

‘A Lighthouse on the Beach’ Stories, Metaphors, and Anecdotes in Teachers’ Personal Recounts

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Recent interest in teacher identity in general and language teachers’ identity in particular has shown that although identity research can be contentious, its examination can cast light on the process of teacher development. In fact, the role of identity in teacher development has been promoted as a key analytical framework. In this study exploring narratives elicited from interview data, I examine how a novice teacher develops more confidence in her role(s) as a teacher by recounting stories based both on her imagined identity as a teacher but also on her practical experience in the classroom. Along with the stories shared by the teacher, she intuitively reflects on her professional identity through the use of metaphors and anecdotes. These under-researched aspects of narrative inquiry are presented in the paper as symbolic discursive proxies that the teacher uses to carve out a space of self-definition within the teacher community of practice.

Introduction

Recent interest in teacher identity in general (Freese, 2006; Olsen, 2008; Riopel, 2006; Sachs, 2005) and language teachers’ identity in particular (Ben Said & Shegar, 2013; Cross, 2006; Farrell, 2011; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Liu & Xu, 2011; Motha, 2006; Nagamine, 2012; Phan, 2007; Phan & Phan, 2006; Reis, 2008; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013; Tan, 2013; Tsui, 2007; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005; Wu, Palmer, & Field, 2011) has shown that although identity can be inherently complex and contentious (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) it still generates critical interest as it casts light on the processes and mediations in teachers’ development. In addition, the role of identity is becoming crucial as a tool of professional self-reflection (i.e. autoethnography, Canagarajah, 2012) and a key analytical framework in teacher education research (Gee, 2001; Olsen, 2011)

In this paper, I focus my attention on how identities are disclosed through the stories that teachers tell. Stories and narratives are a window into teachers' lives. They are also a means by which teachers represent their professional experiences or reflect on aspects of their identity-in-the-making. As mentioned by Johnson & Golombek (2002), these stories:

(...) reveal the knowledge, ideas, perspectives, understandings, and experiences that guide their work. Their stories describe the complexities of their practice, trace professional development over time, and reveal the ways in which they make sense of and reconfigure their work. Their stories reflect the struggles, tensions, triumphs, and rewards of their lives as teachers (p. 7).

Drawing on narrative interviews with *Nur*, a novice English teacher sharing her experience transitioning from a teacher training institution to her first few weeks of teaching in Singapore, I will explore the ways in which these stories serve as *discourses of socialization* into her new community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Specifically, I examine the shared anecdotes and metaphors used by Nur to legitimate her position of active and contributing member in her new community of practice. The types of narratives examined in this study are in line with Barkhuizen's (2011, p. 392) description as they form: 'coherent entities embedded within and relatively separate from the surrounding interview discourse'. Sometimes elicited by a question but needing very little output or contribution from the questioner to develop. As will be shown in the paper, the anecdotes shared by the participant illustrate some of her beliefs, expectations, and projections of teachers' roles and characteristics. While some representations may seem idealized or counterfactual —possibly due to her lack of significant teacher experience — Nur's metaphors and anecdotes are mitigated with recounts of less successful teaching experiences which are characterized by apprehensions, difficulties, and challenges. The paper will also delve into how narratives impacted on the personal and professional identities of the teacher involved and how these stories may enable teachers "not only to make sense of their professional worlds, but also to make significant and worthwhile change within themselves and in their teaching practices" (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p. 7).

Anecdotes, Metaphors, and Teacher Identity

Although anecdotes form part of the narratives and stories shared by teachers, they nonetheless stand out as distinctive episodes in the narrative event as they unsettle the progression of the spoken account delivered during interviews or focus group discussions. While a full characterization of the defining features of anecdotes is not possible here, it is sufficient to say that anecdotes signal a short interesting or amusing account within the narrative sequence and may be used by the speaker to illustrate an idea mentioned earlier in the story. As mentioned in Van Manen (cited in Weber Weber, 1993, p. 76):

The paradoxical thing about anecdotal narrative is that it tells something particular while really addressing the general or the universal. Conversely, at the hand of anecdote, fundamental insights or truths are tested for their value in the contingent world of everyday experience.

Anecdotes - - in the form of analogies, parables, or springboards - - also constitute a form of aside, or a 'story within a story'. The heteroglossic (Bakhtin, 1981) mark of this genre of spoken account has been scarcely explored in studies on teacher development (Doecke, Brown, & Loughran, 2000; Weber, 1993), and more research on anecdotes and their roles in mediating teachers' voices is needed.

Among the several definitions of Metaphors as listed in Thomas & Beauchamp (2011, p. 763), one is particularly relevant to the present study:

Metaphors are not just figures of speech, but constitute an essential mechanism of the mind allowing the modeling and reification of prior experience. Thus, metaphors can be understood of (sic) as a psychological modeling experience leading to new forms of conceptual insight" (Zhao, Coombs, & Zhou, 2010).

Reification (Barton & Tusting, 2005) (i.e. the transition from abstract to concrete forms of meaning) is a key element whereby teachers, when using metaphors of their professional identities, capture complex notions in vivid images, analogies, or representations. As Wenger states, "any community of practice produces abstractions, tools, symbols, stories, terms, and concepts that reify something of that practice in a congealed form" (1998, p. 59). Metaphors are therefore powerful cues and 'blueprints' (Martinez, Sauleda, & Huber, 2001) by which humans

come to terms with experience and which allow researchers but also teachers themselves to access, and evaluate their underlying beliefs and assumptions about the roles, expectations, attitudes, and other crucial elements of teachers' identities.

When compared to anecdotes, metaphors have been extensively discussed in the literature on teacher development (Bullough, 1991; Dickmeyer, 1989; Miller & Fredericks, 1988; Munby, 1986; Provenzo, McCloskey, Kottkamp, & Cohn, 1989) with their role on identity receiving more attention in recent years (Hunt, 2006; Saban, Kocbeker, & Saban, 2007; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011; Weber & Mitchell, 1995a) and particularly in ELT (de Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Farrell, 2006; Gillis & Johnson, 2002; Mann, 2009; Nagamine, 2012; Oxford et al., 1998; Warford & Reeves, 2003)

In this study, I adopt a poststructuralist stance on identity development where identity is negotiated, nonlinear, contingent, and expressed through language and discourse. As language plays a crucial role in mediating identity, it is of key importance to look at the how teachers engage in linguistic/discursive practices to define their 'selves'. In Olsen's terms: "any self is defined, made, and continually remade by participation in language and language practices" (2011, p. 262). All will be seen subsequently, these discursive practices allows the novice teacher to initially voice her limitations and progressively situate herself with more confidence as a legitimate participant in her new community of practice. Nur uses this narrative encounter, interspersing her recounts with anecdotes and metaphors, to establish and maintain joint enterprises, gain more confidence in her practice, negotiate meanings, and establish relations with others.

Data & Context

The data excerpts, kept for this paper, are part of a larger longitudinal study which examined teachers' identities from their last year of training until their third year of teaching. In the pilot phase, narrative interviews were undertaken by the researcher who also kept a reflective research diary throughout the process. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim so as to keep narratives intact (Riessman, 2008) and critiqued by both the researcher and his research assistant in order to improve interviewing techniques and identify potential pitfalls in the data elicitation (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

The data collected for this study consists in semi-structured interviews with Nurⁱ, a novice teacher who completed her training in a teacher training institution in Singapore and who had started teaching for a few weeks. In this respect, the ‘emergent’ identity of this teacher is more characteristic of a beginning teacher rather than a seasoned professional. The purpose of the interview was to gain a deeper understanding of the background experiences of education, the impact of those experiences on the teachers’ beliefs about teaching competencies and on her identity as a teacher before joining the teacher training program. The excerpts included here are derived from an interview conducted in May 2012 at the teacher training institute. The participant was allowed to choose the venue for the interview.

The ethical guidelines by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) were abided. These guidelines include respecting the participant’s rights, seeking written consent, and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality. Semi-structured interviews were chosen based on the flexibility they granted to the interviewee in expressing her ideas and elaborating her points of interest. Although interviews are not devoid of methodological caveats, one being that participants’ responses are always influenced by the researcher’s involvement and attributes (age, sex, ethnicity, etc.) (Denscombe, 2010, p. 178), they however needn’t be conceived of as a major inadequacy since identity – as already mentioned earlier – is conceptualized in this paper as co-constructed and contingent on external factors one being the research involved in this study. Commenting on this idea, Menard-Warwick (2011) states:

When I analyze teacher narratives from interviews, my analysis assigns certain identities to the tellers (English teachers, Californians, Anglo-Americans, etc.), while also attempting to account for how the tellers represent themselves and others. Thus, in recounting my own narrative, I am implicated in the processes of identity construction - claiming identities for myself and assigning them to my research participants (p. 566).

It is important to mention that while Nur also reports on some aspects of her teaching in the interview, I have not observed her actual teaching and therefore all I know of her pedagogy is what she is able to report to me.

Results & Discussion

Both in her teaching practicum as well as in her initial weeks of teaching in the same school, Nur closely collaborated with a senior teacher who helped introduce her to the new school environment, and offered advice on teaching. In this guided practice where the senior teacher acted as a mentor, the novice teacher becomes more aware of her teacher roles and coincidentally may become more mindful of the adjustments to make in her own teaching. As she recollects in Excerpt 1, collaborating with the seasoned teacher provided Nur a window of opportunity to compare her skills and pedagogy with her mentor, which made her aware of some of the areas she herself needed to improve:

Excerpt 1

Umm.. because um as compared to my own teaching, I think she is better, able to engage the students because, during my own teaching um I felt that most of the students were not paying attention. Ahh whereas in her case, there was, I mean there was still one or two but uh generally they were paying attention. Yes.

When asked to share some of the reasons why she thought students were not paying as much attention in her classes when compared to her senior teacher, Nur commented:

Excerpt 2

Could be a few reasons. Firstly, of course it could be the, the fact that they know that I'm a temporary teacher so I'm not very, they don't have to give me much importance in that sense, so that could be one reason.

The assumption expressed by Nur here is that due to her status as temporary teacher, she does not deserve students' full attention in the same way as a regular teacher would. In this sense, her role and identity which is 'liminal' in the school (being neither a complete stranger yet still not being a regular member of the teaching staff) does not entitle Nur to complete membership to this community of practice. Thus, her teacher identity is not fully claimed both due to her temporary status as well as due to her lack of confidence in teaching (Excerpt 3).

Excerpt 3

Secondly, of course, ahh in terms of lesson delivery and things like that, maybe my umm pacing and my voice modulation may not be err as you know, good as what my CTⁱⁱ has you see, so in that sense it might become a bit boring or dry the teaching so it's easier for them to just, you know, umm you know, just to wander off to another place you know, during the lesson. Yes.

When expressing this lack of confidence in some aspects of her teaching and enumerating the potential reasons to account for her inadequacies, it is interesting that Nur also steps back into a position of student where she relegates her identity as ‘teacher’. After discussing her duties and tasks during her teaching practicum, Nur re-positioned herself in the role of a learner as evidenced by the following comment. In this narrative, Nur portrays her role as being peripheral/accessory. She positions herself not as a confident professional but rather as a passive outsider to the school:

Excerpt 4

Ahh, I think, that uh, my role is basically just to go and um learn from the school and er support the school in a small way because I think it’s, they don’t quite need me um, I mean ok, sometimes if there’s a shortage of manpower, yes you can, you do, you do ah, fill up for them, but generally it’s more for me to, student teacher, to actually learn, uh, and uh, you know, about what is happening in the current context of uh Singapore classrooms. Yes.

This sudden shift from her role as teacher to the one of student is justified according to her words by her lack of engagement and participation in the pedagogical activities of the school ‘they don’t quite need me’. As Wenger (1998) points out, “identification takes place in the doing” (p. 193) and therefore as Nur is relegated to the status of peripheral/marginal participant, where she does not take on the active role of a teacher, she feels that her identity as a teacher is not promoted or accentuated. In addition, Nur expresses reservations about fully claiming a teacher persona due to her status of outsider to the school. The doubt in her status as a teacher is voiced in her statement as well as in her repetition of ‘I think’ twice. This showcases that she is more left to guess what her actual role in the school really is.

The first metaphor mentioned by Nur when asked to reflect about her teaching is to equate the teacher with a lighthouse:

Excerpt 5

I like the notion of a lighthouse on the beach. Yeah I was thinking because a lot of students actually, they are very near the shore, some of them a bit very far but quite a lot of them are near and you need some sort of guidance to actually come to the shore and you know, go, so I guess what a teacher does is really is to shine the light and um make them see certain paths in their life because as a teacher I think you open up doors for students, you create new opportunities for them. And that’s why when they, they will always remember you because when they go down that

path and they get success, they will always, you know, want to thank you for opening that door for them.

In her explanation of this metaphor, Nur argues that similarly to the lighthouse for ‘lost’ ships, the teacher provides light (presumably in the form of knowledge, guidance, and directions) to students who are stranded ‘some of them a bit far’. Interestingly, Nur seems to infer that the majority of students are only in need of minimal guidance ‘quite a lot of them are near’. The symbolism and analogy behind this metaphor assumes a conception of teaching by Nur which transcends the level of the classroom. In fact, she goes on to explain that teachers’ roles are to ‘make them see certain paths in their life’. In this teacher identity which she espouses, guidance entails not only imparting knowledge and skills, but accomplishing a lasting impact in the life of students (i.e. they will always remember you) by opening doors and creating opportunities.

In a second metaphor, Nur evokes the character of a gardener and shifts from the idea of ‘guidance’ which she considered to be an essential attribute of teachers to ‘nurturing’:

Excerpt 6

It depends on whichever way you see teaching. Yeah. For me, I see it more as a guidance. Guidance. But some may, if you see it more like a nurturing, sort of thing, than maybe gardener? Yah, so it depends. It depends on your own personal take.

When compared to the previous metaphor, this one did not seem to have been coherently explained or expounded by Nur. In fact, she did not provide a logical connection between her choice for comparing teachers to gardeners and the idea of nurturing students in the same way as she did for her first example. In this respect, her initial characterization of ‘teaching as guidance’ is one which she is more attached to as expressed by her statement in Excerpt 5.

Excerpt 7

I could say that my father was a teacher so that could be one reason. Secondly is also because I like to talk and interact with people and uh discuss about issues and I feel like happy when I explain certain things and people understand. Yeah, so it could be innate, in me as well to actually explain and teach, so that, that makes me happy, so that could drive my passion to teach.

In Excerpt 7, Nur explains that her passion for teaching derives from her father who also used to be a teacher. This fact makes it is clear that for her, becoming a teacher began long before she even entered the teacher training institute. Part of her enthusiasm for teaching is also due to her relative ease of communication: ‘I like to talk and interact with people’ and propensity to

facilitate knowledge transmission: ‘I feel happy when I explain certain things and people understand’. In her explanation for this passion which forms part of her existing identity, Nur therefore gives ample evidence of her received identity as a teacher and points to the fact that she was predisposed to be a teacher. This confident testimony where she validates her membership in the teaching community of practice is in sharp contrast to the insecurity she expressed in Excerpts 1-3. Her passion and drive for teaching which she characterizes as ‘innate’ develops into an anecdote (emphasis added):

Excerpt 8

*Uhh.. my, my father say was umm, I mean, his influence in the sense that umm he was a very, he was in the teaching service for very long so ahh he could tell me a lot of his own **personal stories** and made me sort of interested in teaching, his own **personal stories of teachings**. He will explain like how there was students who ah like did not even, did not bring their pen or pencil to class at the start and, but later on they would actually umm as the as the year, the days went by, they actually got a liking for the subject and they actually more and more motivated and they become one of the better students. Umm yah. There are also lots of cases of his ex-students. you know, coming and seeing him and visiting him and all that.*

Part of the existing (accumulated prior to her training and actual teaching) and emerging identities (derived from training and teaching) which Nur foregrounds in this story are the result of other prior scripts and stories accumulated over years from her father. Much in the same way as semiotic, visual and spatial cues play a prompting role in shaping teachers’ identities (Ben Said & Shegar, 2013; Weber & Mitchell, 1995b), stories and narratives will equally influence our perceptions of what teachers’ roles entail. These stories which Weber & Mitchell call ‘cumulative cultural texts of a teacher’ and expressed above in Nur’s anecdote constitute part of the expectations which students and - - more relevantly to this paper - - beginning teachers aspire to and wish to emulate. In fact, when asked about the qualities of a good teacher, Nur had a rather clear set of attributes in mind:

Excerpt 9

Ok, a good teacher, first and foremost, must have a desire to teach, passion to teach. Umm, if you are just there umm without, you know, without actually enjoying the teaching process then you can never be a good teacher. Ahh secondly, the teacher must have of course, a very good grasp of his or her subject, so the content wise, it must be uh well, you know, basically well prepared, in

that sense. And also the qualities, certain qualities, meaning, umm, they need to always be learning because err you don't need, I mean, a good teacher will always I mean, I think, keep on learning. Yeah. So that is important. Ahh you also need to know, umm, how to relate to your students. Yah so it's no point knowing everything but you do not know how to relate to them because different students have different learning umm needs and so you need to actually modify your lesson accordingly so that you can deliver the content with the different sort of groups of students. Yes and I think patience as well, you need to, you can't expect students to immediately understand what you're saying so you need to be very patient as well.

This rather vivid description of what a teacher should be, gives a clear indication about the identity which Nur wishes to cultivate. As mentioned previously in her narratives, Nur places passion as a strong prerequisite in teachers' qualities and lists it as the criterion which distinguishes a good teacher from a mediocre one: 'if you are just there without actually enjoying the teaching process then you can never be a good teacher'. In reality, passion is one of the core qualities which are emphasized in the visual ecology of Nur's teacher training institute (Figure 1) and as discussed in Ben Said & Shegar (2013) contributes to a semiotics of identity and visual prompting.



Figure 1. Banner promoting the quality of Passion at the teacher training institute

Based on her enumeration of a teacher's qualities, Nur carves out a typified profile of her aspiring or imagined identity. In my desire to evaluate her idealized criteria with her own teacher qualities, I asked her whether she recognized some of the listed qualities in her teaching. Her reply is stated in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 10

Ahh my strengths are, in the sense that I have the qualities I just mentioned in terms of I am patient, I can relate to the students and um I'm also I'm always, I always desire to learn new things as well. Yah. Uh in terms of competence in my subject, I'm still working on it. I think um, it will definitely take some time to be really well dealt in your own subject. It's not easy but I mean over the few years, next few years, I hope to achieve mastery in my own subject. And, of course a passion to teach, I mean, I would not be here if I do not have it.

Nur here recognizes that knowledge of and competence in the subject matter is for teachers a lifelong process, as also evidenced in her earlier statement in Excerpt 9 'a good teacher will always keep on learning'. Most importantly, when comparing this excerpt to her testimony in Extracts 1-3, one notices a more comfortable tone where Nur confidently claims pedagogical strengths and qualities of a good teacher. As stated in Wenger (1998, p. 152) identity "is an experience and display of competence". This competence displayed in the above excerpt serves to validate her emerging professional identity and to legitimate her voice as a teacher; through her recounts, Nur is displaying her readiness to be part of the teaching community of practice.

Conclusion

While narratives constitute are a key element in recounting teachers' subjectivities, experiences and insights, anecdotes and metaphors are equally important analytical tools to understand how teachers envision their imagined identities and how they conceive their roles in their communities of practice. In the stories reported in this paper, Nur's narrative progressed from a stated lack of expertise and confidence, which she initially attributes to not being fully part of the teaching community of practice, to claiming more assertively her teaching capabilities. Growing more confident along the interview process, she started sharing more about her personal beliefs, stories, and teacher qualities. Of specific interest and importance is how Nur was able to renegotiate her teacher identity position throughout the narrative encounter. As explored in this chapter, symbolism and analogy found in metaphors are largely influenced by a mix of biographic and institutional factors which consist in teacher's history, imagination and past 'prompting' (Weber & Mitchell, 1995b). It is also essential to mention that metaphors about teachers and teaching are culturally-bound. Commenting on this characteristic of metaphors, Thomas & Beauchamp state:

Although metaphors can provide insight into ways in which people conceptualize experience, they are also culturally bound, which can limit meaning and interpretation, rendering the accompanying explanation crucial (p. 763).

Based on these considerations, it is therefore essential to triangulate metaphor elicitation with additional clarifications collected from the participant teachers. While this paper has succinctly examined the stories, anecdotes, and metaphors in a teacher's narrative, it is hoped that more research will delve into these discourse events in the future.

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