Reconstructing Teacher Professional Identity in Rural Secondary Schools of Eastern Kenya: A Phenomenological Study

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This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of secondary school teachers in rural Eastern Kenya as they reconstruct their professional identities in response to unique contextual challenges and opportunities. Twelve teachers from five rural secondary schools across three counties participated in in-depth interviews, reflective journaling, and focus group discussions over a four-month period. Data analysis following Giorgi's phenomenological framework revealed three major themes: (1) navigating identity tensions between professional ideals and rural realities, (2) community integration and the expansion of professional identity beyond traditional pedagogical roles, and (3) resilience and agency as central dimensions of reconstructed professional identity. Findings indicate that professional identity reconstruction is an ongoing, dynamic process requiring continuous negotiation between individual aspirations and contextual constraints, formal expectations and community demands, and professional standards and localized definitions of effectiveness. Teachers demonstrated remarkable adaptability by developing hybrid professional identities that encompassed expanded roles including community leadership, cultural brokering, and multi-dimensional educational advocacy. Successful identity reconstruction was facilitated by collegial support, school leadership recognition, community integration, and personal resilience strategies. The study highlights the need for context-sensitive teacher education and professional development that

prepares teachers for the realities of rural teaching, validates their expanded professional roles, and provides sustained support for identity development across career stages. These findings contribute to understanding how professional identity is constructed in resource-constrained contexts and have implications for teacher preparation, retention strategies, and education policy reforms in Kenya and similar developing nations.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher professional identity has emerged as a critical factor in understanding educational quality and teacher retention, particularly in rural and underserved contexts. Professional identity encompasses the beliefs, values, and commitments that shape how teachers perceive themselves and their role in the educational landscape (Beijaard et al., 2004). In rural secondary schools of Eastern Kenya, teachers face unique challenges that continuously reshape and reconstruct their professional identities, including limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-cultural complexities that distinguish rural education from urban contexts. Understanding how teachers in these settings construct and reconstruct their professional identities is essential for developing targeted support systems and improving educational outcomes in marginalized communities.

The concept of teacher professional identity has been extensively explored in educational research, with scholars emphasizing its dynamic and evolving nature. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) argue that professional identity is not a fixed attribute but rather a continually negotiated phenomenon influenced by personal experiences, professional contexts, and social interactions. This perspective is particularly relevant in rural Kenyan contexts, where teachers must navigate between traditional community expectations and modern educational mandates. The reconstruction of professional identity becomes a necessary adaptive mechanism as teachers encounter contextual realities that often differ significantly from their pre-service training experiences. Such reconstruction processes are deeply embedded in the daily lived experiences of teachers, making phenomenological inquiry an appropriate methodological approach for this study.

Rural education in Kenya presents distinct challenges that significantly impact teacher professional identity formation. According to Mulkeen and Chen (2008), rural schools in Sub-Saharan Africa often suffer from teacher shortages, inadequate teaching materials, and limited professional development opportunities. These constraints force teachers to redefine their professional roles, often extending beyond traditional pedagogical responsibilities to include community development, mentorship, and advocacy functions. In Eastern Kenya specifically, teachers frequently serve as cultural intermediaries between local communities and national educational policies, a role that requires continuous identity negotiation. The rural context thus becomes a crucible where professional identity is constantly tested, challenged, and reconstructed through daily interactions with students, parents, community members, and administrative structures.

The phenomenological approach offers valuable insights into understanding the lived experiences of teachers in rural settings. Husserl's phenomenology, as applied to educational research, seeks to uncover the essence of experiences by examining how individuals make meaning of their professional lives (Van Manen, 2016). For teachers in rural Eastern Kenya, their professional identity reconstruction occurs through accumulated experiences of success and failure, acceptance and rejection, empowerment and marginalization. These experiences shape not only how teachers view themselves professionally but also influence their commitment to the profession, their teaching practices, and ultimately, their students' learning outcomes. By exploring these lived experiences through phenomenological inquiry, this study aims to reveal the complex processes through which rural secondary school teachers construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct their professional identities.

The Kenyan educational context provides a particularly rich setting for examining teacher professional identity reconstruction. Kenya's education system has undergone significant transformations, including the introduction of free primary education in 2003 and the implementation of the competency-based curriculum in recent years (Okwara et al., 2009). These policy shifts have created additional pressures on teachers, particularly those in rural areas who must implement new curricula with minimal training and limited resources (Santalia et al., 2025) and (Muhsyanur, 2024). Furthermore, the decentralization of education management has placed greater responsibility on local communities, requiring teachers to engage more directly with parents and community stakeholders. These systemic changes necessitate ongoing identity reconstruction as teachers adapt their professional self-concepts to align with evolving expectations and realities.

Teacher professional identity is intrinsically linked to job satisfaction, effectiveness, and retention. Day et al. (2006) found that teachers with strong, positive professional identities demonstrate greater resilience in the face of challenges and maintain higher levels of commitment to their students and schools. In rural Kenyan contexts, where external motivators such as competitive salaries and career advancement opportunities are limited, professional identity becomes a crucial internal resource that sustains teachers through difficult circumstances. Understanding how teachers in these settings reconstruct their identities in response to contextual challenges can inform policy interventions aimed at improving teacher retention and effectiveness in rural schools. This understanding is particularly urgent given the critical role that quality education plays in rural development and poverty alleviation.

The cultural and social dimensions of rural Eastern Kenya add additional layers of complexity to teacher professional identity construction (Muhsyanur et al., 2021). Teachers in these communities often come from the same cultural backgrounds as their students, creating both opportunities and tensions in identity formation. While shared cultural understanding can enhance teacher-student relationships and community engagement, it may also create role conflicts when traditional values clash with modern educational practices (Ngugi, 2011). Teachers

must negotiate these cultural boundaries while maintaining professional authority and implementing national curriculum standards. This cultural negotiation process represents a significant aspect of identity reconstruction that deserves focused phenomenological exploration.

This study addresses a significant gap in educational research by focusing specifically on the phenomenological experiences of teacher professional identity reconstruction in rural Eastern Kenyan secondary schools. While existing literature has explored teacher identity in various contexts, limited research has examined the unique experiences of rural teachers in East Africa using phenomenological methodologies. By centering the voices and lived experiences of these teachers, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how professional identity is constructed in resource-constrained, culturally complex rural educational settings. The findings have implications not only for Kenya but also for other developing nations facing similar challenges in rural education provision, offering insights that can inform teacher education, professional development, and education policy reforms aimed at supporting teachers in rural contexts.

METHODE

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of secondary school teachers in rural Eastern Kenya as they reconstruct their professional identities. Phenomenology, rooted in the philosophical traditions of Husserl and Heidegger, seeks to understand the essence of human experiences by examining how individuals perceive and make meaning of their world (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was particularly appropriate for this study as it allowed for deep exploration of the subjective experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes that teachers engage in as they navigate the complexities of rural education. The study was conducted in five rural secondary schools across three counties in Eastern Kenya, selected through purposive sampling based on criteria including remoteness, resource constraints, and representation of diverse rural communities. Twelve secondary school teachers participated in the study, with teaching experience ranging from three to fifteen years in rural settings.

Data collection involved multiple methods to ensure rich, comprehensive understanding of participants' lived experiences. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, lasting between 60 to 90 minutes, exploring their personal narratives of professional identity formation and reconstruction. Interview questions focused on critical incidents, challenges, sources of professional meaning, relationships with students and communities, and perceptions of their evolving professional roles (Seidman, 2019). Additionally, participants maintained reflective journals over a four-week period, documenting daily experiences, thoughts, and feelings related to their professional identity. Focus group discussions were also conducted with groups of three to four teachers to explore collective experiences and shared meanings. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated

from Kiswahili to English where necessary. Field notes were maintained throughout the research process to capture contextual observations and researcher reflections.

Data analysis followed Giorgi's phenomenological analysis framework, which involves systematic procedures for identifying essential themes and structures of experience (Giorgi, 2009). The analysis began with multiple readings of transcripts to achieve immersion in the data, followed by identifying meaning units—segments of text that contained coherent meanings related to professional identity reconstruction. These meaning units were then transformed into phenomenological language that captured their essential psychological meanings while remaining faithful to participants' original expressions. Through a process of free imaginative variation, essential themes were identified across all participants' experiences, revealing common structures of professional identity reconstruction in the rural context. The researcher practiced epoché, or bracketing of preconceptions, throughout the analysis process to allow participants' experiences to emerge authentically. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing with fellow researchers, and maintaining a reflexive journal documenting the researcher's own assumptions and responses to the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Navigating Identity Tensions Between Professional Ideals and Rural Realities

Teachers in this study described experiencing profound tensions between their pre-service professional ideals and the harsh realities of rural teaching contexts. Upon entering rural schools, participants encountered resource scarcities, large class sizes, and infrastructural inadequacies that contradicted their training expectations and initial professional aspirations. One teacher reflected, "I came with dreams of transforming lives through quality education, but found myself teaching 80 students in a classroom with no textbooks and crumbling walls." This dissonance created what Pillen et al. (2013) describe as identity tensions—conflicts between different aspects of teachers' professional self-understanding that require reconciliation or reconstruction. Teachers in this study engaged in continuous negotiation between who they thought they would become as teachers and who they were actually becoming in the rural context, leading to fundamental reconstructions of their professional identities.

The process of reconciling these tensions involved three primary strategies that emerged from participants' narratives. First, teachers engaged in redefining success and professional effectiveness in contextually appropriate terms. Rather than measuring their effectiveness against urban or international standards, participants reconstructed their professional identities around localized indicators of impact, such as students' character development, community engagement, and incremental academic improvements despite resource constraints. This reframing represents what Hong (2010) identifies as adaptive professional identity development, where

teachers modify their self-concepts to align with contextual possibilities rather than ideal conditions. Second, teachers developed what might be termed "pragmatic professionalism"—a hybrid identity that combined pedagogical expertise with practical problem-solving, resourcefulness, and improvisation skills necessary for rural teaching success.

However, this identity reconstruction was not without psychological costs. Many participants described periods of professional disillusionment, frustration, and questioning of their career choices. The constant gap between professional aspirations and daily realities created ongoing emotional labor that required significant identity work to maintain commitment and motivation. Kelchtermans (2009) argues that such identity tensions can lead to either professional growth or burnout, depending on available support systems and individual resilience factors. Teachers in this study who successfully navigated these tensions demonstrated remarkable resilience, but emphasized the importance of peer support, recognition from school leadership, and occasional professional development opportunities that validated their efforts and reinforced their sense of professional competence despite challenging circumstances.

The data also revealed that identity tensions were particularly acute in relation to curriculum implementation and assessment practices. Teachers felt pressure to prepare students for national examinations while recognizing that standardized curricula often failed to address the unique educational needs and contexts of rural students. This created a professional dilemma: should they prioritize examination success to maintain their credibility as effective teachers, or should they adapt curricula to local contexts even if this meant potentially lower examination performance? This tension reflects broader debates in education about standardization versus contextualization, and highlights how policy decisions at national levels create identity challenges for individual teachers in diverse settings (Priestley et al., 2015). Participants who successfully navigated this tension constructed hybrid identities that honored both examination requirements and local relevance, though this required significant additional effort and creativity.

Community Integration and the Expansion of Professional Identity

A central finding of this study was the significant role that community integration played in reconstructing teacher professional identity in rural contexts. Unlike urban teachers who might maintain clearer boundaries between professional and personal lives, rural teachers in Eastern Kenya found their professional identities deeply intertwined with community membership and responsibilities. Teachers described being viewed by community members not merely as subject instructors but as educated community resources expected to provide guidance on diverse issues ranging from health practices to agricultural techniques, conflict resolution to civic education. This expansion of role expectations beyond traditional pedagogical boundaries required teachers to reconstruct their professional identities to encompass these broader community functions. As one participant explained,

"Here, you are not just a teacher of mathematics. You are a community leader, a counselor, a role model for everything the community aspires to become."

This expanded professional identity brought both challenges and sources of professional meaning. On one hand, the additional expectations created role overload and blurred professional boundaries in ways that participants sometimes found overwhelming. Teachers reported feeling exhausted by constant community demands on their time and expertise, with limited recognition or compensation for these extended roles. This aligns with research by Lampert et al. (2013) showing that rural teachers often experience role ambiguity and expansion beyond formal job descriptions. On the other hand, many participants derived deep professional satisfaction and meaning from their community integration. Being recognized as valuable community members, seeing their influence extend beyond classrooms into families and community practices, and experiencing genuine appreciation from parents and community leaders became important sources of professional identity and motivation that sustained teachers through material hardships.

The process of community integration required cultural competence and sensitivity that became central to participants' reconstructed professional identities. Teachers needed to navigate complex cultural protocols, respect traditional authority structures while maintaining professional autonomy, and bridge potential conflicts between modern educational values and traditional community practices. Those who successfully integrated into their communities described learning to communicate educational concepts in culturally resonant ways, seeking collaboration rather than confrontation with community leaders, and demonstrating respect for local knowledge while introducing new ideas. This cultural brokering function became a core component of their professional identity, requiring skills not typically emphasized in teacher education programs. Ladson-Billings (2009) describes similar identity work among culturally responsive teachers who view cultural competence as essential to their professional effectiveness rather than as an add-on to pedagogical expertise.

Participants' narratives revealed that successful community integration was critical not only for professional satisfaction but also for practical teaching effectiveness. Teachers who were accepted and respected by communities found parents more supportive of their efforts, students more motivated to learn, and communities more willing to contribute resources to school improvements. Conversely, teachers who maintained professional distance from communities or failed to navigate cultural expectations effectively experienced greater isolation, reduced community support, and increased difficulties in their teaching work. This finding underscores the importance of preparing teachers for the community dimensions of rural teaching and supporting ongoing identity development that embraces rather than resists community integration. As Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) argue, professional capital in teaching includes not only human capital (individual knowledge and skills) but also social capital (relationships and

networks), which in rural contexts extends significantly into community relationships that shape professional identity and effectiveness.

Table 1. Dimensions of Reconstructed Professional Identity in Rural Teaching Context

Identity Dimension	Traditional Professional Identity	Reconstructed Rural Teacher Identity
Role Definition	Subject specialist and instructor	Multi-functional community resource
Success Indicators	Student achievement scores	Holistic student development and community impact
Professional Boundaries	Clear separation of professional and personal	Integrated professional-community identity
Knowledge Base	Pedagogical content knowledge	Pedagogical, cultural, and practical problem-solving knowledge
Professional Relationships	Primarily with students and colleagues	Extended network including parents, community leaders, and stakeholders
Sources of Meaning	Curriculum delivery and academic results	Student transformation and community contribution

Resilience and Agency in Identity Reconstruction

The third major theme that emerged from participants' experiences was the critical role of resilience and agency in successfully reconstructing professional identity despite challenging circumstances. Teachers in this study demonstrated remarkable resilience—the capacity to maintain professional commitment and effectiveness despite adversity—but this resilience was not simply an innate personality trait. Rather, it was actively constructed through specific cognitive, emotional, and relational strategies that became integral to their reconstructed professional identities. Participants described learning to focus on aspects of their work they could control rather than dwelling on systemic constraints beyond their influence, finding joy in small victories and incremental student progress, and developing philosophical perspectives that framed challenges as opportunities for growth rather than evidence of professional failure. This aligns with research by Mansfield et al. (2016) showing that teacher resilience involves active cognitive and emotional regulation strategies that can be developed and strengthened over time.

Agency—the capacity to act purposefully and make meaningful choices within constraints—emerged as another crucial dimension of reconstructed professional identity. Despite working in contexts with significant resource limitations and systemic barriers, participants rejected passive victim identities and instead constructed identities as active agents capable of making meaningful differences. Teachers described various ways they exercised professional agency: improvising teaching materials from locally available resources, adapting curriculum to local

contexts, organizing community fundraising for school improvements, creating extracurricular programs addressing local needs, and advocating with education officials for support. This agentic professional identity reflects what Priestley et al. (2015) describe as teachers achieving agency not despite constraints but through creative responses to contextual challenges. Participants who maintained strong agency in their professional identities reported greater job satisfaction and commitment than those who felt victimized by their circumstances.

Importantly, resilience and agency were not purely individual achievements but were significantly shaped by relational and contextual factors. Teachers identified several key sources of support that enabled their resilient, agentic professional identities. Collegial relationships with fellow teachers provided emotional support, practical assistance, and validation of their professional worth that sustained them through difficult periods. School leadership that recognized and appreciated teachers' efforts, even when material rewards were impossible, significantly strengthened professional identity and commitment. Occasional professional development opportunities, visits from education officials, or recognition through awards programs provided external validation that reinforced teachers' sense of professional competence and value. Additionally, relationships with former students who had succeeded despite difficult circumstances, and expressions of gratitude from parents and community members, served as powerful reminders of teachers' impact and importance, strengthening their professional identity and motivation to persist.

The study also revealed important differences in how teachers at different career stages experienced identity reconstruction processes. Early-career teachers (those with less than five years of rural teaching experience) described more dramatic identity reconstructions involving significant disillusionment followed by either adaptation or consideration of leaving the profession. Mid-career teachers had generally achieved more stable reconstructed identities that integrated initial professional ideals with realistic rural contextual awareness, though they expressed concerns about professional stagnation and limited advancement opportunities. More experienced teachers (those with over ten years in rural schools) demonstrated the most fully integrated professional identities that embraced rural teaching as a meaningful vocation rather than a temporary assignment. These career stage differences highlight the ongoing, developmental nature of professional identity reconstruction and suggest the need for differentiated support strategies. As Day and Gu (2014) argue in their research on teacher resilience across career phases, sustaining professional commitment and effectiveness requires understanding and supporting the distinct identity challenges teachers face at different points in their careers, particularly in challenging contexts like rural schools where attrition risks are elevated.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study has illuminated the complex, multifaceted processes through which secondary school teachers in rural Eastern Kenya reconstruct their professional identities in response to the unique challenges and opportunities of their contexts. The findings reveal that professional identity reconstruction is not a one-time adjustment but an ongoing, dynamic process involving continuous negotiation between professional ideals and contextual realities, individual aspirations and community expectations, personal needs and professional commitments. Teachers in this study demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience, reconstructing their professional identities to encompass expanded roles, culturally responsive practices, and contextually appropriate definitions of success and effectiveness. Their experiences highlight that professional identity in rural contexts extends far beyond classroom teaching to include community integration, cultural brokering, and multi-dimensional educational leadership that addresses not only academic but also social, emotional, and community development needs.

The study's findings have significant implications for teacher education, professional development, and education policy. Teacher preparation programs must better prepare prospective teachers for the realities of rural teaching, including not only pedagogical skills but also cultural competence, community engagement capabilities, and psychological resilience strategies. Professional development for rural teachers should recognize and validate the expanded professional identities these teachers develop rather than imposing urban-centric models of professionalism that may not fit rural contexts. Induction and mentoring programs for early-career rural teachers are critical to supporting the challenging identity reconstruction processes they experience and reducing attrition rates. Furthermore, education policies should acknowledge the additional roles and responsibilities rural teachers assume and provide appropriate recognition, support, and compensation that honor their comprehensive contributions to rural communities and student development.

This research contributes to broader educational literature by demonstrating the importance of context-sensitive approaches to understanding teacher professional identity. While general theories of teacher identity provide valuable frameworks, this study shows that professional identity construction is profoundly shaped by specific contextual factors including resource availability, community structures, cultural norms, and systemic support systems. Future research should continue exploring professional identity in diverse educational contexts, examining how different cultural, economic, and social settings shape identity reconstruction processes. Longitudinal studies tracking teachers' identity development over extended periods would provide valuable insights into career trajectories and factors that sustain or undermine professional commitment. Additionally, comparative studies examining professional identity reconstruction across different rural regions or between rural and urban contexts would deepen understanding of how context shapes professional identity and could inform more targeted, effective interventions

to support teacher development and retention in diverse educational settings worldwide.

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