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Teachers' Life-history Narratives and Reform Policy Implementation at Classroom Level

Abstract

In many countries across the world, teaching is regarded as a noble profession. However, in some countries, it has degenerated into a low status occupation. This qualitative study explores the life-history of four Zimbabwean teachers and how they were implementing the New Curriculum Framework 2015-2022. The self-identity theory provides the framework for this life-story narrative. Data were collected using three-tier semi-structured interviews, non-participatory lessons observations and document analysis. Findings indicate that individuals join teaching for a myriad of reasons. For some it may not be their first, second, or even third career choice. Teachers' life histories seemed to promote or constrain reform implementation. It was interesting that one participant, who became a history teacher by accident appeared to enjoy the profession and embraced the new curriculum. Systematic career guidance and improved remuneration can assist in recruiting committed and gifted individuals to the teaching profession; thereby improving teacher retention and increasing chances of reform implementation.

Keywords: life-history narrative, career aspirations, self-identity, reform implementation, classroom practice

Introduction

In some countries teaching is a profession for those who fail to secure more lucrative careers in the private and public sectors. Low remuneration, long working hours, and low status impact negatively on the teaching profession in the USA (Klimek, 2019). Consequently, most American states face perennial shortages of licensed teachers because few university graduates are attracted to the profession.

Several studies reveal that careers with low remuneration and status attract less talented individuals (Klimek, 2019; Abdul-Rahaman et al., 2018; Shih, 2016). Conversely, careers that are perceived as better paying and prestigious (like engineering, medicine, and pharmacology) attract talented people, elevating the status of these professions. In Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, for instance, teachers are relatively well remunerated and enjoy high social status (Shih, 2016; Lim, 2014), attracting talented individuals to pursue careers in education.

In contrast, teachers in Africa earn very little and have low social status. In most African countries teachers earn less than US\$100 per month (York, 2019). In Zimbabwe, for example, teachers earn an average of US\$2.50 a day (Bulawayo 24News, 2019). Low salaries increase African teachers' economic hardships, demoralising them. This increases attrition out of the profession, undermining the quality of instruction.

Purpose of the paper

Numerous studies have investigated early career aspirations and why individuals become teachers (Memo, 2019; Bergmark et al., 2018; Han & Yin, 2016; Richardson & Watt, 2006). However, there is paucity of research on how teachers' life histories influence classroom practice. Jita (2004) explored how individuals' early life experiences shape classroom practice when they become teachers. The central argument in this paper is that teachers' life histories are resources that can promote reform implementation; or constraints that undermine change. The question driving this life-story narrative, therefore, is: How does a teacher's life-history promote or constrain reform implementation at classroom level?

Review of related literature

Career aspirations revolve around the type of work students want to do in future. One's career aspirations are generally influenced by personal interest and external factors like family background, school experiences and prospects for career advancement.

Motivation to join teaching

The reasons why individuals choose the teaching profession are multifarious. In developed countries, intrinsic and altruistic motivations appear to be the pull factors (Bergmark et al., 2018; Han & Yin, 2016). These include a desire to work with students, a drive to impart knowledge and offer service to society, and the opportunity to continue learning. However, extrinsic factors appear to motivate individuals to join teaching in the developing world. A regular salary, job security and career status are valued more than intrinsic and altruistic motives. Shih (2016, p. 44) observes that some teachers in the developing world "entered teaching by accident or were even forced to choose teaching because it was the only job available".

Different motivations to join teaching may be an indicator of the different socio-economic contexts in developed and developing countries. In the developed world school leavers have wider career choices, while in developing countries career opportunities are limited.

Teacher attrition

Worldwide, teacher attrition has been attributed to low remuneration, long working hours, heavy workloads, low status, and limited career advancement. This has resulted in teacher shortages in many countries. In the past decades, teacher shortages have been reported in the USA, Australia, UK, Germany, and Norway (Klimek, 2019). Taylor and Robinson (2019) estimate that more than 3.2 million trained teachers are needed worldwide, and two-thirds (2.2 million) of these vacancies are in Africa. "Nowhere in the world do teachers work in more challenging situations than deprived areas in African countries", remark Abdul-Rahaman et al. (2018, p. 103), making teaching less attractive to school leavers and university graduates.

Theoretical framework

This paper is illuminated by the self-identity theory because life-stories attempt to answer the question “who am I among others?” (Pan et al., 2017, p. 76). The theory can be divided into two related categories: individual self-identity and social self-identity. Individual self-identity is what separates a person from the other people in a social group. “Groups tell us who we are, and who we are not” (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019, p. 3). So, social self-identity is how one sees him/herself in relation to other people.

The self-identity theory was selected as an appropriate framework for this study because participants were afforded the opportunity to narrate their early career aspirations and why/how they became teachers. Guided by the self-identity theory, the life-history narrative was selected as the research design for this study.

Methodology

A qualitative life-history narrative was adopted to explore teacher biographies and how they were implementing curriculum reform policy. Zhao (2008, p. 186) explains that: “A teacher’s life-history in education refers to his or her formative experiences, which influence the ways in which teachers think about teaching and subsequently their actions in their practice.”

Before undertaking fieldwork, ethical clearance was sought and granted by the University of the Free State and the Ministry of Education in Zimbabwe. Out of thirteen secondary schools in one school district in Harare, four schools were purposively sampled. One history teacher was selected from each school. The criteria were a minimum of five years’ teaching experience and a degree in history pedagogy. Participants voluntarily participated in the study and were informed of their right to withdraw, if they so wished.

Interviews, lesson observations and document analysis were used to gather data over an eight-week period. Each teacher was interviewed at the pre-observation, intermittent and exit stages, culminating in 12 interviews. Non-participatory lesson observations were conducted. The aim was to observe each teacher twice a week. However, because of unanticipated disruptions a total of 47 lessons were observed. The New Curriculum Framework 2015-2022 and History Syllabus 4044 were analysed to understand reform expectations.

Data were transcribed, coded, and categorised into themes. Intra-case analysis was used to construct each teacher’s life-story and how s/he was implementing the new curriculum.

Findings

Two themes emerged during data analysis: early career aspirations and the influence of life-history on reform implementation. These themes were used to construct each teacher’s life-story.

The story of Angela: Teacher by default

Early career aspirations

Angela had a Master's degree in Development Studies, a Bachelor of Arts with Education in History, and 10 years' teaching experience. She recounted that: "At secondary school history was my favourite subject because I wanted to be a lawyer, a police officer, or a nurse. I never thought of teaching."

How she missed her occupational dreams sounds like a fairy tale. After completing Advanced Level in 2001, Angela could not secure a place to study law at the University of Zimbabwe. With her first career choice frustrated, she joined the police force. But she withdrew after one week of training because she was offered a more lucrative nursing opportunity in the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, her visa was delayed. She lost the chance. She then enrolled for a four-year degree in History and Education and began her teaching career in January 2007.

Influence of life-history on reform implementation

Angela was unhappy with her identity as a teacher. She lamented: "Sometimes I regret because of the low remuneration in the profession... I feel that if I had become a police officer, with all my degrees, I could have moved up the ranks." She lambasted the new curriculum as a diktat:

Yes, we are implementing because that is what we are instructed to do. But deep down in our hearts we are not convinced... and the whole effort is a failure because teachers have not changed their practice. The new syllabus requires us to use the internet and interactive boards, but all these things are not available.

In the 13 lesson observations Angela's efforts to use learner-centric pedagogy appeared cosmetic. She always reverted to teacher-talk and dictation, attributing her failure to reform practice to resource shortages.

In the exit interview she stressed that: "To be honest, teaching is no longer in me. I still have ambitions. I am thinking of lecturing. I want to leave the classroom..."

The case of Bessie: History teacher by accident

Early career aspirations

Bessie had a Diploma in Education, a Bachelor of Education in History and ten years' experience. She remembered that: "When I was in secondary school, I used to hate history. I was very quiet... I was not born a teacher." She explained why she joined the profession:

I became a teacher because of the rural areas I grew up in. What you only saw was the teacher. At the end of the month you saw them wearing new clothes, every time you went into the staffroom you saw them eating delicious food... They ended up being my role models.

It is interesting that Bessie was teaching a subject she used to hate. She narrated that: "The way our history teacher taught was monotonous. He would give us voluminous notes and assign someone who was eloquent to dictate the notes." Despite her hatred of history, she passed it.

The turning point in Bessie's attitude towards history occurred after completing school. She recalled that: "I decided to become a history teacher in 2004 when I was doing temporary teaching. I was asked to teach history and realised history was an interesting subject..."

Influence of life-history on reform implementation

Bessie embraced the new curriculum when it was introduced in January 2017 because “The new methods in the new curriculum are familiar as I covered them at university.” But in the 10 lessons she was observed, she often abandoned learner-centred methods once students failed to respond to her questions. She would remark: “So, you don’t want to talk? Then take the following notes.” And she would start dictating. Although she had a positive attitude towards the new curriculum, Bessie failed to implement its pedagogical requirements, maybe because of her late turning point to history.

In the exit interview she summarised her identity as a history teacher: “Now I am enjoying teaching. I can manage pupils. I think teachers can be trained, like me. I really was trained to become one.”

The story of David: A preordained future

Early career aspirations

The holder of a Master’s in Educational Management, a Bachelor’s in History, and a Diploma in Education; David had 25 years’ teaching experience. He recalled that: “At one point I wanted to be a policeman. I wanted to be a Patrol Officer. During those days Patrol Officers had large motorbikes and I really liked their uniform.” But with the movement of time this dream fizzled. He explained why: “When I was growing up my father used to say: ‘This one is going to be a teacher, like me.’ This made me aspire to be a teacher at an early age.”

David’s family background and secondary education were instrumental in making him a teacher. He narrated that: “My father always wanted me to be a teacher. I also liked the way Mr. Moyo [pseudonym] was teaching us. I thought one day I would like to be a history teacher, like him...” Thus, David was directly influenced by his father and history teacher to become a teacher.

Influence of life-history on reform implementation

Although he joined teaching willingly as a first career choice, David’s classroom practice was largely at variance with the learner-centred expectations of the new curriculum. In the nine lessons he was observed teaching, he used some learner-centric pedagogy, but his practice remained teacher dominated. He justified his methodology: “The teacher remains the master of the subject. Some of the textbooks students use lack facts and that is where the knowledge of the teacher becomes very important.”

For David implementing reform was a matter of choice but becoming a teacher was preordained. He was proud that “teaching is a legacy passed on by my father and I have the duty to protect and perpetuate the family tradition”.

The case of Emmy: A legacy bequeathed

Early career aspirations

In this study Emmy stood out as a history teacher cut from a different block of wood. She had eleven years’ experience and was the holder of a Bachelor of Arts Honours’ in History, and a Post-Graduate Diploma in Education. For Emmy,

teaching history was a dream come true. “I am a teacher, born a teacher by nature. I enjoy teaching”, she said in the pre-observation interview. She viewed teaching history as a legacy bequeathed by her brother.

She articulated her life-story: “When I was in secondary school my brother was a history teacher, so I used to have all the textbooks I needed ... My brother influenced me to be a history teacher. I cannot rule that out. He still is my role model.” Emmy appeared to have an emotional attachment to her job as a history teacher.

Influence of life-history on reform implementation

In the 15 lessons Emmy was observed teaching, she engaged students in the study of primary and secondary sources. She used text, picture, and map study; individual and group presentations; role playing; debate and discussions, as recommended in the reform documents. Her approach was that students write notes on their own before a topic was taught. The lessons then explored the topic in-depth using learner-centred activities.

Emmy was the only teacher in this study who did not use the lecture method, dictate, or write notes on the chalkboard. “There is no room for dictation in the new curriculum”, she remarked. Her classroom practice lived up to her word and conformed with reform prescriptions. “I think my background is useful in explaining my classroom practice”, she said in the exit interview. “I have my honours’ degree in history. I am into history, I love it.” Her classroom practice vindicated her.

Discussion

The purpose of this life-history narrative was to examine how individuals’ life histories can be resources or constraints for reform implementation. Some findings were unique and interesting. For instance, David’s story showed that the fulfilment of one’s career aspirations does not necessarily make one a reform-oriented teacher. David became a history teacher by choice and was aware that the new history curriculum required him to use learner-centred pedagogy. But he still believed that the history teacher remains the master of the subject, undermining reform policy. Bessie became a history teacher by accident. As a secondary school student, she hated history. But she now enjoyed teaching history and embraced the new curriculum, though she struggled to implement its pedagogical prescriptions.

However, some findings echoed previous studies. Richardson and Watt (2006) established that teachers who are intrinsically motivated to join the profession are more likely to adopt learner-centred practice. Teaching was a first career choice for Emmy, and she practiced learner-centric pedagogy. Angela was in the classroom “by default” (Zhao, 2008, p. 189). Zhao uses this concept to denote a scenario in which an individual is forced by circumstances to become a teacher. Angela studied history education because her career aspirations to become a lawyer, a police officer or a nurse were frustrated. This may partly explain her reluctance to implement reform policy. Angela’s desire to leave teaching resonates with previous studies (Martin & Mulvihill, 2016; Klimek, 2019) which established that demoralised teachers look for an opportunity to exit the profession in search for greener pastures.

Conclusion

Teachers' life histories can be resources that promote reform implementation or constraints that undermine it. It was interesting that one participant who joined teaching as a first career choice was less receptive to change, while the other who became a history teacher by accident embraced curriculum reform. Future studies can explore the other factors that work in tandem with teacher biography to promote or hinder reform implementation. Systematic career guidance and improved remuneration can assist in recruiting gifted and committed individuals to teaching, thereby improving teacher retention and commitment to reform implementation.

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