



USING *IDENTITY* AS A TOOL FOR INVESTIGATION: A METHODOLOGICAL OPTION IN THE RESEARCHER'S TOOLBOX

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Building on Gee's call to use *identity* as an analytic lens for research in education (Gee, 2000), this paper further advocates the use of the construct of *identity* as an alternative research 'tool' when researching people. The research discussed here employed a model of *identity* based on post-modern theory, and a critical case research, to scrutinize teachers in contexts of ongoing educational change. Researchers are aware that people are difficult to understand, impossible to quantify and awkwardly inconsistent to research. There are difficulties if not limitations in viewing participants from a particular perspective and so the study employed a carefully constructed model of *identity* to showcase the effects of educational change on participants. The paper summarises *identity* as it is evidenced in literature and used in the research, giving details about the model of *identity* that was used in this study. It highlights the benefits and options for utilising this model as a research 'tool' for studies which investigate what happens *to*, *with* and *for* people in given contexts, outlining three key benefits of its use. The paper concludes with a call for further discussion, application of and academic conversation about the use of *identity* as a tool for research.

Keywords: Identity, qualitative methodology, education, teachers.

Introduction

Researchers acknowledge the importance of a range of mechanisms for conducting research about people. This paper argues for the use of the construct of *identity* as a methodological option when conducting a qualitative investigation. It outlines four key reasons why the construct of identity provides a useful methodological option, an alternative lens through which to view participants in given contexts. It overviews the original research and describes the model of identity that was used for this study and that provided a lens into these teacher's understandings of their work lives.

Four key reasons why the construct of identity provides a useful methodological option in researching people in given contexts are discussed. This paper argues that the use of identity as a research tool does the following:

1. It provides a mechanism for deepening understandings about the impact of situations, events or specific contexts on participants
2. It retains the uniqueness of participants, allowing for a range of 'voices' in the research findings
3. It provides a safeguard against simply reducing participants to a single aggregated voice and respects and honours each participant's contribution.

4. Paradoxically, it also permits an aggregation of contributions, with the option for individual voices to be heard. This validates the data for use by policy-makers, managers and leaders in the field.

Calling for the use of identity in research design is appropriate because the research process is complicated by a host of interpretive understandings, knowledge, values, experiences, world views, perceptions and actions (Danielewicz, 2001; Zembylas, 2003). In the case of this study, the participants were teachers embedded in structural and cultural change processes. For this study, it is not so much the aggregate of voices that provided powerful data, but rather the effects of change on each of them. The construct of *identity* provides the research option to maintain their individuality while determining potentially generalisable findings.

There are other constructs for a researcher to utilise that are both similar to *identity* and that could produce similar results. These include: selfhood, self, personality, personal traits or characteristics, and persona (Sachs, 2001; C. Taylor, 1989; Tierney, 1993; Vulliamy, Kimonen, Nevalainen, & Webb, 1997; Zembylas, 2003). However, *identity* was the chosen as the core theoretical framework for developing a data-gathering lens aimed at producing a finer-grained vision of the participants' world and what was happening in it (Polkinghorne, 1988).

The working definition of *identity*, for this study, was determined to be, 'The collective aspect of the set of behavioural and personal characteristics which identify a person as a distinct individual'. This is expanded upon later in the discussion.

The next section of the paper gives an overview of the research from which this paper is drawn. This is then followed by an outline of the model of identity that was used for this study.

Research Methodology and Design

The qualitative research project from which this paper is drawn employed a critical case study approach (Stake, 1995) to examine the effects of change on teachers. Ongoing educational change, commencing with changes to the way that literacy is taught, was the springboard for conversations with teachers. Open-ended interviews (Kvale, 1996) with eight early childhood teachers¹ working in Tasmanian² government education department schools provided the data, which were analysed using a three-tiered approach. Interviews were conducted to garner teacher's ideas and opinions about how ongoing educational change affected their personal and professional identity.

The first level of analysis utilised a narrative approach, and provided background information about each of the teachers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Mishler, 1999; Polkinghorne, 1988), drawing together information provided by each participant. The second level of analysis, using case study and grounded theory approaches, arrived at three themes of *change*, *power* and *identity*, with accompanying categories and sub-categories (Chamaz, 2002; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1999). Expanding on this analysis, the third level of analysis employed Gee's (1999) eighteen analytical questions, in conjunction with the research questions, to develop further and deeper understandings of the impact of ongoing educational change from teachers' perceptions of it (S. Taylor, 2001; Vadeboncoeur & Torres, 2003; van Dijk, 1985; Wetherall, Taylor, & Yates, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

The main findings highlighted the interconnected issues of teacher professionalism, the impact of the actions of the education system towards teachers, and the complexities of the relationship between teachers' and change. In contexts of ongoing educational change, these teachers experienced personal and professional uncertainty and instability. This put at risk the residual goodwill that existed between

¹ In Tasmanian government schools, early childhood teachers teach students ranging from 4 years of age through to 8 years of age, i.e. Kindergarten to Grade 2.

² Tasmania is the island state of Australia.

teachers and the education system. Marked disparities in how issues of professionalism were understood by teachers and managers also created the need for self-protective behaviours on their part. In turn, this set of circumstances provided the conditions whereby the teachers' commitment to teaching tasks was diminished. Thus it can be speculated that such an outcome has direct implications for teacher effectiveness and student learning.

The next section of the paper gives an overview of the model of *identity* as it was used in the research. This model is but one of a myriad of potential constructs of identity that could be used for research tools. It is included here, not as the 'ideal' construct of identity, but rather as an exemplar of (i) how identity could be conceived of and (ii) how it was defined for this study. A brief discussion of the benefits of using *identity* as a lens for studying people and a call for further ongoing academic conversations about the use of *identity* as a tool for research follows.

The Construct of *Identity*: A problematic Concept

There is a vast array of research, writing and definition around the concept of identity. An investigation of the academic databases (e.g. ProQuest, ERIC, EdNA and A+Education) reveals an array of associated issues related to the topic. These include: racial, ethnic, cultural, national, gender, athletic, and criminal identity; identity conflicts, formation, development, achievements, diffusion, disorder; and feminist identity, the self, identity construction, social identity, situational identity, personality development, personal ideologies and personal philosophies. Hence to mention 'identity' is to invoke a range of both understandings and assumptions. For the purposes of this research study, a definition was required from which shared understandings could be discussed. Although highlighting some of the key elements of definitions and understandings about *identity*, this paper does not seek to come to a finite conclusion about what identity is, or to delineate categorically the nature of *identity*. Rather, it articulates an understanding about how this particular study conceived of *identity*.

A brief review of the *identity* in the literature is set out in the following paragraphs. However, due to the limited space available, this review is not able to address all the attending literature or the range of theories that underpin this literature.

Identity in the Literature

Much of the early writing on the topic of *identity* emerged from the modernist perspective that viewed identity as a fixed and knowable entity that we each possess. It has been viewed from sociological (Goffman, 1959/1959; Lortie, 1975; Walker, 1976), psychological (Ball, 1972; Lilienfeld, Kirsch, Sarbin, & Lynn, 1999), anthropological (Kondo, 1990; Mayer, 2003) and philosophical (Gergen, 2000; C. Taylor, 1989) perspectives. *Identity* has also been investigated for the purposes of understanding how people have developed or maintained individual identities. These purposes included: various identity and personality disorders (the psychological perspective); how identity was manifest or evident for studies of groups, cultures or ethnic populations (the anthropological perspective); and how or in what ways the 'self', 'I' and 'me' are constructed, maintained and developed (a philosophical perspective) (Goffman, 1959/1959; Mead, 1934). Since the 1980s and across academic disciplines the conceptualisation of identity has moved away from the modernist view of a fixed, knowable and clear construct towards a post-modern and more recently a post-structuralist view of identity (Coffey, 1999).

'Contested' and 'slippery' are two terms that well describe the model of *identity* when viewed through a post-modern lens. The post-modern view asserts that knowledge and truths cannot be adequately known or revealed; that all are open to contestation and changing and are therefore difficult, if not impossible, to define or essentialise (Coffey, 1999; Lather, 1992). Therefore each person's identity cannot be 'known' and the 'truth' about it cannot be defined because its susceptibility to change and reformation presumes that, even as it is defined and quantified, it has again been changed by the language,

social interactions and experience of living (Danielewicz, 2001). Thus, *identity* as a post-modern notion cannot be finitely defined.

The post-modern and more particularly the post-structuralist views of *identity* are complicated further by the understanding that modes of language—spoken or written—provide inadequate mechanisms for capturing a sense of identity (Gee, 1996). As Tierney asserts, “we must accept that conflict and competing interpretations of situations are inevitable” (Tierney, 1993, p. 128). The language and discourses used to define *identity* are open to interpretation based on the writer/speaker and listener/reader’s individual life experiences, as are the understandings taken from any dialogue about the topic (Gee, 1999). While acknowledging this stance, this paper and its attending research required a shared understanding to facilitate discussion. From the post-structural perspective, any understanding cannot be deemed to be final, finite or in any way fixed, nor can a concrete definition of *identity* be determined. It would simply be a definition of identity for the purposes of this research. That is what was needed here – a shared understanding of what is meant by the term ‘identity’ in the contexts of this study.

Reaching a Definition of *Identity* for This Research

There are several characteristics in the following statement by Palmer that resonated with the needs of this study. These are discussed here to share and describe the model of identity that was used in this research. Palmer (1998) proposed that identity be understood as:

... an evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute my life converge in the mystery of self: my genetic makeup, the nature of the man and woman who gave me life, the culture in which I was raised, people who have sustained me and people who have done me harm, the good and ill I have done to others, and to myself, the experience of love and suffering—and much, much more. In the midst of that complex field, identity is a moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make me who I am, converging in the irreducible mystery of being human (Palmer, 1998, p. 13).

First, the idea of “*evolving*” highlights that identity is “under construction” (Danielewicz, 2001) and is continually forming and reforming. For teachers, a teaching identity has is developing as they progress through their careers (Britzman, 1991; Danielewicz, 2001; Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1994; Nias, 1989). As Danielewicz (2001) states, it is a “conditional, restless, unstable, ever-changing state of being” that “can never be completed” (p.3).

Second, identity is constructed from the contexts, experiences, social interactions and relationships that are brought together in each teacher’s life. As such, the ‘context’ is important in teachers’ lives. As the teacher’s world is ever-changing and never-completed while simultaneously exhibiting eternal features, identities are developing and evolving. Teaching is highly social and interactive and therefore potentially unstable, “*a moving intersection*” in Palmer’s words.

Palmer also emphasises the implication of the importance of the relational and social aspects of identity. The relationships that form and determine each person’s identity include the family, friends and working colleagues with whom one is in contact (Palmer, 1997). It also encompasses virtual people: that is, people we may ‘meet’ on the internet, in emails, as characters in films or in books who, in some way, influence our lives. Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe (1994, p. 47) state that identity is “the result of a process of social construction that goes on throughout the life cycle.” We see ourselves in relation to others. We know ourselves and are known, and this occurs in a socially constructed world (Danielewicz, 2001). But the experience of each person’s life is dependent on the nature of the contexts, culture and levels in which each of us exist (Cooper & Olson, 1996). The socio-cultural, relational aspect of one’s identity and the ongoing nature of this social construction of identity are closely linked. There is a myriad of variables that determine how these social and external experiences are internalised for us and assist in the creation, reformation and maintenance of our identity (Cooper & Olson, 1996; Danielewicz, 2001).

Gee (1999), in defining the ways in which understanding integrally linked to language, acknowledged this socio-cultural aspect, highlighting the “personal, social and cultural knowledge,

feelings, values, identities and relationships relevant in the interaction” (p. 83). This linking together of “*identity with personal, social and cultural knowledge, feelings and values*” is reflected in the understanding about identity that the researcher utilised in this study. Identity is seen as a combination of elements or characteristics that include knowledge, feelings, values and beliefs.

The understanding that accommodation of the beliefs and individuality of teachers in the process of change is evident when Bell (1994), in his discussion about teachers’ work, noted: “Any attempt to understand teachers’ work must therefore begin by recognising that teachers are not cardboard cut-outs. Behind what they do lie values and beliefs which are a product of past and contemporary events” (p. 52). This highlights the individuality and the importance of teacher identity in the study of teachers in contexts of change

The Parts and the Whole

In examining people and focussing on identity, it can be seen that there many are elements of our lives that are inherently interconnected. The elements include one’s genetic disposition and makeup, personality, physical characteristics, family experiences, religious encounters, gender preferences, educational background, ethnicity and culture. In tandem with these are our understandings, knowledge, beliefs, values and feelings (Gee, 2000). These elements can be interpreted by others and by ourselves as each person’s *identity*. Each of the ‘parts’ or elements, for example one’s religious belief system, may be similar if not the same as another person’s. However, the convergence of the ‘parts’, when considered as a whole, are what is perceived by self and others as constituting identity. In bringing together these component ‘parts’, at any particular situated socio-cultural moment, *identity* is perceived to be unique in that we each have different but similar genetic dispositions and makeup, personality, physical characteristics, family experiences, religious encounters, gender preferences, educational background, culture and ethnicity, roles, understandings, knowledge, beliefs, values and feelings.

Which of these elements or ‘parts’ of one’s identity are more stable and enduring, and which are in a state of flux and more fluid, was not a concern of this study, but is certainly an area for further research and consideration.

Identity in This Study

In summary the, identity, as it was utilised for this study, is considered to be post-modern and socio-culturally situated, a momentary perception about a person that incorporates the following components and descriptors as drawn from the above literature. *Identity* incorporates the following:

- Identity is comprised of one’s genetic disposition and makeup, including personality and physical characteristics; family experiences, religious encounters; gender; educational background; ethnicity and culture. One’s identity can be considered as the convergence of each person’s roles, knowledge, beliefs, values, feelings, and understandings.
- Identity is socially, culturally and relationally constructed and maintained, with language and dialogue playing a major part in its construction, maintenance and development.
- Identity is created and recreated through experiences and is continually being reformed, challenged, transformed or stabilised on a moment-by-moment basis. It is understood that identity is ever changing and flexible.
- It is holistic in that it represents the amalgamation of the ‘parts’ of our lives and
- Each person’s identity is unique in that it may have similar attributes and much commonality with others’ identities, but it is never identical to another person’s identity.

The working definition of *identity*, for this study, was determined to be, ‘The collective aspect of the set of behavioural and personal characteristics which identify a person as a distinct individual’.

The next section of this paper outlines four benefits in using identity as a research tool.

Benefits and Options for Using ‘Identity’ as a Research Tool

This paper argues that there are distinct benefits in selecting identity as a research tool. The use of this ‘lens’ as a methodological tool when investigating people in given contexts can enhance our understandings about what happens *to*, *with* and *for* research participants (Gee, 2000). The four benefits, noted earlier, are briefly discussed.

1. The use of identity as a research tool provides a mechanism for deepening understandings about the impact of situations, events or specific contexts on participants.

The focus for this research was on breadth and depth of appreciation of how the contexts of change affected and influenced these teachers. While the study started with a narrower focus—literacy change for early childhood teachers—the participants broadened the focus to encompass many more areas of change that had affected them. With this flexibility a broader focus, depth of data was achieved. The teachers discussed and named the impacts on their lives—personally and professionally—of a range of educational changes. Data analysis, using the previously mentioned three levels of analysis and Gee’s analytical framework of questions, provided understandings about what was happening *with*, *for* and *to* these teachers in the contexts of change. The depth of discussion led directly to more informed understandings about the impacts of change that became possible by using identity to ‘see’ these teacher’s perspectives. This was what was sought.

2. The use of identity as a research tool retains the uniqueness of each participant, allowing for a range of ‘voices’ in the research findings.

In research that reports on the effects on participants of particular situations, events and contexts the individual *identity* of each of the participants is often blended with those of the others. The potential for each participant’s unique opinion and contribution to the research evaporates as individual accounts are merged and aggregated to ‘strengthen’ to form a mass of data, a in unison voice. While it is acknowledged that there is research ‘strength’ in numbers and unity gives power, the benefit of qualitative, post-structural research permits and encourages the individual voices to be heard and heard loudly (Goodson, 1991). Utilising individual identity provides an avenue through which this distinctiveness of the participants and their unique voices can be heard. It is the variety of voices that is able to provide research ‘strength’ through the scope of understandings, positions and stances that become evident through data analysis. Multiple voices give manifold positions, stances and a range of understandings about the participants and the phenomenon or event in the investigation. This was achieved in this research. It has demonstrated the benefit of the use of identity as a research tool in qualitative research projects that seek to hear the voices of individual participants and understand the effects of contexts upon them.

3. The use of identity as a research tool provides a safeguard against reducing participants to a single aggregated voice and thus denying their individual contribution or perspective about the event or specific context. This respects and honours each participant’s contribution.

As a post-structural, qualitative researcher seeking to maintain the integrity of the individual participants, potential data reduction to a single aggregate voice was of concern. Safeguarding against the ‘aggregate’ at the expense of the ‘individual’ was important for this researcher (Goodson, 1991). Methodologically the use of *identity* can provide a holistic view of each participant, maintaining their individual ‘story’, perspective and opinion. It minimises the diminishing effect of aggregating the participants into one group—where an individual voice is clouded by the voices of others. It permits different and sometimes conflicting opinions and seeks to deepen and broaden rather than condense understandings.

4. Paradoxically, the use of identity as a research tool permits an aggregation of contributions, from or through which individual voices to be heard. This validates the data for use by policy-makers, managers and leaders in the field.

Against this backdrop of maintaining the individual voices, stances and understandings of each participant, an aggregated perspective can still be drawn. So, while respecting and honouring the individuality, it is possible to create aggregations—where and when they apply—to make more generalisable assertions about how this might be for others in similar contexts. This validates the data for use by policy-makers, leaders and managers in the field.

In summary though, it must be noted that this ‘tool’ for research is not a viable option for all research projects and would provide challenges, for example, in dealing with large numbers of participants. However, if the aims of the research are aligned with those outlined above, this paper asserts it provides another tool for the researcher in their methodological toolkit.

Conclusion

Drawing from elements and characteristics of *identity* as reviewed in the literature, the model of *identity* that was used in this study is outlined. It is conceptualised as being holistic and individually unique, comprised of a convergence of all the elements of life experiences, physical characteristics, personality, roles and background, genetic makeup, ethnicity and culture. It includes a person’s understandings, knowledge, beliefs, feelings and values. This study acknowledged that identity is socially and relationally constructed, unique to each person and comprises an array of elements that continually form and reform as each person lives their life.

Having outlined how *identity* has been defined for the purposes of this research project and listed four of the benefits of utilising it as a research tool, one key purpose of this paper is to encourage further investigation about, and research using this, or another model of *identity*.

As researchers well understand, people are complex. This tool provides another option to deepen knowledge and appreciation about the vast complexities with which researchers struggle when investigating humans in specific circumstances. Further academic conversations on the topic are invited and the call goes out to researchers to consider the use of *identity* as a tool for researching what happens *to*, *with* and *for* people in given contexts and the effects of situations, contexts and events on people.

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