

# A veteran female teacher losing professional footing in a "New" South African school

BRUCE NDUNA



*BRUCE NDUNA is a lecturer in the Department of Mathematics Science Technology and Computer Education at the University of Johannesburg. His research interests and teaching include professional teacher training of science teachers, in-service training and practitioner-oriented programmes. His current research concerns education and school reform and teacher development.*

## Abstract

*This article uses a hybrid of ethnography and discourse analysis combined with an aspect of contemporary narrative inquiry to make sense of a veteran teacher's story. Interview and free discussion data were collated to capture the turning points in the teacher's history. These turning points are discussed, using the analytical categories of 'footing', 'positioning' and 'voice'. In this framing, her history is captured as that of a veteran who loses her footing and who longs for a past in which she was a "starred teacher" whose practice was applauded. The analytical device used presents not only glimpses of her history, but also of her positioning and what has become for her a volatile educational environment in which her identity is in flux.*

**Keywords:** Ethnomethodological footing; struggle; voice

## Introduction: Identity dynamically constructed

This conversation piece analyses the 'talk and text' of a white, female, middle class teacher with a four year teachers' diploma, in the setting of a suburban primary school<sup>1</sup> in South Africa. The dialogue discussed is captured on my website ([www.uj.ac.za/edu](http://www.uj.ac.za/edu) ...) and is a reflection of 'new media' (Voithofer, 2005) form of dissemination that combines print and electronic media<sup>2</sup>. I reflect on aspects of chronology and turning points in the teacher's narrative, and on *positioning* and *footing* – terms used in conversation analysis and ethnomethodology, which capture how language and texts reflect the position of a social actor's utterance (Bamberg, 1997; Ribiero, 2006). I employ this analytical tool with its three categories to show how the teacher present and represents herself in the dialogue constructed from data I gathered over two years.

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<sup>2</sup> The length of the text does not allow for the inclusion of extensive verbatim data. I therefore narrate her story and use only brief quotes from her text.

The research encounter began as part of a three-year research project on "teacher identity and the culture of schooling", conducted by 12 researchers at a University in Gauteng province. At the outset of the inquiry, when interviewing the teacher 'Mary', she says, "It was some years ago when things were just simple". In the teacher's communication and my observation in their school over two years, she acted like, and referred to herself, as a 'veteran' – someone who has fought on many fronts for fair education and equal opportunities for pupils. Her metaphor is appropriate if viewed in terms of 'war' against crime, poverty, HIV&AIDS, and a continued divide in education. She has 'fought' the education system of the past (prior to democratic rule in 1994), and has been engaged in giving much of herself to "fight for her school" on many fronts. In our joint narrative in the dialogue, this is evident, and in the text (online) it is clear that she is tired, that the many changes in educational policy are taking their toll and that, although her heart is willing, she finds it difficult to cope.

In her talk she rallies behind fellow teachers who suffered from an unequal teacher education, some of whom are now colleagues. She is also a custodian of children's rights and a champion of 'excellence'. She has leapfrogged the debris of a history that has trapped many well-meaning teachers in the *semiotic* "webs of significance" (Geertz, 1973; Henning, 2000) of their life and professional experience, but she is tired of struggling continuously and in her story the discourse shows that the 'order and discipline' to which she had been accustomed, in the context in which she had been working throughout most of her career, is now largely lacking. It is hard for her to learn new skills on all fronts of her professional life. She is struggling to recontextualise herself with the continuous change and to find her *footing*, to settle in a new *position*, and to find her *voice* in this position where she encounters pupils and parents from the full social, ethnic, and cultural spectrum of 'the rainbow nation'. Ultimately she succumbs, losing her footing and her voice becomes still. Towards the end she concludes that, "I feel I'm exhausted trying to keep everything in place, and everybody in check. I sit with them, helping them, and now I've got big groups of kids who need help ... This job is not for the faint hearted!"

## Framing the dialogue: Making sense theoretically

I present her story as I also invoke my reflection on extracts from her recorded text. Thus, as fellow teacher I 'talk' to her in a dialogue and I take on the role of "Thabo" – which is an inscription of myself as a teacher with a very different past. Also, as researcher, I reflect on the talk as an intertextual 'dialogue', and speak as "Bruce". Thus my own story, which is one of an African male teacher and academic in the same city, is invoked. In our combined narrative, both blended and juxtaposed, we give a glimpse of a world that may be recognised far beyond our context.

It is in looking back on her life in the different front lines in which she has fought that I reflect on how she engages reflexively with her own story – how she sees the past from a point of the 'double arrow of time' (Mishler, 2006) and how her present position and her struggle for footing, recontextualises her past efforts. In addition to using Mishler's metaphor, I also invoke Ribiero's exploration of Goffmann's (1981) notion of 'footing'. In conjunction I refer to related ideas such as 'positioning' and 'voice' (Bakhtin, 1981). This teacher, with her experience and dedication, is losing her footing and ultimately also her voice. In the online text it is evident that Bruce, the researcher, is struggling to make sense and to reflect on and theorise about Mary's talk. He takes scholarly refuge in tools from sociolinguistics and in terms of language as discursive social action. I (Bruce) draw largely on the work of Fairclough (2003).

In a synthesis of *ethnomethodological* and *sociolinguistic* theories I find a way of making sense of Mary's talk, her references to her history, and my own dual part in the dialogue. I see, as Mishler (2006) has argued, that time is less chronological than it is *experiential* and that the past is seen from the only perspective it can have for the narrator, namely the present.

The chronology of Mary's story has the 'now' as point of departure and of reflection. In Ricouer's words: "We can learn to read time backward as the recapitulating of the initial conditions of a course of action in its terminal consequences" (1981, 180). Her story unexpectedly 'ended' at the time this conversation piece was being finalised. Before she informed me that she had resigned as a teacher, I had written her story as if the end was a resolution and a conviction to keep up her struggle. She politely informed me by text message that she had resigned and would not be able to participate in the last of the three years of research. The 'arrow of time' had turned.

## Reflections on how Mary's discourse captures her struggle and her loss

As this teacher communicates with Bruce she refers to herself and indexes words that show how she searches for footing and the creation of a continuously new context. However, she does so by inscribing herself in a past in which she excelled and was celebrated as a 'starred' teacher (i.e. winner of awards and accolades). Her teacher's position as she identifies herself currently is no longer sure – she refers to herself and to the 'pupils', parents and fellow teachers from a position of strength initially, but as the data accumulated and time moved on, it became evident that she was losing her *footing*, changing her *position*, gradually softening, and ultimately losing her *voice*.

In her effort to find footing in a world that is "moving under (her) feet", Mary gradually relinquishes her position as veteran teacher. In the excerpts of the dialogue from various interviews between her and Thabo, she positions herself increasingly as an *outsider* and ultimately moves *out*. The motivation to remain a 'starred' teacher succumbed to change. As Bourdieu (Rex & Nelson, 2004; i) wrote: "When faced with conflict and ambiguity teachers act pedagogically according to a personal sense of honor about what seems appropriate or possible in constrained situations." Also, Rex and Nelson (2004) argue that:

who teachers are as professionals is so intricately tied to who they are as people that to think of teaching as a job that can be performed separately from what one believes to be important is to dehumanise the role of the teacher.

Mary cannot find a position that will make it possible for her to use her voice (to be herself). She cannot create a context that is aligned with her whole sense of self and past. She says she loves the children and yet she struggles to cope with their behaviour. She makes a number of statements that position her as the 'strategic' white female teacher who lives in a transforming South Africa, and yet the realities of the changes are numbing her sense of self. In much of her expression she appears to speak in a strong voice, but there are signs of referencing (Schiffrin, 2006) that reveal how she sees herself in the social context as one who is becoming weaker. She is 'an outsider' who has 'to cope' and 'to deal' with behaviour that she cannot 'control', even by rewarding the 'orderly children'. In the end she gives up. By invoking past comparisons, it is as though the 'double arrow of time' of her narrative, is bringing ambiguity to her *present* space. She laments that she is not going to be recognised for merit in the new system. In terms of her identificational meaning-making (Fairclough, 2003; Henning, Van der Westhuizen & Diseko, 2005; Petersen, 2007) there are discursive signs that show a woman in identificational turmoil. Her resignation is not a surprise.

The implications for the diminishing teacher corps in South Africa are clear. If experienced and ostensibly open-minded and adaptable teachers like Mary withdraw, the chances are that more teachers will be lost in this way. Perhaps this should come as no surprise in a society that is struggling to find its footing in a radically different 'web of significance'. Teachers are willing to take on a new role in schools with different demographics, but if the odds are too great, they may just one day send the text message that says: "It is all too much".

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