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Critical reflections: Experiencing discrimination, disrespect and disregard; forming a professional identity

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Abstract

This article offers a brief account of some critical incidents in the author's educational journey as a learner and teacher in South African schools and universities, and an analysis of the influence of these incidents on the formation of her professional identity. It examines how social interactions and engagement with peers and students have helped to construct and reconstruct her professional identity, allowing her to better recognise herself as an educator shaped by experiences of various forms of discrimination, disrespect and disregard. These experiences and her critical reflection on them have proved valuable for the development of her personal 'voice' as a reflective professional. The author argues that the process of critical reflection has led to a deeper understanding of how negative (and some positive) experiences in her journey from rural primary school learner to university lecturer have been positive for strengthening her determination to succeed academically and to be the kind of teacher in academia who aims to be respectful and supportive of all students.

Keywords: critical reflections, epistemic injustice, professional identity, discrimination, disrespect, disregard

INTRODUCTION

Experiences of life as a child, a learner, an employee and an adult contribute to the formation of a person's identities. This formation is also shaped by cultural, historical, psychological and social relationships as people interact with others in life. As a teacher, all of these relationships have helped to shape the professional identity which I bring to the work environment. Professional identity has been defined as how professionals such as teachers define themselves to themselves and to others (Lasky 2005, 901). It is a construct of the professional self that changes throughout a career as the professional experiences different institutional cultures and interacts in different social spheres. Through reflection teachers can begin unearthing the various influences that have shaped their professional identities.

In this article I use narratives of critical incidents to explain how my experiences as a child, a learner and a teacher – particularly experiences of discrimination,

disrespect and disregard – have contributed to the development of my professional identity. The first part of the article outlines conceptualisations of self-identity, identity and professional identity. It also offers a definition of reflective practice and explains how such practice can be used as a vehicle for understanding professional growth and identity formation. The second part presents critical incidents in which I experienced various forms of discrimination, disrespect and disregard, which are ultimately similar in that they are all negative. However, they can yield positive results for the individual who responds resistantly to them. I argue that critical reflection on various negative constructions of my abilities has led to a deeper understanding of who I am and who I have the potential to become as a teacher-researcher in a tertiary institution.

Self-identity and professional identity

In order to understand what professional identity is and how professional identities are formed, it is important to understand how self-identity is defined as a social science and as a philosophical concept. Mead (1934) and Erickson (1968 in Beijaard et al 2004) view identity as something that develops during a person's whole life, through transactions with the environment. According to Mead, the self can arise in a social setting where people engage in social communication; in these engagements people learn to assume the roles of others and to monitor their actions accordingly. For Gee (2001), identity development is a process of interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person and being recognised as such in a given context. In that context identity can be seen as an answer to the question 'Which facet of my identity is dominant at this moment?' According to Beijaard (1995), identity can generally be defined as who or what someone is, the various meanings people can attach to themselves or the meanings attributed by others. The 'self' cannot be described without reference to those surrounding it (Taylor 1989).

Dillabough (1999, 389) defines identity in terms of difference. She argues that difference carries enormous power as a concept that explains 'how one comes to identify oneself and others within the state'. She states that identity is not simply a recognition of difference as a part of oneself, that is, the authentic individual as expressed in liberal theory, it is a recognition that teachers, for instance, are embedded in meaningful social and political contexts where multiple selves meet within a dialectical sphere. Through such interactions, teachers can identify experiences that are either similar to or different from their own experiences and learn from such identification.

Coldron and Smith (1999) maintain that professional identity, like self-identity, is not fixed or unitary; it is not a stable entity that people have but it is a way to make sense of themselves in relation to other people and contexts. The formation of professional identity is a process involving many sources of knowledge, such as knowledge of feelings and emotions, teaching, human relations, and subject matter. Such identity develops as teachers reflect on the landscape they are part of and it is also manifested in classroom practice. It is to some extent unique as experiences

differ and impact differently on individuals. Being a teacher is therefore a matter of being seen as a teacher by oneself and by others; it is a matter of reflecting on and then redefining an identity that is socially legitimated. For Sugrue (1997 in Beijaard et al 2004), a teacher's professional identity 'is part of a discourse which is open to continuous redefinition rather than a set of essential characteristics which are common to all teachers'. Reynolds (1996) emphasises that what surrounds a person and what the person allows to impact on him/her greatly affects his/her identity as a teacher.

The concept of professional identity is used in different ways in the literature on teaching and teacher education. Professional identity formation is a process involving many knowledge sources, such as knowledge of affect, teaching, human relations, and subject matter (Antonek et al 1997). The concept not only refers to the influence of the conceptions of other people, including broadly societal expectations about what a teacher should know and do, but also to what teachers themselves find important in their professional work and lives based on both their experiences in practice and their personal backgrounds (Tickle 2000).

Through self-evaluation, a person's self-identity and professional identity are continually informed, formed and reformed as individuals and teachers develop over time and through interaction with others (Cooper and Olson 1996 in Beijaard et al 2004). Through self-reflection, teachers relate experiences to their own knowledge and feelings. Such reflection guides how they willingly integrate what they define as socially relevant into their images of themselves as teachers (Korthagen 2001 in Beijaard et al 2004, 114).

In the next section critical reflective practice and how the concept relates to the concept of self and professional identity are briefly discussed.

Critical reflective practice and formations of identity

Reflective practice has become an influential concept in various forms of professional education. Being reflective involves taking a step back and trying to look at experiences from a different perspective. For Bolton (2005, 5), being reflective 'is sometimes a personal journey but can also create space to engage others to discuss things, think them through and see them differently and also see yourself differently'. It should be a critical and (as far as possible) objective analysis a person's own experiences, values and principles with an open mind and an engagement with the memories and emotions attached to them. It involves focusing close attention upon a person's own actions and on the ways others experience and perceive him/her. Such reflections should 'go beyond personal navel-gazing and be examined in terms of wider social and political structures' (Bolton 2005, 5). Through looking at their own practices in relation to their own histories and through the 'eyes' of those they are working for and from the perspectives of both their colleagues and of the relevant literature, people should be able to make sense of the decisions they make about what they do and ways of refining their practices. Critical reflection is therefore a never-ending learning journey.

Moss (2008) sees reflective practice as a rigorous process of meaning making, and a continuous process of constructing theories of the world. He maintains that these theories can be tested through dialogue and listening and then be reconstructed. Reflective practice is a learning process which involves a person expressing his/her own views about experiences, beliefs and assumptions whilst listening and responding to the thoughts and experiences of others. Reflecting on thoughts and experiences may enhance the development of new understanding and insights. For Schon (1983), this type of reflection involves both 'reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action'. Reflection-in-action is a matter of 'thinking on our feet' whilst recognising that this should not just be random thought or 'common sense' but that people should use their professional knowledge and draw on that knowledge base as they reflect in action. Reflection-on-action, on the other hand, involves people using their professional knowledge base to further develop their understanding and to test and develop their knowledge base (Thompson and Pascal 2012, 316). Thompson and Pascal (2012) have added the concept of reflection-for-action to Schon's (1983) concepts. This refers to the process of 'planning, thinking ahead about what is to come, so that we can draw on our experience (and the professional knowledge base implicit within it) in order to make the best use of the time and resources available to us' (Thompson and Pascal 2012, 317).

Brookfield (1995, 9) describes critical reflection as a way to examine the 'personal, social and political assumptions surrounding us'. He defines assumptions as 'the taken for granted beliefs about the world, and our place within it, that seem to be so obvious to us as not to need to be stated explicitly. In many ways we are our assumptions. Assumptions give meaning and purpose to who we are and what we do'. A reflective practitioner seeks to probe beneath mere common sense reading of experience, to investigate the hidden dimensions relating to 'self' and 'own practice' and to become aware of the 'omnipresence of power' (Brookfield 1995). What people think are democratic, respectful ways of treating others, for example, can be experienced and assumed by them as oppressive and constraining. Becoming critically reflective therefore increases people's chances of taking informed actions that are based on assumptions that have been carefully and critically investigated.

Thompson and Pascal (2012, 319) introduce the concept of reflexive practice as another form of reflection. Through reflexive practice, people are able to look back at themselves. It is a process of self-analysis in order to make sure that people's professional knowledge base is being fully used and that their actions are consistent with their values. Whilst trying to make sense of their experiences and challenges, there are still opportunities for them to learn and develop from the process.

My overall impression is that all of the authors referred to, recommend reflective practice as an important tool for understanding self-identity and professional identity. Critical incidents (Tripp 1993) recorded in the form of biographies, stories or diaries may be used as sources for such reflection and to help teachers construct and reconstruct the purpose and priorities in their work, both individually and collectively. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) suggest that storytelling is one of

the reflective practices that teachers can use in trying to understand how their self-identities and professional identities are constructed and changed over time. Teacher professional growth and identity are seen as constructed when teachers tell and live out particular stories of their teaching experiences.

The short narratives and examples of critical incidents presented below are used to reflect on how my identity has been continually informed, formed and reformed over time by my experiences of discrimination, disrespect and disregard in my learning and teaching career.

CRITICAL INCIDENTS: DIFFERENT FORMATIONS OF SELF AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Critical incident technique is described as a procedure for collecting direct observations of human behaviour that could be useful or of significance in a person's life (Flanagan 1954; Inger 2002). A critical incident is an observable human behaviour that occurs in a situation where the purpose or intent seems very significant and permits inferences and predictions about the person performing the act (Flanagan 1954). In reflecting on my journey as a learner and a teacher I have used critical incidents as the starting point for reflecting on negative, (and in some cases positive), experiences which have shaped my professional identity.

Childhood and educational background

Growing up in Marapyane, a rural South African village in Mpumalanga, taught me lessons of survival and emotional toughness. I am the third child and the second daughter of four children, born to parents who had passed Standard 8 at school and then acquired a two-year teacher training qualification. Both my parents were primary school teachers though my father later secured a principal's position. My parents were amongst those who could not get teaching posts in their local villages, so we grew up in the care of my grandmother since my parents worked in faraway villages. They only came home over weekends or sometimes at the end of the month. My father was an agricultural science specialist so we spent most of our weekends working in the fields. Though I then did not have enough knowledge to reflect critically on these experiences, looking back now, I believe that there were life lessons that I gained from them. From the experience of working in the fields, I learnt the values of hard work and perseverance. I knew how to plough the fields, to look after the crops, to harvest them and to process some of the crops like mielies. Though we were not privileged to have a great variety of food, I learnt healthy eating habits and how to look after and store food for meagre seasons. I learnt much from my grandmother and from my parents about ways of surviving under difficult circumstances.

My primary school years included both exciting and sad experiences with the most memorable incident being one for which I was severely punished and humiliated. We were asked to memorise William Wordsworth's poem, 'Daffodils'. Many of

the words were unfamiliar to me: 'daffodils', 'tossing', 'jocund', 'solitude' just to mention a few. Coming from a background where my mother tongue, Setswana, was the medium of instruction with English taught as one of the subjects, I struggled to understand even the title of the poem. Memorising the four stanzas of six lines each without understanding what the poem was all about and pronouncing some of the unfamiliar words were other challenges. My teacher punished me with five lashes on my back with a 'sjambok' because I could not pronounce the word 'tossing' properly. When I cried he brought an empty bucket and asked me to drop my tears in the bucket as a lesson in water conservation, with the whole class watching, which was very humiliating. As if that were not enough, I also had to stay behind during break to repeat the word 'tossing' a hundred times. I endured the pain and humiliation privately knowing very well that my parents would not even listen to my complaints because they also believed in punishment as a solution to learning problems. Thus, I did not have anyone to share the incident with. I was still very young at the time and my reflection on the incident then was based on the face value of the situation and on the general assumptions I had that teaching and learning involved struggle; that a child's feelings and emotions did not matter; and that the way to success was through humiliation, disrespect and disregard. I thought that perhaps corporal punishment was an acceptable pedagogic practice. My teacher did not recognise and respect the humanity of the child. Later, I sometimes wished that I could replace him, teach differently from him and help learners enjoy the subject. At the same time, that experience instilled in me a fear of being perceived as unintelligent by my classmates. As a way of coping with such hardship, I developed a 'thick skin' and told myself that such treatment would not break me. I made sure that I was top of the class. Throughout the rest of my educational career I threw myself into my studies in order to avoid either being out-performed academically by those around me or being humiliated in front of others. I carried memories of that incident throughout my studies and my teaching career. Looking beneath the surface of that incident I came to realise that it informed the personal and professional qualities and identity that I developed and the sense of responsibility I developed as a teacher in trying to ensure that my students succeeded in their learning in a conducive learning environment.

The journey to a different life from that of my parents, who did not have university degrees, continued when I enrolled for a BA Ed degree at a South African university. This was a new institution in one of the so-called 'bantustans' during the South African apartheid era. I did not know much about degrees or career possibilities. Coming from a family background in teaching, I could only think about teaching as a career. We had very limited teaching subject specialisations to choose from so I majored in Education, English and Afrikaans. I found myself among students with different expectations, backgrounds and strengths in the way they coped with their studies. The level of competition was high. Though we were all products of the same secondary curriculum, lines of differentiation with regard to English language proficiency, exposure to a variety of pedagogies and access to resources were very clear. There were many things that I experienced for the first time at university, such

as the library and accessing materials from there. It was always a challenge to select relevant books for my studies. My study skills were also poor. I remember failing my first English test because I studied a lot of information from reference materials from the library instead of focusing on the prescribed texts. Note taking was another skill that I lacked for coping with the pace of lectures, especially during my first year of study. My under-preparedness for university studies was an obstacle to success in my academic journey. Despite such challenges, I did not allow circumstances to limit my chances of success. Using Mezirow's (1983) words, I did not allow 'self-limiting understandings of the situation' I found myself in to trap me and deny me the chance to emancipate myself through self-empowerment from the challenges. I always acknowledged that my intellectual ability and potential were sufficient to enable me to succeed. I align my thinking at that time with Brookfield's (1995, 12) notion that 'being reflective involves critically analyzing your own practice and looking at what is good and what needs improving. This enables you to set personal targets and to improve future practice.' I had to be open to changing my ways of thought and views about learning; relooking at my study skills; improving my reading skills; and consulting with my lecturers in order to succeed. The fear of failure made me face those challenges constructively.

After completing my undergraduate degree I registered for a postgraduate BEd degree, part-time, at the same institution. My love for English made me decide to move back to English after completing my BEd degree. Subsequently, I did an honours degree specialising in Applied Linguistics at another university, followed by a master's degree with the same specialisation. This is a correspondence institution where students rely mainly on external sources for support, as well as self-discipline and perseverance to succeed. After I had completed the coursework, the Head of Department (HoD) of the Applied Linguistics Department wanted to know why I was studying English linguistics instead of Setswana, my mother tongue. He advised me to rather accept a certificate of attendance for the degree because according to him I was not academically ready to pursue research at that level. Instead of explaining the expectations and challenges of the research process at masters level, given the fact that my English language background was poor and that I still lacked well-grounded research skills, he concluded that I was not going to succeed in that programme. He could not offer any support for students in my situation. He was not ready to offer me the option of taking a risk or to suggest ways to cope with the programme, but concluded that I was not the right person to do master's level research. That was another moment of contestation for me. I felt discriminated against; disrespected as a black woman; and disregarded as a person with potential. The incident made me reflect on the broader sociological context, specifically with regard to aspects of power relations since the HoD was a male; discrimination and oppression because he was white; and issues of accessibility because of our differences in educational opportunities. I struggled to understand why I was not affirmed as a black woman, from a Tswana language background, who deserved recognition and respect for passing my coursework like all my counterparts. This treatment was another

form of testimonial injustice that threatened my general intellectual character and undermined my intellectual abilities (Fricker 2010, 47).

I acknowledged my different language and cultural background, and my poor schooling background. However, the fact that I had managed to pass the coursework made me realise that, despite all the barriers, I had sufficient intellectual ability to complete the degree. That motivated me to continue with my studies despite the HoD's attempt to discourage me. My aim was not only for recognition, but also, for the HoD to 'see his activities of description and evaluation as themselves problematic' (Nicholson 1996, 6). So instead of being discouraged I turned this demoralising experience into an enthusiasm for new challenges and rose above the positioning offered me by the HoD. I felt the need for recognition of my position as a black woman who was pursuing a degree in my fourth language. My first language is Setswana, Sepedi my second, and Sesotho my third. Reflections on the successful outcome of my master's studies and research suggested that experiencing discrimination, disrespect and disregard contributed to my determination to construct an identity of a successful black woman, student and teacher. What surprised me was the encouragement and support I received from my supervisor, a white woman, who believed in my potential and intellectual ability and who assisted me to complete the project and obtain my degree. I am still grateful for her enormous support. My research was mainly quantitative and I struggled to analyse the data using quantitative research techniques. My supervisor took the trouble to show me how to use different quantitative research programmes, and it was through her support that I ultimately completed the research requirements of the degree.

My reflective journey as a practitioner

As I reflected on my five-year journey as a high school teacher, memories of my primary school experiences as a learner came back. My experience of the teaching styles of my primary school teachers made me sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses of my students, and I made every effort to respect their diversities and to do what was required of me as a professional teacher to the best of my abilities. In all the high schools at which I worked, the principals were male. My efforts to teach in learner-centred ways were in most instances opposed by these men. My reflection on my relationship with these principals is that it was a struggle for power. They wanted to put me in my place as a woman who should not have a voice and who should never lead or make any major decisions. It was a further example of disrespect and disregard.

One outstanding incident from my high school teaching experience occurred at a morning briefing when the principal emphasised the importance of managing our teaching time and ensuring that students were not deprived of learning time. He further emphasised that we should not grant students permission to go to the bathroom except during break and we were not to send students from our classes to shops during lessons. It happened that during a five-minute recess, between lessons, a boy fought with a girl from my class. On arrival in the classroom, I was not even

aware of the incident because it had happened during student movement from one venue to another. The principal demanded that I release the boy for a disciplinary hearing and punishment during my lesson. I requested that the meeting be held at the end of the period because he was going to lose learning time. Though I tried to explain that I thought the 'no permission to leave the class during lessons rule' applied to everybody, the principal did not want to listen to my side of the story. He felt that I was disrespectful, that he had the right to take students out of the class if necessary because he was the head of the school. He insisted that I sign a logbook to confirm that I had disobeyed him and that my action affected the smooth running of the school. On refusing to sign, arguing that I had not refused to release the student but that I would send him at the end of the lesson, he agreed with the circuit manager that my salary cheque be retained until I had signed the logbook. It was only through the intervention of the senior circuit manager that my salary was released. The incident made me feel discriminated against, disrespected and disregarded as a woman. According to Fricker (2010), failing to give me an opportunity to present my side of the story in my capacity as a knower, was another form of epistemic testimonial injustice. This was another example of identity prejudice where the principal as well as the circuit manager were in control and undermined my capacity as a giver of knowledge. For Fricker (2010, 44), 'when someone suffers a testimonial injustice, they are degraded *qua* knower, and they are symbolically degraded *qua* human'.

After teaching at high schools, I worked at three teacher training institutions as well as at two Further Education and Training (FET) colleges. My experience of lecturing at an FET college also brought another challenge that relates to discrimination, disrespect and disregard. Students enrolled in the South African FET college sector come from very diverse educational, socio-economic and racial backgrounds. As an English lecturer in a multiracial college I once experienced a situation where white students in my class decided to be unruly and make teaching and learning impossible. Apparently they were unhappy about my teaching English given that it is not my home language. During lessons, they would switch on their cell phones with loud music and hold conversations very loudly so as to make teaching and learning impossible. Through reflection, I realised that I needed to develop strategies which could allow me to make sense of, and adapt to, such disruptions. According to Hughes (2013, 7), reflection in action is descriptive of a person's practice as he/she develops abilities to know, practice and refine actions each time when challenged to make professional judgements. I tried all I could to control the situation but it became so unbearable that I had to ask the college management to intervene. I requested that the students' parents be called and for the students to explain their grievances to everybody so that if there was something that I had done wrong I could learn and improve from their advice. What surprised me was that the campus manager and her deputy, both white women, called the parents and together with the students held a meeting without inviting me. On making an enquiry, the campus manager told me that I could not be a part of the meeting because they felt that I would intimidate those students. My side of the story did not matter. I was not even informed of the

resolution taken but I found out later that that group of seven students was moved to a white lecturer's English class.

I had concerns about the way the issue was handled, whether it had racial implications or not, especially because no one cared to even inform me about what I had done wrong. Despite the 100 per cent pass rates that I obtained each year as an English lecturer when I was employed at that college, that incident made me realise that it is not always a person's academic qualification and success rates as a practitioner that earns him/her respect and recognition. I obtained my master's degree whilst working at that campus and I thought that achievement would contribute to liberating me from social injustices and lack of recognition. The right to be respected as a black woman and recognised as a fellow academic who has a voice and can make a contribution in empowering her students was not easy to earn. Surprisingly, such discrimination, disrespect and disregard did not lead me to experience self-doubt and professional inadequacy or insecurities. I refused to allow this form of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2010), which aimed at attacking my intellectual confidence and inhibiting my intellectual performance, to interfere with my work. Instead the 'thick skin' that I had developed throughout my life experiences made me stand my ground, apply for promotional positions and contribute even more to the academic development of the students. I obtained a senior position at another college in 2007 and three months later, I was promoted to the Head of the Language Division at the same college. Those were moments of triumph and celebration. Though I agree with Coldron and Smith (1999), who maintain that professional identity is neither fixed nor unitary, I had never doubted my potential and ability and I knew that I deserved the recognition. My identity was informed by my consistent and conscious consideration of practice for the good of individual students, others, and humankind (Hughes 2013, 5). Acting wisely was informed by lessons learnt from experience.

In 2005, I was employed at a university as a sessional staff member in the School of Education, teaching the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) to in-service teachers whilst continuing to teach at the FET college. Discussions with my colleagues about challenges at the college confirmed my concern about the need for research in the FET sector to arrive at a better understanding of this sector. Such research could guide decisions that could improve what is offered to students. The desire to be a voice of the college sector by encouraging my colleagues to see the need for quality teaching and learning and research in this sector grew stronger and prompted me to abandon my full-time position at the college in order to take up an offer to work at the university on an annual renewable contract basis from 2009. Though my influence has been limited thus far, and the research focus of most of my colleagues is on schools, I have not lost hope that colleges will also receive the attention they need.

The university at which I am currently employed, like other universities, is striving to adhere to democratic principles and to develop a culture of transformation and change in its racial structures by, for example, opening space for more black students and striving to exercise affirmative action in terms of its employment practices. All

these initiatives do not exempt the institution from challenges. As a single mother with two boys to support, being employed on a renewable contract basis is a heavy load to carry. Being annually contracted has limited my scope for engaging in projects that involve finances, in case my contract is not renewed. Towards the end of each contracted year, I started panicking about my employment status. Uncertainties about contract renewal became even worse in 2012 when the ACE project which funded most contracted staff members was phased out. Another thorny issue is that a PhD qualification is now a requirement to be permanently employed as a lecturer at this institution, and most contracted staff members, (including myself), are still PhD students. This limits our chances to compete for permanent staff positions until we finish our doctoral qualifications. It would be unfair to blame the treatment on racial or gender discrimination because the rule applies to everybody. However, the emotional effects of this arrangement are enormous.

Whilst teaching in the ACE course, I also taught in the university's BEd programme. A practice that made me feel marginalised and disregarded while working in this programme was that I was always allocated to teach first-year students. Fellow staff members who were employed after me were allocated to teach senior students in the BEd programme and also to teach postgraduate classes even though we had the same qualifications, with differing experience. The criteria for allocating lecturers to teach students at various levels were not explicit and transparent. Only recently, when voices were raised about issues of transparency around allocations and workloads, was I allocated a postgraduate class to teach as well as to supervise fourth-year BEd research projects. Student research supervision allocations are also questionable. It seems that only the respected few are given postgraduate students to supervise. Sometimes in meetings I have felt devalued, disrespected and disregarded by colleagues when I have tried to give input to discussions. They would make it obvious that my input was unimportant when they did not show respect for what I was saying either by not listening to me or continuing with something else whilst I was speaking. In one committee meeting I made a suggestion that we allocate some students to FET colleges for their teaching experience since schools seemed not to have enough capacity and resources to accommodate all our students. I was told that there are no good role models at the FET colleges, that standards are low and that students will not benefit from being placed in the sector. Being the only one coming from the FET college sector, that comment made me ask myself many questions. Perhaps my FET college teaching background contributed to decisions about my teaching and research supervision allocations. If so, I consider this to be an example of unfair discriminatory treatment.

In reflecting on these experiences in order to find ways to cope with such challenges, I have asked myself questions about my academic qualifications, with special focus on my level of content knowledge and pedagogical practices. While I have always been confident that my content knowledge is good and that I can engage appropriately with varied teaching methods and strategies, the issue of discriminatory teaching allocations has made me realise that in academia some may be more equal

than others. I agree with Reynolds (1996) who maintains that people's professional identities are affected by their surroundings and all that they allow to impact on them as teachers.

Another part of the institutional culture, and one which was not part of my contract when I was first employed, is the expectation to publish articles and chapters in books in order to be regarded as an academic. A person's academic qualifications, the will to continue studying and researching while also teaching cannot qualify him/her to be regarded as an academic unless he/she has published something. While I acknowledge the standards set by this university that require a PhD for permanent appointment and also require academics to publish, what is distressing is that little space is created for assisting academics to achieve these expectations. Any annually contracted lecturers, whether black or white, male or female, have such a heavy workload that in order to manage their work, studies and publications, it is necessary to work overtime and compromise on time with their families in order to cope. I agree with Hargreaves (2000, 812) when he states that institutional pressures on practice are dangerous to people's notions of 'self' if they bypass their value bases. Such experiences could instil feelings of self-exclusion and despondency.

However, the feedback I continuously receive from the students I teach and supervise and their appreciation for the contribution I make to their academic journey, always humble me. I regularly welcome students who ask for help with courses that I do not even teach and that makes me feel very optimistic. The form of recognition and respect I receive at this level reveals the potential I possess to make a contribution to students' educational lives despite, (or even because of), my own negative institutional experiences.

Towards the end of 2012, I was invited to allocate some of my time to research projects in the area of vocational education. My decision to accept this invitation accorded with my wish to be an ambassador for FET colleges in order to encourage research on the sector. My experiences thus far have been fulfilling and I now have a three-year contract in the vocational research unit, which has given me relief from my annual uncertainties about having a job.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that reflection on my experiences of discrimination, disrespect and disregard could have had both negative and positive effects on the development of my personal and professional identities. The effects of these negative experiences, which could also be referred to as forms of epistemic injustice, could inhibit a person's formation of self. Such injustices, if persistent, may inhibit a person's intellectual performance, and undermine his/her confidence and development. However, wherever I have experienced injustices I have refused to accept the status quo and I have pursued the goal of proving my capabilities as a woman and a professional.

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