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Teacher identity, pedagogy and disciplinarity: Exploring the three strands of practice

Julie Ballantyne, Peter Grootenboer

Abstract

Disciplinarity has long been associated with pedagogy – teachers' approaches differ depending on the discipline being taught and the ages of their students (Martinez, 1994; Shulman, 1987; Shulman & Sparks, 1992). Literature in the area suggests that discipline specialist teachers tend to view themselves firstly as specialists (mathematicians, scientists, musicians), and secondly as teachers, and this translates into particular approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. Additionally, it seems that non-specialists tend to view themselves firstly as teachers (often as specialists of particular aged children), and secondly as experts in the discipline.

'Teacher Identity' as a construct has been used to represent multiple things, from teacher perceptions of what they do in the classroom, to enacted pedagogies in the classroom, to observed teacher dispositions. Teacher identity has often also been associated with the discipline being taught – for example the 'musical identities' of music teachers and the 'mathematical identities' of mathematics teachers – a quite different idea related to discipline preferences and teacher skills. The idea that disciplinarity, pedagogy and teacher identity are intertwined is certainly not new. What has not been established is *how* these relate, particularly how 'identity' in relation to the discipline might be central the nature of pedagogy employed by teachers. Research that explores issues surrounding professional identity, disciplinarity and pedagogy has the potential to illuminate the influences underlying the professional practices of teachers, and therefore has the potential to provide insights into improving classroom practice – within, and across discipline areas.

The term 'identity' has been variously defined and there is continuing debate about whether an individual has one identity with many aspects, or if they have multiple identities (Grootenboer, Smith and Lowrie, 2006). While finding clarity and theoretical rigour concerning the phenomenon of identity is important, it is not the focus of this paper. Here we take the term as being unproblematic and we do not take a stance on the singularity or plurality of personal identity, although we do acknowledge that this is a simplification of a complex term. We as authors are far more interested in how teachers see and define their own identities, and implications of such identities to their practice.

This paper will address the question: How are teachers' perceptions of their professional identity, their abilities as discipline specialists and their pedagogy interrelated? The analysis will draw on data collected in 2009 and 2010, as part of a larger study that focussed on mathematics and music teachers. The project was conceptualised as a series of related case studies (Stake, 1995) and employed qualitative methods to explore the professional and disciplined-based aspects of the school teachers' identities, and the relationship between these aspects of their identities and their teaching practice.

Fourteen teachers (7 music and 7 mathematics specialists) from Primary and Secondary schools in South-East Queensland were interviewed for this project. There was an equal balance of male and female participants and all were experienced teachers (7 to 35 years experience). Semi-structured interviews were the primary mode of data collection, and all the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Grounded theory analysis techniques were utilised to analyse the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) using the NVivo8 software. The data was initially divided into conceptual units and coded both inductively and deductively (Schwandt, 1997). Once this initial coding was complete, we began to impose some structure upon the data by developing themes and sub-themes. The structured data set was then used to theorise the central topics of the study, while always returning to the empirical data for verification and exemplification.

Findings suggest that when teaching music and mathematics, teachers often enact a pedagogy that unconsciously reflects their identities as somewhere on the continuum from disciplinarian to teacher. It appears that 'excellence' as teachers may be associated with teachers viewing themselves as educators first and foremostly, but who have a positive perception of the discipline area, and who are confident in the related Pedagogical Content Knowledge. Thus teachers' perceptions of the discipline being taught (what the key tenets of the discipline are, what it means to be proficient in the discipline), their perceptions of what constitutes 'good' pedagogy, their perceptions of themselves as teachers and their perceptions of their abilities within the discipline are all interrelated. Initial recommendations for teacher education and professional development include building realistic and accurate understandings and experiences in the discipline, as well as developing pedagogical knowledge and skills that addresses discipline specificity. Reflection on abilities as discipline participators and as teachers is also seen as being crucial to developing a

healthy and productive professional identity.

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