

These Kids Are Different: An Exploration of How Ideologies and Personal Experiences Influence Teachers' Identities

Tiffany Farias-Sokoloski
University of Texas at San Antonio

Este estudio trata de atraer atención a las complicadas y únicas experiencias de vida de maestras que trabajan con estudiantes de diversos niveles socio económicos en escuelas públicas. Pone el enfoque en cómo las maestras representan sus identidades e ideologías a través de las interacciones con sus estudiantes. La estructura teórica del estudio está basada en el pensamiento feminista post-estructural, ya que esta teoría investiga las relaciones entre lo individual y lo social; la manera en que las mujeres encuentran sentido en sus experiencias, tratan de transformar instituciones como las escuelas, y cómo rechazan la perspectiva de que las investigaciones son objetivos o sin prejuicios (Weedon, 1996; Norton, 2000). Las identidades de las maestras que participaron en el estudio subrayó la negociación entre su narrativa personal como maestra y la narrativa dominante institucional de la escuela que era parte en la práctica pedagógica.

Palabras clave: Formación del profesorado, ideología, identidad, cultura

This study seeks to bring attention to the complex and unique lived experiences of elementary public school teachers who work with socio-economically diverse students by calling attention to how teachers represent their identities and ideologies through interactions with students. The theoretical framework for this study is rooted in feminist poststructuralist thought because this particular theory investigates the relationships between the individual and the social; the way women make sense of their experience(s), aim at transforming institutions such as schools, and rejects the view that research is objective or unbiased (Weedon, 1996; Norton, 2000). The identities of the teachers involved in the study underscored the negotiation between her personal narrative as a teacher and the institutionalized master narrative of the school that was a part of the teaching practice.

Keywords: Teacher education, ideology, identity, culture

The teaching profession extends far beyond simply delivering instruction. Teachers often find themselves taking on various roles such as that of a counselor, friend, parent, and at times, a performer. Teaching can also be a political act as teachers reflect, interact with, and advocate for equitable education for students of socio-economically, socio-culturally, and socio-linguistically diverse backgrounds. In this study, I follow three elementary teachers as they transition into their third year teaching at a socio-economically diverse school. The aim of this study was to explore the ways in which ideologies and personal experiences influence teachers' identities.

As a definition for identity, I use Norton's (2000) concept: "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 5). Moreover, I characterize a teacher's identity as a process that is fluid, non-linear, and heavily influenced by lived experience as well as social interaction (Ricoeur, 1991). Thus, continuous interactions between the teacher and her students are an important element in the formation of a teacher's identity and may play a significant role in the ways in which social class is distinctively reflected in the teacher's ideologies, and interactions with her students.

Theoretical Framework

Identity

As a definition for identity, I use Norton's (2000) concept: "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 5). Moreover, I characterize a teacher's identity as a process that is fluid, non-linear, and heavily influenced by lived experience as well as social interaction (Ricoeur, 1991). Thus, continuous interactions between the teacher and her students are an important element in the formation of a teacher's identity and may play a significant role in the ways in which social class is distinctively reflected in the teacher's ideologies, and interactions with her students.

I also use Ortner's (2006) definition to describe class so that it is explained as a "position in social space defined by economic and cultural capital" (p. 1068). Thus, continuous interactions between the teacher and her students are an important element to the formation of a teacher's identity and may play a significant role in the ways in which class is distinctively differentiated from, and reflected in, the teacher's lived experiences, ideologies, and interactions with her students (Banks, 2006; Heath & Street, 2008, Milner, 2010).

School as an institution

This study refers to school as an institution as "a unified program of change planned and organized by the norms and ideologies of groups in power" (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 19). In other words, it is within institutions of formal education that teachers' cultural patterns are shaped. Cultural patterns reflect habits, ideologies, and provide a foundation for teachers to create, explore, test social relationships, and develop a sense of agency (Heath & Street, 2008). Ideology is understood to be the ideas that a society views as common sense (Oakes et al., 2013). "The ideas are so thoroughly accepted that they seem natural, whereas views that don't fit that same ideology might seem unacceptable, countercultural, or radical" (Oakes et al., 2013, p. 46). In poststructuralist feminist terms, ideology is characterized as "language in the form of conflicting discourses which constitutes us as conscious thinking subjects and enables us to give meaning to the world and to act to transform it" (Weedon, 1996, p.

31). Agency is integral to the notion of ideology because it “is seen as discursively produced in the social interactions between culturally produced, contradictory subjects” (Weedon, 1996, p. 176). A poststructuralist feminist analysis of school as an institution suggests that socio-political forces pressure members (in this case teachers) to adopt a particular ideology, and in this way, teachers are coerced to learn the school’s modes of operation and the values maintained (Weedon, 1996). Framing school as an institution allows for a critical exploration for the ways in which institutional power and practices further shape teachers’ narrative identities within the specific context of the classroom.

Teacher culture

Every institution of formal education contains its own form of teacher culture. Within the context of this study, teacher culture is defined as a core of complex habits and beliefs that are set forth as prescriptive norms. This study adopts Street and Heath’s (2008) description of culture as a verb in order to underscore the idea that teacher culture is unbounded, dynamic, and fluid. Heath and Street (2008) describe this shift in teachers’ narrative identities as a process when individuals “sustain old habits and values and invent new ways to relate, display, and transmit who they are and how they came to be as well as what they see themselves becoming” (p. 14). In fact, classroom discourse drawn from interviews and classroom observations further substantiates this idea for two major reasons. For one, classroom discourse serves as the primary site where teachers’ identities are played out. Finally, it is the classroom discourse that is influenced by the institution, teachers’ identities, culture, and issues of power relations that stem from poststructuralist thought. Power is a relation that “inheres in difference and is a dynamic of control, compliance and lack of control between discourses and the subjects constituted by discourses, who are their agents” (Weedon, 1996, p. 110). The notion of culture as a verb provides a lens for exploring teachers’ narrative identities because it recognizes the dynamism of teachers’ lived experiences and ways in which teachers’ narratives impact shifts in actions, memories, and identities.

Subjectivity

Subjectivity, as defined by Weedon (1997) consists of one’s “conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions, which can account for the relationship between the individual and the social” (p. 3). Individuals, in this case, three women entering in and working within a school learn how the institution (or school) operates as well as the values and beliefs, the prescriptive norms it upholds. According to Weedon, (1997) “poststructuralism theorizes subjectivity as a site of disunity and conflict, central to the processes of political change and to preserving the status quo,” and can therefore be characterized as fluid rather than fixed, and intimately tied to power (p. 21). Weedon’s (1997) notion of subjectivity is critical to this study because it places the ways in which teachers’ make sense of their lives at the core for understanding and

explaining power relations and the effect such relations may have on student experiences in the classroom.

Methodology

The study implemented an explanatory case study design rooted in poststructuralist feminist thought. The explanatory case study design was vital to the study because it aided in the process of examining the ways in which teachers frame their experiences and identity as teachers of socioeconomically diverse students. The study aimed to provide the opportunity for teachers to openly share their experiences within and outside of their work in the school, and more importantly, allow the teachers and the researcher to reflect upon, and counter, previous ideologies.

Marina Elementary

Marina elementary is the pseudonym I use for the school where the study took place. The school is located in South Texas and is part of a district known as one of the five largest school districts in the State of Texas. In fact, the school is one out of a total of 74 elementary schools in the district. It is located in the city's far West side of town and is referred to by teachers and administrators as "Title I." According to the United States Department of Education, Title I, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), "provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards" (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html>). One can see that the term "Title I" refers to a specific section of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) rather than a particular institution itself. The U.S. Department of Education goes on to explain that Title I is designed to help students served by the program to achieve proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards. Title I schools with percentages of students from low-income families of at least 40 percent may use Title I funds, along with other Federal, State, and local funds, to operate a "school wide program" to upgrade the instructional program for the whole school (<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html>).

Interestingly, although the U.S. Department of Education clearly lays out and explains Title I as a federal aid program created to help students from low-income households achieve State academic standards, it is more often than not used by teachers and administrators to mean the school. As a result, Title I schools have become a social construct often associated with students of color such as Black or Latino, and stereotypes such as poor, run-down, and dangerous. As such, designating a Title I campus as the primary site of the investigation provided an opportunity to provide a platform with which to spotlight teachers' experiences and explore classroom discourse, and attempt to better understand particular social constructs associated with socio-economically diverse campuses.

Participants

The study focused on one particular campus. At the time of the study, there were seven teachers with fewer than five years of experience. Of the seven, three were in their third year of teaching and taught different grade levels. These three teachers were subsequently chosen as participants, primarily based on their years of experience. Focusing on three teachers afforded the time and space to establish trust and rapport with each teacher in order for them to feel relaxed when I was in their classroom, and comfortable when speaking to me about their beliefs and daily experiences.

Each participant was given a pseudonym in order to maintain anonymity. Ms. Max taught second grade and was in her second year of graduate school. Her graduate work was in literacy because she eventually wanted to become a reading specialist within the district. Ms. Sally taught Kindergarten. Teaching was something that Ms. Sally went back to school for because she realized later in career that she knew she wanted to do. Ms. Lucy began teaching after earning her Master's degree in education. At the time of the study, Ms. Lucy was the first grade, bilingual teacher and was questioning whether teaching was a profession she wanted to remain in.

Data Collection

In an attempt to try to understand each teacher's experiences, I needed multiple sources of data that would provide a perspective other than just that of my own. These included interviews that documented how each teacher narrated her experiences, field notes that notated my weekly observations of each teacher in practice, and an awareness of what other experiences were influencing her practice and perceptions of teaching socioeconomically diverse students. In turn, I collected data that I hoped would best capture and reflect each teacher's personality and experience, would help me contextualize and better understand their realities, and would spotlight the ways in which each teacher enacted their identities. In order to do this, I collected interviews, classroom observations, transcriptions of interviews and classroom observations, and photographs of each teacher's classroom as well as around the campus.

Data Analysis

Analysis and interpretations of the data were obtained in a recursive manner as interview transcripts, field notes, and various artifacts were reviewed multiple times throughout the process. As a first step, NVivo 10 was used to organize the data and help break down the transcripts from the interviews and classroom observations into discrete parts. Coding was implemented in two separate cycles because according to Saldaña (2009), coding is the "transitional process between data collection and more extensive data analysis" (p. 4). I tackled the first cycle by implementing descriptive and narrative coding methods (Saldaña, 2009). I chose descriptive coding for the informal interviews, field notes, photographs, and video recordings because "its primary goal is to assist the reader to see what you saw and to hear what you heard" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 71) and further provided an organizational grasp of the study.

Findings

This section captures the formal interviews between the teacher and me, and moreover, the examples provide a means with which to further observe and examine the teachers' ideologies and identities.

Interview with Ms. Max

From the first week of school until the last week of my observations, Ms. Max's classroom routine seemed to run in a smooth and controlled manner. Ms. Max describes her students as struggling and views Title I funding as a means for providing additional academic support.

Throughout my time with Ms. Max, she was confident in her decision-making as well as fair and consistent when interacting with students. I began to wonder if she was even aware of the confidence she exuded so as part of the exit interview, I asked Ms. Max to tell me more about her class and the way it was run. The response below begins to layout the ways in which Ms. Max perceived herself and her role in the classroom:

You know there's always that kid that's going to be really challenging, but I don't have those kids this year. Maybe, I'm just more comfortable with my grade level and I know what to do now. Maybe, I'm more knowledgeable about how to handle situations. I feel more knowledgeable and I can kinda' gauge how things are going to turn out. (Interview, Ms. Max, 12/09/2014)

From this conversation, one can see the ways in which Ms. Max begins to reflect on her practice then begins to link her effectiveness and decrease in behavioral problems to her feeling more comfortable and knowledgeable with her job. As such, Ms. Max's level of confidence and knowledge is reflected in her positive perception of self.

Another factor that contributed to Ms. Max's growth in knowledge and confidence was her work and experience in graduate studies. In what follows, Ms. Max describes the ways in which her graduate work has helped to strengthen and improve her teaching abilities:

I think I'm less ignorant because now, I'm not satisfied with everything I do. I think before I might've been because I didn't know any better, but now I think it helps. Now, I know that I can do that better and it's exciting because I *feel* different. I *know* I'm different (laughs) and knowledgeable. (Interview, Ms. Max, 12/09/2014)

Her willingness to reflect upon her teaching not only places herself accountable for her effectiveness in the classroom, it also fuels her need to improve as she gains more experience(s) and knowledge. She recounts her first year of teaching, when she did not think about why she was doing things in particular way with her students. She describes her then self as ignorant because she now realizes and

underscores the importance of reflecting on, as she refers to it, thinking about what she does with the students and, perhaps more importantly, how she does it.

Interview with Ms. Sally

This year proved to be quite the challenge for Ms. Sally. The quotidian stresses every teacher faces were coupled and intensified by the daunting, yet rewarding experience of being pregnant with her first child. On several occasions, she told me how her husband and family were concerned with her stress levels. In the next section, Ms. Sally begins to tell me what it is like for her to teach at a low-income school.

As a Title I school, we are given resources to help out those kids and get them where they need to be because guardians or the parents or whoever is with them is not able to give them that. A lot of my family, after the baby, want me to go to a non-title school (Interview, Ms. Sally, 12/11/2014).

When asked how she felt about moving to an affluent school, Ms. Sally responded with the following:

I like being with these students. I like students who crave attention 'cause I feel like you can work with them easier. They're a lot easier to reach if you're paying attention. If you go to another school that's *not* a title, you're going to have to deal with the *parents*, and isn't that the purpose of being a teacher? To work with the *students*? (Interview, Ms. Sally, 12/11/2014)

In a sense, Ms. Sally provides a counter-narrative for what it is like to work at a school that qualifies for Title I funding. She describes the students as craving attention and uses that as an opportunity to enhance her rapport and effectiveness in the classroom. She thinks that moving to an affluent school would only turn the tables around, leaving her to work with parents craving her attention rather than the students. Ms. Sally believes challenging situations with students are what help make a good teacher. Thus, Ms. Sally's narrative identity correlates with her students, as she believes their successes and failures are a direct reflection of her.

Interview with Ms. Lucy

Ms. Lucy's interview revealed the ways in which her narrative was highly influenced by the school as an institution and teacher culture. In the next section, Ms. Lucy discusses her experiences teaching at low-income school:

I knew that I loved teaching, but you never think of the behaviors. Then I thought, maybe I don't want to do this. Then I thought, maybe I really don't have any control. Maybe it's me, but then they [students] go to other teachers and it's the kids. I mean, yeah, you have some control, but sometimes, it's just who they are (Interview, Ms. Lucy, 12/11/2014)

From her comment, one can begin to see the marginalization occurring within the narrative as she begins to think, "maybe it's me," but then realizes that it's not her, "it's the kids". In this, one can see the ways in which Ms. Lucy's disconnect from her

students has distanced herself in such a way that she feels she has no control over the ways that her students behave.

Conclusion

The school as an institution played a pivotal role in how the teachers framed their narrative identities. The school's implicit expectations further established the norms for the teacher culture as well as things like teachers' perceptions, values, and classroom practice. For example, every faculty restroom door had a poster with a message displayed in large print. The posters' messages all related to cultural deficit perspectives that implicitly influence teachers' perceptions and overall classroom practice. Messages such as the ones just mentioned served as the crux for the ways in which teachers framed their narratives. Arguably, the posters affirmed the notion that working at Title I comes with children who are poor and are from broken homes that lack love and attention. Clearly, such posters and messages are problematic in the ways in which they frame the teacher culture and implicitly influence teachers' narratives, perceptions, and interactions in classrooms.

Perhaps the bigger issue is that interactions in classrooms are not only reflections of teachers as individuals as much as they are reflections of a larger institutionalized system in place to privilege and reproduce ideologies. Moreover, class and race are centrally placed within this institutionalized system where certain ideas are allowable and others are not. This in turn informs the shifts that occur within teachers' narrative identities because it is the institutionalized system that influences what teachers go on to resist and not resist.

Ultimately, the teachers' discourse served as a site where teachers' identities are played out, and also reflected the influences of the school as an institution, teacher culture, and issues of power relations. Subjectivity additionally brought forth the ways in which teachers' made sense of their classroom practice while highlighting teacher and student power relations. Subjectivity or as Weedon (1997) describes "conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions, which can account for the relationship between the individual and the social" (p. 3) facilitates in the process of how the teachers learn the particular values and beliefs upheld by the school as an institution.

References

- Analysing identities in discourse: *Discourse approaches to politics, society and culture*. (2008). R. Dolon & J. Todoli Eds.). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Banks, J. A. (2006). Democracy, diversity, and social justice: Educating citizens for the public interest in a global age. In G. Ladson-Billings & W. F. Tate (Eds.), *Education research in the public interest: Social justice, action, and policy* (pp. 141-157). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Darder, A., & Torres, R. (2013). *Latinos and education: A critical reader* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Del Alba Acevedo, L. et al. (Eds.). (2001). *Telling to live: Latina feminist testimonios*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Delgado Bernal, D. et al., (Eds.). (2006). *Chicana/Latina education in everyday life: Feminista perspectives on pedagogy and epistemology*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

These Kids Are Different

- Gee, J. (2001). Identity as an Analytic Lens for Research in Education. *Review of Research in Education*, 25, 99-125.
- Gee, J. P. (2010). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Grad, H. & Martín Rojo, L. (2008). Identities in discourse: An integrative view. In R. Dolon & J. Todoli (Eds.). *Analysing identities in discourse: Discourse approaches to politics, society and culture* (pp. 3-28). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Hancock, D. R. & Algozzine, B. (2011). *Doing case study research: A practical guide for beginning researchers*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Heath, S. B., & Street, B. V. (2008). *Ethnography: Approaches to language and literacy research*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Milner, H.R. (2007). Race, culture, and researcher positionality: Working through dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen. *Educational Researcher*, 36(7), 388-400.
- Milner, H.R. (2010). What does teacher education have to do with teaching? Implications for diversity studies. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(1-2), 118-131.
- Moore, J. (2009). *Visions of culture*. NY: AltaMira Press.
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Harlow, England: Pearson Education.
- Weedon, C (1997). *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory* (2nd ed.) MA: Blackwell Publishing

Tiffany Farias-Sokoloski works at The Office of Organizational Learning and Professional Development, San Antonio Independent School District. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to the author at TFarias-Sokoloski1@saisd.net.