

Cultural construction of indigenous pre-service teachers' identities prior to teacher education

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Abstract

This study examined how teachers' identities are constructed and represented in the indigenous cultural context and its influence on the construction and representation of indigenous pre-service teachers' identities prior to teacher education. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with three indigenous pre-service teachers who were just beginning the first year of their four year teacher education program. Data analysis revealed that the way teachers' identities are constructed and legitimized in the cultural context has a profound influence on the construction of indigenous pre-service teachers' own identities as future teachers prior to teacher education. It was also found that indigenous pre-service teachers enter their teacher education program with a multiplicity of identities rather than a singular identity.

Keywords: student teachers, prior beliefs, cultural context, teacher identity

Introduction

The formation of teachers' identities has emerged as an area worthy of study over the last decade. In particular, researchers have focused on the formation of teachers' social and professional identities (e.g., Goodson, 2003; Rots; Aelterman, Vlerick, & Katrien, 2007), the construction and representation of teachers' identities through their biographies (e.g., Atkinson; 2004; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) and the identification of characteristics of teachers' professional identities (Beijaard, 1995; Moore & Hofman, 1988; Siraj-Blatchord, 1993). These studies have made a number of useful findings. Although the role of context in the shaping of professional identities was not directly examined by these studies, it was found that it played a role in the construction of teachers' professional identities (Campbell, 2005; Samuel & Stephens, 2000). Moreover, it was found that the formation of professional identity involves a journey. This journey is individual and group oriented. It is often long and slow, complex, developmental and non linear (see Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000; Dillabough, 1999; Mawhinney & Xu, 1997; Volkmann & Anderson, 1998). Furthermore, professional identity was formed by other sources as well apart from context (see Sugrue, 1997).

While previous studies into the formation of teachers' professional identities and their findings have provided useful insights into how teachers' identities are formed, these studies, as noted by Beijaard, Meijier and Verloop (2004), emphasized the personal aspect of identity formation while little or no emphasis was placed on how professional identity shapes and is shaped by

context. The study reported in this article seeks to fill in this gap by examining how professional identities, more specifically teacher identities, shape and are shaped by context. The focus is on how teachers' identities are constructed and represented through their interaction with the cultural context and its influence on the construction of indigenous pre-service teachers' identities as teachers to be prior to teacher education. Moreover, Beijaard, Meijier and Verloop (2004) also noted that the studies on the formation of teachers' professional identities undervalued the importance of teachers' teaching and learning theories, images and beliefs in the formation of teachers' identities and, hence, did not use these as a way of making sense of how teachers' identities were constructed and represented. The study reported in this paper uses pre-service teachers' prior beliefs of teaching, learning, a teacher's role(s), students as learners and knowledge as a means of understanding how indigenous teachers' identities were constructed and represented culturally, and how this influenced and shaped the identities of pre-service teachers.

The teacher as a cultural construction: a conceptual framework

Culture plays an important role in the construction of personal and social identities. Culture is a *hermeneutic circle*. What du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negus (1997) refer to as the '*circle*' of meanings. It enables us to make sense of phenomena in a cultural context. According to du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negus (1997) "...men and women are...cultural beings. As cultural beings, we are always, irrevocably, immersed in this 'sea of meanings', in this giving-and-taking of meaning which we call culture (p.4). "Things and events simply will not or cannot make sense on their own" (p. 14). These phenomena are constructions of culture. Therefore, to understand any of these phenomena one must use culture as an interpretive framework to make sense of it. This is also true in relation to how a teacher is perceived and understood within a cultural context. A teacher or being a teacher is a construct and a creation of society and its culture. Thus, in order to develop an in depth understanding of what it means to be a teacher, we need to employ culture as the conceptual framework to enable us arrive at that understanding.

Before being inculcated into the modern practices and experiences of teaching and learning, Papua New Guinean pre-service teachers were an integral part of the teaching and learning processes of their indigenous cultures. They observed first hand what the teaching and learning processes entailed. What it meant to be a teacher and how a teacher's roles were to be played out in teaching and learning contexts were clearly defined by society and shaped by its culture. Pre-service teachers were privy and subjected to cultural beliefs, values, practices and experiences that undergird these teaching and learning processes as members of their linguistic groups, tribes and clans. These were the hermeneutic circles in which teachers were culturally defined and their identities discursively constructed and represented.

Teachers are often viewed as possessors of knowledge, both private and public knowledge. They are viewed and appreciated by society as experts in their field or domain. For example the knowledge of sorcery, different forms of magic,

rite of passage, and charms are viewed as private or privileged knowledge. Those who possess these types of knowledge are perceived as experts and are accorded high status in society. They are also viewed in both the public and private realms as possessors and dispensers of knowledge, heroes or heroines, wise men or women, authoritative figures, master teachers or gurus. These constructions of teachers' identities are represented and regulated in both the public and private pedagogical sites.

When knowledge is transmitted to those who are at a stage where they are perceived to be ready or mature to acquire it, they (the learners) are normally taught and transmitted the knowledge in a defined and prescribed space, for example on a secret initiation site, in the men's or women's house, in the women's or men's circle, in a fishing or hunting expedition, or in a gardening outing. A father, a mother, an aunt, or an uncle normally carries out the teaching of a particular form of knowledge. In the patrilineal society the teacher or instructor is normally a father, a mother, a chief or a possessor of required knowledge. In this society knowledge is normally transmitted from a father to his son, a mother to her daughter, a chief to his eldest son or an expert to the novice. In the matrilineal society the teacher is normally a mother, an uncle or an expert. Pedagogical process is the same as in a patrilineal society, except that in the matrilineal society an uncle normally transmits knowledge to a nephew, particularly privileged knowledge, for example the knowledge of sorcery or land. Generally, this is the hermeneutic and pedagogical framework in which teachers' identities are constructed as well as teaching and learning pedagogy is played out. It is the framework that shapes those who what to become teachers prior to them enrolling in teacher education programs in the Papua New Guinean formal context.

The study

The case study approach was employed in this study to provide the conceptual framework to enable me to develop an in-depth understanding and make sense of how Papua New Guinean teachers' identities are constructed and represented in the cultural context through the use of indigenous pre-service teachers' prior beliefs about teaching, learning, a teacher's role(s), students as learners and knowledge. The approach enabled me to also ascertain how the construction and representation of teachers' identities in the cultural context and in society contribute towards influencing and shaping the identities of indigenous pre-service teachers as teachers to be from their own emic perspectives and lived experiences prior to teacher education.

Three pre-service teachers volunteered to participate in the study after all pre-service teachers enrolling for the first time in their teacher education program at the University of Goroka in Papua New Guinea were given an open invitation to participate in the study. The purpose of the study was thoroughly explained and the three participants were given an opportunity to make comments and raise questions about the study. The interviews were conducted using prepared semi-structured interview questions with each of the

participants. Opportunities were provided for participants to add additional comments and for clarifications and meanings to be ascertained from participants' responses. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed immediately after it was completed. Pseudonyms were used in order to protect the privacy and the identity of the three participants throughout the study.

In the interviews, I focused on each of the participant's life history, lived experiences and emic perspectives, and his or her meaning of teaching, learning, a teacher's role(s), students as learners, and knowledge and how these contributed towards the construction of his or her identity as a teacher to be. By delving into the participants' beliefs of teaching, learning, a teacher's role(s), students as learners and knowledge it was hoped that these beliefs would reveal how teachers' identities were constructed and represented in their cultures. It would also reveal how the cultural construction and representation of teachers' identities influenced and shaped the participants' own identities as teachers in the making.

The constant comparative method of data analysis was used throughout the study to analyze and make sense of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). This method of data analysis allowed me to continuously compare participants' responses with each other and to construct categories for the data. Using this method, I was able to note tentative themes or categories emerging from the data and look for consistencies and inconsistencies from the participants' responses to ensure that there was coherence in the data. As tentative categories emerged from the data, I gave special attention to further evidence that either challenged or supported these categories. Through my constant comparison of the data, the emerging themes and categories crystallized. I took time to re-examine and refine the categories and constantly double-checked and compared segments within and across categories to make sure that all segments of the data were assigned appropriately and made sense, until I achieved a satisfactory closure.

Results and discussion

The teacher as the transmitter of knowledge

The three pre-service teachers in this study generally believed that teaching is the transmission of prescribed knowledge to the students by the teacher, as well as telling students what to do and not to do. In this context, the teacher is culturally perceived and constructed not only as the transmitter of knowledge, but also as someone who is entrusted the responsibility by society to ensure that the culturally acceptable forms of knowledge, ways of doing things, and perspectives of the world are transmitted to the children and adolescents. The teacher is perceived as the one who transmits knowledge to the learners. He or she is seen as a *conduit* in which knowledge is channelled to the learners. Teaching is thus perceived as a process where the teacher transmits knowledge to the learners. This cultural construction of the teacher as the transmitter of knowledge is eloquently represented in the following prior belief of teaching held by one of the three pre-service teachers' prior to teacher education

program.

Teaching in my culture was . . . the transferring or the transmission or the giving of things or something, I mean knowledge, skills, and values that elders have or my society has to children when they are growing up. Children are told how to behave and do things, . . . [pause] . . . for example they are told how to make a garden, make fences, bows and arrows, biliums [string bags], and hunt animals and birds. Elders or adults transfer to us the knowledge and skills or the know-how of doing things while we sit closely and listen to what they are telling us. After that we put into practice the knowledge the elders have transferred to use and behave in the way they have told us . . . [pause]. . . so that we do what they have told us to do properly or the right way (Anowan).

The construction of the teacher as the transmitter of knowledge is also explicit in the three pre-service teachers' prior beliefs of students' as learners. The three pre-service teachers' viewed students as learners as "empty vessels" or "baskets" prior to teacher education. The role of the teacher, then, is to "fill these empty baskets" with knowledge. This is represented in the following elaboration of prior belief of students as learners by one of the three pre-service teachers prior to teacher education.

Mothers, fathers or elders in my culture are our teachers. They are the ones who possess and transmit to us, the learners, cultural knowledge while we children are viewed as "empty vessels". For example in the making of bilums [string bags], the mother has or possesses the knowledge of making bilums and her daughter does not. If the mother wants her daughter to know how to make bilums . . . an important activity in my culture, then the mother will transmit . . . or fill her daughter with the knowledge and skills of making bilums. In this case the daughter is viewed as lacking or not possessing the knowledge and skills of bilum making. In other words . . . she is viewed as an empty vessel (William).

The cultural construction and representation of the teacher as a transmitter of knowledge or a pipe for disseminating knowledge to the "empty vessels; the learners, is intertwined with the construction of the teacher as the possessor of knowledge.

The teacher as a possessor of knowledge

The three pre-service teachers' entered their teacher education program believing that knowledge was something that was possessed by the teacher. Thus, the teacher is viewed as someone who is in possession of knowledge required by learners as well as society in order to function and sustain itself. In this context, the teacher is perceived as the "*reservoir*" of knowledge and it is his or her responsibility to ensure that knowledge is "*piped*" to the learner, the "*empty basket*", so that the learner is filled with the required knowledge. This

is an expectation placed on those who are responsible for educating children by society. The society expects this teaching role to be carried out diligently and effectively. The identity of the teacher as a conduit is shaped, reinforced and regulated by this power relationship between the teacher as the reservoir of knowledge, the learner as an “empty basket”, and the expectations of society. The following prior belief of knowledge held by one of the three pre-service teachers prior to teacher education exemplifies this representation of the teacher as the possessor of knowledge culturally.

Knowledge in my culture is viewed as something that people possess . . . especially the elders, adults or parents and they transmit it to the children whom they viewed . . . you know, as knowing nothing. Culturally, people who have knowledge are the ones . . . who have gone through particular experiences in life and would be seen as having something in their heads or possess knowledge. They know everything and children don't, so they . . . have to get it from them. Those who possess knowledge have to show us how to do things or give us the knowledge that we children don't have . . . so they have the responsibility of giving it to us (Imale).

The construction and representation of the teacher as the possessor of knowledge is also explicit in the three pre-service teachers' prior beliefs of teaching. Knowledge is not only viewed as a possession, it is also contextual. Knowledge is transmitted by adults and acquired by children in different pedagogical sites such as a garden, a feasting occasion, battle fields, traditional dancing, mat weaving and fishing. There is both public and private knowledge as well as sacred and gender privileged knowledge. These forms of knowledge are transmitted and acquired in different cultural contexts and society sanctioned pedagogical sites. This is illustrated by the following elaboration of one of the three pre-service teachers' prior belief of teaching.

In my village when we are preparing . . . for example for a feast, the people whom we consider and look up on as elders are the ones who organize and coordinate the feasts because they are the ones who have the knowledge. The young people are transmitted the knowledge and told about how it is to be done . . . and the extent of their participation. They are taught the skills of how to do certain things. The young people only carry out the instructions and use the knowledge given to them by the elders who possess the knowledge (William).

The cultural construction and representation of the teacher as a transmitter and a possessor of knowledge is interwoven and connected to the cultural construction of the teacher as all knowing. The teacher is perceived as someone who possesses all the knowledge hence, knows everything thing there is to know about a particular subject, for example weaving of mats, hunting, fishing, sorcery, etc.

The teacher as all knowing

The three pre-service teachers viewed the teacher as someone who knew everything. This resonates with the view that the teacher is the reservoir of knowledge, thus, he or she knows everything while the child, the learner, knows nothing. It is assumed culturally that the child brings to the teaching and learning situation a clean slate or no knowledge and prior experience of what is to be taught and learned. Thus, it is the teacher's job to inculcate the child and socialize him or her to Society's expectations. This is how teachers' identities are constructed and represented in the actual practice of teaching and learning. The prior belief of a teacher's role held by Imale prior to teacher education clearly illustrates this cultural representation of a teacher as all knowing.

In my culture we tend to see the teacher as knowing everything and his or her role is to tell the learners what he or she knows. Children have to learn from the teachers because teachers are the ones who have the knowledge. Teachers are people who know everything. Whose role is to ensure children acquire the required knowledge from them.

The cultural construction of the teacher as all knowing is also represented in the three pre-service teachers' prior beliefs of learning. It is assumed that if the children want to acquire the required knowledge, they had to acquire it in a passive manner. The teacher, who is all knowing, is responsible for transmitting the required knowledge to the children. This is represented in the prior belief of learning held by Anowan prior to teacher education.

My cultural experiences have also contributed a lot in shaping my view of learning. We all come from different cultural backgrounds and have different cultural experiences of learning different things... Children in my area, that is, the Okapa area of the Eastern Highlands Province, learn by listening and memorizing what the elders or the adults want them to know and by observing and practicing what elders or adults demonstrate. The elders are our teachers and they know everything. If children want to learn these things . . . then they have to listen carefully and memorize everything they are taught.

The cultural construction of the teacher as a transmitter and possessor of knowledge and as all knowing are connected to the construction of the teacher as a guardian of knowledge.

The teacher as the guardian of knowledge

The teacher is also looked upon as the guardian of knowledge. He or she ensures that the learners acquired the *correct* forms of knowledge. He or she self-guards and ensures that public, private, sacred, and gendered knowledge are securely stored and protected from being stolen and plagiarised by others. Knowledge is a society's valued possession that is of great significance to its own existence and survival. Thus, the teacher is bestowed a very important and privileged responsibility of storing and protecting this knowledge. He or She is placed in a position of power and trust by the society to ensure that its stock of

knowledge is properly stored, secured and managed so that it is sustained for the benefit of society and its members. This is eloquently represented in the prior belief of teaching that Imale held before enrolling in her teacher education program.

In my culture . . . when I am told something or to do something, for example if I have to do or I have to make a basket . . . there is always a certain way of making it and my mother would know the way it should be done. To learn how to make a basket I will have to follow my mother's instructions, listen and observe what she is doing and then practice the skill with her guidance. In teaching me how to make a basket my mother will always correct me whenever I am not doing it correctly . . . and may also ask me to repeat certain things. Another example is in the scraping of coconut. I tend to hold the coconut in a different way from the way my mother would hold it. Because of that my mother kept commenting and instructing me not to do that. "You must hold the coconut this way and scrape it", she tells me. I tell her that this is the way I prefer to hold the coconut but she doesn't accept it. She says "this is not . . . the way we hold and scrape a coconut" and insisted that it should be done the correct way. I can't do it differently than what she does. I have to obey and follow what she does without questioning why it has to be done her way and not my way.

The teacher is placed in a position of power because he or she is the one who stores, protects and manages society's knowledge. He or She is also the person responsible for transmitting knowledge to the children or learners. Because of this, the teacher occupies an important position in the in society and wields a certain amount of power. Thus, he or she is viewed as an authoritative figure.

The teacher as an authoritative figure

The teacher is also perceived as an authoritative figure. This is because the teacher in this case is viewed as in possession of the knowledge that is needed by the learners. Teacher' authority to store, protect, manage and transmit knowledge is entrusted on him and legitimized by society. Because of this, the learners are expected to respect him or her when he or she is transmitting knowledge to them. This is epitomized by the following prior belief of learning held by one of the three pre-service teachers prior to teacher education.

In my culture what is given or transmitted to the children or the young ones by the elders or the parents is believed to be appropriate, is the correct way, or the correct advice, ideas, and skills that children should learn, follow and practice. To question what an elder or the parents are telling you or transmitting to you . . . is simply being disobedient and disrespectful. To question somebody who is an elder by a younger person is an offence. Because when children question their elders they are breaching the expected norms . . . that they are expected to abide by and follow as young members of society or someone who is considered as a child. The parents and elders are

respected and considered as people who possess the knowledge . . . and therefore, are much superior to those who do not, including the children and the young people in the society (William).

The teacher is constructed and represented as an authoritative figure based on his or her role as the guardian, possessor and transmitter of knowledge, and him or her being perceived as all knowing. He or She is viewed as an authoritative figure because he or she wields a certain amount of position power as well as his or her power relationship with the learner and the society at large.

Conclusion

This study examined the role cultural context plays in the construction and representation of teachers' identities, and its effect on the formation of indigenous pre-service teachers' own identities prior to teacher education. The study revealed that cultural context plays a significant role in the construction and representation of teachers' identities. Teachers' identities were discursively (re)constructed and represented in a dialogical relationship with context. Teachers' identities are not formed in a vacuum, but within a context. Discourses and discursive practices employed and privileged in a particular context play an important role in the way teachers' identities are shaped, communicated and legitimized. What is more profound is that a teacher's identity is more or less a fixed phenomenon. It varies only with regards to the pedagogical sites in which it is being played out. A teacher's identity does not change and evolve, because there is an absence of an overt reflective process as well as competing and alternative paradigms of teaching and learning in the cultural context. For teachers' identities to be clearly understood, the role of the context in their formation should be given serious consideration.

The study also revealed that culturally the teacher is constructed and represented as a transmitter of knowledge. He or she is viewed and identified as a conduit in which knowledge is piped to the learner. Within this context the learner is viewed as an "empty basket", which needs to be filled with knowledge piped from the reservoir of knowledge possessed by the teacher. Thus, the teacher is, in this situation, perceived and understood as the possessor of knowledge. The teacher is the one who possesses the knowledge that the learners would require for their personal growth and development, and for the society to sustain and reproduce itself and its culture. This identity of a teacher was represented explicitly in the three indigenous pre-service teachers' prior beliefs of teaching and learning.

Culturally, the teacher was also constructed and represented as 'all knowing'. A teacher is someone who knows everything and has all the knowledge, which connects to the construction and representation of the teacher as the possessor and transmitter of knowledge. Additionally, a teacher is also constructed and represented as a guardian of knowledge. He or she should ensure that the learners are taught the *correct* skills, values, attitudes, norms, and behaviours. He or she must also ensure that the learners practice, do things, perceive and

interpret cultural phenomena and the world in the *correct way*; their indigenous way. Ultimately, these cultural constructions of the teacher position him or her as an authoritative figure. The representation of the teacher culturally as an authoritative figure is inscribed and dialectically shaped by cultural construction of the teacher as the transmitter of and possessor of knowledge, all knowing, and as a guardian of knowledge. This is the cultural context in which the power relationships between the learner as the “empty basket”, the powerless, and the teacher as the “reservoir” of knowledge, the powerful, are played out. This is the cultural context in which the identities of those who want to become teachers in Papua New Guinea are constructed prior to becoming students of teaching.

What is salient and, perhaps more profound, is that a teacher is constructed and represented in the cultural context as assuming multiple identities. This multiplicity of identities was a consequence of not only the context of which teaching and learning was played out, but also how power relationships were played out in the society as a whole. Knowledge, (both public and privileged knowledge) production, storage (including possession), protection, management and transmission are important determinants of the power relationship between the teacher and the learner. Teachers’ identities are constructed and represented through this power relationship. This is the cultural context that has shaped indigenous pre-service teachers’ identities prior to teacher education. Thus, indigenous pre-service teachers not only enter teacher education with prior beliefs and images of teaching and learning, but also a multiplicity of identities. This is the phenomenon that has been given no or little consideration in our teacher education programs.

This study also explored how teachers’ identities are culturally constructed through an in depth examination of how these are manifested in indigenous pre-service teachers’ prior beliefs of teaching, learning, a teacher’s roles, students as learners, and knowledge. It was construed from the interview data presented that it was possible to utilize pre-service teachers’ prior beliefs of teaching and learning to make sense of how teachers’ identities are constructed and represented culturally, and how this process influences the construction of pre-service teachers’ identities as teachers to be. This study has clearly demonstrated that prior beliefs of teaching and learning that pre-service teachers bring when they enrolled in their teacher education programs is one powerful way of understanding who pre-service teachers are as potential teachers and their interpretations of the teaching and learning process.

The findings of this study are significant and point to the need for teacher educators to make every attempt at understanding how teachers’ identities, particularly pre-service teachers’ identities, are culturally constructed and represented. As teacher educators, one of our foremost tasks should be that of critically examining how pre-service teachers’ identities are constructed and how these identities provide the conceptual framework in which pre-service teachers make their decisions and make sense of the process of learning-to-teach. We should endeavour to provide pedagogical spaces or sites in our teacher education programs to allow for pre-service teachers’ identities to be

critically deconstructed to enable the implicit assumptions underpinning these identities to be made explicit so that pre-service teachers become cognizant of the limitations and the problematic nature of teacher identities possessed prior to teacher education. This should be an integral part of the process of pre-service teachers becoming as teachers.

Pre-service teachers' identities should not be treated as pathological and targeted separately from all other aspects of learning-to-teach. These should be seen as an opportunity to assist pre-service teachers become better teachers and enabling them to be cognizant of the fact that teacher identities continuously shape and are shaped by teaching and learning contexts, and the power relationships that exist between the teacher and the student.

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