

## NAVIGATING THE TEACHERS' AND THE SUBJECT'S IDENTITY: A CASE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

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### Abstract

This paper explores how out-of-the-field Social Sciences teachers negotiate the Social Sciences teacher's identity without the requisite professional training in the Social Sciences. Teachers' professional identities as subject experts are shaped and reshaped by their PCK, agency, and context. The placement and allocation of teachers with random subjects, regardless of their specialization areas, has ramifications for their identity as teachers and professional development. With the increasing educational inventions and developments emerging daily in the education realm, teachers must have a nuanced comprehension of who they are when teaching the subjects they have been assigned. While there is a plethora of studies on teacher identity, particularly that of novice teachers, it is equally important to comprehend how the out-of-the-field teachers (novice and experienced) negotiate their teacher's identity in relation to the subjects they are compelled to teach without professional training to do so. Accordingly, the paper explores the challenges encountered by out-of-the-field teachers teaching Social Sciences in negotiating a Social Sciences teacher's identity. The study used James Gee's concepts strands/perspectives on identity formation as a theoretical framework. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with participants and processed through a thematic data analysis approach. The findings revealed that out-of-the-field teachers face challenges with content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, interpretation of Social Sciences CAPs, and innovation in their Social Sciences classrooms. Thus, these factors have detrimental effects on the formation of a Social Sciences identity teacher, which is formed on the basis of strong content knowledge, as well as other factors. Instead, these teachers' identities are developed and sustained through the institutional identity.

**Keywords:** *Teacher's identity, out-of-the-field teachers, social sciences, social sciences CAPs.*

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### 1. Introduction and background

In the teaching profession, 'identity' is paramount for many reasons, including its association with several practices and discourses. The teacher's and subject's identities serve as a cornerstone of teaching; they give the subject an essence and guide the teacher on how to deal with the subject matter. Brooks (2016) asserts that if teachers can be seen as working in a professional knowledge landscape, they need a professional compass to navigate it. In this sense, identity is a north star, guiding teachers in navigating the profession. In this way, identity is not an option but a prerequisite aspect of the teaching profession. Many studies on teacher identity focus on the evolution of teachers in the teaching profession, their narratives about themselves and their teaching, discourses, and other activities they engage in to gain guidance in their teaching and contextual factors (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). These studies have contributed to elucidating the concept of a teacher's identity and the nature thereof.

A teacher's identity is multifaceted and associated with many definitions. Welmond (2002, p. 42) perceives a teacher's identity as "...both the personal experience and role of teachers in a given society. It includes the subjective sense of individuals who engage in teaching and how others view teachers." A similar view by Vokatis and Zhang (2016) positions a teacher's identity with self-image, asserting that it alludes to how teachers identify with themselves as teachers, what they are expected to do, and who they strive to become within the teaching profession. Hence, Gee (2000) persuasively claims that a teacher's identity is what the teacher does. In other words, the professional space reveals the identities of teachers. In the same way, Richards (2021) considers teachers' identities imperative in shaping their selection of teaching and learning approaches. Hence, Brooks (2016) asserts that a teacher's identity is a value and emotion-based compass that guides the teacher in their teaching practices. As teachers evolve and constantly negotiate their being in the ever-changing world, Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) maintain that it is crucial to understand that identity is dynamic and constantly evolving.

However, there cannot be a teacher's identity without the school subject identity, as it is at the center of a teacher's identity formation. Although literature rarely defines subject identity, Brooks's (2016) work provides some insights into subject identity. According to Thompson (2023, p. 863), "Subject discipline identity development involves a process of continuous and evolving transition from being a subject specialist in the sense of knowing a defined area of a subject to becoming a schoolteacher

in command of the pedagogical tools needed to mediate a subject discipline for school-aged learners.” Although this relates more to how a teacher’s identity develops than a subject identity, one can define a subject identity as the attributes, principles, and organization that distinguish the subject and its curriculum from other school subjects. In this well, the identity of a subject provides the teacher with fundamental foundations from which the teacher can understand the subject and her/himself as a teacher who is teaching that subject. Brooks (2016) contends that the values and principles derived from the subject identity are imperative in developing the teacher’s identity and helping to sustain it. Likewise, Rosa and Ramos (2015) argue that school subjects protect teachers’ identities. The study conducted by Rushton, Smith, Steadman, and Towers (2023) reveals that the teacher’s area of specialization plays a vital role in identity development; hence, it is always important to understand the positionality of different subjects.

Considering the positionality of a teacher’s identity in the teaching profession, the placement and allocation of teachers within certain subjects becomes a sensitive process because this has ramifications for the teacher’s professional identity. Thompson (2023) and other studies claim that context is important in the teacher’s identity. Given the rapidly increasing pace of educational inventions and developments, teachers must have a nuanced understanding of who they are when teaching all subjects they have been assigned.

While there are many studies on teacher identity, particularly that of novice teachers in different subject areas, how out-of-the-field teachers negotiate their teacher’s identity concerning the subjects for which they have not been trained is underexplored. The empirical work upon which this article draws was based on an investigation into the challenges and opportunities faced by the out-of-the-field teachers teaching Social Sciences and how they negotiate their ‘Social Sciences identity.’

## **2. Theoretical framework**

Gee’s (2000) theory of identity provided the study with a theoretical framework. Essentially, Gee (2000) understands identity as an ongoing process where an individual constantly re-establishes who they are in a particular context. Understood in this way, although context may be important in the formation of identity, identity is not fixed to a particular place or time. In the case of the teaching profession, a teacher’s identity changes as the world, educational settings, subject matter, educational policies, and learners change. Thus, Gee’s (2000) four ways of viewing identity in different contexts of the individual (I-identities), institutions, discourse (D-identities), and affinity (A-identities) process are used in this study as a theoretical framework to understand how out-of-the-field teachers who are teaching Social Sciences negotiate their Social Sciences identity in different contexts. The framework positions identity as a social construct, making it an external process instead of an internal one.

## **3. Research methodology and context**

The research was conducted through qualitative research methods. As Creswell & Poth (2016) state, qualitative research appreciates the meanings and interpretations the participants associate with their contexts and experiences. Interpretivism was employed as a research paradigm to interpret the experiences of out-of-the-field teachers teaching Social Sciences.

## **4. Data collection and analysis**

Semi-structured telephonic interviews were conducted with participants involved in Social Sciences in the senior phase grade 7-9: twelve teachers who are teaching Social Sciences, four participants from the Social Science supporting team (two subject advisors, one Head of Department, and one provincial coordinator) as well as the Social Sciences Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPs) were used to collect data. All participants are based in Gauteng, and the twelve teachers teach in different schools in the South and East of Johannesburg. The research came from my Master’s thesis and complied with the required ethical standards.

The data was analysed through Braun and Clarke’s (2019) model, which comprises six data analysis phases. The first phase is becoming acquainted with the data collected through the semi-structured interviews, the second phase is producing the initial codes from this data, the third phase key themes were searched, the fourth phase is reviewing themes, the fifth step is defining the themes, and the last step was writing up the findings. The article is grounded in one of the themes that emerged through this process.

## **5. Findings and discussion**

Identity as a broad theme emanated within the themes established for the master’s research, as indicated above. Essentially, the key findings around identity were the conundrum around the negotiation of a Social Sciences teacher’s identity, and this is understood within Gee’s (2000) four perspectives on the formation of identity.

### 5.1. The nature perspective (N-identities)

The nature perspective is grounded on the nature of individuals. This perspective holds that individuals' identities are shaped by their state of being, which may include neurological conditions (amongst other things) (Gee, 2000). The state in which someone is not influenced by society or achievements. Instead, it is driven by genes, which means that individuals do not have control over it. "Thus, N-Identities must always gain their force as identities through the work of institutions, discourse, and dialogue, or affinity groups, that is, the very forces that constitute our other perspectives on identity" (Gee, 2000, p. 102). The N-identity follows an essentialist approach to understanding identity formation because it points to the identity being innate instead of extrinsic. Although the data might not explicitly provide some insights that align with the natural perspective, it is important to understand that all the out-of-the-field Social Sciences possess an innate identity that is not associated with teaching Social Sciences or any other external factors that may consciously or unconsciously influence the way they teach Social Sciences.

### 5.2. The discursive perspective (D-Identities)

The discursive perspective is grounded upon discourse or dialogues. In this perspective, individuals work hard through social interactions to develop and sustain their traits (respectful, charismatic, humble, and so on) (Gee, 2000). These are individual accomplishments that are recognized by others through discourses. In the case of Social Sciences, the D-Identities could be other colleagues recognizing the out-of-the-field Social Sciences teachers as Social Sciences teachers. The discursive perspective also provides insights regarding how the out-of-the-field Social Sciences teachers discuss and enact Social Sciences in practice. However, developing a D-identity is controversial; not everyone will recognize the same thing. Following this, while it could be argued and supported that the out-of-the-field teachers should be recognized as such because they lack certain traits for Social Sciences teachers, others may argue that these teachers should be recognized as Social Sciences teachers because they are recognized as such in schools.

Nonetheless, negotiating and sustaining identities within the discursive perspective also requires individuals to be associated with an affinity group with common practices and experiences. Considering the scarcity of social science-trained teachers in South Africa, perhaps affinity groups could be developed by the current cohort of out-of-the-field and social science-trained teachers. Groups such as subject content workshops may be inadequate because Social Sciences issues are discussed in categories of Geography or History.

### 5.3. The affinity perspective (A-Identities)

The discursive perspective overlaps with the affinity perspective because discourses are grounded upon particular affinity groups. From the affinity perspective, identity is acquired based on individual practices and experiences within certain affinity groups. The affinity group is grounded on the common practices, shared culture, and traits of the individuals within it (Gee, 2000). Similar to the discursive perspective, interaction is at the center and serves as a tool through which individuals can acquire experiences.

In the views below, the participants shared their understanding of Social Sciences. The conceptualization of Social Sciences under the affinity perspective could provide some insights regarding the critical attributes of Social Sciences, which are the out-of-the-field Social Sciences teachers and Social Sciences teachers, so that it could be decided whether or not there are affinity groups that contribute towards these teachers' identity.

*the Social Sciences curriculum it is sciences. Right! It is a type of science of science for the learners because they are learning about how human societies are working so they work on ... uhm it is a science that focuses on human interaction and the relationship that people have with each other. So, that's what I understand when we talk about Social Sciences. It is a type of science that studies human societies and their relationships with one another.*

*Sometimes, you do not see the topics to be integrated because when I am teaching the Geography part, I wear a Geography cap and when I am teaching History, I wear the History cap. I am not wearing one cap, like a Social Sciences cap.....*

The first part of the data indicates an understanding of Social Sciences within the social context (excluding the physical and economic context). At the same time, the latter brings in the element of integration and alludes to issues of identity through positionality. Following the data, the affinity groups upon which Social Sciences issues could be deliberated must be grounded on what Social Sciences is and the challenges around juggling the different hats (identities) when teaching Social Sciences. From an integration point of view, wearing different hats is advantageous because integrating the different insights from the different subjects in the teaching of Social Sciences ensures holistic learning.

### 5.4. The institutional perspective (I-Identities)

The institutional perspective argues that identity is formulated by the positions that we occupy in a society. Institutional authorities drive institutional identities based on a particular institutional position's principles, laws, and traditions (Gee, 2000). In this way, the I-identity differs from the nature perspective because the nature perspective is grounded on natural or biological principles. However, the two perspectives may connect in a situation wherein the state of an individual leads them to be

institutionalized. Gee (2000) explains that N-identities can either be sustained or discontinued based on the occupant's position. In this way, while there may be people who happily carry out institutional duties because they love these duties, on the other hand, some people may feel like the duties that they have to carry out are imposed on them because of their position in that institution.

In the case of the data, there is evidence that the institutional perspective plays a prominent role in developing and sustaining the identity of out-of-the-field Social Sciences teachers.

<p><i>Principals do not look at the CVs and sometimes, some of them, when you ask, they tell you that they look at the needs of the school.</i></p>	<p><i>it is a bad assumption for people to think that Social Sciences can be taught by anyone.</i></p>	<p><i>The name is just there for a show. Social Sciences is just a show [emphasized with a high note], but actually, it's just a Geography time or a History time...</i></p>
<p><i>Sometimes, you do not see the topics to be integrated because when I am teaching the Geography part, I wear a Geography cap, and when I am teaching History, I wear the History cap. I am not wearing one cap, like a Social Sciences cap. If there was integration, I should be able to bring a History topic to the Geography topic that I am teaching'.</i></p>	<p><i>If you can ask me right now, 'What does it mean to be a Social Sciences teacher?', I would not know how to answer because I was trained to teach Geography, not Social Sciences. I know what it means to be a Geography teacher, not to be a Social Sciences teacher, but I do teach SS (Social Sciences)."</i></p>	

The employment of out-of-the-field Social Sciences teachers follows the institutional perspective in that principals (authorities) in schools (institutions) hire these teachers because there is a vacancy that needs to be filled instead of considering the qualifications and experience of these teachers. Hobbs and Porch (2021) define teaching out-of-the-field as a situation wherein teachers are allocated subjects they are not qualified and trained to teach. The data indicates that there is danger in hiring out-of-the-field Social Sciences teachers because the Social Sciences subject requires trained teachers equipped to impart Social Sciences subject matter. Some of the out-of-the-field teachers specialize in either History or Geography and, in some cases, both subjects, but they are trained as Social Sciences teachers. As such, these teachers often struggle to identify and show links and relationships between History and Geography so that Social Sciences can be realized.

Hobbs and Porch (2021) argue that teachers must be warned during the initial teacher education training about the realities of being hired as an out-of-the-field teacher. "While out-of-field teaching has become part of 'what teachers do,' that is, it has become normalized, we need to be honest and decide as a profession whether it is OK to expect teachers to work outside of school hours and in their own time to learn new content, to continue to teach out-of-field without expecting that teachers upgrade their qualifications, and how continued teacher learning and expanding expertise needs to be acknowledged and remunerated" (Hobbs & Porch, 2021,p.607). Also, although it could be argued that out-of-the-field teachers navigate their identity for Social Sciences through the institution, the basis for these teachers' affiliation with the Social Sciences identity is misleading. Although many factors may contribute to the N-Identity in the case of teaching, the subject matter and the pedagogical content knowledge should be at the core. Shulman's (1987) seven categories of teacher knowledge and the minimum requirements for teachers outlined in the Draft Policy on Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (DHET, 2010) must be met to ensure justice and holistic learning for the learners.

The other issue that emerged was the name 'Social Sciences.' All the teachers, both Social Sciences and the out-of-the-field Social Sciences teachers, felt that the name 'Social Sciences' in the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement and the subject are illusive. The first point of departure is the name "Social Sciences" and how it is interpreted in the CAPS. The curriculum policy does not clearly define what Social Sciences is. Instead of defining the subject, the policy states that Social Sciences comprises Geography and History. The division between History and Geography as the primary elements of Social Sciences raises questions about what Social Sciences is. The issue within the conceptualization of Social Sciences is not new. Kgari-Masondo (2017) identified the misalignment between theory and practice in social science, arguing that the Social Sciences are not reflected in the pedagogical practices used in social science classrooms because they are taught in a fragmented way.

Most of the out-of-the-field teachers in this study were concerned about how much time they spent preparing for Social Sciences lessons. They argued that teaching Social Sciences felt like teaching two subjects, Geography, and History, are treated as entirely different subjects in the Social Sciences CAPS. The issue of lesson planning stems from the fragmentation of Social Sciences and simultaneously highlights these teachers' lack of knowledge and skills in teaching the subject. Teachers need to understand how to handle the subject with which they are unfamiliar. This shows that it is problematic to assign hybrid subjects because some aspects may be familiar to teachers. This is why Kgari-Masondo (2017) argues that the Social Sciences curriculum policy must be reconsidered.

Above everything, the issue of out-of-the-field Social Sciences teachers provides valuable insights regarding the identities of these teachers. The data indicates that these teachers often struggle to understand who they are when teaching Social Sciences. At the same time, the data also indicates that these teachers identify with the other subjects that they were trained to teach. While Badley (2009), Lam and Lidstone (2001), Manyane (1999), and Greenwood (2013) have argued that the struggle in the construction of Social Sciences teacher's identity may result from attempts to protect the subjects that these teachers are trained to teach, Gee (2000) and other studies have shown that it is possible to have several identities. In this case, perhaps the out-of-the-field Social Sciences teachers need support to help them forge a Social Sciences identity. Moreover, Manyane (1999) shows that some subjects (such as History) can function as interdisciplinary subjects and retain their identity. Similarly, Geschwind and

Melin (2016) explain that people have different identities and that teachers from other disciplines can develop a Social Sciences identity. This is in line with Gee's (2000) claims that the identities possessed by individuals are context-bound, as Saunders (1982) posits that identity is not fixed; it evolves and changes over time.

## 6. Conclusion

The paper explored how out-of-the-field Social Sciences teachers navigate and negotiate their Social Sciences teachers' identities. Analyzed within the four perspectives by Gee (2000), the data has shown that the navigation and negotiation of the teacher's Social Sciences identity are aligned with the constitutional perspective. However, there are limitations within the constitutional perspectives, which make the navigation and negotiation process questionable. The limitations include the teachers' lack of the requisite social sciences training, which includes content knowledge, making it difficult for the teachers to understand who they are in the Social Sciences classrooms. Therefore, there is a need to support the out-of-the-field Social Sciences teachers because regardless of being qualified by the school to teach Social Sciences, the teachers still struggle to teach and identify with the subject effectively. Without a doubt, this conundrum may also affect how the learners learn and think about Social Sciences. This is problematic because learners are deprived of the fundamental knowledge and skills in Social Sciences that are important in this ever-changing world.

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