Teaching and Teacher Education 26 (2010) 1015–1022

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Teaching and Teacher Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tate

Seeing one another as "other"

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 26 April 2009
Received in revised form
6 September 2009
Accepted 28 October 2009

Keywords:
Prospective teachers
Identity
Teacher development
Life history

ABSTRACT

In this paper, the authors discuss two complementary life history research projects investigating prospective teachers' identities in relation to their race and social class. Drawing on the experiences of one student from each study, they show how both whites and students of color primarily thought about one another as "others"—people who fundamentally differed from one another and whom they understood through preconceived ideas about a group. The authors draw on a Bakhtinian notion of how a "surplus of sight" enables one to develop understandings of an "other" and also of oneself.

1. Introduction

When we enrolled in teacher education, we knew the kind of teachers that we wanted to be. We had over 12 years of role models to emulate—what Lortie (1975) has called an apprenticeship of observation—and we were eager to take up practices that our teachers had instilled in us. We wanted to help all children learn through engaging activities, and to be someone that families and students found knowledgeable, skilled, and thoughtful. In imagining ourselves as teachers, Knowles (1992) has argued that we engage with "early childhood experiences, early teacher role models and previous teaching experience" as these are "most important in the formation of an 'image of self as a teacher'" (p. 126). As such, life experiences shaped our prospective teacher identities which Zembylas (2008) contends are "grounded in multiple ways of knowing, with affective and direct experiential knowledge often being paramount" (p. 112).

Like many of our current students enrolled in elementary education, when we entered teacher education programs, we had not thought very much about how who we were would impact all aspects of learning to teach. We had thought about teacher education as a seamless process of gaining knowledge and strategies to help students learn the material that we had learned. When we entered teacher education, it did not occur to either of us that we would be asked to think about ourselves. We had not before considered that teacher education was as much about who we were as much as it was about what we were learning about curriculum and how to enact instruction. Each of us now has many years of experience as a teacher and a teacher educator, and it has become increasingly clear to us that one's identity or notions about who one is, plays an important role in the learning to teach process.

Despite this knowledge, when [Mary Louise] became chair of the elementary education program at midwestern State University (in the United States) a few years ago, she was surprised and troubled by the large quantity of prospective teachers of color, especially Latino/a prospective teachers, who appeared at her door—telling stories of anger and anguish about interactions with European American/white peers and teacher educators. Prospective teachers of color believed that their white classmates and teachers lacked rich cultural understandings, and often spoke or acted on the basis of stereotypes. Knowledge of such difficulties led [Mary Louise] to generate a research project focusing on understanding Latino/a prospective teachers' life histories—including dimensions of their home, K-12 schooling, campus experiences, and interactions during their teacher education program.

At about the same time, [Edie], a doctoral student and teacher educator in the same program, was crafting a longitudinal life history research project that investigated the attitudes and beliefs of white prospective teachers regarding their thinking about their future students who were people of color. The six teachers (of 24 in the cohort group she was teaching) were selected as those especially concerned with teaching future students from marginalized circumstances. She had asked prospective teachers in her classes to participate if they were actively attempting to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms and to talk about these ideals and goals. So, those prospective teachers whom she interviewed (over time and across occasions)

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doi:10.1016/j.tate.2009.10.044

differed from many of their peers as they asserted they were engaged reflectively on their ideas and trying to understand how these might play out in their classrooms. These two research projects complement one another in that both investigate how the identities of prospective teachers affect their learning to teach.

What we began to see in our interviews was that members of each group—Latinos/as and whites, primarily had thought about and understood one another as inhabiting the category of "the Other"—someone who fundamentally differed from them, and about whom they had many preconceived notions. Together, we began to consider these questions about our projects:

> How do the ways one thinks about "the Other" shape a sense of self?
> How do prospective teachers come to think this way? And, what effect does it have on them?

To understand what was happening with our students, we read literature/s regarding various dimensions of the self. We investigated identity in general as well as how teachers develop identity in relation to their profession. A review of these concepts follows.

2. How can we understand dimensions of the self?

Identity is a multi-dimensional notion; it is fluid and complex, particular and socially marked; it is shaped by one's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and dispositions. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) suggest that "identities, the imaginings of the self in worlds of action, [are] … social products; indeed, we begin with the premise that identities are lived in and through activity and so must be conceptualized as they develop in social practice" (p. 5). And, as Alcoff and Mohanty (2006) contend, identities provide "causal explanations of our social locations in a world that is shaped by such locations, by the way they are distributed and hierarchically organized" (p.6). Holland et. al. (1998) contend that one's viewpoint is shaped by "the dialect we speak, the degree of formality we adopt in our speech, the deeds we do, the places we go, the emotions we express, and the clothes we wear" (p, 127). Our viewpoint also is shaped by the relationships individuals have with significant people in their lives (Mead, 1934). Additionally, the ways people are historically and culturally situated as well as how they internalize their cultural traditions and values shape the ways they view the world (Harding, 2004).

These notions suggest that we do not have a single fixed identity. Rather, at different times and in different places, various aspects of our identities may be foregrounded depending on with whom we are interacting. In this sense, each person's identity is actually a hybrid of multiple dimensions of a self.

Further, our social identity is shaped by how we are perceived within social systems of classification. Sanchez (2006) suggests that the process of identity formation is shaped by "political, economic, and cultural forces" that come together in "distinctive and dynamic ways" (p. 35). Moya (2006) argues that one's social identity is imposed from social structures outside of the self in context specific ways implicating ways a person is treated by others. Social identities often are based on unfounded stereotypical notions regarding particular groups of people.

So while individuals may position themselves one way, their social categorization may prevent others from seeing and or treating them as such. One of the realities of identities is that they are "visibly marked on the body itself, guiding if not determining the way we perceive and judge others and are perceived and judged by them" (Alcoff, 2006, p. 5). Alcoff argues that one's visible self impacts individuals' lived experiences. She states that the color of people's skin, as well as other embodied features, impact the way one is socially positioned and placed within the hierarchy of privilege in the United States. This is true regardless of whether the social distinction is accurate or not.

3. Teacher identity

Just as with identity in general, the identity of a teacher also is not singular or unified. Zembylas (2008) suggests that the belief that teachers have a specific identity "highlights the fact that teachers are produced as *particular* kinds of professionals" (p. 124, italics in the original). Scholars such as Britzman (1992), Elbaz (1991), Goodson (1980) and Weber and Mitchell (1996) argue that teacher identity also is complex and fluid. For educators, this means "taking up an identity is a constant social negotiation that can never be permanently settled or fixed" (Britzman, 1992, p. 42). As one's viewpoint is influenced by a series of experiences over time, so is one's professional or teacher identity continuously in a state of becoming as one's life evolves.

Prospective teachers can mediate their personal beliefs about who they wish to be as a teacher with cultural and institutional expectations of what it means to be a teacher. Yet, this is not so easy. Problems in a teacher's developing professional identity arise when a "culture's definition of normalcy is inconsistent with the personal beliefs or values of the individual seeking to become a teacher" (Alsup, 2006, p. 64). Teachers quickly "learn to internalize and enact roles and norms assigned to them by the school culture through what are considered 'appropriate' expressions and silences" (Zembylas, 2008, p. 119).

Pre-service teachers actively can work to mediate their personal vision of an effective teacher with the external expectations they will meet within the institutions where they work. Alsup (2006) describes the place of the negotiation of the multiple selves, this merging of subjectivities, as "borderland discourse" (p.37). She suggests that this borderland discourse allows pre-service teachers to "bring personal subjectivities or ideologies into the classroom and connect them to their developing professional selves" (p. 37). Thus, with the help of campus and community teacher educators, prospective teachers can negotiate comfortable, effective personal teaching practices (Danielewicz, 2001).

4. How we come to see one another as "Other"

In this next section, we discuss theoretical ideas about how prospective teachers in our studies came to think about one another in terms of fixed social categories rather than as individuals. Cultural psychologist Ernest Boesch (2007) argues that there is no other, but in fact "'other' simply means not like I" and that "There is no other without an 'I'" (p. 5). Further, he says that our images of "others" are not constant, but continually are changing as we come to know one another in various ways and in multiple contexts. Boesch contends that throughout our identity development, the increasing body of experiences with others "refines" our understandings of who they are and why they think and act as they do in relation to us. He calls this the development of empathy for those whom we see as others. This occurs through our social experiences with them as well as our expectations and understandings of who they are based on "…myths of the cultural group—[that] tend to define how individuals should act, think, feel, behave, according to their kind and status" (p. 7). Thus, the more varied interactions one has with individuals different from ourselves, one can imagine others as friends more than enemies. He concludes that:

> Whether he or she will be a friend or an adversary is often uncertain, and thus we look for signs helping us see through the outer appearance. Which, of course, will depend upon our familiarity with the cultural context (p. 7).