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A Close Read of My Classroom: Teacher Research and Identity Work

Joy Kammerer Myers - James Madison University

Abstract

It is not uncommon for classroom teacher researchers to face multiple obstacles, but for the fifth grade teacher in this study, Donna, her administrators did not support her research efforts because they thought it would take away from preparing students for end of grade tests. The purpose of this study was to explore the ways conducting teacher research shaped Donna's teacher identities and to examine how the context of her school impacted any identity shifts. Data sources included: interviews, observations, and teacher-created artifacts such as annotations of journal articles; her research proposal, paper, and presentation; reflections; and classroom observations. Findings indicate that instead of being discouraged, Donna persisted because she believed that the research she was doing in her classroom helped her see her students and teaching in new ways. In particular, she was able to participate in meaningful, self-selected professional development while at the same time improving her classroom instruction.

When students enter the Teacher as Researcher/Leader (TRL) graduate class, their expectations of what they will learn and do are quite different from mine. They see teacher research as a final hoop they have to jump through before finishing their master's degree. I view the class as an opportunity to promote identity work with the ultimate goal of educators seeing themselves as teacher researchers.

During my many years of work with educators who wear the hats of teacher and researcher, I have seen them face multiple obstacles including lack of time and unfamiliarity with the research process. However, when my student Donna (a pseudonym) shared, "I have tried not to get caught doing research on a day when I know a coach will appear or an observation will occur, and I have tried to not bring a lot of attention to what I'm doing in my classroom," I realized that Donna faced a level of resistance from her school that may not be unique. Instead of being discouraged, Donna, a fifth grade teacher, persisted because she believed that the research she was doing in her classroom helped her see her students and teaching in a new way. Donna also expressed that she felt like she was "changing" as a result of

doing research. The purpose of this study was to explore the ways conducting teacher research shaped Donna's, identities and to examine how the context of her school impacted her identities shifts.

In this article I argue that teacher research can engage teachers in meaningful, self-selected professional development while at the same time improving classroom instruction and fostering positive teacher identities. Teacher education scholars commonly study teachers as a way to understand their identities (Hall, Johnson, Juzwik, Wortham, & Mosley, 2009). Few studies, however, investigate the effect of teacher research on teachers' identities (Goodnough, 2010; Margolin, 2007; Marsh & Vagliardo, 2002; Vetter & Russell, 2011). There is a need to better understand the potential of teacher research to support and impact teachers' identities amid the struggle for standardization within schools. Donna's story highlights the potential of teacher research to assist teachers in closely examining their teaching practices as well as engaging in identity work.

Theoretical Framework

In the past, identity was viewed as something inside of us, fixed and unchanging, a stable entity possessed by an individual (Fairbanks et al., 2010). By extension, a teacher's identity was also seen as something one has, rather than something that develops during one's teaching career. More recently, scholars in the fields of psychology, anthropology, and sociology have challenged these previous notions and defined identity using words like fluid, multiple, and dynamic (Fairbanks et al., 2010; Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, & Cain, 1998). The term "identities" is now often preferred among certain circles because it signals the idea that one person enacts many different identities both across and within a variety of contexts (Moje & Luke, 2009).

This more recent work informs our understanding that teachers have multiple identities which are socially constructed and reconstructed through the negotiation of everyday interactions (Erickson, 2004; Freedman & Appleman, 2008; Moje & Luke, 2009). Thus, scholars view teachers' identities as a construction of values, beliefs, and attitudes from teachers' personal lives as well as understandings from their professional practice. Thus, teachers' identities influence action in classrooms (Merseeth, Sommer, & Dickstein, 2008).

In a review of the research on teacher identity, Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) found that different researchers conceptualized identity differently and that studies on teachers' professional identities could be divided into three categories: 1) focus on identity formation; 2) focus on associated characteristic identification; and 3) focus on representations within teachers' stories. They also determined that authors often do not provide a definition of identity and there is a little attention paid to the context in which teacher identity formation occurs.

As teachers' professional identities develop so may their sense of agency (Alsup, 2006). Identities are not defined by a single event; rather they are shaped over time (Holland & Lave, 2001). This understanding of identities warrants further investigation of educational practices that encourage teachers to engage in identity work. In this particular study, teacher research is the practice in focus.

The Study

Case study methodology (Yin, 2013) was used to build an understanding of how a group of teachers constructed their researcher identities within a yearlong graduate course. The overall study represents a holistic case, while each teacher in the larger study represents an individual

sub-case. Specifically, this article focuses on one of those teachers (Donna) and addresses the following questions: In what ways did conducting teacher research as part of a graduate class shape Donna's identities as a teacher? What role did the context of her school play in her identity construction?

This study began in August 2012 in a graduate course at a university in the southeast United States. At this particular university, students in the Reading master's program are required to take the Teacher as Researcher/Leader (TRL) course. I was one of the instructors, and we met once a week for three hours, during which we discussed the readings, the teachers worked in research groups with other students, and the instructors met with students to discuss their specific research projects. One of the main objectives of the course was to encourage teachers to choose a question that was meaningful to them and provide them with the tools to systematically research that question. A core idea of the course was that one must be a researcher, not just act like one. This happens when one sees oneself and is seen by others as a researcher. In addition, research has shown that "the interplay of internal and external forces in the midst of social interaction allows for the construction of identities" (Danielewicz, 2001, p. 11). With that in mind, the instructors tried to offer many opportunities for the teachers to engage in independent and group reflection related to their teacher researcher identity. I also engaged in teacher research, specifically focused on the identity construction of the in-service teachers, during the yearlong course. I often shared and talked about my data collection and analysis with the class.

Donna, an African American female, was in her fourth year teaching fifth grade in a public elementary school with approximately 245 students during the time of the study. Forty percent of students in the school identified as White, 29% African American, and 25% Latino, 4% multiracial and 2% Asian. Fifty-eight percent of students in the school were eligible for free and reduced lunch. The fifth grade classes at the school were divided by gender, so Donna taught only girls. Donna shared that her school relied heavily on scripted programs, and there always seemed to be other adults in her classroom. Donna found both of these aspects of her school challenging. During the TRL course, her teacher research project focused on vocabulary instruction. Prior to conducting research, she taught vocabulary solely by modeling to students how to use word structure, context clues, and apposition to build meaning of words. This was in part because that was the approach of her school's adopted basal reading program, and Donna did not know other ways to help her students build vocabulary knowledge. At the start of the semester, Donna shared that she felt wary about research and her identity as a researcher because she only had a few years of teaching experience and had never conducted research. This article highlights how Donna's uncertainty about research eventually disappeared over the yearlong course.

Data Collection and Analysis

Multiple sources of data were used in this study including interviews, observations, and teacher-created artifacts. This allowed the convergence of different types of evidence to investigate how teacher research shaped Donna's identities as a teacher and how the context of her school shaped her understanding of inquiry. By interviewing Donna throughout the year, I was able to better understand how she constructed her identities as a researcher and observe how those identities evolved over time. In addition, other artifacts from the two-semester TRL course included: ten annotations of journal articles related to her research topic; rough and final drafts of the research proposal and paper; three reflections about her development as a teacher researcher;

a conference presentation in the form of a PowerPoint; and observations from thirteen class meetings. These data served as artifacts for how Donna constructed and began to enact her identity as a researcher during the course.

The analysis of the data took place over several stages. The transcripts, field notes, and artifacts were examined, read, and reread. Analytic memos (Maxwell, 2013) facilitated insightful thinking and initial patterns, and documented rich descriptions. Initial understandings were revisited throughout the year using open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). As patterns emerged, themes were identified and recorded. Coding was discussed with colleagues in the field of teacher research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All transcripts, field notes, and artifacts collected from Donna were triangulated to verify and confirm interpretations of the data. Member checking (Creswell, 2007) and thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of Donna's experiences helped illuminate how, despite the challenging context of her school, she began to embrace a teacher researcher identity. Donna's story does not imply that all teachers in the graduate class had the same experience. Rather, the point is to highlight one example of a teacher's identity formation process as it relates to teacher research.

Findings

We do not just become someone over night; thus making and living our identities involves action, occurs in real time, and depends on our connections with others (Danielewicz, 2001). The data in Donna's case study revealed two significant themes related to how conducting teacher research shaped her identities as a teaching professional. These themes—which I have called *fighting assumptions* and *utilizing support systems*—also reveal the role her school played in her identity construction. Discussed below, they highlight how conducting teacher research provided Donna an avenue to self-identify as a teacher researcher as well as identify with others teachers in the graduate course who embodied the same identity.

Fighting Assumptions

As a result of conducting teacher research in the graduate class, Donna confronted several internal assumptions of which she was unaware until this project. She did this by becoming critically reflective, which was fostered by engaging in research. Through this process, Donna recognized that her own deficit view of her students was part of her teacher identity. Donna described her initial realization of the assumptions she had about her students in an analytic memo written for the class: *My teacher research project is revealing a few things about the learning needs of my students. For one, I have realized my students have a higher self-efficacy than I thought they did.* Donna never realized that she had a deficit view of her students. This discovery was upsetting to her. It made Donna question who she was as a teacher and how this mindset had taken hold. Donna identified as a teacher who had high expectations for all of her students, yet careful and critical reflection helped her determine that was not actually true.

As she engaged in the research process, first reading journal articles on the topic and eventually writing a literature review, Donna learned new ways to teach vocabulary which made her critically reflective of her previous teaching. Analyzing observations, student interviews, and work samples allowed Donna to see her students in new ways. This forced her to recognize some of the assumptions she was making about students' vocabulary knowledge. For example, since all of the students came from the same neighborhood near the school, Donna assumed they all had similar experiences growing up. In addition, after critically reflecting, Donna realized that she was basing whole group instruction on only a few of the most vocal students in the class.

Prior to conducting research, these assumptions led her to use only the basal textbook for vocabulary instruction which restricted her ability to differentiate. Donna now knows that a “one size fits all approach” does not meet the needs of her students because some were bored and others were getting left behind by the pace of the basal. Donna’s critical reflection allowed her to fight the assumptions she made about students and take action to supplement vocabulary instruction outside of the basal.

Donna shared that she envisioned teaching as a form of service to her community. However, through the process of becoming a teacher researcher, Donna adjusted her inner thinking and assumptions about her role as a teacher because of the external cues from her students. These cues fostered her reflection related to what her students knew and how she could support them. For example, Donna described a time when she played a word game with her class. She asked students to raise their hands if they knew what certain words meant. Donna admitted, “I did not think I would have that many hands up for some of the words.” Donna wrote in a memo, “I assumed due to socioeconomic status, parent backgrounds, poverty, and daily environments that my students would not come to school being word conscious; however, some of these students are.” By engaging in critical reflection as part of teacher research, Donna was able to negotiate between the perceived identity of a teacher whose job it is to “fix” everything and the real identity of a teacher who makes mistakes and assumptions but keeps trying to improve her practice.

Donna openly talked with her students about her research and what she was learning about teaching them vocabulary: “I could not believe how interested they were. They asked lots of questions and it opened up a conversation we may not have had about their learning.” Through this process, dialogue with her students about her research, Donna transitioned from a private teacher researcher identity to a public one. As she made this transition, Donna gained confidence talking about her research with others. She also talked with colleagues about some of her assumptions related to students’ self-efficacy and lack of word consciousness. She confided that these assumptions were impacting her teaching and how she was interacting with her students.

Donna’s experience with teacher research forced her to negotiate the tensions within her identity as a teacher. Specifically, Donna struggled with who she wanted to be as a teacher and who she actually was within the context of her school. This realization about her professional identity spurred Donna to continue to look closely at her teaching practices and take action to change what did not align philosophically with the teacher she was still in the process of becoming.

Utilizing Support Systems

The second theme in the data, utilizing support systems, highlights how the two places Donna spent the most time, the graduate class and her school, impacted her identity as a teaching professional. These support systems are discussed below.

The graduate class. In the interviews, analytic memos, and in her research journal Donna revealed that meeting each week with her research group in the graduate class was essential in Donna recognizing that “researcher” was part of her teacher identity. This was especially important because Donna’s school context did not value teacher research because it led to Donna challenging the way vocabulary had always been taught. Sharing her data with others in her research group was particularly influential. For Donna, this had the effect of “opening my eyes to new findings or reaffirming what I was already thinking.” Each week the

teachers had about thirty minutes to work in their groups during class. The process of sharing her research with others in the group allowed Donna to discover and reflect on her identity as a teacher. This included noting the similarities and differences between her teaching context and her peers' schools in different counties. Donna also compared and contrasted her emerging researcher identity with others' in the graduate class. She wrote in her research journal, "Talking to my research group reminded me that I am a work in progress and that I should not know all of the answers about research or the best way to teach vocabulary." The conversations in the TRL course, along with Donna's reflections on those conversations, furthered her identity work as a professional in a positive way because she received the affirmation that she needed to face the challenges that would await her at her school the next day.

Being reminded each week in the graduate class that she is a professional who is capable of making the complex decisions that teaching demands, became more important as the context of Donna's school, its scripted programs, and constant observations seemed to wear on her. Donna felt that her identity as a teacher was being questioned at her school; later, her identity was affirmed during the graduate class. This vicious cycle repeated each week. Donna said she felt exhausted but at the same time she felt hopeful; something she admitted she was not prior to engaging in teacher research.

Donna's school. At Donna's school, teachers were closely supervised by the principal, assistant principal, and the district-level instructional coaches for reading, math and science, none of whom were thrilled with the idea of her conducting research during instructional time. It was clear that the school had an assortment of ready-made identity positions and a clear vision of the role of a teacher at the school. Teacher research was not a supported identity in part because Donna's principal was unfamiliar with it. This created an additional challenge in Donna's context by adding to her uncertainty of her role as a teacher researcher. Although Donna incorporated research into her teaching practices, she admitted, "I am not able to do research every day in my classroom; however, I am working on consistency. Juggling research with being a teacher in a tested grade at a low performing school is difficult." There was a small number of staff at her school, and Donna's administration made it clear that teachers should not stand out. The oppressive nature of her school played a role in the research process and Donna's ability to identify as a researcher. Donna was scared to talk too much about her research with her colleagues because she feared that her principal would think that she was not teaching enough. Donna felt that she and her students were growing as a result of her research due to the close focus on a particular area of her teaching; however, according to Donna, they all still had to play the "school system game."

Throughout her year of research, Donna recognized how support systems, or lack of them, shaped her teacher identities. In order to identify as a researcher, she needed others to reinforce and validate this way of being. Prior to conducting research, Donna identified as an educator who could teach any student in any school. However, the context of her school caused Donna to have to negotiate her perception of this identity. Donna also began to realize that the context of her school was not providing the type of support that she needed to continue to grow as a professional. Each week, Donna's research group gave her the strength to navigate an unsupportive school environment by providing support systems outside of her school building. The external validation and support Donna gained from her research group strengthened her identity as a teaching professional.

Discussion

While some tout the benefits of teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005) and others highlight the connection between teacher research and identity work (Goodnough, 2010; Marsh & Vagliardo, 2002; Vetter & Russell, 2011), we must not forget to listen to teachers' voices as they share the ways that classroom research impacts their practices and how they see themselves as professionals. We must also keep in mind the ways that classroom and/or school context influences teachers' identities. Someone who desires to expand his or her professional identity to include researcher needs to be acknowledged. Colleagues and administrators can reinforce or hinder this identity construction, either making it more real for the individual or less plausible.

Donna felt that she had to hide her research, yet despite this obstacle and the obvious tensions associated with it, engaging in research positively impacted Donna's identities as a teacher and as a learner. When asked about what she learned from conducting teacher research in her classroom, Donna shared, "I used to teach in isolation for vocabulary strategies but through my research I am learning that good readers and those with good vocabularies just don't know those strategies; they have knowledge of words." This realization did not come from the literacy methods class where Donna learned about vocabulary instruction. It came as a result of conducting teacher research in her classroom. Donna's teacher research informed her understanding about the content, it influenced how she taught it, and through that process she learned about her students.

As evidenced in this study, teacher research can foster identity work and positively impact teachers' sense of self and their understanding of their classroom practices. For Donna, enacting a researcher identity allowed her to address assumptions as well as recognize the value of outside support systems. However, this took time. Perhaps conceptualizing teachers' identities as "thickening" or becoming more consistent across a series of events (Holland & Lave, 2001) is one way to build teachers' sense of professionalism. Recognizing herself as a researcher, someone who can generate her own knowledge, gave Donna confidence to negotiate the many tensions she felt at her school. This study contributes to the conversation started by Alsup (2006) and others whose work examines teachers' professional identities and the factors that influence them. More research is needed using the broad sociocultural theory of identities presented (for example, Holland et al., 1998) and the specific nuances of teacher identities and teacher education to further understand if teachers are capable of seeing their identities as educators in broader ways and if teacher research is one way to foster this work.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges uncovered in this study, teacher research remains a hopeful endeavor. It holds great potential for engaging teachers in meaningful, self-selected professional development, improving classroom instruction, and fostering positive teacher identities. This study shows that the work of teachers is affected by the particulars of their context. By taking a closer look at their teaching, educators have opportunities to reposition themselves and to speak back to dominant discourse related to deficit mindsets and the standardization of teaching. As Harre and Gillett (1994) point out, "To act with freedom, the discursive possibilities that are potentially available to an individual must be affirmed, owned and use in some practice" (p. 27). Teacher research allows educators professional development opportunities that can directly address issues of identity and positioning in ways that still allows them to impact positive change

in their classrooms, such as Donna did, or even their schools. Further research may explore how obstacles and opportunities for teacher research and identity work vary from district to district and state to state. It is important to continue to explore ways to support teacher researchers so they can be successful advocates for change within their schools. As Donna shared, “I am a teacher and a researcher. I have and will continue to make a difference where I can.”

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