



“... by seeking help I became equipped, skilled and enlightened”: Ugandan tutors’ stories, identities and spaces for professional development in teacher colleges.

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## Introduction

The title of this paper is taken from a story written by Norah Nakitto, a tutor at Jinja Primary Teachers’ College (PTC) in Uganda. Like a majority of stories generated during a storytelling research project with Ugandan tutors, Norah’s focuses on professional learning. In this paper we explore tutor learning and professional identity in the context of national programmes promoting more inclusive and equitable teaching at the primary level (MOES 2019, UNAPD 2019), which have an impact on how tutors are expected to work.

We draw on an analysis of 39 stories from research led by the TESSA (Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa) programme in collaboration with Kyambogo University. The study was initiated to understand the impact of a TESSA-MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) on tutors’ practices. However, the early stages of the research suggested that, despite well-articulated examples of impact from those who had engaged with it, uptake in the Ugandan PTCs was limited; none of the tutors who participated in the storytelling strand were aware of the MOOC. As these tutors worked in colleges where staff members had participated in a workshop to introduce the MOOC, this raised questions about knowledge-sharing. The research focus shifted to learning and collaboration in colleges to better understand the mechanisms for knowledge sharing, and the research design was adapted accordingly.

Educational outcomes for children in Uganda remain low (Bold et al. 2017) with teachers frequently reported to lack the pedagogical skills and subject knowledge to deliver the curriculum. Of 2.5 million children with a physical or cognitive disability in Uganda, only 9% attend primary school, and there are reports of insufficient support and higher-than-average drop out for these children (Baguma 2017). Teachers are said to struggle with tensions between international and national frameworks for inclusion and their structural, cultural and financial school contexts (Bannink et al 2019). PTCs produce around 7000 primary teachers each year (Kyeyune 2011) so the implication is that changes are needed in these institutions - yet little is known about the professional lives of PTC tutors. Much of the limited literature available depicts a conservative cohort of professionals, unprepared for their role, who feel under-valued in the tertiary education hierarchy, and who are resistant to change (see O’Sullivan 2010). This research aimed to move beyond this persistent characterisation. Tutors were asked to share a story that gave insight into their profession. The stories were then analysed to respond to the following questions:

1. What factors impact on the professional identity of college tutors in Uganda?
2. In developing their identity as a teacher educator, what is important to them?

Space prevents us from sharing the stories here, rather we focus on emerging themes which relate particularly to the conference sub-theme of inclusion. A book of the stories is being prepared and will be available online at the end of August 2019.

## Context

In a global review of 137 papers about teacher education, only two were from Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Lunenburg et al 2014). The key message from a rather limited literature over the past two decades is that teacher educators across SSA are inappropriately recruited, under-qualified, discontented with their status, overburdened and unsupported (see Ballantyne 1999; Robinson 2003; Baiyelo and Oke 2015; O’Sullivan 2010). They are positioned as experts within institutions (Akyeampong 2017; Buckler 2019; Murphy and Wolfenden 2013) but often depicted as inadequate in the literature, responsible for many of the failings at the school level (see also Obanya 2015; Ogunyemi and Agbatogun 2015). In addition, much of the literature fails to recognise

teacher educators as learners and takes very little account of what they need to learn, for what purpose and how this learning might come about. This matters, because policy aspirations across SSA are asking for new approaches to teaching (MoE 2012, MGE 2013). If teachers are being expected to teach in more inclusive ways, then teacher educators need to change as well.

In this paper we build on the work of Murphy and Wolfenden (2013), Buckler (2019) and Stutchbury (2019) - as well as the TESSA programme more generally - all of whom have emphasised the need for more dialogue between teacher educators to support their learning and professional identities.

There are 45 government-funded teacher colleges in Uganda. In 2007 the minimum qualification for tutors was upgraded from a Diploma in Teacher Education (DTE) to a Bachelor of Education. Kyomuhendo and Kasule (2017) emphasise the cultural importance given to tutor professional knowledge in Uganda, an emphasis reinforced through high-status international assessments of educators in Ugandan settings (e.g. Wane and Martin 2016). The government also introduced an additional qualification - Certificate of Teacher Education Proficiency (CTEP) - but less than half of the 900 tutors who took the course passed the examinations (Kyeyune 2011). O'Sullivan (2010) reports that CTEP did not support pedagogic change or model the pedagogy that was promoted. In relation to inclusion, the thematic curriculum, introduced in 2006, aims to more effectively engage all learners, with a particular emphasis on those with special needs (Altinyelken 2010). In 2017 the Ugandan National Action on Physical Disability group launched a country-wide awareness raising campaign for the education sector (UNAPD 2019). More generally, the Ugandan Government continue to invest in and direct international funds towards teacher education. A recent Ministry of Education report highlighted four major recent investments in teacher education by the World Bank and the Government, including £4m for PTC development (MOES 2017). This report also noted a key challenge as the 'over glorification of university education' and the 'negative perception of vocational-skills training' (p.10). Teacher education at PTCs sits somewhat uneasily between the two.

### Teacher educator professional identity

This study is based on the premise that *'ultimately the quality of teacher education programmes is a reflection of the state of the hearts and minds of teacher educators and of their desire and ability to imagine their work in new and refreshing ways and then to take concerted action to realise their visions'* (Dinkleman 2011:309). Having a clear sense of 'who they are' ('hearts and minds') and 'what they do' (how they imagine their work) is necessary to help teacher educators to respond to the changing context in which they work (Davey 2010). 'Who they are' and 'what they do' can be expressed through the concept of professional identity. Professional identity emerges as actors (teacher educators) take action in their setting (colleges of education) (Stutchbury 2019). If we can find out about their professional identity it will provide insights into how they are constrained and empowered in their role, and what sort of professional development might enhance their capacity to respond to changing contexts and policies.

A review of the teacher education research reveals slightly different perspectives on professional identity, depending on whether a socio-cultural stance (e.g. Menter 2011, Swennen et al. 2010), a psychological perspective (e.g. Murray and Male, 2005) or a post-structural view (eg White 2014, Dinkleman 2011) is adopted. Drawing on Davey (2010) we take the view that professional identity embraces all of these perspectives and is:

1. both personal and social in origin;
2. multifaceted and fragmented, as well as evolving and shifting in nature, in response to national and institutional policies;
3. involves emotional states and value commitments;
4. involves some sense of group membership.

How tutors carry out their role (their agency) will be constrained and empowered by the social structures in which they operate (Archer, 1995). In the context of teacher education, this will include their past history, their experience as a teacher, the political and cultural environment in which they work, the resources available to them, their relationships with students and other professionals, and their professional knowledge. Through taking action in their social setting, their professional identity will emerge. Complementing Davey (2010) with Scott (2010), we propose that the professional identity of teacher educators will have a number of dimensions:

- Past histories including roles and experiences (points 1 and 3 above)
- The professional knowledge they hold and value (points 1, 2 and 3)

- How they see this complex role (2 and 4)
- The political, institutional and cultural environment in which they work and their response to that environment (2, 3 and 4).
- The relationships they have within the institution with peers, teachers and students (1, 3 and 4)
- Their sense of agency (1 and 2).

From our collective experience of working with teacher educators at the college level in Uganda, we recognise that they are not often encouraged to examine their own practice or question the status quo – reflexivity and reflexive discourse are not common. Yet this does not mean that they are not ‘agentive’ in many ways. For example, they often negotiate difficult economic or political situations and create opportunities for themselves. Their agency is not necessarily directed towards pedagogic changes, and the challenge for teacher education is to understand how it might be (see Pawson and Tilley 1997). This challenge shaped the second research question which acknowledges that professional identity is in part self-constructed - people can and do have agency in relation to how they develop their sense of self. In this research we were interested in recognising tutors’ professional identity and what this means for their practice - through a methodology based on storytelling.

### Using a storytelling approach to explore identity and agency

‘Stories’ are often associated with fiction or entertainment. But the process of generating (non-fiction) stories through research aims to be as rigorous as other qualitative approaches such as interviewing and focus groups. In fact, these methods are often used to help build the narrative and generate data in addition to the story itself. Krueger (2018) outlines the disciplined inquiry necessary for story research; a process which demands focused preparation, and follows pre-determined, deliberate and transparent steps to generate, document and analyse stories with research participants.

Storytelling - as we use it in this research - positions the storyteller at the heart of their story. It helps us to understand how they see themselves in relation to the structures within which they exist and how they see themselves in relation to other people in these structures (Bhaskar 1994). The use of storytelling in research is increasingly understood to ‘both humanise and politicise learning processes’ (Wheeler et al 2018:1). It doesn’t just extract knowledge from participants, but supports them to think about and share their experiences differently.

In July 2018, 39 tutors at eight PTCs across Uganda were asked to develop and share a story about their professional experiences. The process was supported by the research-fieldwork team which consisted of two UK-based and two Ugandan academics.

In this research we drew from the transformative storytelling approach developed by Wheeler et al (2018) but adapted it to be workable in one-day workshops<sup>1</sup>. At each college, through a range of creative activities tutors were supported to write a story about their work; a story they thought would help people to understand what it was like to be a tutor in Uganda. While the stories are - for each tutor - a personal story, the iterative nature of the workshop activities facilitated a telling and re-telling their story within the group. This allows for shifts in understanding of how stories link to the stories of others, and the wider society in which they are positioned (Trees and Kellas 2009).

This approach, therefore, resonated with our conceptual frameworks of professional identity, in particular Bruner’s ideas about the symbiotic nature between ‘our experience of human affairs’ and ‘the narrative we use in telling about them’ (1996:132). We drew on the work of Jackson (2013) and the idea that when we tell stories to other people about our experiences, we transform our sense of who we are. The space to iteratively articulate an experience or a moment and shape it into a coherent narrative can help people to see how they are - or could be - ‘actors and agents in the face of experiences that make [them] feel insignificant, unrecognised or powerless’ (*ibid* p.17).

The ‘data’, therefore, consists of 39 stories (between 200-1000 words in length). The analysis process for stories naturally differs from that of other qualitative data, given the differences between a series of prompted, un-

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<sup>1</sup> We recognise that the transformative element of the approach is not possible to achieve in one day, however, we strove to maintain the core principles including the epistemological underpinnings, and emphasis on iteration, listening and trust.

prepared narrative responses across a range of topics usually generated through interviews, and a deliberately and iteratively constructed account of an event: ‘a story [...] does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength’ (Benjamin 1973). We do not suggest that the stories provide a comprehensive account of the tutor experience, rather an insight into how they see themselves and/or how they want to be seen by their colleagues and the outside world.

We are in the process of a two-stage analysis. We first aimed to identify this ‘concentrated strength’ and looked for symbolic archetypes (see Lewis 2011) framed around the six dimensions of teacher educator professional identity set out above. We asked ourselves ‘what dimension does this story *mainly* speak to?’ We each identified one archetype per story, before sharing and debating these until we (as a group) agreed on one per story. We are currently re-reading the stories looking for themes which emerge from and across the stories. We are asking ourselves ‘what is the tutor communicating with this story?’ in order to elicit what appeared to be important to the tutors. Throughout, we are linking both the archetypes and themes back to Davey’s (2010) framing of professional identity. Our intention is to develop an understanding of the tutors’ professional identity that is rooted in the literature, but is not constrained by it: we want to acknowledge and highlight tutors’ agency in constructing a sense of professional self. In the next section we briefly describe the college context. We then present some emerging highlights of this analysis.

### The college context

All colleges in the study were set in spacious, carefully kept grounds, with lush green spaces and freshly-painted buildings. The workshops tended to take place in a library block, most of which had been recently built as part of a government upgrading programme. The libraries were full of books, but mainly consisted of multiple copies of a limited number of textbooks. There were signs banning students and tutors from taking their own books or electronic devices into the libraries. Only two of the eight colleges had public internet access, and one of these only had one working computer. We invited tutors to bring laptops to the workshops, but only one tutor did. This meant that stories were scripted and edited by hand, and also gives an insight into the more general access to computers (and, as suggested by one of the Ugandan researchers, the practice of not using personal computers for work activities). The majority of tutors had internet access on their phones, although connectivity was expensive and unreliable. Only half of the tutors had email addresses. Most colleges had accommodation blocks for tutors, but these were not large enough to accommodate all staff, and some tutors spent several hours a day travelling between their home and the college. Tutors were allocated to a particular subject - usually (although not always) based on their previous training or experience. Professional development opportunities were usually ad hoc and not formally connected to promotions.

### Emerging findings

In ‘*Kange: the special needs student?*’, Grace Nandera from Kaliro PTC writes about a time when she - having recently attended a special education training programme - was the only tutor on an interview panel willing to give a place to a potential student with a visual impairment. In the story she describes the futility of trying to convince her colleagues that the student could be a capable teacher. She concludes with a call for more training on inclusion.

This story is interesting for several reasons. First, it was the only one to explicitly focus on the issue of inclusion - surprising, given the national awareness-raising programme and emphasis on inclusion in the curriculum. Second, it highlights a prevailing valuing of formal learning over collegial discourse, and third, Grace positions herself and her knowledge as detached from that of her peers. On one level, this is not surprising; this particular storytelling approach encourages participants to put themselves at the centre of their story. But while some stories did emphasise the importance of collegial learning - “*The tutoring journey brings with it extended, life-long friendships with colleagues who become people to learn from, and learn with.*” (Peter Maina, Iganga PTC) - the notion of working independently and learning independently, was a much more regularly recurring theme.

However, independently or not, learning was seen as central to their role. While much of the literature positions teacher educators’ practice in Sub-Saharan Africa as static and resistant to change, most tutors in this research presented themselves as dynamic and *committed* to change. Of the 39 stories, 20 were categorised under the archetype of ‘professional knowledge’. The second stage of analysis revealed that twenty six of the stories emphasised a need for tutors to continue learning throughout their career, mainly by describing how their own practice had developed and what had inspired this development. Two focused on a personal epiphany following a dramatic incident, four stories referenced the memory of their own tutors in inspiring and shaping their

practice, and four emphasised the importance of doing their own research and going beyond what was in the text books. Eight stories emphasised the importance of formal training courses or programmes:

*“I used to use the lecture method – just as I had been taught. I would prepare my notes from the textbooks, stand at the front and deliver my lecture. Afterwards the class was usually somewhat quiet. I never really knew if they had taken the knowledge in, or not. Then, I was invited to a workshop on different methods of teaching Science. My eyes were opened up! I quickly developed an urge to try practical methods! Only a week after I attended the workshop, the opportunity arose...”* (William Okoboi, Kaliro PTC)

However, the most common theme related to tutors’ learning was the importance of trying out new techniques and then reflecting on student interest, behaviour, feedback and marks to evaluate their effectiveness:

*“Later the students were amazed that the salt that had formed was of the same nature, colour and taste that they had dissolved in their water earlier on. They began to shout ‘Wooh! This science is truly a miracle!’ and ‘A miracle has happened!’. I realised how different their excitement was [...]. Their reaction just made me feel it was my best lesson as a tutor!”* (Terah Mahono, Kaliro PTC)

Ideas about inclusion, as an implicit rather than explicit focus, therefore, were present in 22 stories. This included descriptions of more practical and engaging approaches like the two examples above, but also of getting to know students, understanding their personal challenges, finding out what interests them, and giving them extra support. In one case, the tutor was proud that this extra support involved subversive behaviour in which he protected the students from an authoritarian principal. Another wrote about a student who found Kiswahili difficult and didn’t concentrate in class, until he discovered she was amused by learning Kiswahili translations for insults and used this to spark her interest in the subject.

Finally, it is interesting to consider how tutors portrayed the profession within their stories. Above we outlined how teacher educators are portrayed as both experts and deficient simultaneously. Almost all of the stories, whatever the focus, contained an explicit or implicit message about the value of the tutor role: to society in general, or personal examples of being celebrated by others for their work:

*“A tutor’s students are like arrows which shoot up in various directions, and every arrow has a catch, which is a successful career. I have trained students who have gone on to become classroom teachers, of course, but also politicians, head teachers, mentors and counsellors... I like to think of this: each year about 500 students pass through my hands. These students go on to become teachers and will, on average, teach 100 children. Many of these children will be inspired by the teachers I taught, and they too will join the college... and they too will become teachers and teach 100 children, and the journey continues”* (Peter Maina, Iganga PTC).

*“... students often come to me and ask ‘once I am a teacher, what does it take to become a tutor? When does one become a tutor?’ So there has been a great change in how people see me and I appreciate being greatly respected. But the greatest change has been in myself. As a tutor I have greater knowledge and I am always learning. I am proud, I feel confident, and I feel really valuable now”* (Haruna Karunga, Kaliro PTC).

## Reflections and conclusions

We are still in the process of analysing the stories. However, taken together, they reveal a group which values the professional knowledge that they hold and see themselves as more expert than the teachers they are preparing. They enjoy the recognition this brings and feel pride when their students do well. They are caring, motivated and will seek advice when they encounter difficulties.

However, it needs to be remembered that they are working in the context of a radical new thematic curriculum, asking for more participatory and inclusive approaches to teaching. While the underpinning ideas around inclusion were present in the tutors’ depiction of their work, it is widely reported that classrooms in Uganda are not supporting the learning of all children (Bannink et al 2019). There is no mention - either explicitly or implicitly - of the collective effort required to respond to such a big change: challenges were articulated as personal; while there were examples - like in Norah’s story - of having taken or given advice to someone, the challenge and ultimately the solution lay with the tutor themselves, in their own classrooms. This is also apparent in the way the tutors write about success in their role; it is mainly linked to students’ immediate enthusiasm for or understanding of a particular idea or concept, and/or validated by a high pass-rate in their examinations. Success is only linked to the ongoing work of their students in primary school classrooms in three of the 39 stories. While the notion of group membership (Davey 2010) is important in the shaping of their

professional identity, there was no sense of being part of a professional *team* - people working together to recognise, discuss and address the national-level task of how to prepare teachers for a new, more inclusive context. This builds on an observation from Moon and Umar (2013: 234): 'Within the teacher educator community there is [...] a resistance to change'. Moon and Umar attribute this partly to a culture of individualism in which the autonomy in the classroom extends to all aspects of their work and meetings are administrative rather than discursive or developmental: on the contrary, the desire to change among these tutors is strong, but the individualism culture is still evident.

The storytelling methodology gave the tutors the opportunity to demonstrate their agency. They were collected in a context in which pedagogic change is being asked for in teaching and teacher education, and to some extent what is not said reveals as much as what was chosen by the participants to tell us (Rosiek and Heffernan 2014). This study was initiated following activities linked to professional change from the TESSA network. Direct questions about TESSA revealed very little interest or awareness, which in the policy context of the new curriculum was surprising. The reasons for this are unclear and will be the focus of ongoing research, although Schweisfurth (2011) points towards an over-ambitious and un-resourced reform process. These stories show an individual willingness to embrace change and develop professional knowledge (including around inclusive teaching and learning), but without a collective effort - and support for teacher educators to work as a collective - it may be unlikely to have the desired impact on teachers' work in schools.

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