



How teachers become teacher researchers: Narrative as a tool for teacher identity construction



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Instructor and teachers constructed identities as teacher researchers through talk.
- Instructor used narratives as a tool to co-construct the teacher researcher identity.
- Narratives were also used to discursively position teachers as teacher researchers.

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ABSTRACT

While scholarship on teacher research suggests the value of this work for teaching and learning, there are challenges in sustaining it beyond teacher education, in part because teachers may not envision themselves as researchers. Drawing on sociocultural theories of identity, this paper uses discourse analysis to consider how an instructor in a graduate course on teacher research supported inservice teachers in constructing identities as teacher researchers. The analysis identifies the ways the instructor used personal narratives as a tool to intentionally position teachers as teacher researchers as participants discursively negotiated these identities.

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1. Introduction

Just as many teachers seek to shift their pedagogy from transmission or banking models (Freire, 1993) towards more inquiry-based approaches, some teacher educators have looked to teacher research, a form of practitioner inquiry, as an effective tool for teacher learning (Zeichner, 2009). By engaging teachers in research on their practice, teacher education can move away from the teacher-centered positioning of transmission models towards more student-centered approaches, thus shifting the positioning of teachers from receivers of pedagogical knowledge from outside authorities into creators of such knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Teacher research provides not only an instructional tool for teacher educators to engage in student-centered, problem-posing pedagogy (Souto-Manning, 2012), but also a tool for teachers to inquire into tensions or problems of practice within their classrooms and schools (Baumann & Duffy, 2001). These tools

extend beyond the teacher education classroom, allowing teachers to continue their professional development after completing their formal coursework, providing opportunities for teachers to improve teaching and learning (Blumenreich & Falk, 2006; Lysaker & Thompson, 2013; Moran, 2007), explore questions of power and social justice (Fecho & Allen, 2011; Friedrich & McKinney, 2010), transform their understanding of their students (Ballenger, 1999, 2009; Hankins, 2003; Parkison, 2009), and build their sense of agency (Christenson et al., 2002) and professional voice (Whitney, 2012).

Yet, research from both the United Kingdom and North America have identified challenges in moving teacher research from teacher education spaces into teachers' own classrooms (Reis-Jorge, 2007; Schulz & Manduk, 2005). Participation within communities of teacher researchers can support teachers in learning about and sustaining this often difficult and time-consuming work (e.g., Phillips & Gallas, 2004; Wells, 2001), and teacher education programs could potentially provide a space in which these communities are developed and supported (Baumann & Duffy, 2001). However, in considering how teacher education might support

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teachers in engaging in teacher research, there is a lack of empirical work that explores how teachers might be supported in constructing identities as teacher researchers.

Sociocultural theories of identity suggest that, in order to develop new practices, one must construct an identity that supports those practices (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001). Because an identity can span contexts, it can allow practices to be transferred from one space to another. It follows that in the case of teacher research, the development of teacher researcher identities can support teachers in taking practices of teacher inquiry learned in teacher education programs into their classrooms. To encourage teachers to continue engaging in research, then, teacher education might not only introduce the tools and practices of teacher research, but also intentionally encourage the development of teacher researcher identities. While there has been increasing attention to teacher identity within the academic literature internationally (Hamilton & Clandinin, 2011), there is not yet substantial research on how teacher educators might support teacher identity development (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Izadinia, 2013), and this is particularly true for work in teacher research. To further explore the role teacher education might play in teacher researcher identity development, I draw on case study and discourse analytic methods to explore how a group of six inservice teachers and one teacher educator co-constructed (Jacoby & Ochs, 1995) identities as teacher researchers across two graduate education courses. Given the role of discourse in the development of teacher identity (Cohen, 2010; Sfard & Prusak, 2005), I attend closely to the language of the teachers and their instructor to consider the following research question: How does the course instructor use her interactions to support teachers in co-constructing identities as teacher researchers?

2. Theoretical framework and review of literature

First, I situate this study within sociocultural perspectives on identity, considering how these perspectives understand the development of new identities and the interaction between identity and practice. Then, I examine how existing research has considered the process of teachers becoming teacher researchers, including how such work has approached questions of identity development.

2.1. Sociocultural approaches to identity

Early research on teacher identity tended to view the construct of identity as a singular and static one (Day, Kington, Stobard & Sammons, 2006), an approach challenged by more recent research drawing on varied disciplines to frame their explorations of identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). One such approach, a sociocultural framework, understands identity as an active, ongoing process constructed through social practice. This approach views identity not as a set of inherent characteristics, but as a continual process of construction and negotiation by people in interaction (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Stuart-Faris, 2005). Within scholarship on teacher identity, a variety of terms have been used to describe these shifts, including 'developing', 'forming', 'shaping', and 'building', with each term reflecting slight differences in approach to identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Consistent with a sociocultural approach, I use the terms 'construction' and 'co-construction' to highlight this notion of identity as always being in process.

Sociocultural approaches to identity draw on positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990), which posits that individuals take on identities by using language to position themselves within particular categories. Typically, these identity positions are not claimed

explicitly through language (e.g., "I am a woman", "I am a teacher researcher") but instead are inferred through on a person's activity (Ochs, 1993). Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, and Cain (2001) work in particular attends to the connections between action and identity, recognizing identities as "bases from which people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being" (p. 5). Identities allow individuals to envision new worlds, and in the process new identities for themselves within those worlds, thus providing space for "improvisation and innovation" (Urrieta, 2007, p. 108). In addition, although identities may be constructed in one setting, individuals can carry these identities into new discursive contexts, allowing identity to serve as a resource that travels over space and time (Bloome et al., 2005).

Within the literature on teacher identity, this connection between identity and activity has been purposely explored, considering how identity might impact teaching practice (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Research in Britain has found that teachers' commitment, effectiveness, and resiliency are all interrelated with their identities (Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005; Gu & Day, 2007). Engaging in new activities, such as entering the teaching field - or in the case of this study, taking courses on teacher research - can lead to changes in identity (Flores & Day, 2006). Thus, in considering how teachers might engage in new or different practices, sociocultural theory suggests attention to identity development is a necessary component.

While sociocultural approaches to identity allow for an understanding of how identity constructs and is constructed by individual activity, attention must be paid to the role of discourse within this relationship (Scollon, 2001). Bucholtz and Hall's (2004, 2005) framework for the discursive production of identity builds on this work from a linguistic anthropological perspective by categorizing different ways identities are constructed through social interaction. Their framework focuses on the construction of identity occurring at the level of talk, arguing identity is continually emerging through social positioning within interaction. This approach attends to both "identity-in-discourse and identity-in-practice" (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005, p. 39), recognizing how identity is discursively constructed with others in the context of activity. Within their framework, Bucholtz & Hall identify "'tactics' for the 'interactional negotiation in the formation of identity'" (2004, p. 382), including the use of adequation and distinction in order to position an individual as similar to or different from a particular identity position.

They define adequation as working towards "socially recognized sameness... potentially salient differences are set aside in favor of perceived or asserted similarities that are taken to be more situationally relevant" (2004, p. 383). Thus, adequation does not require that the individual exactly matches a particular identity position, but rather that the two are enough alike within the particular discursive context. Conversely, distinction highlights the differences between an individual and an identity position. In using this tactic, similarities are ignored while disparities between the two are highlighted, often through the establishment of "a dichotomy between social identities constructed as oppositional or contrastive" (2004, p. 384). Both adequation and distinction, as interactional tactics, point to the partiality and context-dependent nature of identity, recognizing both the multiplicity of identity and the construction of greater saliency of certain identities within a particular context. By attending to the use of these tactics in social interaction, researchers can analyze how identity construction occurs in practice. It can be especially useful in cases where an individual desires to become part of a new social group, such as in this exploration of teachers constructing identities as teacher researchers.

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