Teacher Identity: An African Perspective

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1. Introduction

As the topic suggests, this paper addresses the issue of teacher identity "from an African perspective". The overarching aim here is to argue for a more definitive place for African teachers' identity in the education research discourse of the A-A University Dialogue, as well as those of others that aim at improving education in the region generally.

The paper is based on the following assumptions, some of which are rather obvious, while others may, perhaps, be contestable:

1. The on-going education revisions and reforms in Africa do not sufficiently posit the teacher as the locus of change in the school system.
2. The teacher, however, is the single most important element in the *ordinary* teaching-learning situation in the classroom – more than the infrastructure, the curriculum, and the teaching-learning materials. Ultimately, it is the teacher who animates all of these, makes meaning of them, and manipulates them to the desired goals through her/his teaching activities.
3. The teacher must, therefore, be perceived as a 'change champion' in any meaningful educational change and development effort.
4. How the teacher goes about doing this depends, among other things, on how s/he perceives her/himself and her/his role, how others perceive her/him, and, of course, her/his 'professional' competencies and the kind of preparation s/he has received for performing this role.
5. The identity the teacher constructs (or fails to construct) for her/himself is influenced by a number of factors, some of which are beyond her/his control.
6. An understanding of 'teacher identity', and the factors that influence it, therefore, is critical both for designing appropriate teacher education programmes and for the effective implementation of education policies generally.

A cursory look at the literature on *teacher identity*, however, immediately underscores the complexity of the construct, and a number of questions come to mind, among which are: 'who *is* a teacher?', or 'who *should* be a teacher?' 'How do teachers perceive themselves – in terms of their roles, career prospects, professionalism, social status, etc.?' 'How do others perceive them

– policy makers, administrators, pupils, parents, and the community in which they live, among others?' 'What, in fact, is *teacher identity*?' 'How does it impact on teacher performance?' 'Why should we be concerned with it?' 'What can we do about it?' 'How is knowledge of teacher identity likely to impact policy formulation and the design of teacher education programmes in Africa?'

There is little doubt that education in Africa is undergoing something of a *renaissance* that corresponds to what Carson (2005) calls "the globalization of the reform phenomenon" (p.1). There is evidence of a process of rapid expansion and change – whole education systems are being restructured; policies are being enacted; infrastructure such as schools and sanitary facilities are being renovated and new ones constructed; teaching and learning materials are being provided; teachers are being recruited and trained; and in almost all countries, there has been significant (and in some cases, phenomenal) increases in enrolment rates at all levels.

In spite of these apparent changes, however, African education still manifests identifiable inadequacies that severely affect both quality and effectiveness in meeting national goals. Assie-Lumumba (2008) has done well to document the many challenges still facing African education. Part of the problem has been that sufficient attention has not been given to the teacher as a 'change champion' in the current efforts at education change. Carson (2005) re-echoes the concern of Aoki (1984, p.111) that "a lack of adequate attention to the place of teachers as acting subjects in educational reform movements reduces teachers to the status of simply being installers of curriculum rather than being originators of curriculum". A case in point is my country, Sierra Leone, where it is only recently that a policy on teacher training and development has been formulated, a Teaching Service Commission established, and a *Code of Conduct for Teachers and other Education Personnel* adopted, all aimed at reforming and regulating teaching as a 'profession'.

There is also evidence (albeit mostly anecdotal) that teachers themselves are generally demotivated, and no longer consider themselves as being a socially valued group. Teachers no longer seem to enjoy the prestige they had enjoyed in the past when the teacher (probably being the most educated person in the community) was accorded a high status. In many traditional African communities, the teacher was the ultimate authority on practically every issue, and was accorded tremendous regard. Rapid socio-economic changes, however, have impacted (largely in a negative way) on this status of the teacher. For example, the *State of Teacher Professionalism in South Africa* report by the Wits Education Policy Unit (2005) calls attention to the growing dissatisfaction of teachers about their working conditions, and the failure of the profession to attract enough students. The report cites a study by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) which found that 55 percent of teachers would leave teaching if they could. This might very well be the case in most other African countries. Consequently, there are indications that teachers in Africa have either lost, or have not developed, the distinctive *identity* that is enhancing to their professional work as well as their social standing.

It has been argued, nevertheless, that the notion of identity is "an organising principle in teachers' jobs and lives" (Maclure, 1993, p.311), and that understanding the identities that

teachers construct for themselves "is central to effecting innovation within a changing policy environment" (Robinson & McMillan, 2006, p.1). As Haber (2005) argues, "understanding teachers' beliefs, understanding and practices – their identity – is important if policy implementation is to be successful and if in-service courses are to be suitably designed to facilitate change" (p. 8). Understanding African teachers' identity, especially in the context of on-going reforms, may be even more critical in an era when that identity seems to be undergoing something of a crisis under contemporary social, economic, and, in some cases, political pressures (Maclure, 1993).

2. What is Teacher Identity?

As has been indicated, teacher identity is a complex construct for the reason (among many others) that it is formed in multiple contexts. Wenger (2000) defines identity as "what we know, what is foreign and what we choose to know, as well as how we know it. Our identities determine with whom we will interact in a knowledge sharing activity, and our willingness and capacity to engage in boundary interactions" (p.239). He views identity as "engagement in the world", but notes that people have multiple sources of identity and ways of connecting. He argues further that affiliation to an organization is not enough to constitute identity, but rather it is the experience one undergoes as a professional in engaging with others in learning and knowledge creation.

Lave & Wenger (1991) have also argued that "because participation constitutes identity construction, it will include dimensions of mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. In this context, identity is not just defined by the individual but by the way in which the individual is perceived as being a full member of a community". In a similar vein, Wenger (1998) also argues, "…we define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through participation as well as by the ways we and others reify ourselves" (p.149).

Identities, however, are formed not only by participation, but also by an intricate interplay of our own individual ontogenic development and the personal goals we set. Billet (2000) reminds us of this when he says that "becoming" a professional (or constructing a professional identity) relies on the interplay of two processes – 1) the kinds and qualities of interactions and activities in the workplace; and 2) the individual's ontogenic development which includes personal goals that determine how and why individuals choose to engage. "The individual can be seen, therefore, as being socially shaped ontogenetically, albeit in ways rendered unique by their personal histories of self construction...." (Billet, 2006, p.66).

Beijaard (2006) argues along somewhat similar lines when he says that:

Teachers' professional identity implies both a cognitive psychological and a sociological perspective: people develop their identity in interaction with other people (sociological perspective), but express their perception of 'who they are' and 'who

they want to become' as a result of their interaction (p, 6).

In her study of academic identity development in higher education, James (n.d.) concludes that "identity is a shifting entity and is negotiated with others within personal, situational and historical constraints" (p.14). Morgan (2004) has likewise called attention to a line of inquiry that "looks closely at the concept of identity itself, not as a fixed and coherent set of traits, but as something complex, often contradictory, and subject to change across time and place" (p.172).

In her own study of teacher professional identity in Australia, Sachs (1999) identifies two kinds of distinct teacher identities: 1) the *entrepreneurial identity* which derives from the "managerialistic discourse…in which the market and issues of accountability, economy, efficiency and effectiveness shape how teachers individually and collectively construct their professional identities; and 2) the *activist identity* "…in which collaborative cultures are an integral part of teachers' work practices" (p.8). Her work itself, by her own admission, is based on Wenger's (1998, p.149) five dimensions of identity which are: i) Identity as *negotiated experiences* – we define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through participation "as well as the way we and others reify ourselves"; ii) identity as *community membership* - we define who we are by the "familiar and the unfamiliar". We belong to 'this' group with which we are familiar, and not to the 'other' with which we are unfamiliar; iii) identity as *learning trajectory* – we define who we are by where we have been and where we are going; iv) identity as *nexus of multi membership* – we define who we are by the ways we reconcile our various forms of identity into one identity; v) identity as *a relation between the local and the global* – we define who we are by negotiating local ways of belonging to broader constellations and manifesting broader styles and discourses (Sachs, 1999, p.4). Thus, being a teacher in Nigeria should mean the same thing as being a teacher in South Africa.

From this theoretic framework, let us now see where we stand in our engagement with the construct of *teacher identity*. When I say 'I am a teacher', what should it mean for me and for others? Going by the framework above, it should mean *all* of the following:

- That I identify with a group with which I have "a mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire";
- I know the distinguishing characteristics of this group, and I manifest these characteristics to the point that others in the group recognize me as a member. These characteristics include a shared set of attributes and values;
- I know the roles and functions of the group called teachers, and I can perform these roles to an appreciably high degree;
- I have "investments and commitments" to the goals and functions of the group. In other words, I have "core beliefs", developed over time, which are central to my membership of the group. My membership has involved an 'identity formation' over time which *personally* defines for me who I am;
- I have other roles I play – as a parent, community leader, church warden, etc., but these

others do not necessarily clash with or detract from my identity as teacher.

Put this way, we may begin to experience some comfort with the construct of teacher identity. But that comfort dissipates when we consider that that identity itself is subject to change across time and place. "New sets of circumstances that are external to the self" (Carson, 2005, p.2) may come into play in getting me to revise my own notions of my identity. This is what Carson (2005) calls "the significance and psychodynamics of teacher identity formation in education change" (p.3). He argues that transformational change implicates identity, and thus "the need to understand that identities are negotiated both inter-subjectively and intrasubjectively" (p.5).

From the perspective of the rapid (and sometimes profound) socio-political and economic transformation taking place in Africa, and the attempts to reposition and retool education to better serve this, perhaps we need to turn attention now to why we should be concerned with teacher identity in our education systems.

3. Why Should We Be Concerned about Teacher Identity?

I have called attention earlier to the on-going significant changes in government policies on education, and the restructuring of educational systems generally in Africa. It was contended that these reform efforts do not sufficiently posit the teacher as the locus of change. There is little evidence of empirical studies directed at teacher identity and professionalism as core determinants of how teachers perform their roles. At the time when there is a call for education to take the lead in the transformation process on the continent (Sifuna, 2001), little notice seems to be given to the place of teachers as "acting agents in educational reform movements" (Aoki, 1984, p.111). Studies elsewhere have tried to demonstrate how teachers are viewed differently by different publics, and how these views impact on teacher identity (Mockler, 2004). To speak about teacher identity "from an African perspective", therefore, may be justifiable especially when we consider Haber's (2005) contention that teacher professionalism and teacher identity are geographically contextualised; and that this has implications for initial and in-service education, not only for teachers but all education professionals.

In a study carried out in Tanzania, Komba and Nkumbi (2008) noted that much attention has not been paid to teacher professional development, even though it is widely acknowledged that pupils' learning outcomes are, ultimately, affected by teacher quality. Haber (2005), in his own work on teacher professionalism carried out in sub-Saharan Africa since 1977, quotes a South African Deputy Minister of Education as saying:

> *...Many of our teachers are not committed to quality teaching, their behaviour leaves much to be desired, are more interested in their own welfare, are not professional and dedicated, are never in school on time, pursue their studies at the expense of the children, do not prepare for lessons...* (Haber, 2005, p.7).

Haber asserts in that work that teachers being key factors in education reform, it is important to understand their beliefs, understanding and practices (their identity), not only for the purposes of successful policy implementation, but also for designing suitable in-service courses that would facilitate change. He cites a 1994 National Teacher Audit in South Africa which asserted that "many students in teacher education colleges did not have a genuine desire to teach" (Haber, 2005, p.8).

The scenario described above should be a familiar one in many other African countries. Teaching is, at best, considered a semi-profession which does not always attract the best candidates (it is jokingly referred to in Sierra Leone as a 'stepping stone' by young graduates). Adverse socio-economic circumstances have conspired to decrease teachers' economic and social standing, leading to general demotivation. The indications are that teachers do not seem to demonstrate the same sense of 'professionalism' as, for example, doctors, lawyers, and engineers do. On the whole, the "acute feelings of disempowerment and demoralisation of the teaching corps" that Haber (2005, p.8) fears seems to be happening now. Meanwhile, teacher education programmes seem to put more emphasis on the performance of roles with little regard for the development of teacher identity.

Let us expand a little more on why forming a teacher (or professional) identity is central in the process of effective teaching. Palmer (1997), asserts that "teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse" (p.1), and that "good teaching cannot be reduced to techniques; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p.2).

Collay (2006), on her part, argues that teaching should be accepted as "a moral enterprise" (p.6), and that "teachers' values define their practice" (p.1). What teachers do, and how they do it (their sense of purpose), has "deeply personal, intellectual, and moral dimensions that must be fully recognized" (p.5).

Mayer (1999) has made a distinction between 'teaching roles' and 'teaching identity':

> *A teaching role encapsulates the things the teacher does in performing the functions required of her/him as a teacher, whereas a teaching identity is a more personal thing and indicates how one identifies with being a teacher and how one feels as a teacher* (p.8).

She goes on to reiterate Britzman's (1992) point that "role speaks to function whereas identity voices investments and commitments" (Mayer, 1999, p.9). Recounting her own growth from student to teacher, Yerkes (2004) concludes that "teaching is all about who you are as a person", and that "teaching is difficult. If you do not know who you are as a person then teaching is going to be even harder" (p.3).

Considering then this critical role of 'identity' in determining how teachers perform their 'role', Graham & Phelps (2003) lament the limited opportunity provided in the teacher education context to "acknowledge, nurture and challenge the developing identity of the teacher" (p.1). As

they put it:

> *The critically important question of 'Who am I?' is subsumed by an emphasis on 'What do I have to do?' In establishing an identity as a teaching professional it is critical that teacher education students come to understand their identity as a lifelong learner and consequently, their own values, attitudes and beliefs as learners* (p.1).

Cross (2006) also reaches a similar conclusion in exploring *identity and language teacher education*:

> *...by understanding the formation of language teacher identity, and especially the relationship this has for teachers' classroom practice, it is clear that we need to rethink how that content knowledge of teaching can be infused with an understanding of the influence that teachers' broader contexts have for classroom practice* (p.8).

The above review has attempted to establish the centrality of teacher identity for educational policy implementation, effective classroom practice, and ultimately for teacher education. Sadly, this is a largely ignored construct in education research and discourse, as well as in policy planning and implementation in Africa. To start with, teachers may be quite unaware of policy development in the first place, and where they are, have not developed a professional identity robust enough for meaningful participation in it. Indeed, a commitment to teaching as a profession may not even be a strong part of all teachers' personal identity. Consequently, teachers in Africa, by and large, serve as 'recipients' of education reform and reconstruction rather than being key players in them. In a number of cases, their involvement is restricted to being participants at so-called 'stakeholders' conferences/workshops' where policies and programmes, prepared without their participation, are presented to them for their reaction and implementation.

Teacher education programmes also manifest severe shortcomings in addressing the issue of 'identity formation'. The approach to pre-service and in-service teacher preparation seems heavily focused on equipping teachers with the so-called 'knowledge base' in their individual subjects, and the 'appropriate' methods and techniques for communicating this knowledge to pupils. Little attention is paid to the formation of those core beliefs, values and attitudes that will, eventually, mediate their effectiveness as teachers. As Mayer (1999) has admonished:

> *Learning to teach is individualised, personalised and contextualised, and it is on-going. It happens within multiple contexts, and sometimes this causes dilemmas during identity formation. Therefore valuing personal theories and creating links to public theories, ensuring that the university-school links in teacher education are strong, and recognising the importance of linking preservice and inservice teacher education, are all crucial considerations for those responsible for preparing teachers* (p.14).

The nexus of teacher identity, professionalism, policy and practice appears to be well established in the theoretical considerations above. What seems to be lacking is the empirical foundation on which to anchor policy formulation on teachers' practices and quality and teacher professional development (both pre- and in-service) within an African context. We have notions of teachers going through something of a 'crisis' in their identity, one that is reflected in their low motivation, poor performance, and a general decline in the quality of education. While a few empirical studies have attempted to show this (e.g. Harding & Mansaray, 2005), much of the evidence we seem to have is anecdotal – with all the attendant weaknesses of this. What is needed now, perhaps, is evidence based on solid research and reflection.

4. Putting African Teacher Identity on the Research Agenda: In Search of a Paradigm

Considering the complexity of the construct of *teacher identity* which the above review has hopefully demonstrated, it seems reasonable to suggest that any meaningful investigation of it has to be contextual or situation-specific. It has been indicated that a number of factors combine to influence the identities teachers construct for themselves. The figure below is my attempt at categorising these factors.
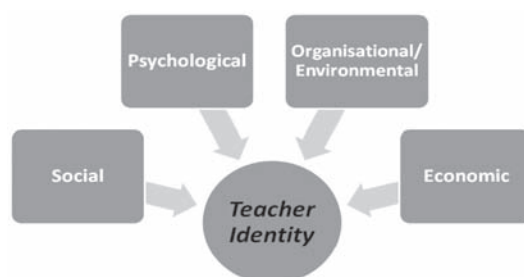

Fig. 1: Conceptual framework of factors influencing teacher identity in Africa

The factors in the conceptual framework above encapsulate the following:

1. *Economic*: Salary and emoluments, conditions of service, promptness of salary payment, etc.
2. *Social*: Perceptions of teachers by others (parents, pupils, community, education officials, etc.); interaction with teacher groups and other social groups; workplace interactions, etc.
3. *Psychological*: Teachers' perceptions of themselves; expressions of personal goals, values, attitudes; perceptions of roles and responsibilities; family background; experience, knowledge and skills, etc.
4. *Organisational/Environmental*: Existing policies, legislation, organisational structures and power relations (including school governance patterns); social norms; existing facilities; community support; prevailing national economic situation, etc.

It must be pointed out that these categories are not mutually exclusive and meaningful research must include how they interact. Moreover, there may be a number of other country-specific factors which may require the development of additional categories. In effect then, inquiry into teacher identity must adopt a multivariate approach.

It is usually said that meaningful research must be based on some existing theory. To this end, it is necessary to identify a theory or set of theories to provide a framework for our inquiry. Certainly, there is no shortage of theories of identity – philosophical, psychological and psychosocial. For our purposes in this paper, however, I will briefly review two related theories that I believe have a more direct relevance to our topic. These are Erik Erikson's *Psychosocial Theory of Development*, and its corollary, James Marcia's *Identity Status Theory*.

Erickson (1968), who was influenced by Sigmund Freud, explored three aspects of identity: the *ego identity* (self), *personal identity* (the personal idiosyncrasies that distinguish one person from another), and the *social/cultural identity* (the collection of social roles a person might play). He believed that the course of development is determined by the interaction of the body (genetic biological programming), mind (psychological), and cultural (ethos) influences.

Erikson's theory considers the impact of external factors, parents and society on personality development from childhood to adulthood. According to him, every person must pass through eight stages from birth to death:

1. *Infancy*: Birth to 18 Months – (Ego development outcome: *Trust vs. Mistrust*; Basic strengths: *Drive and Hope*)
2. *Early Childhood*: 18 Months to 3 Years – (Ego development outcome: *Autonomy vs. Shame*; Basic strengths: *Self-control*, *Courage*, and *Will*)
3. *Play Age*: 3 to 5 Years – (Ego development outcome: *Initiative vs. Guilt*; Basic strengths: *Purpose*)
4. *School Age*: 6 to 12 Years – (Ego development outcome: *Industry vs. Inferiority*; Basic strengths: *Method and Competence*)
5. *Adolescence*: 12 to 18 Years – (Ego development outcome: *Identity vs. Role Confusion*; Basic Strengths: *Devotion and Fidelity*)
6. *Young Adulthood*: 18 to 35 Years – (Ego development outcome: *Intimacy and Solidarity vs. Isolation*; Basic strengths: *Affiliation and Love*)
7. *Middle Adulthood*: 35 to 55 or 65 Years – (Ego development outcome: *Generativity vs. Self-absorption or Stagnation*; Basic Strengths: *Production and Care*)
8. *Late Adulthood*: 55 or 65 to Death – (Ego development outcome: *Integrity vs. Despair*; Basic Strengths: *Wisdom*) (Harder, 2009)

Perhaps the main significance of Erikson's theory for our purposes here is in his contention that our personality traits tend to come in opposites – we think of ourselves as either optimistic or pessimistic, emotional or unemotional, independent or dependent, leader or follower, adventurous of cautious, etc. According to him, while many of these are "inborn temperamental

traits", other characteristics, such as feeling either competent or inferior are learned, based on the challenges and support we receive (Harder, 2009). The young and middle adulthood stages may also concern us more as these correspond to the cohort of people we are concerned with – pre- and in-service teachers whose *identity* may have become more crystallised at these stages.

One of the objections to Erikson's theory is that in reality we do not go through life in the discrete stages suggested by him, i.e. we pass one stage and never return to it. Some psychologists (e.g. Harder, 2009; Marcia, 1966) see development as more of a spiralling cycle rather than as compartmentalised stages. The other objection is to the second of the two major themes on which his work is based, which are: 1) the world gets bigger as we go along, and 2) failure is cumulative. While the first assumption is taken for granted, many have taken an exception to the second, and have argued that "there's always the chance that somewhere along the way the strength of the human being can be ignited and deficits overcome" (Harder, 2009, p.2). Erikson's theory, nevertheless, could be of some value in our research paradigm in identifying, among other things, those predominant traits in teachers' identity.

The 'Identity Status Theory' of James Marcia (1966) is another that could be of value to our paradigm. Marcia actually refined and extended Erikson's model, primarily focusing on adolescent development. While Erikson had suggested that the "normative conflict" occurring in adolescence is the opposition between identity and confusion (what he identifies as 'identity crisis'), Marcia suggested that there is neither 'identity resolution' nor 'identity confusion' at this stage. Rather, he contends that it is the extent to which one has (or has not) explored and committed to an identity in a variety of life domains, including politics, religion, occupation, intimate relationships, friendships, and gender roles He identified two distinct parts that form adolescence identity: 1) a 'time of choosing or crisis', and 2) a 'commitment'. For him, a 'crisis' is a time of upheaval where old values or choices are being re-examined. The outcome of this process leads to a commitment to a certain value or role.

Marcia (1966) proposed four stages (or *Identity Statuses*) of psychological identity development:

1. *Identity Diffusion*: The status at which the individual has not yet made (nor is attempting/ willing to make) a choice. He is undecided about occupational and ideological choices, and is likely not showing much interest in such matters.
2. *Identity Foreclosure*: The stage at which there is willingness to commit to some relevant roles, values, or goals for the future, but there has been no 'identity crisis'. This occurs often when parents dictate to their adolescents what commitments to make before they have had the opportunity to explore a range of options.
3. *Identity Moratorium*: The adolescent is currently in a crisis at this stage, is exploring various commitments and ready to make choices, but has not made a commitment to these choices yet.
4. *Identity Achievement*: This is the status at which the adolescent, having gone through an 'identity crisis', has made a commitment to certain roles or values that he or she has

chosen.

Marcia cautions that these statuses are not stages and should not be viewed as a sequential process. Rather, his emphasis is that one's sense of identity is determined by the choices and commitments made regarding certain personal and social traits.

The value of this theory for us is that it provides a frame for determining whether (and why) individual teachers have made certain choices, and the extent to which they display the commitments relevant to the choices.

As I indicated earlier, these theories are, by no means, the only ones that could provided the conceptual foundations for our inquiry into African teachers' identity. My personal opinion, however, is that they have the quality to provide directions that are relatively easy to follow in designing and implementing the much needed research in this area, especially with regard to the individual teacher's motivation and commitment to teaching as a career.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have addressed the issue of teacher identity, and argue for a more definitive place for African teacher identity in the research agenda, as well as in the policy formulation and implementation process of African states. It is apparent that not much attention has been paid to the related issues of teacher identity and teacher professionalism in the on-going education reform process of many African countries. Meanwhile, it is clear that teachers' professional profiles, their motivation, and how they perform their critical functions are increasingly becoming a cause of concern. This is especially so when one considers the apparent decline in the quality of education that is observed in our education systems. It is something of a truism that ultimately, the success of any education system depends to a considerable extent on how teachers perform their roles and exercise their professionalism. This in turn depends, among other things, on the identity they construct for themselves, and how this identity propels them to achieve their individual and collective goals of teaching, as this paper has tried to show.

The review done in this paper has shown that teacher identity is itself a complex construct which is formed in multiple contexts. It is the outcome of an intricate interplay of group participation and the personal goals set by the individual, and the degree of commitment to these goals. The identity so constructed defines the professionalism of the teacher.

The questions that keep recurring in my mind as I write this paper are 'who are our teachers?' 'What do they bring with them into teaching (in terms of qualifications, perceptions and motivation)?' 'How committed are they to the profession, and what informs that commitment, or lack of it?' 'What is the nexus of teacher identity, professionalism and education performance?' 'In what ways can teacher education influence teachers' construction of their identity?' 'Who does in fact *teach* our teachers?' To my mind, answers to these questions are pivotal to our efforts at designing teacher development programmes and policies that would produce the calibre of teachers needed to achieve our educational goals on the continent.

Research plays a critical role in this regard.

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