The Renaissance Group

Research Article

Why didn't anyone tell us what it would really be like?

How Experienced Secondary Teachers Make Sense of Their Role

Russell Greinke, PhD, University of Central Missouri
email: greinke@ucmo.edu

Abstract
Historically, teacher retention has been a more significant issue than teacher recruitment. This study looks at how teachers become "comfortable in their own skin." To be successful in their chosen careers, teachers undergo a process of Teacher Identity Formation that blends one's educational philosophy, teaching style, and personality. Finding one's own voice, one that is less imitative of influential teachers from one's past, occurs in those "Borderlands" where the personal and the professional meet, where who you are as a person and who you are as a teacher coalesce. Via an interview-based phenomenological study, this paper uses the cumulative wisdom of successful, experienced teachers to look at how they ultimately make sense of their position and overcome obstacles to identity formation. The findings may offer guidance to new teachers and teacher educators.

Introduction

This research study focused exclusively on the question: How do experienced full-time teachers make sense of their role of teaching on the secondary level? There is a need for such a study. The narratives of teaching in Kane (1991), for example, followed the formula of beginning-teacher-experiences-frustrations-but-then-lives-happily-ever-after, whereas the reality may be quite different. The National Council of Teachers of English, in an issue of The Council Chronicle (2005), reminded readers that, regarding beginning teachers, "nearly half will leave teaching within their first five years" (p. 2). This attrition rate assuredly has many causes, yet it suggests the need for a research study that goes straight to teachers themselves in order to peel back the layers and discover the center of their lived experience.

Allen (2000) used an analogy to Dorothy from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* to recall her first year as a teacher:

> Like Dorothy, I had ended up in a place inhabited by people I didn't recognize from my past experiences as a student and intern teacher. Unlike Dorothy, I had no idea where to begin looking for a wizard who could help me learn how to teach struggling and reluctant secondary school readers . . . . So I began counting the days until I could resign. (p. 1)

That is just one example of why it could prove insightful to understand, and capture the reality of, classroom teaching by going directly to experienced teachers.

Allen (2000) recalled a meaningful dialogue she had with new teachers, which highlighted the incongruity between teacher expectations and reality:

I recently had the opportunity to work with fifty teachers who were in their first year of teaching. I said to them, "What would you like to ask me now that there is no one in the room who is evaluating you?" They had one heartfelt response to that question: "Why didn't anyone tell us what it would really be like?" (p. 88). That is what this study seeks to do, from the perspective of teachers who know.

Such research may enlighten teacher training programs as it discovers the center of teaching as it is experienced by teachers who are there or have been there. They would seemingly possess the wisdom that comes from transforming theory into practice. Tremmel (1999) recalled that "Once, in a methods class, when we were reading a realistic account of a teacher's struggles, one of my students burst out with enthusiasm over having *finally* read something in a university course that seemed real and not contrived to present an idealized view of students or teaching practice" (p. 42).

Those who train teachers might use this study's findings to more finely calibrate what they emphasize regarding how working teachers experience the classroom.

Background

A terrible mistake was made and I was offered a position teaching a writing workshop. . . . Like branding steers or embalming the dead, teaching was a profession I had never seriously considered. I was clearly unqualified, yet I accepted the job without hesitation, as it would allow me to wear a tie and go by the name of Mr. Sedaris.

--David Sedaris,"The Learning Curve" in *Me Talk Pretty One Day*

There are substantive constructs that buttress a phenomenological study focusing on the lived experience of secondary teachers and how they make sense of that role. Social Identity theorists (e.g., Tajfel & Turner [1986]) have argued that part of our identity derives from the groups (e.g., secondary teachers in the case of this study) we feel connected to. Boss, Doherty, LaRossa,

Schumm, and Steinmetz (1993) explain that "'Identities' refer to self-meanings in a role" (p. 145) and that "Roles are shared norms applied to the occupants of social positions" (p. 147). Social Identity theorists, then, try to understand individuals within the context of their roles in groups. Allport (1937) explained that the social influence is relevant to a study of identity formation because social constructs can "become *interiorized* within the person as a set of personal ideals, attitudes, and traits" (p. viii). Our way of *being* in the world is partly explained by the social roles we occupy.

Alsup (2006) focused on pre-service teachers to test her hypothesis that the formation of a teacher identity means blending the professional life of a secondary teacher with the unique human being who inhabits that role. Her study found that learning to live in the space where those two identities overlap, which she labeled "borderland discourse" and defined as "discourse in which disparate personal and professional subjectivities are put into contact toward a point of integration" (p. 205), is a necessary ingredient to settling into the role of teacher. She focused on the experiences of six pre-service English teachers to learn how they underwent the transition from student to teacher. The three neophyte teachers who made the least progress in establishing a sense of teacher identity were the three who did not take teaching jobs, a possible cause/effect relationship that Alsup found significant.

A research study by McCann, T., Johannessen, L., and Ricca, B. (2005), which centered on "three student teachers and eight other novice teachers" (p. 8), identified a trend that pre-service teachers' expectations of what secondary teaching is like are often discordant with their experiences once they have their own classrooms. The McCann et al. study offered various findings, including charges that beginning teachers often underestimate the workload and thus have difficulties with time management, they have less autonomy/control over their own classroom curriculum than they had imagined, and they find it challenging to form positive relationships (as opposed to mere crowd

control) with their students. Of particular interest is their treatment of what they term a "teacher persona," a "public self," or a "public persona." The study acknowledges the significant learning curve beginning teachers face in finding a comfortable fit with the role of teacher.

Methods

Research Design, Researcher Role, and Assumptions

This qualitative study takes a phenomenological approach, because the study, as Creswell (1998) defined phenomenology, "includes entering the field of perception of participants; seeing how they experience, live, and display the phenomenon; and looking for the meaning of the participants' experiences" (p. 31). It involves asking individuals about their lived experiences.

Participants

The interviews were conducted with fifteen experienced secondary teachers from multiple disciplines since the experience of being a secondary teacher was the focus of this study. As such I was "identifying at least the initial elements of what will be the final sample" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 234). The participants ranged in age from the latter 20s to the mid-60s. Most were from the humanities. Twelve were female; three were male.

The data was derived from interviews. Participants are given pseudonyms.

Data Sources

The data I drew on came from interviews with the participants, technical literature, and nontechnical literature. My own experience as a teacher gave me a grounding in terms of understanding the context of the data. Since I sought the lived experience of secondary teachers, observations were not a data source. I wanted the teachers to describe how they made sense of the job, not make conjectures based on what I saw.

Analysis Procedures

Seidman (1998) identified interviewing as the ideal vehicle for obtaining analyzable data in a phenomenological study because "At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 3). When patterns in the interviews became clear, I cross-referenced with the nontechnical literature. I used inductive analysis (see Hatch [2002]), ranging from reading the data to coding to rereading the data to triangulating categories with the data to searching for negative cases to identifying emergent themes within and across categories to mapping themes to pulling evidence to support findings.

Results

The central hypothesis I find in my study is that secondary teachers who stay in the profession form a "teacher identity" that blends who they are as individuals with their role as teachers. This "identity formation" has a number of aspects to it, and there are factors that help, and others that hinder, this creation of a professional identity.

Defining Teacher Identity

A teacher identity is a self-image that successfully incorporates the job of teacher with the actual person who holds that job. It's like wearing a suit of clothes that fits and one feels comfortable in. Here is how Jane described the process of realizing that being a secondary teacher was an integral part of who she is as a person:

> That was a really cool transformation. When I first started teaching, I was basically a building sub for 3 1/2 years in ____ because you just couldn't find a job and the more that I looked, it was just so disheartening because I couldn't find anything. And that teacher identity was not really there—I was just the sub. You know, even though I was in a school that really liked me and I really liked them. But I still wasn't full-fledged. You know, I was on the outskirts, on the cusp. So for the first couple of years, it was like I really couldn't see myself that way. You know, it wasn't just a job, but I didn't identify myself, you know, as teacher.

Contrast that with Jane's earlier work experience, when, to use my metaphor, she tried on suits of clothes that did not fit:

I spent 13 years in retail and a couple years in the military, and I never really looked at myself, well, I was in the Navy so I wasn't really a soldier, but I never really, you know, thought of myself that way. As far as my identity as a retail person, I always knew there was something else out there. It didn't really fit. Even though I was in management, it just didn't fit. This [secondary teaching] fits for me, and it fits more and more every year.

Physical Presence

The way a teacher physically occupies a classroom is part of identity formation. In teaching, this physical presence includes the aspect of dress. Alsup (2006), part of my literature review, believed that oftentimes teachers underemphasize this factor because "as academics, we are used to living lives in our heads" (p. 92). She cited Ginsburg's 1988 study, with its "emphasis on 'socially constructing an image of professionalism' through clothing" (p. 93). Alsup cautioned that "without such attention to the bodily, without admitting that the core identity is not only intellectual or ideological but also corporeal, the new teacher will have a difficult time developing a self-actualized professional identity" (p. 95). Her study offered a take-home message to teacher educators: "This is where the teacher educator must step in with assignments and classroom activities that assist in the creation of a fully embodied teacher identity" (p. 105).

Survival

Another aspect of identity formation is the necessity to survive long enough in the profession to form an identity. During this study, it didn't seem to me that I was uncovering any situations that could be labeled "negative cases," that is, participants who did not feel a "teacher identity." A random conversation offered an insight. All of my participants have at least five years of experience. In the course of talking to someone who turned out to be a former secondary teacher, who had taught three years before switching careers, I asked her about the concept of forming a teacher identity. She said she never felt she had a "teacher identity." That was revealing to me since it suggested that the lack of "negative cases" was explained by the level of experience of my participants. Tremmel (1999) recalled his former student teacher "Linda," whom the teachers at the school where she ended up working remembered as "the best teacher any of them had ever known" (p. 58). What made her so remarkable was that "When she first became a teacher she committed herself, body and soul together, to her students and their learning. She worked twelve-, sixteen-, eighteen-, twenty-hour days. She worked wonders of the sort that are too rarely worked in the schools" (p. 59). Unfortunately, she neglected to consider her own survival. "The classes Linda taught were too large, the number of preparations she had was too many, the amount of work it took to do a good job was too great. Where other teachers would have pulled back and settled for less, this teacher pushed on, could not figure out a way to survive, and finally left" (p. 59). The lesson Tremmel learned from this was "Survival is first. Survival is always first" (p. 42).

My own participants appeared to have learned the same lesson in their own unique ways. Chloe described her first year of teaching as "Terrible. Awful. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. I learned that I need other people to survive. I learned that my survival is the most important thing." Barbara warned that "teachers are so over worked and underpaid, it's pathetic. . . . We can't push teachers to give 150% right out of the gate, but that's what we do." Annette explained why she sees survival as such a crucial factor: "We have too much to do on top of teaching students on a daily basis and too little time to do it. Teaching consumes our lives, and if we lose that, you know, the passion that called us to the profession in the first place, it will eat us alive. It will burn us out." Angela remembered how this insight hit her:

> My mentor teacher, one of the things he told us before we graduated was, "Don't try to be superteacher." And he shared a story about one night after a chili supper, the school he was teaching at down in Alabama, and he's mopping up chili. And of course, he had stacks

of papers to grade, lessons to plan, and he kind of came to that discovery that, "If I am going to stay in this profession, in one way or another, I have got to, at moments, just let myself be and not worry about the things that aren't getting done. Because I've got to mop up this stupid chili. So his message: Don't worry about being superteacher. Be concerned with survival, and you'll be able to do great things . . . And that helped me because there were so many years where, yeah, staying until 11:00 to clean up the concession stand and having to do all the other duties that pulled me out of, you know, what I really wanted to do. I just had to stop and say, this is part of it and make it through. And say sometimes, I don't care, I'm not going to grade those papers right now. I'm just going to sit here and be a vegetable for a bit. And that has stayed with me all the way through, that I can only do so much, and then I need to take a little breather in there.

Students

Yet another important aspect of a teacher identity is the students, a factor that came up repeatedly during this study. Atwell (1998) offered her reflections on this dynamic, regarding her middle school students:

> My kids pretty much look like adults. Most are taller than I am. When an eighth-grade girl lets me try on her shoes, often they're too big. When the shoe does fit—when it's even a style I'd buy for myself—I forget for a minute that although my students' worlds and my world intersect, they are different. I have to keep relearning the ways young adolescents are like me, and ways they aren't. (p. 56)

The shoes in this case work as a metaphor for finding a teacher identity that fits.

Beyond the Classroom

It is clear that teacher identity plays out while the teacher is in the classroom, as when McCourt (2005) noted that after eight years of secondary teaching, "I was learning what was obvious: You have to make your own way in the classroom. You

have to find yourself. You have to develop your own style, your own techniques" (p. 113). Yet this professional identity may also extend beyond the classroom. Jane is still her "teacher self" when she shops:

> Now when I go into Wal-mart and, you know, I'm starting to get the brothers and the sisters of kids that I had when I first got here and, you know, I know parents and they remember me. It's like, "Oh, yeah! You were so-and-so's teacher," and "Hi, Miss ___, how you doing?" Usually there are big smiles and all that kind of stuff . . . That is part of who I am. You know, those kids are, in a way, a mirror identity of me because I am part of them . . . That is part of me there.

The consensus among the participants was that they saw themselves occupying a role that truly mattered.

Helping the Creation of an Identity

There are identifiable factors that aid in the formation of a teacher identity; one example is life experience. Those teachers who had "other lives" before becoming teachers felt that impacted their identity. Jane explained, "I do have a much different background than they [fellow teachers] do. And so, I can make connections, I can do things differently because I've been out there in a different world a lot longer than they have. I may not be valued for that quite yet [smiling], but I value that." Diane, who noted she was "45 before she chose this career," stated, "I went into my first classroom with the confidence to manage behaviors based on experience. Truth is, my college courses did very little to prepare me to successfully handle student behavior."

Hindering the Creation of an Identity

There are also factors that hinder the formation of a teacher identity; one example is external demands on the classroom time of secondary teachers. Chloe complained that "First you have to make sure no counselor wants to come in and use your class time to schedule classes for next year. Then you have to make sure there are no district

or state mandates that require you to teach certain things. Then, hopefully, you can finally teach some [content]." Diane commiserated about "government mandated rules that take way too much time away from teaching and make little if any difference in education."

Can Help or Hinder

Sometimes the same factor is identified by some participants as helping, and others as hindering, identity formation. It all depended on the situation. An example is administration. Karen happily recalled "a principal who was really wonderful, and there was no reason that he should have been so nice to me as many mistakes as I made." Angela proudly remembered working "in a school that hated standardized tests. The administrators would publicly make that comment—that they did not believe in every-year standardized testing. So they did them, but they saw them as just one little piece of the whole puzzle. We did online portfolios while I was there, so we were really progressive in the way we looked at assessment." Jackie, however, identified the low point of her teaching career as "not being able to order a program for three years in a row that cost $300 even after I clearly demonstrated to the principal my need. It cost more than that to outfit a football player, which I pointed out. The answer I got was that football is what passes bond issues." Annette resented that "our administration has a difficult time supporting us in matters concerning poor student conduct." Edward had experience on both sides of this issue. He found "the total, complete lack of support from administration" to be the "most shocking" aspect of teaching. Early in his career, though, it was different: "For two years, I had a principal who had my back, who supported me fully. After I left his care, I never found that again."

Synthesis

It seems that successful secondary teachers form a teacher identity that blends who they are as individuals with who they are as pedagogues. Edward described the transformation: "I felt like that when I started, that I wasn't really a

teacher.After ten years, however, I am completely comfortable in the role." Diane defined the dynamic this way: "I think it is important for students to realize you are a person with a regular life and not just a teacher who exists only within the confines of the classroom. It's like, when they are able to see and hear bits of your life, positive relationships form as they make connections between their lives and yours." Jane had emotion in her voice as she talked about how well the role of teacher fits who she is as a person:

> I like being a teacher. I think it's one of the best jobs around. I really do. Yeah, it can get to you. Yeah, the stress day to day can definitely get to you if you let it. There are those lucky individuals who know how to take care of it better than others. But I can't imagine not being a teacher. I just can't. There are days, most days, when I turn my lights off, I look around in my classroom, and it's all dark and quiet. You know, there are lights coming in through the windows, of course, and it's all cleaned up. And I look at the posters on the wall, and I check out the desks, and it's so cool that that's my classroom. And I feel so privileged, really, even though that may sound so cornball. I do. I feel so privileged to even have a classroom, to have kids sit there, and to want to teach, and to want to learn. . . . I think all of that is just fantastic.

Discussion

"I used to be like you. I wanted to mold young minds, stretch their imaginations, introduce them to the exciting world of words. Make the English language and literature come alive for them. Right?"

"Exactly," I agreed.

"You'll get over it," he said, abruptly.

-LouAnne Johnson, *My Posse Don't Do Homework*

Summary and conclusions.

One appeal of teacher identity is that the concept makes such eminent sense. Protherough and Atkinson (1992) noted that in matters of education,

there is "a marked 'variance' between professional and general public opinion" (p. 386). This study may shed new light on teachers' lived experiences so that this gap in understanding between those inside, and those outside, the profession, may be narrowed. And just as the participants in Protherough and Atkinson's study found "personal qualities" (p. 399) significant to their role as teachers (including establishing a personal relationship between teacher and student), my study appears to reinforce their results in finding that teacher identity must incorporate who the teacher is as a person and who the students are.

Although Alsup (2006) also looked at teacher identity formation in regard to secondary teachers, her study focused on pre-service teachers and their fledgling attempts to form an identity. My study may expand on her research in that I looked at highly experienced teachers reflecting back on identity formation. My participants had the added perspective that comes from long practice. They seemed to learn, for example, that the variables that enter into identity formation are multi-faceted and changing. Jane, for example, explained that:

> We always change. You know, if we're an effective teacher, an effective educator, we do change to meet whatever it is our kids are doing. If we have a group that needs to have more discipline, or needs to go slower, well, that's part of our identity. We have to be patient. If we have a group that is definitely a lot more fun and can handle a lot more things, well, we respond to that too. That's just good teaching. I think that whatever it is we teach is also part of our identity.

This is an epiphany that Alsup's participants could not yet have articulated. Here, for example, is Alsup's participant, Carrie, feeling quite unnerved by her lack of experience and how far she has to go to form a teacher identity:

> I had a hard time viewing myself as a teacher, and as I'm getting closer to graduation I'm having a hard time viewing myself as an adult. Because it's like I'm expected to go out there and get a job and they're going to give me

responsibility, and I just want to look at them and say, look, I'm just a kid! What am I doing here? I can't do this stuff! So when I was in the classroom, I felt a whole lot more like a student than I did a teacher. (pp. 62-63)

Pre-service teachers stand to benefit from learning what the participants in my study revealed about how their professional identities evolved.

Personal Identity theory appeared in my literature review to account for the important role personal characteristics play in teacher identity formation. That helps explain Chloe's comment that "I use humor and story telling . . . as I teach – that is who I am as a person." And Cindy's remark: "I think your personality matters a lot more than your [content knowledge]." Jane cautioned that personal characteristics can "make or break" a teacher: "Just because you're good at [your subject matter] doesn't mean you're going to have a relationship with the kid or a bunch of kids or that you're going to find this, you know, somewhat fun. Because you have to find teaching fun."

The nontechnical literature in my literature review, such as the published memoirs of secondary teachers, allowed me to triangulate the data and compare the oral accounts of my participants with the more carefully crafted remembrances of stories in print. The findings, in both cases, seemed to reinforce each other, as when McCourt (2005) stressed the need for secondary teachers to present an identity that incorporates their true selves in the classroom:

> You can fool some of the kids some of the time, but they know when you're wearing the mask, and you know they know. They force you into truth. If you contradict yourself they'll call out, Hey, that's not what you said last week. You face years of experience and their collective truth, and if you insist on hiding behind the teacher mask you lose them. Even if they lie to themselves and the world they look for honesty in the teacher. (p. 203)

Implications

The most significant implication is that formation

of a teacher identity can and should be taught in Methods classes. One way to facilitate this is to give preservice teachers room to grow an identity. Boxing them in by suggesting there is one correct way of doing things handicaps identity formation. Here, for example, is one supervising teacher's published memory of how she learned to let teachers incorporate their own personalities into the classroom even if it does not match the prevailing orthodoxy of a teacher preparation program:

> One day . . . I was assigned to observe the class of a young teaching assistant. He met me at the classroom door dressed in a three-piece suit, tie, and polished dress shoes. I assumed that he could not relate to the students and that I would endure a long and tedious hour.
>
> He asked the students to move the chairs from the discussion circle in which they rested to straight rows from front to back. I considered that a mistake, like his formal attire and stance in front of the class. But as he talked, with very proper diction, his excitement about the material became increasingly apparent. I looked around and saw that students were paying close attention and taking notes. When he paused and requested questions, many hands went up. The students asked good questions, he responded well, and then returned to his lecture. . . .
>
> As part of my job as observer, I asked the instructor, with about 15 minutes remaining in the period, to leave the room so I could discuss his teaching with the students. As soon as he left, the students spontaneously began to praise him. I was skeptical: "Wasn't he too formal? Do you really relate to someone like that in a three-piece suit?" But indeed they did . . . They truly liked and respected his enthusiasm for the material.

That experience overturned many of my prejudices about teaching. I decided to teach more in line with my personality. . . .

> I had learned a crucial lesson: Most students possess superb radar that quickly locates

phoniness . . . Thus, every teacher has to figure out who she or he is, how best to appear before a class, and what material to teach. And in long teaching careers, every instructor should have three-to five-year checkups and revise their dress, approach, and material as their personal values and circumstances change. Teaching is a highly individual endeavor, and each instructor should work according to what personally feels most comfortable. (Sperber, 2005, p. B20)

Limitations

Regarding phenomenological studies, Moustakas (1994) warned that "knowledge does not end with moments of connectedness, understanding, and meaning. Such journeys open vistas to new journeys for uncovering meaning, truth, and essence—
journeys within journeys, within journeys . . . each stopping place is but a pause in arriving at knowledge" (p. 65). I do not live under the illusion that this study is anything more substantial than a mere "pause."

There are ways in which my study had limitations. I could have sampled a more heterogeneous mix of participants. That would have allowed me to consider the impact of gender, ethnic, or age differences in the teachers I interviewed (or how those same differences play out when applied to the students who occupy their classrooms), and the possibility that urban versus rural schools, or private versus public schools, or well-funded versus financially strapped schools could reveal significant variables. Interviewing may have limitations. Do teachers necessarily "walk their talk"?

Final Thoughts

The popular author C. S. Lewis coined the word "Shadowlands" to describe the belief that the earth is a mere reflection of a more perfect, and more real, world that lies beyond. Many teachers, I believe, begin their careers with the notion that their goal is to, as closely as possible, model the "ideal teacher" that they have envisioned from their Methods classes. What my participants

seemed to say, though, is that they do not live in a Platonic Shadowlands where teachers imitate an idealistic vision situated outside themselves, but in what Alsup (2006) called the "Borderlands" where personal and professional spaces overlap.

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Appendix A

Sample Interview Questions

*What is it about your life story that has you in a position to be able to talk about what it is like to be a secondary teacher?

*What journals/periodicals related to your job do you read regularly? Why?

*What is an example of a high and a low point in your secondary teaching career? What was learned from both?

*What is an example of an epiphany you had as a teacher, and what inspired it?

*Did your teacher preparation classes adequately prepare you to be a teacher? Why or why not?

*Why does the profession have a high dropout rate?

*What are the three most important books, whether fiction or nonfiction, for a teacher to have on his or her bookshelf? Why?

*Of the attempts that have been made to depict what teaching is really like, whether in the form of a book or a film, whether it is fiction or non-fiction, which one do you believe comes closest to "telling it like it is"? Why?

*What will the secondary classroom look like 10 years from now?

*What conferences, if any, do you find most helpful to your job? Why?

*Would you recommend this profession to a young person who is considering it for a career? Why or why not? If you could start over, would you choose it again for a career?

*What is it really like for you to be a secondary teacher?*What does it mean to you to be a secondary teacher?