

Researching dance teachers' professional identity in Taiwan

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Abstract

A teacher's professional identity is simply an image of the professional self in his or her professional work. Previous personal experience allows for a significant influence on the formation of one's professional identity. This paper discusses an ongoing doctoral study examining the development of teachers' professional identity in Taiwan. A brief history of the Taiwanese context is presented, followed by a discussion of the methodological approach that draws upon in-depth personal life stories. Nine school teachers, who initially trained to be professional dancers, were interviewed, and their experiences in dance learning, teacher education, and teaching practice were gathered and analyzed to construct an understanding of teachers' conceptualizations of their professional identity.

Keywords: teacher, professional identity, life story

This paper is based on an ongoing doctoral study that researches Taiwanese teachers' professional identity. The nine participant teachers initially trained to be professional dancers. Their professional identity is a multi-dimensional issue in which both personal and professional experiences are inter-woven, influencing a comprehensive concept of self. A teacher's professional self is conceptualized within his or her working place, usually a school. In order to construct an understanding of teachers' professional identity in the Taiwanese context, the background of this study will be presented first, followed by the discussion of the theoretical framework and the methodological stance for the research.

Background of the research

Research into teachers' professional identity has received significant attention in educational research. This is a complex subject in the Taiwanese context because most teachers who teach dance in the curriculum have a professional dance training background. The study described here aims to provide an understanding of how teachers conceptualize their professional identity through research into their lives and work. It seeks to present the voices of teachers, encourage changes in teacher training and teaching practice, and prompt discussion of policy guiding both. Dance education in Taiwanese schools has two forms: dance training as preparation for future professional training, and dance as part of the regular curriculum. The former is based on *The Special Education Art* (President's Office, 1984, 2006), which established the Gifted and Talented Program for Dance. This runs from Grade 3 in primary school to the end of secondary education. In higher education, arts universities, physical education colleges and other universities provide graduate and postgraduate courses in dance studies. Typically, dance in higher education in Taiwan is focused largely on training for a career as a professional dancer.

Before the introduction of the current Grade 1-9 Curriculum in 2001, dance for mainstream students was taught as part of Physical Education along with around 20 other physical activities

(Lin & Lu, 2008, p. 191). In the curriculum guidelines, dance is included with drama as a Performing Arts subject. This curriculum reform not only changed the situation of dance in general education for these students, but increased the need for teachers and inspired dance undergraduates to consider pursuing a teaching career. Soon after the curricular guidelines were introduced, the number of dance undergraduates undertaking teacher training courses indeed increased.

To become qualified teachers, new graduates must undertake a teacher training course, do school teaching practice, and pass a national examination. In the initial period of the new curriculum, teachers who were already in schools only needed to take extra subject-specialist courses to be allowed to teach the subject.

In Taiwanese culture, teaching is regarded as a stable profession. The fact that dance teachers were initially trained to become dance performers causes Chang (2008, pp. 24-25) to question teachers' motivation in undertaking teacher training. She further observes that the contents and pedagogy taught in the dance community are different from those they would be required to teach in school. In the professional dance system, students are trained in certain dance forms, with learning experiences centered on physical training. As a result, conflicts may arise when teaching non-dance specialist students.

Typically, during teacher training, student teachers begin to understand the circumstances of teachers' work in schools. They learn about school administration systems and become aware of the requirements of a performing arts teacher. There is an argument that dance specialists might encounter challenges when they are in schools because of the differences in approach from the dance community, which has a great impact on the concept of professional identity.

Professional identity

From a psychological perspective, identity can be categorized into two types: ego identity and cultural identity. Erikson (1968) sees ego identity as personal identity and cultural identity as social identity. He states that identity formation is an interaction between people in a social context. Furthermore, sociology emphasizes that identity exists within a community (Wenger, 1998). "Who am I?" is the question people ask when they inquire about their own identity, which leads to an investigation of the relationship among people.

In educational research, there is general agreement that previous experiences, significant people, and role models influence the conceptualization of identity (Goodson, 1991; Knowles, 1992; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005). Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004, p. 122) state that identity is shaped and conceptualized by the "interpretation and re-interpretation of experience." Their view not only emphasizes the importance of personal life experiences in conceptualizing identity, but also highlights the significance of self-negotiation, which occurs when people make sense of what happens in daily life. Goodson (1991) holds a similar view, saying that "life experiences and background are obviously key ingredients of the person that we are, of our sense of self" (p. 144).

Identity, a concept of self, is shaped when people enter a new community. Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004, p. 122) indicate that when teachers tell their stories, they "engage in a period of

“theorizing” and “discover and shape their professional identity” according to those stories. It is suggested that the stories teachers live by and those they tell others shape an understanding of “who I am,” and follow continual life experiences. Identity is unfixed. How we think about ourselves, how we see and understand ourselves is shaped and/or conceptualized with our ongoing experiences in different communities.

Goodson (1991, p. 138) claims that knowing what issues are important to teachers is a way to understand their conceptualization of their identity. He explains that “life experiences and background are obviously key ingredients of the person that we are, of our sense of self” (p. 144). This suggests that researching teachers’ lives and work, and the contexts they are in, would demonstrate the influences of teachers’ prior experiences on their conceptualization of identity.

We are unique individuals, assimilating whatever happens around us with our own experiences. Since teaching is an individual activity (Nias, 1989, p. 13), each teacher has his or her own means of dealing with what occurs in classrooms. The actions they decide to take sometimes come from their own experiences, and thus are influenced by what has occurred in their lives.

After reviewing the studies by Nias (1989), Goodson (1991), Knowles (1992) and Huberman (1998), I wondered whether an understanding of the person who teaches, what they teach, and how they teach, could be revealed by investigating teachers’ lives. Knowles (1992, p. 99) suggests that teachers’ lives influence the ways they teach. He particularly points out that teachers’ lives, which include experiences in pre-service and as newly qualified teachers, influence the ways they teach and “their actions in the classroom.”

Goodson and Cole (1994), in a two-year observational study of the development and socialization of community college teachers, identified a period of transition in which teachers constructed their own concept of their professional self as teachers. They found that teachers’ previous experiences and the concept of self have a great impact in conceptualizing a new professional identity. In the case of artists teaching in schools, Adams (2007, p. 268) points out that when changing a role (e.g. when dance students become schoolteachers), they encounter difficulty in the shift of the image of the self. This is because there are gaps between teachers’ expectations of teaching in schools and the actual practice of teaching. For example, the different pedagogical approaches that are used in dance training and in the curriculum would cause considerable challenge for teachers who initially trained to be dancers. As Been and Walters (2001) observe with reference to ballet training, the body culture is rooted in the training; this means that dance students’ attitude and behavior have been influenced by the culture of the professional dance community.

Tensions appear when teachers with professional dance training experiences move to schools. Influences from the culture of dance training and that of dance teaching in the professional dance community are parts of teachers’ selves. In addition, how dance teachers conceptualize their professional self depends on the groups in the professional community to which they refer.

Based on the above, professional identity in this research is regarded as a notion whereby teachers consider “Who am I?” in school, their place of work. This research essentially examines the influences of personal and professional experiences on teachers’ conceptualization of the

professional self. The teachers in my research were trained initially as professional dancers, but are now teaching the Performing Arts subject in schools. When previous experiences are recalled in the new professional community, an awareness of the differences is needed. It may be stating the obvious that teacher training has to be about preparation for teaching in schools.

Methodology

In the effort to construct a better understanding of the teachers' experiences and the nature of what influences their teaching practice, I adopted a research method that explores in-depth, personal experiences. A biographical approach was used in understanding and constructing nine teachers' life stories and the contexts in which they lived. According to Roberts (2002, p. 20), using this approach can help construct an understanding of the storyteller as they recall their life stories and make sense of their actions within the personal and social context (Cortazzi, 1993, p.14). Roberts, after Miller's (2000, p.10-14) proposition, further points out that the use of a narrative approach constructs the "fact" of reality in "an exploration of the ongoing construction of an individual's unique standpoint" by the storyteller, whilst they are telling their life stories. Therefore, this research is grounded in Miller's claim that using the approach provides a means for the storytellers to present their personal voices (p.9).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 54) suggest that the narrative approach requires, first of all, moving "backward and forwards" in the time line, and "inwards and outward" between the personal and social spaces, and then locating the stories in the contextual place. In other words, experiences from different periods of individual lives tend to be interwoven with the social movements (Plummer, 2001; Roberts, 2002). The purpose of using a narrative approach in this research is to examine teachers' lives and work from a contextual perspective. The personal and social aspects of a storyteller's personal experiences, any changes in their life time, historical events, and social changes, are important elements that should be examined in order to understand "the individual's unique life history" (Miller, 2000, p. 9).

Life history is a person's life story in the historical context (Goodson, 1992; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). This idea is echoed by Roberts' (2002, p. 34) point about 'the interrelationship between individual and society in the use of a biographical approach. Each storyteller's personal perception of any particular situation or event is important. Using narrative in this research locates the teachers' life stories in the social and cultural context to "make contextual meaning" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 20). In revealing teachers' life experiences within different communities, each participating teacher's comprehensive personal and contextual information enables the construction of a life history within its own context (ibid., p. 3).

Data collection

Based on the traditional qualitative stance, questionnaires, interviews, and creative methods were used as stimuli to help the teachers recall memories. An open-ended questionnaire was used to collect essential personal factual information. The structure of the questionnaire resulted from the ideas of key "stages and critical periods" of their life history (Miller, 2000; Knowles, 1992). This data provided preliminary information, which allowed me to gain basic knowledge of the teachers before the interviews, and every interview was modified accordingly. In addition, use of the questionnaire helped teachers to recall and reflect on their previous experiences before the interviews. In this way, it was hoped that the teachers started "to see their life as a whole, to see

life subjectively across time as it all fits together, or as it seems discontinuous, or both” before the interviews (Atkinson, 1998, p. 5).

The interviews aimed to collect in-depth, personal accounts of prior learning and teaching experience. Three interviews were conducted with each participating teacher. The first was an unfocused interview” (Miller, 2000, p. 105), with the teachers telling their life stories in any order. According to each teacher’s questionnaire, I structured an individual list for questions of each teacher. The second interview was focused on follow-up questions seeking to fill gaps in the information which the teacher gave in the first interview. The third interview, which was semi-structured, was aimed at the participants’ experiences as teachers. Here, I looked for not only their current teaching experiences, but also their previous teaching experiences in school, dance studios, or any other educational setting.

Besides interviews, written documents, photographs, film, and video diaries are often used for collecting personal data (Plummer, 2001). Visual images, such as painting and collage, have also been used when performing a narrative approach in field work (Reissman, 2008). Veale (2005, p. 254) states that creative approaches in research serve as “constructivist tools” to help participants give meaning to their experiences from different perspectives.

Taking up this idea in this research, a creative activity using drawing was developed to gather in-depth, personal information. The teachers were asked to visualize events and periods in their lives and draw “personal maps” in any form they wished, sketching an overview of those events and periods in their life in their own way (Veale, 2005, pp. 258-9). The idea was further inspired by the figures of “mapping a life” in Plummer (2001, pp. 124-7). The teachers could also give further description or explanation of the drawing as they wished. The activity took place after the two life story interviews so that the teachers were better able to visualize events and times.

Conclusion

The research is ongoing. Now located in the new Arts and Humanities learning area, dance in Taiwan’s schools for mainstream students is being given increased emphasis. As such, the training of teachers and how they conceptualize their professional identity is increasingly important. Looking ahead, I will give further attention to three areas. First, I will focus on the personal conflicts that arise during the conceptualization of professional identity, including the relationship between teachers’ personal concepts of the professional self and teaching practices. Second, I will consider teachers’ interactions in the community. Finally, I will look at the circumstances of, and the need for, professional development that may arise from teachers’ stories.

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