The construction of teacher identity in an alternative education context

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers construct multiple identities in an alternative schooling context.
- These identities are focused on their perceived role within the school.
- Teacher, co-learner, principal were three identities evident within the context.
- Replacing, blending, and privileging were the three formats that explore teacher identity.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is the construction of teacher identities in an alternative school setting. Using a sociocultural theoretical understanding of 'identity' development based on the notions of 'relational agency' (Edwards, 2007) and 'relational equity' (Boaler, 2008), an adaptation of Burke's (1945) dramatic 'pentad' is used to analyse teacher interview scripts about being and becoming a teacher. Findings suggest that teachers construct multiple identities in an alternative schooling context that are focused on their perceived role within the school — teacher, co-learner, principal. Three formats of teacher identity — replacing, blending, privileging - are offered to explore teacher identity.

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1. Introduction

The notion of identity is difficult to theorise. It cannot be simply reduced to elements such as thinking, emotion, morality, gender, agency, or practice (Roth, 2007). However, researchers often focus on one or two elements of 'identity' to explore, for example, the construction of student discursive identity in subject disciplines (Kumpulainen & Rajala, 2017), the development of teacher agency during curriculum reform (Lasky, 2005; Tao & Gao, 2017), early career teacher emotions (Nichols, Schutz, Rodgers, & Bilica, 2017), and teacher educator collective professional agency (Hökkä, Vähäsantanen, & Mahlakaarto, 2017). Each of the above studies

has an integrity of its own, and each has provided valuable insights into the nature of identity in educational contexts. What each of the above studies is attempting to do is provide a believable account of individuals 'being' in a world that is observable, a world that is constituted of many contexts of activity based on distinctive principles and practices (Roth, 2007).

This article makes a unique contribution to the body of research on 'identity' that precedes it, not because it provides definitive insights into the development of teacher identity, but because it attempts to apply the contributions of research to explore the 'multiple identities' that teachers may construct when engaging with a diversity of colleagues (youth workers, chaplains, etc.) and students within an alternate schooling context. Alternative education in this study is defined as an education context that supports the education of school aged young people who have been pushed or dropped out of mainstream schooling. It attempts to explore the cultural nature of 'being' a teacher in an alternative education

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community, exploring the notion of 'identity' as it applies to a 'collective' as well as to 'individuals'. This is not to deny the individuality of 'identity', but to foreground the dialectical tension that exists between an individual and a collective, to explore the communal principles and practices that enable the expertise of teachers to reach into the realm of students' personal experiences to promote development. As such, 'identity' is conceptualised in this article as a community-forming process where teachers, other adults and students express and communicate ideas according to a shared set of principles and practices.

Relational agency and relational equity are the theoretical frames used to guide the exploration of the research issue articulated above. Three qualitative interviews with educators from an alternative education context formed the data analysed using the dramatic pendant framework. The results are presented as three stories of educator identities as they talk about their work within an alternative education context. Finally, the discussion of replacing, blending and privileging as three formats of identity that teachers might construct in alternative education contexts articulates the potential of the formats as an analytic tool for exploring the construction of teacher identity.

2. Theoretical framing

According to Wertsch (1998), the tension between people and the cultural means (principles and practices) at their disposal results in an on-going process of transformation and creativity that has the potential to not only change the relationship of people to the world by shaping and constraining their participation in it, but also to transform the individual person by incorporating his/her activity into new, functionally active systems that are culturally and historically situated. This interpretation of human development focuses the notion of 'teacher identity' as being constructed within the tension that exists between the cultural knowledge available within an instructional context and the everyday knowledge and experience of colleagues and students (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The institutional context of schools and classrooms, where such tension between the 'everyday' and the 'cultural' typically occurs, provides powerful messages to both teachers and students about their respective roles in the learning endeavor. For instance, in many mainstream schools, the ideal student is often constructed as a receptive, attentive, and respectful learner who is willing to follow teacher directions and complete assigned tasks to the teacher's satisfaction. The ideal teacher is constructed most often as being a classroom leader who can transmit cultural concepts using efficient and effective methods.

In attempts to challenge these traditional roles, Edwards (2007) employed Cultural, Historical, Activity Theory to incorporate the collective into the individual through the elaboration of a form of relational agency that situates the teacher in relationships with others, relationships centered on dealing with problems embedded within social practices. Relational agency as described by Edwards (2007) is the capacity to work with others in a manner that looks for multiple solutions to a problem by bringing to bear the 'sense-making' of others and the resources that they draw upon. In other words, relational agency requires teachers to learn how to recognise and utilise the resources within the workplace, including people, in the transformation of the object of their work (Edwards & Mackenzie, 2005; Edwards, 2005). It challenges teachers to step beyond generalised assumptions and traditional roles for the sake of a shared purpose.

In a similar vein, Jo Boaler (2008) proposes the term 'relational equity' to challenge the traditional roles of the classroom. Relational equity situates teachers and students within a curriculum that requires teachers and students to treat each other's viewpoints

respectfully. That is, having a genuine curiosity about others' perspectives and to give voice to all. It involves principles of social justice such as being able to value diversity, to actively listen to and respect others, and to have a concern for the common good.

Alternative education contexts can be difficult because teachers need to develop and learn new ways to distribute, more symmetrically, authentic roles within the learning endeavor by drawing on the 'funds of identity' of the alternative school context, that is the "historically accumulated, culturally developed, and socially distributed resources" by which, teachers, co-workers and students within an alternative education context define themselves (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014, p. 31). Consequently, understanding the construction of identity within an educational context requires an understanding of the "practices, beliefs, knowledge and ideas" that people make use of in that context (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014, p. 31). To provide insights into how teachers may ethically move beyond the perceived ideals of an education system for the purpose of educating, the present practices, beliefs, knowledge, and ideas employed within alternative education sites need to be observed in context to explore 'relational agency' and 'relational equity' in practice. As the constructs of 'relational agency', 'relational equity', and 'funds of identity' situate learning and teaching within respectful relationships with others embedded within communal practices and principles by which, teachers and students define themselves, 'identity' is conceptualised in this article as a community-forming process where teachers, other adults, and students express and communicate ideas according to a shared set of principles and practices.

3. Research design

3.1. Context of the research

The research reported here is part of a larger four-year study designed to develop and apply a School Renewal Profiling Tool to provide an evidence-based device for enabling school communities to engage in a learning-based approach to school renewal (Brown, Heck, Pendergast, Kanasa & Morgan, 2018). This larger study employed school and classroom observations, interviews and surveys to capture local ways of knowing, doing and valuing as resources to promote organisational renewal through reflecting individual perceptions of participation in collective practice.

The research reported in this article focuses on one education site from the larger study (referred to in this article as Kings) devoted to supporting young people who are experiencing vulnerability, powerlessness and/or poverty because they may be at the margins of society, out-of-home and/or disengaged with education. Kings is a co-educational school where teaching and learning are situated within small classes and a flexible curriculum that draws on student interests. Multi-disciplinary teams work with young people to build self-confidence and esteem and to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in the development of a fulfilling future. Teaching and learning at Kings is grounded in principles that guide practice such as-respect, participation, safe and legal, and, honesty (see Vadeboncoeur, 2009 for more information). The principles provide a common ground approach that offers a space for young people to re-engage with both their community and learning and become empowered to develop their own pathway. These principles are core to the induction of each teacher and student into the school and are constantly referred to in school curriculum and policy documents. In essence, the principles frame the community in which teachers and students operate in a way that respects the agency and rights of all and enables meaningful educational engagement. Although congruent with a Catholic culture of schooling in which this study