nearby town. She flourished in her new-found circumstances, noting of her experience: "*this was one of the best times in my life. This period in my life really enriched me.*" She became independent and this paved the way for

her younger sisters to follow in her footsteps, since they too became teachers.

Her identity was now established, both as the leader in her family and as a professional teacher. This period in her life coincided with the unrest following the 1976 Soweto uprising. During the subsequent years of activism, Iris became more politically aware. She gained a broader understanding of how activities and decisions on a macro-level had invaded her subjectivity and that of her apartheid racial designation. For the first time, she could identify with her mother's sadness when forced to sell some treasured family furniture, only to see it offered for sale later at an antique shop in town for much more than they were originally offered.

Iris began to question the dominant discourses in the country, and their negative impact on her identity. At the same time, she found solace in her community; there she felt valued. She articulated her response to this in the following way: *"but I learned not to be bitter about it, to put the past behind me, stay focused and to move forward."* She also met her future husband while studying and the role of 'cherished wife' became part of her identity. After completing her basic training as a teacher, she went on to specialise in class music. This contributed significantly to her identity as a teacher:

I [would] not change anything about the experience that I gained while studying. I learned about discipline, being on time, and responsibility. I shall always be grateful to my mother for making this possible.

Iris procured a position as a Grade Three teacher in a primary school in the town where she had received her training, and started her teaching career in 1978. She loved her work as class music teacher, and was able to use all the expertise gained during her training. She remembered the principal of this school as an important mentor, from whom she learned valuable lessons. She described him as *"being like a father to [her]"*. Teaching as an activity was central in her life and informed her identity. She flourished in the school and valued the collaborative collegial relationships she formed during her time there.

She worked in a structured environment with clear guidelines. Her initial training as teacher was seen as adequate for her position as classroom teacher, her knowledge and skills were valued, and she was not expected to gain any additional skills by attending workshops (as she would from 1994 onwards). Her pupils could learn, read and do mathematics. Routines were predictable, there were no surprises, no failures and *"the 'department' provided everything I needed, from the curriculum to the necessary resources."* This echoes the statement from the Wits Education Policy Unit (2005) that during the apartheid dispensation,

teachers were both controlled by and reliant on the state.

This observation speaks to one of the paradoxes in Iris's identity trajectory. From a historical perspective, it could be argued that teachers were robbed of any form of agency by both the rigid state control of education and by their own lack of critical awareness. Nevertheless, the more structured environment in which Iris taught, as well as the sound progress of her learners, gave her a sense of safety and a feeling of accomplishment. State control was evident in the inspector system that was employed to appraise performance. Despite this, Iris recalls having only a minimum of administrative record-keeping responsibilities – in sharp contrast to the current demands on teachers. She interpreted this minimal state intervention as an affirmation of trust in her abilities and a confirmation that her work was good. She defined her role as a teacher as being *"responsible for teaching and learning"*. Iris particularly cherished this part of her career. Her goal-directed activity as a teacher, aimed at the successful progress of her learners, delivered positive outcomes. Stetsenko (2005) emphasises goal-directed activity as the driver for the development of human subjectivity in the reciprocal influence between the individual and the social. Thus, in this period, two factors impacted on the development of Iris's identity trajectory as a teacher in this culturally constructed and socially imposed world (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). Firstly, the safety of a structured environment, which allowed her to feel that she was in control and an expert at what she did, and, secondly, her pride in being a provider to her family.

Iris joined the staff at her current school in 1984. As previously noted, this was a farm school in a vulnerable community in the Western Cape. The teachers were confronted by severe challenges due to the adverse circumstances which their learners faced at home and in their community (Perold et al., 2012). Contrary to Iris's experience at the previous school, the first two principals at this school both employed autocratic management styles, ruling with an iron fist. Nevertheless, she still enjoyed teaching. She also furthered her own education, achieving her Grade 12 qualification through distance learning. She subsequently registered for a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree at a university for 'non-white' learners, and successfully completed the degree. She mentioned in her diary that apartheid had made it impossible for her to attend a nearby so-called 'white' university. However, she made full use of available opportunities to further her education, despite the limiting conditions afforded her by society. This more goal-directed activity contributed to her viewing herself in a positive light.

Iris talked with pride about her many accomplishments with school choirs. These had won prizes at local competitions; even colleagues with more years of experience acknowledged her expertise in the field. During these years, she and her husband bought her mother's house (the one her father had built many years before), renovated and extended it. She also "*went to a big academic hospital for infertility treatment in order to start with a family*". She established a stable and successful middle-class family, despite the broader social, political and economic disruptions that were racking the country in the dying years of apartheid.

Nineteen ninety-four was a watershed year in South Africa's history. The new democratically elected government abolished discrimination on the basis of race and feelings of euphoria and optimism abounded. However, the radical nature and extent of transformation caused stress for many teachers, despite their initial elation at their newfound freedoms (Van Niekerk & Prins, 2009). Iris and her colleagues, as she put it, "*had to make huge paradigm shifts*" in being retrained for the changed educational dispensation. They were obliged to attend numerous workshops and felt unsure of what was expected of them. Even the language changed: they were now called 'educators' instead of teachers, while pupils became 'learners'. As if this were not enough, they were inundated with files with information on new ways of teaching. Iris described how she became an "*educator as well as student*"

Tasks doubled, administrative workload expanded, and I found myself not having enough time to teach the way I was used to and what I believed in. Many teachers left education and were not replaced, thus classes became bigger and bigger, and I became a 'crowd-controller' instead of a teacher.

The problem of adapting to curriculum changes has become a hallmark of teaching in the 'new' South Africa. Since 1995, teachers have had to adapt to three curriculum changes. The highly criticised Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) system was introduced in 1998 and modified in 2007. It is currently being replaced by the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12, based on a different set of philosophical underpinnings. Iris complained that the revised practices following from these curriculum changes have not been conducive to learning. These factors – particularly the way in which new language has shaped new roles and new descriptions of the work expected of her – led to confusion and despondency in her working life. She confessed to feeling like she was running around like a "*headless chicken [sic], keeping extremely busy with frenzied activities in order to keep my head above water*". Her activities had become less effective, the expectations of the education authorities confuse her, and, most significant of all, the "*children cannot read, write or do maths!*" Her identity as a strict but competent

teacher has been eroded by a feeling of failure. She felt as if "*she [was] caught up in a wrong world. I have never before felt so stupid, dull and confused! [sic] Just plodding along, just plodding along every day!*"

Iris seemed to have lost a sense of personal agency. She reports that blaming others remained her only defence against the fact that learners were not making progress and that teachers were seen as not making the grade by both the education authorities and the media in South Africa (Bloch, 2009; Perold et al., 2012). She blamed learners for not taking responsibility for their own learning, parents for lacking parental skills ("*parents do not address gnats, they wait for the elephants*" [sic]), outsiders becoming involved as do-gooders in the school, and then using up precious time that could have been spent on teaching (*maybe trying to ease consciences*), and excessive departmental expectations ("*I have to be social worker, pastor, doctor, nurse, psychologist and more*"). Iris's cry for help could well resonate with many teachers in South Africa: "*I am tired, depressed, despondent and fed-up [sic]. I see a very dark future for education in South Africa. When will I be allowed to teach again?*"

Iris felt both that she was a failure and that she was being "*crucified [sic] for being a failure*". She felt she had to "*pick up the pieces*" of her confidence, but did not know how. Her agency as teacher was being diminished and the demands on her were making inroads on her confidence. Her work as a teacher was negatively impacted by these social-cultural demands, which in turn shaped her identity, and recursively affected her teaching practice and how she viewed the current educational dispensation. Her reaction to her situation nevertheless revealed a further paradox in her identity trajectory. Despite painting a bleak picture of education in South Africa and seriously questioning her own future as a teacher, she was not prepared to give up: "*Me throwing in the towel? Never! [sic]*"

Several factors contributed to her determination to carry on, regardless of the overwhelming challenges facing her. First, 18 years ago, she and her husband adopted a baby girl. Motherhood has given her the opportunity and space to live out her original ideals about education. She supported her daughter in all her academic and extra-mural endeavours and, through her success as a mother-who-is-also-a-teacher, confirmed her own identity as a teacher. Second, as a result of her experiences during apartheid, Iris was adept at improvising across the limits of cultural traditions and social forces of power and domination to find spaces in which to re-invent the self (Holland & Lachicotte, 1998, in Daniels, 2007). In this way, she found the determination to carry on, regardless of her current despondency.

Conclusion

Iris's identity trajectory was loaded with complexities, ironies and paradoxes. CHAT helped us to make meaning of the data, offering us a robust and broad-based platform from which to engage with her identity trajectory (Oswald & Perold, 2011). We came to understand how this had unfolded, as the outcome of the various activities in which she had participated, both as a teacher and as a human being, during divergent political periods in South Africa (Stetsenko, 2005). These activities provided the background for the unfolding of her identity trajectory as changes in object-related activities seemed to contribute to Iris's understanding of her identity. It was also clear how her identity derived from an "ensemble of societal relations" (Marx & Engels, 1968, in Roth, 2007:84). This was evident in the narrative of her life, from her birth in the 1950s in a segregated country in which she was marginalised on grounds of her race, to her positive experiences – despite considerable political constraints – as a young teacher, to her current sense of disillusion over the perceived failure of the education authorities to support teachers and to ensure quality education for all learners. Our study offers proof of CHAT's conceptualisation of the self-in-development as located not "under the skull" but in the processes of ongoing practical activity and social transactions (Stetsenko & Arievidtch, 2004:475).

A modest form of agency was evident in how Iris was "inhabited by [the world]" but was still able to "co-construct the social and cultural world" in which she exists (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007:134-135). Her social position until 1994 was shaped by a history which allowed her as a member of the coloured community only a limited space for agency. Nevertheless, as an efficient teacher and as a valued member of a particular community, she still managed to position herself favourably, despite political and other restrictions. Today, however, her experiences as a teacher in a transformed South Africa, threaten the sense of agency that she experienced previously, and therefore also how she currently views herself. In the past, she assumed that if she did her best as a teacher, her learners would prosper. During the previous dispensation she was able to focus on this aim and her learners flourished. Currently, too many complex factors out of her control militate against this. Her learners are mostly not 'making the grade', leaving her cynical, feeling a failure and often depressed.

From all the above it is evident that Iris's sense of agency fluctuated as it was influenced by contextual changes. Regardless, she still remains committed to carrying on, although simultaneously believing that a whole generation of children, subjected to the turmoil of a transforming education since 1994, is lost. This seeming paradox in Iris's thinking illustrates the fluidity of her identity,

dependent on practical activities and social transactions present in her life.

In retracing Iris's identity trajectory, we determined what a teacher might need in order to feel cared for, supported and valued. Iris referred to the importance of positive school leadership. A school leader with the capacity to act as a positive role-model for teachers can inspire feelings of value and safety, empowering them to take risks and to strive to become the best they can be. She also stressed the benefits of a school as a community, where collegial relationships could act as networks of support for all teachers, but especially for novice teachers. Her recent feelings of despondency were intertwined with the failure of her learners to make progress, in sharp contrast to her previous experiences of success. These feelings were exacerbated by negative reactions from the educational authorities and the media, coupled with her frustration at not being heard.

South Africa as an emerging economy market is making progress in the economic sphere, but the quality of education and the unequal distribution of wealth and resultant poverty in certain sectors of the country act as serious inhibitors of further economic growth. The poor quality of education persists despite the fact that change has become integral to the South African education system. Numerous policy changes and subsequent change initiatives on school level have not resulted in sufficient progress. We argue that one of the reasons for the weak effect of education reforms is that the important role of teachers' identities as they are forced to position themselves within new approaches to and practices in education is not sufficiently considered. According to Geijsel and Meijers (2005) identity learning is necessary during periods of innovation and change. They claim that without changes in teachers' personal identity sustainable changes in schools will not be possible.

The OECD report (2013) suggests that the better use of available resources in education would enhance the quality of education and make a positive contribution to economic progress in South Africa. As teachers form the bulk of (human) resources in education and mostly carrying the responsibility for the implementation of change initiatives, it seems reasonable that the nurturing and support of teachers should carry high priority. Iris's message endorses the need of teachers to be heard, to be acknowledged for what they accomplish under difficult circumstances, and highlights their dire need for support. Teachers need access to tools that afford their agency and active stance. The right balance between monitoring and support is crucial, while providing more support staff to schools would allow teachers more time to spend on teaching (OECD, 2013). These messages need to be heard by those in power if a true and enduring transformation in education is to be effected.

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