



Building teacher identity through the process of positioning



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The study explores teacher identity negotiation in the context of pedagogical studies.
- Teacher identity is narratively constructed through the process of positioning.
- Bakhtinian notions of voicing and ventriloquation are relevant in positioning.
- Explores the relationship between the self and others in teacher identity.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 March 2015
Received in revised form
8 March 2016
Accepted 20 July 2016

Keywords:

Teacher identity
Narrative identity construction
Dialogical self
Positioning

ABSTRACT

This study explores teacher identity work in the context of a one-year programme, Pedagogical Studies for Adult Educators. The data consist of weekly learning diaries written by Anna, a university teacher, during one academic year. The diaries are analysed by means of dialogically oriented narrative analysis leaning on Bakhtinian notions of voicing and ventriloquation. The results show how Anna positions her storytelling and narrated self in relation to relevant characters by voicing and evaluating these characters. The construct of positioning provides tools for understanding the relationship between the self and others in teacher identity.

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1. Introduction

In the context of teacher education, the tradition of focusing merely on teachers' and student teachers' acquisition of 'occupational assets', and assessing their development in terms of pre-defined professional standards, has turned out to be too narrow a perspective when it comes to researching and supporting teachers' professional development (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Instead, a new starting point for this aim is to focus on teachers' personal perspectives and how teachers themselves make sense of their teachership and teaching practices (e.g., Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Cohen, 2010). By taking a more personal perspective, the emphasis is on the relevance of knowing oneself for the development and construction of one's teacher identity (Meijer, Korthagen, & Vasalos, 2009).

Flores and Day (2006) suggest that teacher education should place a stronger focus on giving students opportunities to reflect upon their personal biographies and schools' cultural contexts in

order to understand the relationships and possible tensions between these. Therefore, a need exists to develop practices that would actively support reflective identity work (Cohen, 2010) and, hence, promote professional self-understanding (Alsup, 2006; Arvaja, 2015; Meijer et al., 2009). In educational contexts, this identity work can be enhanced through personalisation and subjecting one's own experiences to reflection and analysis (Arvaja, 2015; Malinen, 2000; Meijer et al., 2009). This provides possibilities for the (re-)negotiation of one's I-positioning and 'being, thinking and acting' as a teacher (Akkerman, Admiraal, & Simons, 2012).

This study is situated in the context of a one-year programme, *Pedagogical Studies for Adult Educators* (PSAE), where the importance of personalisation and an explorative attitude is stressed in building and developing one's teacher identity. Leaning on the dialogical approach to teacher identity (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011) and narrative self-construction (Wortham, 2001), this study explores how one individual student, university teacher Anna, negotiates her teacher identity as an interplay of the self and others within the frame of one-year pedagogical studies. The study presents conceptual and methodological constructs of positioning

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(Hermans, 2003; Wortham, 2001) as a means for studying and understanding this relationship. In the dialogical approach to narrative self-construction, both the personal and professional self are seen to be represented, enacted and constructed through constant interactional positioning with respect to others. Therefore, how Anna in her weekly learning diaries narratively constructs her I-position as a teacher through the process of this kind is examined. The study focuses especially on the role of personal narrative and biography in constructing teacher identity and in making sense of one's work.

Next, I first discuss the theoretical background as regards the dialogical approach in negotiating teacher identity. After that, we take a closer look at the dialogical approach to narrative self-construction.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Dialogical approach to teacher identity

The contemporary view of professional learning and teacher identity has overcome the conception of learning and identity as the acquisition of predefined competencies, skills, knowledge and roles offered by institutions and other people (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Vähäsantanen, 2015). According to Vähäsantanen and Billett (2008), the construction of identity rather involves an ongoing process in which individuals are active agents. Professional identity negotiation is manifested in active reflection and interpretation between the person and the social context (Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Luttenberg, Imants, & van Veen, 2013; Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008). In this process, personal experiences, interests, values and beliefs relative to one's professional self are reflected in connection with situational expectations and external conditions regarding their work (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008). Both personal and contextual factors shape professional identity negotiations and influence how teachers perceive themselves as professionals (Flores & Day, 2006; Meijer et al., 2009; Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008).

Recent conceptualisations on teacher identity lean on postmodern (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011) and poststructuralist views (Zembylas, 2003), which are characterised by such conceptions as multiplicity, discontinuity and sociality. *Multiplicity* often refers to different dimensions of identity such as professional and personal identity (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006), or sub-identities pertaining to different contexts and relationships (Alsop, 2006; Beijaard et al., 2004; Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). Terms such as ongoing process, unstable, shifting, changing and dynamic are often used in characterising the *discontinuous* nature of teacher identity construction (e.g., Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Zembylas, 2003). The *social* nature of identity means that teacher identity is communicatively and discursively constructed with other people such as colleagues (e.g., Bannister, 2015; Cohen, 2010) and, on the other hand, that the broader social and cultural context with its (changing) institutional norms, practices, beliefs and discourses is involved in the interpretation and construction of teacher identity (e.g., Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008; Zembylas, 2003). These postmodern and poststructuralist views on identity show how people position themselves differently in different situations, contexts, cultures and historic settings, and also in relation to other persons (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Zembylas, 2003).

Akkerman and Meijer (2011) argue that some problems exist in leaning purely on postmodern (or poststructuralist) views on identity. For example, if identity is constantly changing, how can a person maintain a coherent sense of self in the long term? They

suggest that we also need to take into account the modern stance on identity. The dialogical approach, building on Dialogical Self theory (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Hermans, 2001), combines a postmodern and a modern stance on teacher identity, and sees identity simultaneously as multiple, discontinuous and social as well as unitary, continuous and individual.

Bakhtin's (1981, 1984) concept of voice, especially multivoicedness, provides a tool for understanding and exploring how different perspectives are embedded in the person's self. Akkerman et al. (2012) interpret Bakhtin's notion of voice 'as a speaking personality bringing forward a particular perspective of the world' (p. 229). The theory of Dialogical Self (Hermans, 2001) extends the concept of voice, arguing that voices are not only in what we say, but also in who we take ourselves to be (Akkerman et al., 2012). An 'I-position' of a person, according to this theory, 'is a particular voice that has been internalised in one's Self-presentation' (Akkerman et al., 2012, p. 230). Akkerman and Van Eijck (2013) suggest that the I-position links the notion of voice to a person's identity.

The dialogical self is diverse in the sense of *multiple* I-positions that can be used in expressing oneself (e.g., the I-position of a teacher, mother or hard worker). Multiplicity helps understand teachers' varying positions. For example, teachers also have more personal, inner voices, such as assertive or passive, embedding also their personal and intimate experiences (Seikkula, Laitila, & Rober, 2012; Wortham, 2001). These voices also shape their sense making as a teacher. Consequently, when people are talking or thinking, they often integrate, contrast, and move between different I-positions (Hermans, 2003; Linell, 2009). Therefore, the self is a negotiated space and the voices within the self can be diverse or even contradictory (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Hermans, 2001). However, the self is not usually fragmented since people have a natural tendency to maintain it as a coherent construct (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). This *unity* of the self is held together through constant self-dialogue (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011) or internal dialogue (Linell, 2009) between different I-positions of the self.

According to the dialogical approach, the *discontinuous* nature of identity means that I-positions can change in response to the social settings one encounters. For example, a teacher may move from a caring position to an authoritative position. However, the authoritative voice here does not necessarily signify a dominant I-position in the teacher's self, but may reflect a peripheral position evoked by a momentary need for classroom management (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Hence, some I-positions are more dominant or more familiar than others (Hermans, 2003). Also differences, oppositions and conflicts between different I-positions are indications of the discontinuity of the self (Hermans, 2003). Even though their identity is dynamic and changing, people have a desire and capacity to keep up a coherent sense of the self (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). According to the dialogical approach, the *continuity* of identity is maintained through narratives. Through narration, people construct their identity by integrating their old and new experiences and expressing their interpretations of personal meanings in coherent chains of events (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). Narrative construction connects the past, the present and the future (Wortham, 2001). Therefore, through narration, people also build possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1987). Along with narratives, people rely on cultural or semiotic tools (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011), cultural models (Gee & Green, 1998), typical texts (Shoter & Gergen, 1989) and storylines (Schaefer, 1992) from the culture to organise themselves and to maintain coherence in their identity.

The dialogical self is *social* in the sense that other people have positions in a multivoiced self (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Building on Bakhtin, Hermans and Kempen (1993) argue that individuals often speak the words of the groups or society to which they belong. Thus, the social world plays an important role in the

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