

Introducing *Teacher Identity* and This Volume

By Brad Olsen

Real knowledge comes from those in whom it lives.

—John Henry Newman

Watching a television show recently, I heard a character say, “DNA is *what* we are; identity is *who* we are.” That’s an interesting line—one I’m not sure I accept but one that raises salient questions: What is the “self”? How are boundaries between nature and nurture, or between individuals and their experiences (or between mind/body, self/other, I/we) drawn? These questions, applied to teacher development, frame this issue’s investigation into teacher identity as useful frame for the study and practice of teacher education.

This special issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* brings together several researchers from United States university programs where teachers are prepared for work in diverse classrooms. While each researcher or research team has conducted a separate investigation, all nine studies are bound by a common question: *how do individuals inside social contexts develop understandings of and for themselves as teachers; and how does highlighting the processes by which this occurs aid the various teacher educators who work with them?* Together, these articles offer multiple analyses of teacher development

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inside connected spheres of multiculturalism, professional identity construction, and contemporary teacher education. More specifically, all studies foreground teacher identity as the primary analytic. But teacher identity is hard to articulate, easily misunderstood, and open to interpretation.

What Is Identity?

Part of the trouble defining teacher identity stems from the many ways the word “identity” had been used over time. For example, in early and middle parts of the 20th century, the term was mostly the province of psychoanalysis to refer to the individualized self-image any person possesses (Freud, 1961/1909). In this way, identity was framed as mostly autonomous and frequently directed by its owner. Although social psychologists (including Erickson, 1968; Moshman, 1990; and Vygotsky, 1978) have since framed identity as a more situated, dynamic process of individuals developing conceptions of themselves as rational beings over time, the articles in this special issue tend to avoid these traditional psychological framings of identity.

Another example is that, in the second half of the 20th century, the term gained currency in sociology and anthropology. Troubled by some psychologists’ emphasis on the individual, many social scientists privileged “cultural identity” to refer to the ways any person self-identifies with, or is somehow claimed or influenced by, various cultural or racial/ethnic categories (Anderson, 1991, Fishman, 1973; Bourdieu, 1991). Used in this manner, identity is understood in terms of broad cultural strata such as race, class, gender, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, language, and physical ability, to name a few. This view treats individuals as mostly shaped or constructed via cultural markers and social positionings. It is inside this frame that identity politics emerged, in the early 1970s, as a way to describe how people work to acquire additional power or representation for themselves and the social groups to which they belong. The articles in this volume tend to avoid these broader, structural, perhaps over-determining, cultural framings.

So, it is from this admittedly oversimplified tangle of intellectual traditions that we inherit “identity.”¹ In fact, some may wonder if the word itself has become used up—twisted into so many shapes and disciplinary knots that a new term is required. To this, Kwame Appiah (2006) remarks: “‘Identity’ may not be the best word to use, but it is the one we use” (p. 15).

So that is the word we use.

The articles in this volume mostly draw on sociocultural theory—a loose cluster of complementary, sometimes competing, contributions from social psychology, social anthropology, sociolinguistics, and philosophy that focus on the self in practice; on the various interdependencies among person, context, history, and others; and on the situated, continuous nature of self-development. Most sociocultural theories and theorists ignore neither the individual self nor social positionings such as race,

class, and gender, but they do not over-privilege them, either. However, I will let the authors describe their own particular understandings of identity.

What Is Teacher Identity?

This collection of articles treats *teacher identity* as an holistic outgrowth of ways in which the theoretical histories described above intersect with current treatments of teachers, teaching, and teacher development. Recent educational research reminds us that teaching is not merely a cognitive or technical procedure but a complex, personal, social, often elusive, set of embedded processes and practices that concern the whole person (Britzman, 2003; Cochran-Smith, 2005; Hamachek, 1999; Oakes & Lipton, 2003; Olsen, 2008). Many teacher educators already locate teacher preparation inside apprenticeship models of learning-to-teach. Many also consider the “whole person” in teacher development, and try to highlight the power of context in teacher learning. And many stress critical examinations of race, culture, power, and history in teacher education. Aligned with these perspectives and practices, teacher identity as analytic frame draws attention to the holistic, dynamic, situated nature of teacher development.

The articles here treat teacher identity both as a methodological lens through which to study teacher development, and as a content or assemblage, itself, in which and on which development operates. Teacher identity is a useful *research frame* because it treats teachers as whole persons in and across social contexts who continually reconstruct their views of themselves in relation to others, workplace characteristics, professional purposes, and cultures of teaching. It is also a *pedagogical tool* that can be used by teacher educators and professional development specialists to make visible various holistic, situated framings of teacher development in practice.

The articles in this volume are sequenced loosely around the chronology of the continuum of teacher development. The first article, by Susan Florio-Ruane and Linda Williams, sets the stage with an historical look at identity and two immigrant teachers a century ago: one African American and the other Italian American. The second article, by Brad Olsen, examines how teachers’ reasons for entering the profession illuminate teacher identity development. The next three articles turn their gaze toward the university teacher education experience. Matt Ronfeldt and Pam Grossman consider how teacher candidates negotiate personalized understandings of themselves in programmatic context. Lani Horn, Susan Nolen, Christopher Ward, and Sara Sunshine Campbell study relationships between the shared “world” of university teacher education and those personal “worlds” in which student teachers fit their program to themselves. Dena Sexton investigates student teachers negotiating the institutionalized roles of teachers against their own incoming identities.

The following two articles consider what occurs after graduation. Katherine Merseth, Julia Sommers, and Shari Dickstein’s article investigates novice teachers’ changed commitments to urban schools in communities of color. Sarah Warshauer Freedman and Deborah Appleman’s article explores early career teacher retention

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by way of the relationship between teachers' identities and the contours of their teacher education program.

The penultimate article, by Dan Battey and Megan Franke, applies its teacher identity lens to in-service professional development by studying conceptual change in the classroom practices of mathematics teachers. And to close out the volume, Peter Hoffman-Kipp offers a pedagogical primer on teacher identity by attending to ways teacher educators can highlight embedded conceptions of race, culture, and the self on teachers' (and teacher educators') professional learning.

We hope that these articles, individually and together, will extend existing conversations and practices around teacher education and teacher development, introduce some new ones, and promote teacher identity as a useful frame for research and practice in quality teacher preparation and retention.

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Note

¹ Of course, notions of identity are not only found within psychology, sociology, and anthropology but appear in dozens of other domains including literature, philosophy, theology, art, neuroscience, and linguistics.

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