HAS06354

Interrogating the reflexive subject in/of teacher education

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There are no safe spaces, no alibis, for researchers anymore. We face ever-present and unavoidable choices about our commitments to the people with whom we work, choices that have implications for all manner of ethnographic practice.

- Dimitriadis, 2001, p. 595

In this paper we address the question “What is the subject of teacher education research?” by looking at our collaborative research exploration facilitated by our joint involvement in a “community of scholars”, called Subjectivities in Teacher Education (SITE). At the heart of the research endeavour is a doctoral research project but what we are examining in this paper is how the doctoral candidate [Wendy], in the first instance, and her work with critical friend [Will] in the second instance, made sense of the researcher’s lived experience and the changing terrain of her non-unitary subjectivity. To that end, we explore just who the researcher thinks she is as she engages in a research project about the experiences of school-based teacher educators supporting preservice teachers on practicum placements in teacher education programs. Using research journal entries, field notes and interviews with the teacher educator/researcher [Wendy], we draw out the ways that reflexivity and intersubjectivity in the research process make a difference to both the research and especially to the researcher.

Acknowledging and paying attention to reflexivity is not new and writing reflexively into and about research has a rich history. Lily Orland-Barak (2002) chose to embed her personal reflections into the main narrative section of her writing to highlight “biological nature of the reflexive process” of writing (p. 270). She became aware of, “how mutually engaging and intersubjective the process of fieldwork is, and how her own subjectivity shaped the research as she listened to women’s stories” (2002, p. 270). Similarly, Yvonna Lincoln (1997) notes that the life of the researcher is influenced by the research – but this appears to be in relation to the responses and respondents, not so much about the potential for researcher learning through the methodology. However Di Bloomfield (2006) does recognise the interrelatedness of method and analysis and the transformative potential of that relationship. Citing Dorothy Smith, Bloomfield (2006) was able to describe the ‘power of the discursive practices of the academy and sociological research … which served to conceal her standpoint as a researcher’. Smith advocates a need to self-consciously critique and potentially rework the analysis in order to go beyond a partial reading of the situation under investigation. Carolyn Ellis (1997) questions the common convention that insists that the genre of academic writing should “hide” all introspective data – you should not give voice to what one feels throughout the research process. She posits that there’s something valuable in provoking readers to see themselves in the work

The subjected researcher- Wendy’s tales

The notion of “becoming” as proposed by cultural studies practitioners has been a useful starting point for our thinking about subjectivity. It offers an alternative to the essentialist discourses of “being” and ideas of identity as fixed, and emphasises identity as productive, fluid, dynamic yet also historically and socially located - the process of “becoming” obviously does not happen in a material or cultural vacuum.

(McLeod & Yates 2006 p. 78)

I still don’t have a very good understanding of it, but I am getting better and I know I know more than 12 months ago when I got invited to join this group…But it is still a sense of not quite understanding what I am actually trying to do (Interview, p. 3)

As a researcher pursuing her doctoral degree, there are certain expectations you have of yourself, as well as the felt and experienced expectations of the academy. There is an expectation that the degree will be achieved by persistent hard work. You enter with a successful Masters Honours degree that has been well–
received in the field (of teacher education). You believe, and are told by others, that you can and should do doctorate. There are the new members of the academy that do not question that assertion, while older colleagues seem to have ‘survived’ without it.

You embark on a journey of further research assured by the knowledge that it is the right thing to do, even if you are a late starter, as you will make a contribution to the field as well as your university to finally be formally recognised as “clever”. You have a sound knowledge of the field, having read what is available to you in the literature at that time, in that space, in that way of knowing. You are theoretically sensitive to the field but, in fact discover theoretical sensitivity is a form of blindness (Orland-Barak, 2002). The familiar is not made unfamiliar through the literature as you read what you think you should. You are initially unsure how to react to the unfamiliar when it you do see it. You are also aware that research in teacher education is thought to lack rigour (Nuttall et al., 2006), so you are sensitive to that positioning. The task on which you embarked is becoming longer and even more demanding that you originally anticipated. Evoking a distinction to Adrienne Rich’s notions of ‘receiving’ versus ‘claiming’ an education, Wendy notes,

[p]eople think it is difficult to ‘get’ a PhD but it is not an easy thing to ‘do’ a PhD. I don’t think people problematise or recognise the difficulties of ‘doing’ the PhD, [and] that’s different to me,’ to get it’ is different to ‘doing it’ (Interview, p. 13).

It is not just a matter of doing it – it is about doing it properly. Behar puts it eloquently when she says ‘[D]on’t sacrifice the journey for the sake of the arrival’ (1996 p. 161).

The “ah ha” moments in research may be uplifting and when the work receives positive feedback, you typically take that as a mark of progress. Sometimes a step forward but other times it is a step in retreat. There were numerous occasions taken collectively that signify the journey of research, and some more notable than others. The five moments outlined below are all interconnected and show clearly the peaks and troughs of the research process and non-unitary nature of the related subject positions.

The first ‘critical incident’ we’ll describe here was the invitation to join a group of researchers, whom I [Wendy] positioned as knowledgeable and who would potentially open new ways of thinking and knowing to me. My journal entry at the time notes that,

I will only get accepted to this group if I can demonstrate some degree of legitimacy (Dysthe, Samara & Westrheim, 2006). I need to read as much of this literature to develop the level of understanding to allow me to make the most of this opportunity.

I certainly recognised that I needed to “get involved in the activities of [that] academic community to engage with the technologies of everyday practice in order to get to know what counts as knowledge and how to think, argue write and speak within this culture” (ibid p. 302). This group offered the opportunity to talk within a practice rather than talking about practice from outside – talking as a key to legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger 1991).

The second event was a presentation of my research to my university colleagues where I outlined my project and explained my intentions of writing reflexively - incorporating the story of the original and revised methodological pathways, based on my new understandings of the teacher education process. The response from colleagues was mixed but those whose opinions I most highly valued were positive and supportive. A moment of affirmation- an acceptance by members of the academy.

The third is associated with subjecting your research to the gaze of the academy when you attend conferences, feeling naked by the absence of Dr in front of your name, even when your papers receive acclaim for their originality of topic. Teacher educators are increasingly being called upon to add to the universities research profile by gaining DEST points through publication – adding to the Faculty quantum. Teacher educators are asserting their theoretical capabilities in the academy. Accordingly, I intended to submit a paper for publication. I offered my emerging knowledge (emerging as I struggle to make sense of the new methodological approach) for critique and find that it is not really ‘ready’ for the public gaze of the academy - it is returned by my supervisor in a blaze of glorious ‘suggestions’ that, at the time, I find totally demoralising.

The fourth critical moment - I had been tossing around the idea of writing two accounts of the research process – one from a position that I labelled as “naïve” and one following my introduction to discourse analysis and post-structural methodologies. I thought it interesting to make public through the thesis my subjectified experiences. To write so personally about the reflexive process - to appear in the writing was
unfamiliar to me – I thought I had “discovered” a new possibility through my work, my thinking. A reading by Gregson & Rose (2000) legitimised the path I wanted to follow – one that I previously thought as whimsical (and partially dismissed). They write,

I want to point out that doing this research has undoubtedly changed me….So, the academic performance has produced, affected, a change in this subject and my social identity as constituted through consumption (2000, p. 447).

You could replace the notion of ‘consumption’ with the word research to see why this article resonated with me so.

But with legitimation and further reading came the discovery that this approach is not new at all! What this told me, again, was that I was not fully aware of the literature in that methodological field. I wasn’t really working rigorously. My original narrative study was, by my reckoning ‘naïve’ and now I discover that what I thought was innovative was not quite so.

But what is new work or an original idea? And does it matter new to whom? If a person in isolation makes a “discovery” or has what they feel to be a conceptual “breakthrough”, does it make it any less of a discovery because somebody else, unbeknownst to you, thought of it first?

However, what is exciting about Gregson & Rose (2000) work is that the academy has legitimised the work of others, so gives me permission to continue to work with this approach. Teacher as researcher, seeking permission of the academy.

Working with a colleague to tease out the issues of subjectivities in teacher education was made possible through the community of practice. Typically much of the research conducted in teacher education is isolated and non-collaborative (Nuttall et al., 2006). The discussions and readings Will chose added a new dimension to my understanding of the research process as we simultaneously explored my non-unitary subjectivity. The works of Collins (2004), Harding (1995), hooks (2004), Munro (1998) and others helped me make sense of not only the standpoint I took in the research process – attempting to make explicit to the participants and readers my place in the process – but also to make sense of how I felt marginalised as a researcher in teacher education. The fifth “ah ha” moment occurred when I was able to also see the school-based teacher educators in my study are marginalised - typically positionned as outsiders in the teacher education discourse. Whenever I subject myself to the gaze, I ultimately objectify myself - ironic really, when I am attempting not to objectify the participants in my research (Behar 1996). When I am able to see myself as an outsider, I can more clearly see how teachers might see themselves as outsiders in the teacher education process. Is this an example of “doubleness” to which Luke (2004) refers?

Goodall (2000) urges us to attend to the story of the researcher that emerges. However, what is less obvious in the literature is the notion of the learning “academically” that occurs during the research process ultimately must mean the research process changes. Nuemann (1996) asserts that the autobiographical impulse “gazes inward for a story of self but ultimately retrieves a vantage point for interpreting culture (p. 173). Clearly such a reflexive endeavour is not about just an evaluation and saying it would be done differently next time. There can be no next time in the PhD process. So much rides on the success of the endeavour that it has to be right the first time. By succumbing to this process I am, as the researcher, then producing the discourse of the academy and simultaneously being subjected to the discourse. To me it is imperative that I name these experiences in order to claim the subjectivity, the possibility of historical agency that is given to the dominant group (Harding 1995, p.128).

Revisiting my original comment about “becoming” - it is often perceived as a positive experience with little attention to losses, discomfort, or negative emotions. Clearly, my becoming a member of the academy has been at times, and will continue to be emotionally and professional painful. In my research I attend to the emotional costs for teachers engaged in teacher education, while here I simultaneously explore the emotions associated with the research process - another example of doubleness (Luke 2004)

**Subjectivities and standpoints**

In light of some chunks of “data” from Wendy, we now want to explore some of the theoretical and conceptual tools that we have used in our thinking about subjectivities in teacher education. As mentioned above, the first useful construct is that of *subjectivity*. Moore writes,

Subjectivity is both an entity and a project, an achievement and a set of potentialities and imagined relation to self and others and an embodied one. Subjectivity is itself a linking
term, a borderland product the result of individual intention and agency in contact with social, economic and political discourses, practices and institutions (2001, p. 264).

McLeod & Yates note, “subjectivity is malleable, unstable, never completely sutured, yet it has elements of continuity and is constituted in and responsive to historical and local conditions and patterns of social differentiation” (2006, p. 79). Acknowledging how attention to subjectivity includes but exceeds attention to discourse they continue,

Discourses make available subject positions, provide resources for self making, regulate \normative ideals, incite certain ways of being, and can also structure the techniques available for fashioning the self. But subjectivity is embodies and emotional – desires, dreams and ambivalence – and accumulating life histories shape our subject positions are negotiated and subjectively fashioned (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 87).

The feminist poststructuralist lens that frames our work allows us to focus on non-unitary subjectivity (Bloom, 1998; Munro, 1998). Petra Munro writes about the benefits gained by viewing the subject as non-unitary, noting that such a conceptualisation, “allows me to see multiple centres of power confronting multiple centres of resistance” (1998, p. 35). And Liz Ellsworth illustrates why an attention to subjectivities in teach education is important when she writes,

People in marginalized social and cultural groups……are demanding the right to self-representation in schools and universities – the right to be full participants in constructing official school knowledge about their experiences, histories, needs, ways of knowing the world, social positions, and senses of selves. They are demanding their individual and collective self-representations be visible, respected, and considered legitimate forms of knowledge and topics of study (1994, p. 100).

Yvonna Lincoln reminds us the central place that intersubjectivity plays in our work. She writes, “[m]ultiple stories feed into any text; but equally important, multiple selves feed into the writing or performance of the text, and multiple audiences find themselves connecting with the stories which are told” (1997, p. 38). This is useful when we think about the intersubjective in terms of one’s multiple, non-unitary subjectivities, as well as in terms of the more commonly imagined intersubjectivity between individuals, such as Wendy and Will.

In addition to the growing literature on subjectivities, this work was shaped by and engagement with feminist standpoint theories, whereby “standpoint refers to a position in society that is affected by and in turn helped shape ways of knowing, structures of power, and divisions of labour - feminist standpoint theorists have posited feminism as this sort of position, a way of conceptualising reality from the vantage point of women's lives” (Hennessey, 1995, p. 139). Sandra Harding writes that, “standpoint approaches used the experiences of the marginalised to generate critical questions about the lives of marginalised people and of those in the dominant groups, as well as about the systematic structural and symbolic relations between them” (1995, p. 128). Linda Alcoff writes, “where an individual speaks from affects both the meaning and truth of what she says and thus she cannot assume an ability to transcend her location (1995, p. 98). One's social location can authorise or de-authorise what is being said and how readily it is accepted, so that "the study of and the advocacy for the oppressed must be done principally by the oppressed themselves and that we must finally acknowledge that systematic divergences in social location between speakers and those spoken for will have a significant effect on the content of what is said" (1995, p. 98). Standpoint theories acknowledge that,

There is no neutral place to stand free and clear in which my words do not prescriptively affect or mediate the experience of others. A complete retreat from speech is of course not neutral since it allows the continued dominance of current discourses and acts by omission to reinforce their dominance (Alcoff, 1995, p. 108).

Standpoint theories, as Harding explains, offer windows into subjectivities that are neither unitary nor coherent.

The subject/agent of feminist (or other subjugated) knowledge is multiple and frequently contradictory in a second way that mirrors the situation for women as a class. It is the thinker whose consciousness is bifurcated(Smith), the outsider within(Collins), the marginal person now also located at the centre(hooks), the person who is committed to two agendas that are themselves at least partially in conflict….who has generated feminist sciences and new knowledge. It is thinking from a contradictory social position that generates feminist knowledge. So the logic of the directive to "start thought from women's lives" requires that we start our thought from multiple lives that in many ways conflict with each other and have multiple and contradictory commitments (1995, p.125).

In this work we have examined a doubleness of standpoints - one of seeming privilege [university-based researcher] that is simultaneously marginalised [novice researcher, post-graduate student, working in a new
Reflexivity and the doubleness of practice

Moving beyond simply locating the researcher within the research, our analysis examines the mutual constitution of the researcher and the research, and foregrounds the ways re-constitution occurs during the course of the research. Reflexivity compels us to ask, “Who am I in relation to this research?” Reflexivity also affords a space where, “the researcher asserts both that what she knows cannot be separated from who she is and that her warrants for making knowledge claims are subjectively situated and historically contextual” (Bloom, 1998, p. 148).

We focus on the complex and contradictory ways that Wendy took up and refused identities made available to her throughout the course of the research. By weaving between and juxtaposing those two lines of inquiry – about the research process and about the researcher - we frame issues of reflexivity, intersubjectivity, and ways of representing non-unitary subjectivities.

The re-constitution of the researcher through the research allows us to upend the seeming fixedness of the researcher/researched dichotomy, for

These oppositional relationships are intrinsically unstable. Since such dualities rarely represent different but equal relationships, the inherently unstable relationship is resolved by subordinating one half of each pair to the other. … Dichotomous oppositional differences invariably imply relationships of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical relationships that mesh with political economies of domination and subordination (Collins, 2004, p. 110)

Re-constitution occurs via the research, and via our collaborative relationship as the researcher takes up and refuses identities made available to her in, through, and sometimes in spite of the research.

Instead, a focus on the issues of re-constitution of the researcher foregrounds the mutual constitution of the doer and the endeavour – and uncovers the “outsider within” (Collins, 2004) status both revealed and created by the research. As Collins notes, “outsiders within become different people and the difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be more difficult for established insiders to see” (2004, p. 122). So we embrace notions of ‘becoming’ as product and process through the research rather than merely ‘being,’ (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 77) in order to locate becoming through the series of ‘ah ha’ events we’re mapping here.

This re-constitution also foregrounds issues of simultaneity – answering Kathleen Weiler’s critique of critical theories because they,

- do not address the specificity of people’s lives, they do not directly analyse the contradictions between conflicting oppressed groups or the ways in which a single individual can experience oppression in one sphere while being privileged or oppressive in another (1991, 450).

In this analysis we are attending to the ways in which this process of research is rendering Wendy at once as empowered and disempowered, knower and ignorant, initiator of the gaze and recipient of the gaze. We see this simultaneity when we ask questions such as What is the researcher doing to the research, what is she doing to herself? What is the research doing to itself, what is the research doing to the researcher?

Answering such questions partly entails interrogating the complicity of the researcher in regimes of hegemonic practices, acting as a colonizer in Villenas’ (2000) frame, but also exposing the ways that the research [process] can serve to colonize the researcher. We are also drawn to Trinh T. Minh-ha’s (1991) notion of “narrat[ing] a displacement” in which “women….relentlessly shuttle between the center (patriarchal norms) and the margins (their own understandings)” to make sense of what occurs in these instances of simultaneity. As Wendy articulated above, along this journey there have been many instances of simultaneously being a knower and a novice, someone clever and someone just learning. But we also understand marginality in the ways that bell hooks describes them – “I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as a site of resistance - a location of radical openness and possibility” (2004, p. 159).
Access to instances of simultaneity helps us to see more clearly the issues of *doubleness* that recur in this work as well. We mentioned this earlier in relation to Luke’s work (2004). Doubleness has been a recurring theme in our work together. We have examined the doubleness of the emotional journey of the school-based teacher educators (Wendy’s research) and Wendy herself. There’s a doubleness of the outsider within – both Wendy and the school-based teacher educators were positioned in this manner, taking up this standpoint.

**Methodologies for researching subjectivities in teacher education**

> What might it mean or look like to foment unintelligibility in a research project that requires, and in fact is bounded by and predicated upon, intelligibility, upon “making sense”? What does it mean for us and our work to have, “a tool that can be used to dismantle the discursive structures that seek to falsely stabilise individuals” (Bloom, 1998, p. 135)?

We conclude this paper by using our work together in this project to suggest some possible ways for conceptualising and deploying methodologies for researching subjectivities in teacher education. First, we signal the utility of a move from the “lone researcher” master narrative, which is a bit of a rugged individualist tale, to a *multi-faceted reflexive partnership* - which in this case consisted of a RHD supervisor, a focussed reading group, and our research partnership. One thing this fostered was better theorised connections between the act of reflecting upon the research and research process and mobilising that reflection into praxis. Our collaborative negotiation of meanings and interrogation of/from multiple perspectives offered up the eyes, ears, mind and heart of (an)other in this research endeavour. Doing this work – which could be viewed as ancillary or even a distraction to the doctoral project at hand - in collaboration may reveal issues not previously obvious to us. We are not suggesting that individuals are unable to critically reflect on their practice, but we caution about romanticising what can be achieved through solo reflection in advocating for multiple standpoints in the research process. As Orland-Barak writes,

> The process of reflecting on the various selves that came to the fore throughout the research was a ‘back and forth’ experience of talking to myself, whereby I moved from engaging in inner conversations with myself to enhancing understandings by inviting other voices into my inner conversations (2002, p. 276).

Further, Lather’s acknowledgement that, “There is so much in my performance as a researcher that I cannot reach, much that eludes the logic of the self-present subject” (1993, 685) reinforced the need to work dialogically with others to enhance and extend one’s critical self-reflection.

We also want to advocate for how productive it is to track the “ah ha” moments that pepper one’s practice, and to analyse their significance in relation to both the practice and the sense one makes about the practice. These moments provide touchstones for learning that in turn changes the research, and they deviate from more macro-level markers that are often invoked to signal such changes – such as move from high school drop-out to re-engaging as a student to doctoral student to researching academic. Instead, we focus on a more micro-level, attempting to chart the moment to moment oscillations that signify the simultaneity that is often indicative of subjectivities in motion.

In our research relationship we have endeavoured to interrogate who we are and examine from what position do we speak? However, it is not appropriate to merely elaborate upon your location in relation to the research situation as an excuse for poor interpretation. This can result in the need for the less well-informed listener to attempt to make sense of it themselves - making the tasks more difficult (Alcoff, 1995). And we acknowledge the work of Behar, which cautions,

> No one objects to autobiography, as such, as a genre in its own right. What bothers critics is the insertion of personal stories into what we have been taught to think of as the analysis of impersonal social facts....Efforts at self-revelation flop not because the personal voice has been used, but because it has been poorly used, leaving unscrutinized the connection, intellectual and emotional, between the observer and the observed (1996, pp. 12-14).

Instead, we have attempted to move the analysis of these *personal* critical incidents out from “behind the desk” (Hill, 2006) in order to draw out how they are lived and how the foster a repetition of reconstitution as Wendy travels along her research journey to contemplate how we can capitalise upon it as a “site of radical possibility” (hooks, 2004, p. 156).

**Bibliography**


