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LOOKING FOR DAISY: CONSTRUCTING TEACHER IDENTITIES

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Qualitative researchers typically report studies that provide new insights into cultural practices to help the reader make connections with his or her own lived experiences who, in turn, might choose to transform particular practices as a result of the report. In terms of ethnographic research, for example, a researcher will attempt to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Even though I have conducted ethnographic research in an underprivileged urban school in the US where almost all students were African American (i.e., the familiar), I am not African American, nor am I female (i.e., the strange). Bhaskar Upadhyay’s (2009) account introduced me to Daisy and her teaching dilemmas, for which I am grateful. I now know that Daisy is an African American female 5th grade science teacher from Texas with six years teaching experience and, because she has an undergraduate biology degree, her colleagues seek her out for advice on science teaching. The account also constructed multiple identities for Daisy. I acknowledge that while some of these could be supported from the data presented, others were (unintentionally) hidden from me. I write this response in search of Daisy’s identities for which the supporting data were missing or contestable. I trust Upadhyay’s rejoinder will assist me in looking for and finding those identities.

Felicia Moore (2008) recently noted, “studies that address African American teachers and their experiences in science education or professional development are limited” (p. 686). So the data set upon which Upadhyay drew is a rare and valuable resource. Ten science lessons were videotaped; Daisy was interviewed on eight
occasions, four of which referred to particular video clips selected to stimulate recall; and
the researcher constructed reflective notes from more than 20 observation sessions
involving Daisy’s within school/classroom transactions. These data were scrutinized
initially through the lens of social identity theory (SIT), which formed the basis of several
claims about negotiating contradictions and identity development. In my response to the
article, I identify those claims and experiences with which I can relate and those claims
about Daisy’s identities that remain hidden from or are peculiar to me.

*Dealing with contradictions: The case of high-stakes testing*

Those of us who work in large organizations deal with contradictions every day. In
Australian Universities, for example, academics are expected to use criterion-referenced
assessment to allocate student grades, but are pressured (actual or perceived) not to award
too many high grades; i.e., to overlay a norm referenced assessment scheme.¹ In schools,
science teachers need to implement curricula based on sound pedagogy and monitor
student progress through authentic and embedded assessment, yet prepare students to
“pass” standardised or high-stakes tests that do not necessarily reflect the emphases of the
curriculum. As recognized by Upadhyay, tensions arise when teachers recognize these
apparent competing demands as contradictions, but do these tensions necessarily lead
teachers “to strategically renegotiate their own identities”?

I appreciate that Daisy felt pressured to conform to school policies even though
she wanted to implement an engaging and relevant curriculum for her students, and there

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¹ I have heard a counter argument that criterion- and norm-referenced assessment are not necessarily
contradictory, yet they are frequently positioned as binary opposites in the formal treatment of the
constructs in assessment texts.
is sufficient evidence to support this part of the claim. I am less sure about the perceived inevitability of the need to “strategically renegotiate” identities and the meaning of “renegotiate” in this context. The dynamics of renegotiating identities (i.e., the how and with whom dimensions) are not detailed in the article. Yet, I suspect this is meant to be some sort of internal dialogue between the multiple identities attributed to Daisy—for which evidence could never be produced. Rather than realizing concretely this metaphorical notion of renegotiation, the article does present a clear case for how Daisy simply dealt with the tensions. Perhaps a closer look at “identities” is warranted.

Identity work is complex (Upadhyay 2009). What makes it even more complex is the use of diverse theoretical perspectives and sub-constructs of identity across studies. In the study of Daisy’s identities, Upadhyay refers to social identity theory (e.g. Gee 2001) and the constructs of social and personal identity as well as discourse and affinity identity, yet also refers to situated identity that is linked to teacher positioning, that Moore (2008) refers to as positional identity. In contrast, Maria Rivera Maulucci (2008) adopts Turner’s (2002) constructs of core self, sub-identities, and role identities—a theoretical perspective with which I am more familiar (e.g., Ritchie, Kidman, & Vaughan 2007). To cut through any theoretical barriers I have in interpreting the veracity of Upadhyay’s claims I need first to consider the data presented in terms of role identities, sub-identities and core self. Briefly, Turner (2002) argued that self operates at three hierarchically structured levels: (1) core self or those trans-situational cognitions and feelings about who a person is; (2) sub-identities or cognitions and feelings about self in the classroom and school; and (3) role identities or cognitions and feelings about self in particular roles within the school or classroom, like providing hands-on inquiry activities
or drill exercises in preparation for high-stakes testing. While we all have needs to confirm all three levels of identity, “by far the most important is the core because this level of self activates the most intense emotions about one-self as a person and about how one should be treated by others” (p. 101).

Upadhyay identifies two apparently contradictory identities for Daisy that I recognize as role identities. The first is a compliant teacher who satisfies school requirements by preparing students for success in the high-stakes test. Even though this is not Daisy’s preferred role identity, it demonstrates coherence with a caring teacher identity at the deeper level of sub-identity; that is, Daisy cares for her students and understands that success or failure in the test has long-term consequences for her students. This justifies Daisy’s position for accepting her non-preferred role identity to help her students succeed on the test. The second role identity also is consistent with a caring teacher sub-identity; namely, a teacher who engages her students in relevant activities likely to afford students opportunities for meaningful learning. While the sub-identity does not change, the role identities change with the situation or Daisy’s purpose for teaching at particular times. Yes, Daisy does experience tension in dealing with the dilemma, but the dilemma is resolved in a process of foregrounding one role identity while she backgrounds the other. These role identities exist simultaneously, but they each occupy a temporal privileged space in-the-moment that is necessary to confirm the sub-identity of caring teacher. If this alternative reading has merit then there is no need to identify other parties with whom to “renegotiate”, and the “inevitability” of such action becomes meaningless because it does not happen. Given there is no evidence of other
parties with whom Daisy renegotiates and the existence of such a transaction, this alternative reading appears plausible to me.

Returning to Upadhyay’s use of SIT, it appears that the constructs of situated identity, social identity and personal identity almost match up with the corresponding constructs of role identity, sub-identity, and core self (cf. Turner 2007). However, this analogy mapping exercise breaks down when Upadhyay also refers to temporary and core identities followed by co-identities—phew! Nevertheless, Upadhyay’s argument that “one can also describe teachers as having a situated identity, such that different aspects of identity are switched on or off in response to context and circumstances”, does make sense to me in terms of the metaphor of foregrounding and backgrounding role identities.

Problems with constructing teacher identities

Upadhyay constructed multiple identities for Daisy who did not co-author the manuscript. Without reading Daisy’s reaction to these constructions (i.e., hearing her voice), the data need to be scrutinised more closely. Notwithstanding alternative readings of the same data, there are two claims made in the manuscript that seem to falter under such scrutiny.

First, while Daisy reported at interview that she was a science teacher for minority students, the claim that she “achieved science teacher for minority student identity” takes it too far. Daisy does assert that she likes “teaching my African American students, Hispanic students, and White students,” possibly confirming her sub-identity of caring teacher, but surely this means that Daisy cared for all her students. Daisy’s students may very well have been financially disadvantaged and she may have been especially motivated to help her African American students (i.e., justifying the label of minority),
but this is different from Upadhyay’s claim. A more defensible claim would be that Daisy finds her work with less privileged students rewarding—perhaps generating positive emotions with confirmation of her caring teacher sub-identity.

Second, Upadhyay asserted that Daisy’s “students showed their awareness of recording certain kinds of observations that would help their teacher to look good when the authorities came to observe the class.” While a student (i.e., Candice) questioned Daisy about whether she needed definitions, for example, data linking this question to the intention of helping Daisy look good were less compelling. Furthermore, extending this particular assertion to a conclusion about teachers in general, especially when the evidence for coherence and stability of identities has not been presented, is a flaw in the argument. In other words, the conclusion that “this type of classroom environment will push teachers to generate new identities that are less coherent and stable” is overstated, especially given insufficient discussion of meanings for coherence and stability with respect to the identities constructed for Daisy.

Notwithstanding mild interference caused by the use of SIT in the interpretation of data presented, Upadhyay’s account successfully helped me construct images of Daisy teaching science, and it gives me a sense of why Daisy teaches the way she does. Without a greater emphasis on Daisy’s voice and reactions to Upadhyay’s constructions of Daisy’s identities, however, my images may indeed be figments of my own imagination. Perhaps the complexities of identity work can be reduced by greater use of thick description and the inclusion of more narrative text from the teacher as co-researcher and co-author.
These perceived limitations should not detract from the strong message that school systems can minimize teacher tensions—and increase staff retention—in their situated or role identities by attempting to make a deliberate attempt to align curricular expectations with assessment regimes. For example, if the curriculum emphasis is to develop scientific literacy (see OECD 2006), then the assessment regime needs to go beyond recall of facts and completion of simple problems. In this respect, the 2006 assessment tasks for science in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) might be used as a model for high-stakes tests administered by various authorities.

References


