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# Am I a Teacher? Exploring the Development of Professional Identity

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Fifteen years ago I struggled as a first-year high school English teacher. It was a *very* difficult year. I had thought I was prepared for my new job, so the realization that I was not as ready as I predicted came as quite a shock. I knew my content, and I was knowledgeable about many creative pedagogical strategies, but I couldn't figure out how to place myself in the classroom—who *was* I as a teacher? How much of my old self could I bring to my class? How much of a new persona, almost a new "person," did I have to create to interact effectively with students? I felt disoriented and a little off balance. I didn't know how to be a teacher, even though I knew the fundamentals of a teacher's work. In short, I struggled with assuming a teacher identity.

Over the last several years, I have become increasingly interested in the idea of teacher professional identity and how it develops. I work as an English educator at a Big Ten research university, so I regularly teach "methods" or pedagogy courses to pre-service teachers, and I supervise and mentor many student teachers during their internship semesters. I often observe these student teachers experiencing difficulties similar to mine as they learn to become secondary educators. So to learn how to better prepare my students for the challenges of a teacher's life, I decided to conduct some research exploring what teacher educators or mentors might do to assist new teachers' transition into their professional lives.

Between January 2001 and January 2003, I conducted a two-year, qualitative, interview-based research project exploring the professional identity development of six pre-service secondary English teachers at my university. I conducted six interviews with each student over the two years of the study, observed each of them teaching in his or her student teaching placement, and collected various written and visual artifacts related to his or her developing professional identity. I analyzed this data thematically, employing various theoretical and disciplinary lenses, including genre studies, educational research and theory, composition and rhetoric, applied linguistics, and psychology. In summary, my research has led me to believe that to be successful, a secondary school teacher must develop a sense of professional identity integrating his or her personal subjectivities with the professional and cultural expectations of what it means to be a teacher. Therefore, a teacher's identity is a "weaving together" in Jim Gee's (1999) terms, of various different subjectivities and situated identity positions (p. 21). This incorporation, this merging, this professional identity formation, seems to happen during a new teacher's preparation *through the expression of various genres of discourse* facilitating a dialogic engagement with students, mentors, teacher educators, family, peers, and even internal dialogues with other personal subjectivities, beliefs, or ideologies.

The discourse the pre-service teachers in my study used to describe their identities, subjectivities, and associated ideologies assisted them in learning to occupy what I call the "borderlands," between multiple identity strands that they expressed as various, context-specific, subject positions, such as student, teacher, daughter, friend, mother, or feminist. The borderland is a term that I have taken from Gee who uses it in a study he did of urban middle and high school students from different ethnic groups who "came together" on the schoolyard. When they came together they used "borderland discourse" to communicate, discourse that was "a mixture of the various neighborhood peer discourses, and some emergent properties of its own" (p. 22).

In its essence, borderland discourse explicitly facilitates bringing personal subjectivities or ideologies into the classroom and connecting them to a developing professional self. It is at these

discursive borderlands that the pre-service teachers discovered how to move from being students to being teachers and honor personal beliefs and passions while meeting professional responsibilities and embodying a teacher identity so often overshadowed by stereotypical cultural scripts.

This dialogic discourse took a variety of forms for the students in my study, including narratives, belief statements, philosophy statements, and metaphors that they expressed either during interviews with me or while teaching classes which I observed. I believe the teacher educator and/or mentor teacher can intentionally use these genres of discourse to help new teachers develop workable and complex teacher identities. For example, teacher educators and mentors can create assignments that require the expression of these genres, or they can involve the new teacher in activities or discussions in which these genres of discourse are central. At the end of this article, I provide a few specific examples of such assignments and activities.

## Why Research Teacher Identity?

I am not the first educational theorist or researcher to recognize the importance of teacher professional identity development. Richard P. Lipka and Thomas M. Brinkthaupt (1999) write that it is essential that teacher educators and mentors of new teachers help them balance their "personal development . . . with their professional development" (p. 2). Lipka and Brinkthaupt explore why paying attention to the personal, in addition to the professional, is important for a workable teacher identity to result. Deborah Britzman (1991) calls becoming a teacher a type of identity "transformation" and argues that in order to become a secondary educator we often ask students to give up or suppress aspects of their personal selves that do not conform to the standard cultural model of teacher (p. 47). Such suppression of self can lead to frustration or feelings of inadequacy and isolation.

When approaching my research on teacher identity I first had to ask the question, what does it mean to be a secondary school teacher? Those who have been high school or middle school teachers know that secondary school teaching is demanding work. They have taught 120-plus adolescents per day, have spent weekends and evenings grading papers and planning lessons, and have negotiated the competing demands of various stakeholders including administrators, community leaders, colleagues, and students. They also know that the profession is often perceived, both by "insiders" and "outsiders," as *more* than a job, more as a way of life or a "calling." A teacher is defined as an individual who should go above and beyond the call of duty for the benefit of the young people with whom he or she works, with no expectation of extra reward, much less even adequate compensation.

To make integration into the profession even more challenging, the first few years of teaching are especially daunting. According to Dwight L. Rogers and Leslie M. Babinski (2002), much has been written about the problems of new teachers, and ample research has been conducted on the topic (Bell & Gilbert, 1994; Bullough, 1987; Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Fuller, 1969; Grant & Zeichner, 1981; Kestner, 1994; Ryan, 1970; Veenman, 1984). Yet, Rogers and Babinski state, "despite all of the research and all of the books and articles written about the difficulties endured by beginning teachers, the first year of teaching continues to be an exceptionally difficult time for most of them" (p. 2). All of the research and writing conducted by educational researchers, while respected journals and academic presses may have published it, has not really helped the new teacher. In fact, only 50% of new teachers' careers last longer than five years (Gordon, 1991; Huling-Austin, Odell, Ishler, Kay, & Edelfelt, 1989). And, if that isn't bad enough, Robert Bullough (1987) writes, "many of the teachers who remain in classrooms end up teaching in ways that are inconsistent and even contradictory to their initial pedagogical beliefs, goals, and expectations" (quoted in Rogers and Babinski, p. 3). This statement tells me these teachers cannot find ways to teach as they were taught during their university education, so they revert to lifesaving measures that simply keep them afloat in the classroom, such as traditional teacher-centered methods of lecture and closed questioning.

I believe there is a fundamental paradox in the cultural model of teacher, one that affects teacher education: for a teacher to be deemed effective, our society says he or she must be consistently selfless and generous with her personal resources; however, we all know that only the teacher who has developed a rich, well-rounded identity, or sense of self, is truly successful over the long term. So the successful teacher must be self*less* and self*ish* at the same time, a seemingly impossible seesaw to balance. Among the participants in my study, only the pre-service teachers who had a strong sense of their personal identity and its connection or disconnection with their professional identity were able to successfully transition into the profession. In other words, they needed to be "self-actualized" (to use the 1962 phrase coined by Abraham Maslow and later used by bell hooks in 1994) to whatever extent possible. Self-actualization refers to self-awareness and reflexivity about the intersections of various aspects of self— namely the intellectual/cognitive, the emotional/ affective and the physical/material. In my study, if such self-actualization had not occurred, the pre-service teachers chose not to enter the profession immediately, and if they did take a teaching job, they were likely to experience future professional identity crises, just as I did so many years ago.

Perhaps most readers of this article will not argue with this premise of self-actualization as precursor to professional success; in fact, perhaps some will see it as self-evident. The problem is that often teacher educators do not enact or engage in holistic pedagogies that encourage this more comprehensive model of growth. Instead, methods, pedagogy, or education courses might focus on the acquisition of discrete knowledge or skill sets that pre-service teachers should know to be successful: e.g., state educational standards, lesson planning, adolescent psychological, canonical texts, etc. Such knowledge and skills are relatively easy to teach and assess, and in this age of accountability and standards, the easier-to-implement partial models of pre-service education are taking on an ever-increasing importance, to the neglect of a more comprehensive model. For example, at my

institution as well as many others, state and national standards for teacher education must be "mapped" or connected to our curricula, and our success teaching them is evaluated by NCATE (The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) every four years. This method of assessment primarily measures the knowledge base and skill sets being taught, which, while important, are not necessarily a satisfactory evaluation of the total preparedness of our pre-service teachers. In short, these types of assessments ignore holistic issues of identity.

## What Can We Do to Help New Teachers Develop a Professional Identity?

As teacher educators and mentor teachers, we are implicated in the ideological inculcation and identity formation of the new teachers who emerge from our programs. Therefore, we must step up and enact pedagogies that take our students where we want them to go—to the successful development of critical personal pedagogies and satisfying professional identities. We can make the induction phase of the new teacher easier by giving assignments or facilitating experiences that encourage the expression of various genres of integrative teacher identity discourse, including narratives and metaphors, resulting in experimentation and exploration of ideological, affective, and corporeal borderlands. Examples of such assignments or activities include the following:

1) Ask pre-service or new teachers to provide narrative, or anecdotal, evidence to support pedagogical decisions. Giving such evidence requires them to interrogate long-held, but often unexamined, beliefs based on their educational memories. Consequently, new teachers become aware of when they make classroom decisions based on past experiences as a student and can analyze whether these decisions are pedagogically sound.

2) Ask pre-service or new teachers to compose reflective writings or teaching journal entries grounded and

contextualized in real narratives of experience instead of in educational jargon or cliché.

3) Require pre-service or new teachers to either role-play classroom scenarios or videotape themselves teaching and reflect narratively on the experience. These exercises allow students to explore the embodiment of teacher identity and their affective and corporeal responses to being a teacher.

4) Encourage pre-service or new teachers to create either visual or text-based metaphors that re-conceptualize abstract ideas and philosophies as concrete images. Hence, new teachers will make *implicit* knowledge and beliefs *explicit* in order to be reconstructed or revised.

Each of these assignments or activities can result in the expression of borderland discourse that facilitates the search for a teacher identity, a search that occurs amidst a very difficult to navigate professional landscape.

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