

Review Article

Teacher Identity Formation from a Poststructural Perspective: A Review

Weiyu Xie¹, Hua Huang²

¹Faculty of Economics and Management, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, China

²Faculty of Education, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, China

Received: 01 February 2022

Revised: 02 March 2022

Accepted: 12 March 2022

Published: 23 March 2022

Abstract - This article presents an overview of Foucault-informed post-structural stance in teacher identity research. According to poststructuralism, teacher identity, defined as the teacher's view of his/herself as a teacher, can be interpreted through and within his/her language and discursive practices. It is constructed or disciplined through and within discourses imbued with power relations. Such a theoretical perspective sheds insightful light on future studies on teacher identity.

Keywords - Teacher identity, Poststructuralism, Foucault, Discourse.

1. Introduction

In the previous three decades, teacher identity has increasingly drawn academic interest in the realm of educational research. A wealth body of literature has expanded and developed theories of teacher identity relating to a vast range of topics. Teacher identity is an amorphous construction that is difficult to define precisely. It could be heuristically defined as “the way that teachers view and understand themselves as teachers” [1]. According to Beijaard et al., teacher identity refers to a teacher's “sense or belief of his/her self, that is, as a teacher, who or what he/she is” [2]. By such a definition, the various meanings teacher can attach to him/herself or attribute by others. Accordingly, teacher identity formation is conceived as an ongoing process that involves interpretation and reinterpretation.[3][4]

To date, teacher identity is examined from various theoretical perspectives. Scholars generally employ three epistemological approaches, namely the developmental approach, the socio-cultural approach and the post-structuralist approach. Specifically, Zembylas argues that a Foucault-informed post-structuralist approach is quite useful in investigating teacher identity formation as it focuses on teachers' lived experiences mediated and framed by multiple discourses. In this article, we try to focus on the post-structural work on teacher identity and make a summary of the key tenets[5]. This article provides an overview of the Foucault-informed post-structural stance in teacher identity research.

2. Discourse and Identity Formation

In an investigation on teacher identity, a post-structural perspective shifts its focus from aiming to explore the static, universal and coherent law associated with structuralism beneath people's behaviour to search fluid, localized and

ultimately, “more complicated framings of the world” [6]. This perspective highlights the role of language in teacher identity formation.

According to poststructuralism, language is no longer theorized as a mirror that reflects the world accurately. Meanings between the signifier and the signified are never fixed but are constantly negotiated and contested. This is “the crisis of representation and the associated instability of meaning” [7]. Given that language is the medium where knowledge is constructed, this loose relationship between the signifier and the signified leads to the absence of a secure foundation for knowledge. It enables poststructuralism to become particularly powerful when it is used as a theoretical tool to explore those social phenomena we have taken for granted, such as a fixed and coherent identity.

Poststructuralism pays specific attention to powerful language in circulation, which it refers to as discourse. Discourse is seen as a ubiquitous concept in post-structuralist theories. Discourse here is defined as a connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions which constitute a way of talking about a particular issue, thus framing the way in which people understand and respond with respect to that issue[8][9]. Discourses are evidenced by people's ideas, talks, silences and behaviours in specific social settings. According to Foucault, the discourse has a two-fold meaning. On the one hand, it is a set of discursive resources available in a specific context for people to draw on to achieve their particular purposes.

On the other hand, discourse implicates the function of “framing” people's understanding of the world and their selves. Gee considers that discourses are, in effect, an integration of language-in-use and are specifically associated with ways of acting, interacting, feeling, believing, valuing”



and “using various cultural tools. It means that when people navigate terrains, they access some discourses to make sense of themselves and their situations. Also, people draw on these discourses when encountering cultural signs to understand the contents and significance. Foucault states that discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak ... (they) are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention” [6]. Therefore, language is no longer regarded as merely a reflection of reality, but rather as an active force that “constitute[s] the meaning of the physical body, psychic energy, the emotions and desire as well as conscious subjectivity” [10]. As noted, discourse, in turn, is highly associated with subjectivity, so the paper will briefly explain subjectivity and its relationship with a Foucauldian notion, power/knowledge.

3. Power / Knowledge

According to post-structuralist theory, teacher identity is framed or constituted in and through discourses. In order to understand the ways that these notions of “framing” and “constitution” interplay with discourse, it is necessary to take the Foucauldian notion of “knowledge/power” into consideration.

Foucault distinctly characterizes power. He argues that power is not an oppressive force but a productive one; that is, it has the capacity to shape, facilitate and generate practices, processes and social relationships. Foucault states that “... relationship of power ... is a mode of action which does not act directly or immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those that may arise in the present or the future” [11]. This means that power contributes to the formation of a subject and identity. The constitutive function of power is well-illustrated in *Discipline and Punishment, The birth of the prison*. Foucault uses the panopticon as a metaphor to demonstrate that power lies in an inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over and against himself. Thus, people become the object of correction and normalization as their behaviour is precisely constrained through surveillance, elicitation, and documentation. Therefore, power is exercised by virtue of things being known. This implies that power is intimately tied to knowledge. Foucault speaks of “power/knowledge” to describe the intertwined nature of these two notions [12][13].

Power and knowledge directly imply one another; there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute, at the same time, power relations.

Knowledge here is not the “fact” or “truth” but rather refers to what is accepted as reality. It frames people’s

beings and thoughts and accounts for their actions, thereby normalizing people’s subjectivity. The normalizing and productive faces of power/knowledge are deliberately articulated in Foucault’s theory of discourse and subjectivity. According to Foucault, knowledge is expressed, conveyed, and shared in discourse [14], and power is embedded in these discourses. More specifically, power acts by persuading, coercing or seducing people to internalize sets of norms and views, which is conceptualized as discourse, and consequently makes it sensible and accountable to what people should do, can do and thus do. Through this “internalization” of discourse, subjectivity is constituted. During this process of constitution, Foucault emphasizes those uninterrupted constraints imposed in practices of discipline and training that produce new gestures, actions, habits and skills, and ultimately new forms of subjectivity.

In Foucault’s later work, he shifts his focus to the role that self-regulation, namely “technologies of the self”, plays on subject construction. Technologies of the self are the various operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being that people make, either by themselves or with the help of others, in order to transform themselves to reach a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. Through technologies of the self, subjects came to conduct their own conduct or engage in relation to themselves, which did not devolve into a state of domination and, ultimately, their own subjectivity. In this sense, subjectivity is constituted through a process of self-formation or auto-colonization [15][16].

4. Teacher Identity Formation From a Post-Structuralist Perspective

Following Foucault’s post-structuralist ideas concerning knowledge/power on subjectivity, we can distinctly interpret teacher identity formation from the developmental and socio-cultural approaches. Basically, teacher identity is not some concrete stuff contained in an individualistic conception of human beings, highlighting an individual as a unique bounded person. On the contrary, it “molded, refabricated, and mobilized in accord with reigning cultural scripts and centres of power” [17].

School is an institution and a site where teachers are living with pre-existing, sometimes conflicting discourses. The normalizing discourses embodied in a teacher’s daily life include many school rituals, such as presentations, meetings, teaching manuals, speeches, and memos. Teachers’ growth partly depends on their internalizing and enacting, actively or passively, the norms or regulations circulated in school settings. These norms or regulations are considered appropriate and serve as the guidelines for a teacher’s behaviour and feelings. For example, Zembylas examines teacher’s emotions and identity from a post-

structuralist perspective and demonstrates that teachers internalize the disciplinary norms or rules prevailing within a specific context and which in turn become the guidance for them to “experience, understand, and express their emotions ‘appropriately’” [18]. Their emotions would perform in a way, according to these norms or roles, similarly to the certain actual or imagined authority of such norms or roles. Therefore, discourses, instantiated in these norms and rules, inscribe bodies and thus subjugate people through processes that produce subjectivity.

Teacher identity as discursively “framed” or “constituted” is characterized by several important features. Firstly, language and discourse is the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed. The post-structuralist approach rejects the notion of a real, true or authentic self-constructed. Teacher identity is defined as a teacher’s view of his/herself as a teacher, which can be interpreted through and within his/her language and discursive practices. Secondly, language and discourse are constantly changing and entangled with multiple contradictions; thus, identity is constructed as fluid, contingent and fragmented. [19][20] This is quite different from the humanist view of an essential or single identity. In the post-structuralist perspective, teachers live through uncertainties in the world and embrace plural values, beliefs, and orientations circulate in the institution or the community. These diverse rules, regulations and norms dominate society. Teachers join these fragmental or contradictory discourses as they construct their identities. Thirdly, the post-structuralist approach posits the notion of a contextual identity formation; its authenticities are situated and plural --locally articulated, locally recognized, and locally accountable. Such a contextual view of identity formation highlights its dynamic character. Teacher identity formation is a process of constantly “becoming”. Even a small event in a particular setting would exert some influence on its dynamic of change. Last but not least, identity formation is by no means a neutral or objective process.

On the contrary, it is always mediated, or shaped in particular ways, reflecting these values, norms and power relations that prevail in a given setting. As Foucault claims, “in the end, we are judged, condemned, classified, determined in our undertakings, destined to a certain mode of living or dying, as a function of the true discourses which are the bearers of the specific effects of power” [21]. In this regard, teacher identity is constructed or disciplined through and within discourses imbued with power relations.

References

- [1] Nicole Mockler, “Beyond ‘What Works’: Understanding Teacher Identity as a Practical and Political Tool,” *Teachers and Teaching*, vol. 17, no. 5, pp. 517-528, 2011. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2011.602059>
- [2] Douwe Beijaard, Nico Verloop, and Jan D Vermunt, "Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Identity: An Exploratory Study from a Personal Knowledge Perspective," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 16, no. 7, pp. 749-764, 2000. *Crossref*, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X\(00\)00023-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(00)00023-8)

Yet, the constitutive nature of teacher identity does not necessarily mean that teachers are passive recipients of normalizing discourses. Multiple discourses circulate in school, and these discourses, by nature, are unfixed and diverse. These polyvalence discourses are available at any time for teachers. They can access various discourses through which they attribute certain meanings to what happened to them. The polyvalence leads to some tensions among these discourses. Some scholars employ “transitional space” to describe the inconsistency and contradictions among discourses. Phillips, Harris, & Larson elaborate that “transitional space” is “a relational space, overlapping and competing discourses [that] make possible twists and detours of subjectivity, fissures in our self-fictions, and emergence into other spaces as we reinterpret the stories of our lives” [22]. Transitional space implies the potential of negotiation and struggle that enables teachers to critically examine their “being” and the meanings of their “being”. In this sense, transitional space is where teachers’ resistance takes place and their new identity springs from.[23][24]

5. Conclusive Remarks

To summarize, the post-structuralist approach provides a distinct way to interpret teachers’ identity and formation. It connects the role of discourse with power relations to the constitutive force in identity formation. It posits an integrated notion of identity which differentiates itself from the dichotomy between an individual or socio-cultural function. Yet, identity as the discursive constitution is not a form of discursive determinism. There is still room for the individual’s autonomy. In his later works, Foucault does not preclude the possibility of change in subject construction. He pays specific attention to exploring the possibility of agency and resistance [25].

A poststructural perspective sheds new light on teacher identity research, focusing on identity as fluid, dynamic, shifting and variant. It also highlights that identity is contextually situated in a past-present-future time frame. Future research could adopt concepts from Foucault-informed poststructuralism to understand and analyze teachers’ lived experiences in their identity formation.

Acknowledgements

This study is supported by Zhaoqing Educational Development Research Institute [grant number ZQJYY2018029]

- [3] Sanne F. Akkerman, and Paulien C. Meijer, "A Dialogical Approach to Conceptualizing Teacher Identity," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 308-319, 2011. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.08.013>
- [4] Douwe Beijaard, Paulien C. Meijer, and Nico Verloop, "Reconsidering Research on Teachers' Professional Identity," *Teaching and Teacher Education*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 107-128, 2004. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2003.07.001>
- [5] Michalinos Zembylas, "Emotions and Teacher Identity: A Poststructural Perspective," *Teachers & Teaching: Theory and Practice*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 213-238, 2003. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540600309378>
- [6] David Block, "The Rise of Identity in SLA Research, Post Firth and Wagner (1997)," *The Modern Language Journal*, vol. 91, no. s1, pp. 896-876, 2007.
- [7] Barry Smart, *Facing Modernity: Ambivalence, Reflexivity and Morality*, London: Sage, 1999.
- [8] David L Collinson, "Rethinking Followership: A Post-Structuralist Analysis of Follower Identities," *The Leadership Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 179-189, 2006. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.12.005>
- [9] R. Danielle Egan, and Gail L. Hawkes, "Endangered Girls and Incendiary Objects: Unpacking the Discourse on Sexualization," *Sexuality & Culture*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 291-311, 2008. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-008-9040-z>
- [10] M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London: Tavistock, 1972.
- [11] Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Post-Structuralist Theory*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997.
- [12] Nirmala Erevelles, "Voices of silence: Foucault, Disability, and the Question of Self-Determination," *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 17-35, 2002.
- [13] Justen Infinito, "Ethical Self-Formation: A look at the Later Foucault," *Educational Theory*, vol. 53, no. 2, pp. 155-171, 2003. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2003.00155.x>
- [14] Michel Foucault, "Afterword: The Subject and Power," In P. Rabinow & H. Dreyfus Eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, pp. 208-226, 1982.
- [15] Ian Leask, "Beyond Subjection: Notes on the Later Foucault and Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 44, no. s1, pp. 57-73, 2012. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2011.00774.x>
- [16] Thomas Lemke, "Critique and Experience in Foucault," *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 28, no. 4, pp. 26-48, 2011. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411404907>
- [17] T. A. Van Dijk. "The Discourse-Knowledge Interface," *Critical Discourse Analysis: Theory and Interdisciplinarity*, New York: Palgrave, pp. 85-109, 2003. *Crossref*, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230288423_5
- [18] Michalinos Zembylas, "Interrogating "Teacher Identity": Emotion, Resistance, and Self-Formation," *Educational Theory*, vol. 58, no. 1, pp. 107-127, 2003. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2003.00107.x>
- [19] Keith Richards, "'Being the teacher': Identity and Classroom Conversation," *Applied Linguistics*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 51-77, 2006. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/ami041>
- [20] Judyth Sachs, "Teacher Professional Identity: Competing Discourses, Competing Outcomes," *Journal of Education Policy*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 149-161, 2001. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930116819>
- [21] Michel Foucault, *What is Critique? The Politics of Truth*, Los Angeles, Semiotex, pp. 23-82, 1997.
- [22] Donna Kalmbach Phillips et al., "Trying on—Being in—Becoming Four Women's Journey (s) in Feminist Poststructural Theory," *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 15, no. 9, pp. 1455-1479, 2009. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800409347097>
- [23] Rachelle Hole, "Narratives of Identity - A Poststructural Analysis of Three Deaf Women's Life Stories," *Narrative Inquiry*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 259-278, 2007. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.17.2.06hol>
- [24] Christopher Day, "School Reform and Transitions in Teacher Professionalism and Identity," *International Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 37, no. 8, pp. 677-692, 2002. *Crossref*, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-0355\(03\)00065-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-0355(03)00065-X)
- [25] Gene Combs, and Jill Freedman, "Narrative, Poststructuralism, and Social Justice Current Practices in Narrative Therapy," *The Counseling Psychologist*, vol. 40, no. 7, pp. 1033-1060, 2012. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000012460662>