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Teacher Identity

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Framing the Issue

The concept of teacher identity has experienced a resurgence of research attention as scholars in education, psychology, and related fields have expanded our understanding of identity from something internal, coherent, and fixed to something socially mediated, fragmented, and multiple. Identities are constructed as individuals claim identity positions and as external others assign identity to individuals; these self-positionings and positionings done by others may be complementary or contradictory. Simultaneously with an individual's use of agency to claim identity positions, external forces are at work to assign identity positions to that same individual; and, when these two forces clash, a negotiation of identities occurs. External others, such as persons, institutions, and the media, may endorse an individual's identity positions (e.g., a teacher's claim to be a *legitimate* language teacher) but may also exert pressure to alter or overturn such positions (e.g., a school's assignment of lower status to a non-native English-speaking teacher who claims to be a legitimate English teacher). Identity, then, is "a cover term for a range of social personae, including social statuses, roles, positions, relationships, and institutional

and other relevant community identities one may attempt to claim or assign in the course of social life" (Ochs, 1993, p. 288). Identity work comprises self-positioning and positioning by others. Identity is a continual negotiation between personal agency and external forces, which work in concert with or in opposition to an individual's identity claims (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Identity is not singular but multiple, and multiple identity positions are inhabited by an individual simultaneously. An identity position as "language teacher," for example, may coexist in an individual simultaneously with (or in addition to) others, such as parent, Latina, or fitness buff. Aside from multiplicity in the number of identity positions held, there can be also multiplicity within each identity position. For example, a language teacher may simultaneously claim identities as a communicative language teacher and as a proponent of grammar-based language instruction, two positions that, taken at face value, would not appear to coexist harmoniously. Identities, then, are not only multiple but contradictory at times.

Identity is continually under construction, and identity work is ongoing throughout an individual's life. This is not to say, however, that an individual has no enduring identities. While all aspects of identity are open to alteration and negotiation, most individuals' identity work includes carrying forward relatively stable identity positions (e.g., gender). Identities have varying degrees of durability, depending on the strength of an individual's agency and the pressure of external forces. Less durable identity positions may fall away, while more durable ones may remain largely unchanged throughout all or large chunks of an individual's life.

Identity work, the construction and negotiation of identities, is accomplished by two primary means: discourse and practice (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). Identity in discourse locates identity work as occurring primarily in language and social interaction. Identity in practice asserts the importance of the enactment of identity through one's behavior and participation in particular communities. Identity-in-discourse and identity-in-practice perspectives are not mutually exclusive, and teacher identity research commonly includes both perspectives.

An identity position as teacher or language teacher is one that may be claimed or assigned, supported or contested through individual

agency and external others. Further, the elements and markers of this identity—what a teacher says, how a teacher acts—are in constant negotiation not just between self and others but even within oneself.

Making the Case

Within the study of teacher identity, research has focused on three broad fields of inquiry: the process and impact of teacher identity on the development of language teachers, the marginalization and legitimation of particular teacher identities, and the import of teachers' enactment of teacher identity on instruction and on students. These categories are not exclusive and findings are often related across the three categories.

Teacher identity and the development of teachers are intricately linked. To teach is to adopt an identity as a teacher, although the nature of that identity remains in constant dispute among students, teachers, institutions, and the media. Research has identified much multiplicity in what it means to have a teacher's identity. Farrell (2011) found sixteen teacher identity roles within three categories of teacher identity positions (teacher as manager, as acculturator, and as professional). Farrell placed these roles on a continuum from readymade to individually created teacher roles. In this framework, teacher identity construction is largely a matter of choosing an identity position that has been constructed by others (teacher as vendor, teacher as entertainer) or of creating a new identity position (teacher as collaborator, teacher as learner). Farrell found experienced teachers to be at ease with adopting and creating identity positions that suited their preferences within the confines of what was institutionally available.

The facility for adopting, altering, and creating identity positions that Farrell found in experienced teachers stands in contrast to the rigidity Trent (2010) found in his study of pre-service teachers' identities. Trent's pre-service teachers evidenced inflexible views on teacher identity that eschewed such identities as "spaces of ambiguity." Related to this observed inflexibility, early-career teachers may experience identity crises, in which they fluctuate in their sense of who they are and adopt and discard teacher roles rapidly. Tsui (2007) discussed this potential for identity conflict during the induction of new

teachers as a factor that can facilitate or hamper teacher development, even teacher retention. "These conflicts could lead to new forms of engagement in practice, new relations with members of the community, and new ownership of meanings. Or they could lead to identities of marginality, disengagement, and nonparticipation" (Tsui, 2007, p. 678). Teacher identity construction, then, is intricately bound up with teachers' growth and development, and the successful induction of new teachers may depend on healthy, robust teacher identity construction. Flexibility and tolerance for some ambiguity and multiplicity may be helpful for new teachers engaged in this process.

As it is socially mediated and discursive, teacher identity is tied to societal, institutional, and ideological power differentials and inequities. Particular teacher identities are legitimated while others are marginalized. This is strongly evidenced within research on native and non-native speakers among language teachers, and research on this divide has been particularly rich in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). The native-speaker myth, in which native speakers of the target language are viewed as superior teachers, impinges strongly on the legitimacy of an individual's identity as a teacher when that individual speaks English as an adopted language. Non-native speakers of the target language are too commonly positioned as not fully legitimate target language teachers. The identity negotiation between non-native speakers and the myth of native-speaker superiority are marked by ubiquity and strength. Some non-native speakers in the language-teaching profession accept, if unhappily, a lower teaching identity. Others claim identity and legitimacy as non-native speakers, even as that identity is continually challenged by the "native speaker as a superior teacher" metanarrative (Golombek & Jordan, 2005; Tsui, 2007; Park, 2012). What research into the native–non-native language-speaking teachers divide clearly illustrates is that some teacher identities are socially and institutionally legitimated while others are not, and this causes marginalized identities to feel under threat.

Teacher identity is intricately intertwined with the way teachers teach and with the relationships they have with their students. Teacher identity is the practice of becoming and being a teacher. This concept of identity in practice highlights the symbiotic relationship between identity and practice: only through enactment are identities

realized. Further, changes in identity coincide with changes in teaching practice (Kanno & Stuart, 2011). The enactment of teacher identity in classrooms and schools necessarily impacts the experiences of others, including, importantly, the teachers' students (Motha, 2006). Cultural and linguistic mismatches between teachers and students (e.g., white teachers of black students; non-native English-speaking teachers of native English-speaking students) have been a fertile ground for observing how teacher identity shapes and is shaped by teacher–student relationships, although these mismatches certainly do not constitute the only relevant context. Menard-Warwick (2008), for example, found a context in which the teacher and students had matching identities as transnationals and the shared experience of living between nations was a rich site of identity development. These research studies and others assert that teacher identities are not and cannot be racially, culturally, or linguistically neutral. Neither can acts of teaching be neutral. To teach as if teacher and student identities were neutral risks obscuring "issues of power and privilege and consequently perpetuate[s] racial and linguistic hierarchies" (Motha, 2006, p. 498). Teachers, this body of research indicates, ought to be aware of the ways in which the enactment of their identity as teachers may impinge upon others, most notably upon their own students.

Pedagogical Implications

In pedagogical terms, teacher education programs should strive to

> provide trainee teachers with the tools they need to investigate and comprehend local cultural practices in the educational systems, schools and classrooms in which they will teach and how these practices might interact with their own processes of becoming a teacher. (Trent, 2010, p. 912)

One such tool is critical reflexivity (Varghese et al., 2005), which requires teachers to examine not just how they are shaped by the forces (social, cultural, political) within the contexts of their work as teachers, but also their own roles in shaping the context and the identity

options of others. Critical reflexivity can be practiced in a number of ways during formal or informal teacher education.

A first step toward critical reflexivity is to raise teacher awareness of identity processes at work within one's own teaching life. Scholarship has mainly focused on raising teacher identity awareness through work within pre-service teacher education programs or during the first teacher induction years. However, experienced teachers may similarly benefit from such attention to identity. Identity awareness-building activities can include reflection on one's own identity work, for example, by writing teachers' life history narratives (Park, 2012), by helping teachers identify, through written and oral reflection, the "cultural resources and constraints that arise from their personal and social histories" (Menard-Warwick, 2008, p. 636), and by inviting teachers to plan hypothetical lessons from the perspective of alternative teacher identities. These activities ask teachers to explore their own identities and to begin to play with new ones.

Whichever pedagogical strategies are employed to build teachers' critical reflexivity, those who educate teachers ought not allow them to lose sight of the *critical* element in critical reflexivity. Society, schools, and educational policies are socially negotiated and imbued with vested interests and power inequities. In order for teachers to be deeply reflective of their teacher identities within educational institutions, they need to look at society, schools, and policies with a skeptical, inquiring eye. Teachers' educators can serve as guides to those who are new to exploring how schools and schooling (and, by extension, their own role as teachers) can advantage particular individuals and marginalize others. As an example, teachers' educators might ask teachers to examine tracking or placement policies in their own institutions, where English learners' own identity options are limited by placement in nonacademic track courses or other marginal spaces. Critical reflexivity requires teachers to examine not only societal or institutional inequities but also their own implication in those inequities via their teacher identity and the positions they may inhabit.

Helping teachers imagine alternative teacher identities should also be central to the work of those who educate them. The value of teacher education, Golombek and Jordan assert, "lies in its ability to offer alternative discourses … to enable preservice teachers to imagine alternative identities" (2005, p. 513). Such imaginative work can lead to

the creation of new, different instructional practices, which are better suited to teachers' contexts and to social justice than the ingrained but perhaps ill-fitted and inequitable instructional practices in place. As an example, teachers, either novice or experienced, can be invited to imagine new identity possibilities through innovative arts-based teacher education that employs visual, movement-based, poetic, or other expressive media.

Disrupting teachers' established societal or institutional assumptions and ways of being is key to opening teachers' imagination to alternative perspectives on who they can be as teachers. Toward that end, immersing teachers, through field experiences, in a new school setting with new institutional ways of being is one promising strategy. These disruptions can include local solutions such as looking at alternative options (e.g., dual language schools or innovative programs within schools) or at global solutions that put teachers in contact with peers across the world through travel study. Whatever method is employed, developing in teachers a habit of imagining new possibilities for teaching and new teacher identities is critical to building teachers' own desire and ability to reshape the role of teacher.

Without an understanding of how teacher identities are negotiated—the push and pull of internal and external forces—teachers may be hampered in finding and using their own agency to claim or reject teacher identity positions. This may be of particular importance when a teacher's legitimacy is under threat. Non-native language-speaking teachers, commonly subjected to the "native speaker as superior teacher" metanarrative, ought to learn about, wrestle with, and speak back against such narratives during their initial preparation programs in order to claim legitimacy as language teachers. Teachers who face threats to their legitimacy might, as Golombek and Jordan suggest, claim legitimacy in their areas of strength in language teaching, for example, in "their command of content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of their students' needs, and knowledge of the institutional demands of the teaching context" (Golombek & Jordan, 2005, p. 529). Practicing these claims to legitimacy ought to begin in pre-service teacher education.

Similarly, teachers ought to understand how the enactment of their teacher identities shapes the learning environment and the identity options for their students. Motha (2006), among others, advocates the

deconstruction of seemingly innocuous, dominant identities, such as white teacher and native English-speaking teacher, which may camouflage power differentials and inequities. Such deconstruction work can be accomplished through guided readings and viewings of case studies of non-majority teachers and students, as well as through carefully constructed field experiences or experiences with non-dominant communities outside the classroom (Menard-Warwick, 2008). Teachers' educators play a key role in helping the dominant culture and the dominant language teachers see inequities that may otherwise remain invisible to them.

Although most research into teacher identity concludes with a call for the inclusion of explicit, guided teacher identity work during the education of teachers, too little research attention has been paid to effective teacher identity pedagogy. As the resurgence of research into teacher identity continues, more scholarship on effective pedagogy should follow.

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