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Using identity as a tool for investigation: a methodological option in the researcher's toolbox

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Using ‘identity’ as a tool for investigating people: Another methodological option in the researcher’s toolbox.

Abstract

Building on Gee’s call to use ‘identity’ as an analytic lens for research in education (Gee, 2000), this paper further advocates the use of the construct of ‘identity’ as an alternative research tool when analysing people. The case discussed here employed ‘identity’ to scrutinize teachers in contexts of ongoing educational change. Researchers are already aware that people are difficult to understand, impossible to quantify and awkwardly inconsistent to research. There are difficulties if not limitations in viewing participants from a particular perspective and so, out of a desire to maintain a holistic ‘picture’ of the participants that respected each aspect of their selves, this researcher employed a carefully constructed notion of *identity* to showcase the effects of change on the whole person. The paper outlines *identity* as it is evidenced in literature and used in the research, giving details about the journey towards a more precise vision of *identity* for the purposes of one research project. It then highlights the benefits and options for utilising this as a research tool for other studies which investigate what happens *to*, *with* and *for* people in given contexts. The paper concludes with a call for further discussion, application of and academic conversation about the use of *identity* as a tool for research.

Introduction

The processes of researching people—their understandings, knowledge, values, experiences, world views, perceptions and so on—becomes complex when one identifies the variety of aspects or layers of each of these dimensions. Humans, as complex assemblages of characteristics, are difficult to quantify, impossible to know and forever changing. This post-modern understanding about humanity serves to complicate the research process when one seeks to arrive at understandings about people. In an attempt to facilitate a point of entry into researching people, it was important to investigate and read widely to locate a construct, notion or handle that would provide a mechanism whereby deeper understandings about the participants, in this instance, teachers, could be provided. It was the construct of *identity* that provided this tool. Many similar notions and constructs—

selfhood, self, personality, personal traits or characteristics, and persona to name a few—were considered and discarded along the way. Some remained acceptable, but it was the notion of ‘identity’ that provided the lens through which to analyse participants to arrive at a finer-grained vision of their world and what was happening in it. When seeking to understand what happens *with, for* and *to* people in given contexts, *identity* provided an ideal tool towards a deeper understanding and appreciation of the effects on the whole person.

It needs to be noted that *identity* in the sense of psychological deficit, something to be mended to remedied, was not considered to be useful in obtaining an understanding about the whole person; nor was the strongly sociological and psychological senses of ‘self’ in relation to the social construction of reality, the sociology of thought and emotions, the ‘self’ and inequality and interaction in social contexts investigated in great detail (Branaman, 2001). These related and appealing areas were judged to be interesting, but incidental to the focus of the investigation’s aims.

The next section gives an overview of the research project. This is followed by in-depth discussion about the definition and construction of the notion of *identity* as it was used in the research.

Research Summary

The qualitative research project from which this paper is drawn employed a critical case study approach to examine the effects of change on teachers. It used the concept of *identity* to investigate the deeper personal and professional implications of change on teachers. Open-ended interviews with eight early childhood teachers provided the data, which are analysed using a three-tiered approach.

The first level of analysis utilised a narrative approach, storying the interviews. This summarised the information and provided background understandings about each of the teachers. The second level of analysis interrogated the data using a grounded theory approach and arrived at three themes of *change, power* and *identity*, with their

accompanying categories and sub-categories. Expanding on this analysis, the third level of analysis employed a discourse analytic approach using Gee's (1999) framework of 18 analytical questions, in conjunction with the research questions, to develop further understandings from the teachers' perceptions of their identities in contexts of change.

The key findings related to the interconnected issues of teacher professionalism, the actions of the education system towards teachers, and the relationship between teachers' identity and change. The study evidenced the ways in which the actions of the educational system shape the value that teachers assign to themselves and their working lives and corroded teachers' sense of value to their employer. In contexts of ongoing educational change, these teachers experienced some degree of personal and professional uncertainty and instability. This put the teachers at risk of eroding the residual goodwill that existed between teachers and the education system. Marked disparities in how issues of professionalism were understood also placed teachers in a position of uncertainty and conflict and created the need for self-protective behaviours on their part. In turn, this provided the conditions whereby teachers' commitment to teaching tasks was diminished and has direct implications for teacher effectiveness and student learning.

The next section outlines the literature that was considered and utilised in cementing an understanding about what was to be meant by the use of the term *identity* for this particular study. It is followed by a brief discussion on the benefits of using *identity* as a lens for studying people and a call for further ongoing academic conversations about the benefits and potential pitfalls in the use of *identity* as a tool for research.

The Construct of *identity*

At the outset of the initial investigation a search of the academic writing databases

(ProQuest, ERIC, EdNA and A+Education) revealed an array of topics related to *identity*.

These included: racial identity, ethnic, cultural, national, gender, athletic, and criminal identity; identity conflicts, formation, development, achievements, diffusion, disorder; and feminist identity, the self, identity construction, social identity, situational identity,

personality development, personal ideologies and personal philosophies. This listing gives an indication of the range of thinking, research, writing and definitions that have developed around this topic.

Dictionary definitions of *identity* highlighted some of the variations in its meaning. For example, an online dictionary (Dictionary-Online, 2005) lists four meanings for identity:

1. The collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a thing is definitively recognizable or known
2. The set of behavioural or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group
3. The quality or condition of being the same as something else
4. The distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity; individuality (Dictionary-Online, 2005).

For the purposes of this study, *identity* was considered as a compilation of these elements. That is, it acknowledged the “collective aspect of the set of characteristics,” the “set of behavioural or personal characteristics” and the “distinct personality of an individual.” In this sense, the preferred definition of *identity*, for this study, was determined to be: “The collective aspect of the set of behavioural and personal characteristics which identify a person as a distinct individual”. This is discussed in greater detail below.

The plethora of meanings across academic divisions serves to further complicate the wider dialogues when the term is used without specific definition. This study viewed these related topics as just that—related topics. Individually they did not give an impression of the nature of one’s identity—the person that each individual is. They each relate to an aspect or element of the whole picture of *identity*. For example, the study of identity formation looks at the ways in which individuals construct, form and maintain their individual identity; gender identity investigates the aspect of identity which relate to the ways in which sexual identity is considered—by individuals and by others. This study sought to step back from these views of *identity* to arrive at a broader perspective that takes into account an array of kinds of identity and sees identity as the amalgamation of these dimensions and elements.

There are, then, a myriad of conceptions about *identity*. However, because identity has varying connotations and definitions in its use across the domains of academic literature this has created certain difficulties when discussing it. Therefore, although highlighting some of the key elements of these definitions and understandings about *identity*, this paper does not seek to come to a finite conclusion about what identity is, or to delineate categorically the nature of *identity*. It seeks to delineate a shared understanding about how this particular study conceived of *identity*, for the purposes of this investigation. Using this as the basis, the discussion investigates the implications for participant –in this case, teachers and their identity, in contexts of ongoing educational change. A brief historical account of the *identity* in the literature is set out in the following paragraphs.

Identity in the Literature

Much of the early writing on the topic of *identity* emerged from the modernist perspective that viewed identity as a fixed and knowable entity that we each possessed. It has been viewed from sociological (Goffman, 1959; Lortie, 1975; Walker, 1976), psychological (Ball, 1972; Lilienfeld, Kirsch, Sarbin, & Lynn, 1999), anthropological (Kondo, 1990; Mayer, 2003) and philosophical (Gergen, 2000; Taylor, 1989) perspectives. Identity has also been investigated for the purposes of understanding how people have developed or maintained personal identities. These purposes included: various identity and personality disorders (the psychological perspective); how identity was manifest or evident for studies of groups, cultures or ethnic populations (the anthropological perspective); and from a philosophical perspective, how or in what ways the ‘self’, ‘I’ and ‘me’ are constructed, maintained and developed (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). Since the 1980s and across academic disciplines the conceptualisation of identity has moved away from the modernist view of a fixed, knowable and clear construct towards a postmodern and more recently a poststructuralist view of identity (Coffey, 1999).

‘Contested’ and ‘slippery’ are two terms that well describe the notion of *identity* when it is viewed through a postmodern lens. The postmodern view asserts that knowledge and truths cannot be adequately known or revealed; that all are open to contestation and changing and are therefore difficult, if not impossible, to define or essentialise (Coffey,

1999; Lather, 1992). Therefore each person's identity cannot be 'known' and the 'truth' about it cannot be defined because its susceptibility to change and reformation presumes that, even as it is defined and quantified, it has again been changed by the language, social interactions and experience of living (Danielewicz, 2001). Thus, *identity* as a postmodern notion is not able to be finitely defined. The understanding of *identity* in this paper is, broadly speaking, a postmodern one. The postmodern and more particularly the poststructuralist views of *identity* are complicated further by the understanding that modes of language—spoken or written—provide inadequate mechanisms for capturing a sense of identity. As Tierney asserts, "we must accept that conflict and competing interpretations of situations are inevitable" (Tierney, 1993, p. 128). The language and discourses used to define *identity* are open to interpretation based on the writer/speaker and listener/reader's individual life experiences, as are the understandings taken from any dialogue about the topic (Gee, 1999).

Having acknowledged this difficulty with the notion of *identity* though, it would be impossible to have any kind of meaningful conversation about the construct of *identity* if no shared understanding of what is meant by the term is formalised. It is acknowledged that, from the postmodern perspective, any understanding cannot be deemed to be final, finite or in any way fixed, nor can a concrete definition of *identity* be determined. This research though sought to allow for different and sometimes conflicting views and voices to be heard through the eight participants in this study—to expand rather than reduce these shared understandings (Danielewicz, 2001). It sought to highlight the elements and features of *identity* that had relevance for the study at hand, and indicated the ways that they were relevant to the research investigation.

Three Types of (Teacher) Identity in the Literature

This study though was focussed on teachers and so *identity* in the areas of educational literature was scoured for more information. On reflection, it appeared that the most contemporary education literature on *identity* falls into three main categories. These were:

- the literature about *teacher* identity that relates to *teacher professionalism*, and the identity of people in their role as teachers,

- the literature that approaches identity from a *narrative, storied and/or biographical perspective*, and
- the literature about identity in the contexts of *teachers' lives and work*.

The first of these categories contained two terms that were, at times, used synonymously in the literature—those of ‘teacher identity’ and ‘teacher professionalism’. *Teacher identity* literature looks at how teachers take up their professional identity, usually over time, as teachers assimilate into the culture and discourse of teaching, and how this identity is maintained and developed throughout their careers. There are also links to the study of teachers’ lives, their career paths, life styles or life cycles and how these relate to their ‘identity’. Authors who discuss these views of *teacher identity* include Ball and Goodson (1985), Britzman (1991, 1997), Coldron and Smith (1999), Connelly and Clandinin (1999), Danielewicz (2001), Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe (1994), Mishler (1999) and Nias (1989). However, in these writings, identity is rarely foregrounded as instrumental in determining teachers’ understandings, knowledge, beliefs, values and feelings about them and/or their work lives. The focus remains on how teachers acquire, maintain and develop their *teacher identity*, over the course of their teaching lives. Teacher ‘professionalism’, another term referred to in the literature, is often linked to *identity* through the inference that teacher professionalism is based on a set of professional standards that may “shape the professional identity of teachers” (Sachs, 2001, p. 149).

The second category into which much of the writing about identity falls is that of the ‘life history’, narrative, ‘stories to live by’ and biographical attitudes. This includes authors such as Mishler (1999), Clandinin & Connelly (2000), Goodson (1997), Goodson and Walker (1991) and MacLure (1993). These authors assert the need for the study of *identity*—which is variously conceived—and consider that the methods of narrative and storying, using critical incidents, biography, autobiography and life history accounts are the most appropriate for analysis and investigation. There are others who recognise the value in these types of research methods but this review concentrates on those who also make the links between these narrative methods and *identity* (Ben-Peretz, 1995; Tierney, 1993). When reading literature that uses the biographical, narrative and/or storied methods this researcher was left wondering whether in some instances the method had become the

raison d'être for the research. In some literature it appeared that the method was at risk of usurping the researched topics themselves.

The third of these categories into which the literature on identity falls is that of *teachers' work lives*. In reality it is the other way around. Discussion about *identity* can be found in the literature on teachers' work lives, with authors acknowledging the importance of teachers' identities in their teaching practices, experiences and reactions (Ball & Goodson, 1985; Britzman, 1997; Campbell, 1996; Churchill, 1995; Churchill, Williamson, & Grady, 1997; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Coldron & Smith, 1999; Danielewicz, 2001; Juhasz, 1990; Latham, 1998; Menter, Muschamp, Nicholls, Ozga, & Pollard, 1997). However, the problem for this researcher has been the secondary nature of the acknowledgement of identity's role in teachers' work lives. In most of the literature, *identity* is simply one aspect of the study, whereas, for this study it has been considered to be central to the research. In many studies there are elements, hints and glimpses of *identity* to be found in the writings about teachers' work lives. These may acknowledge the individuality and identity of teachers but it frequently becomes one of many details within the study rather than the core issue in the study of teachers' work lives (Elbaz, 1983; Fullan, 1997; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Goodson, 1991; Hargreaves, 1998a; Huberman, 1989; Lortie, 1975; MacLure, 1993; Nias, 1989; Palmer, 1997, 1998; Poppleton, 2000; Sachs, 2001).

This next section reports on some of the complexities of the use of *identity* in the processes of research. It outlines some of the perspectives that are evident in the literature about aspects of *identity* and moves towards a working definition of *identity*.

Other variations in perspective

Also evident in the literature are concerns with the multidimensionality and plurality of identity. Implicit in much of the writing (Ball & Goodson, 1985; Danielewicz, 2001; Gee, 2000; Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1994; Kondo, 1990) about identity is the conception of identity as plural—that 'identity' is actually *identities*. In much of the writings about *identity/ies* it/they are linked to the variety of roles which we each assume in our lives. It could be considered that the multiple identities that we each possess contribute to our

sense of self. All of these roles carry with them aspects, responsibilities, duties, values, beliefs, emotions, actions and reactions that constitute our uniquely individual identity (Gee, 1996, 2000). What is presumed is that we each possess a myriad of characteristics which converge to make the resources from which our moment-by-moment display of identity occurs. Hence, the use of the singular term *identity* was preferred in this study, as it indicates a sense of wholeness rather than the fragmentation that is sometimes evident in research and writing.

The issue of the difference between one's roles and one's identity remains in contention in the literature. While there are numerous authors who discuss roles in relation to identity in a generic sense (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Gee, 2000; Goodson, 1992; Hargreaves, 1997; Woods, Jeffrey, Troman, & Boyle, 1997), no research could be found that discussed with any clarity the specific links between what teachers *are* (that is, their *identity* as teachers) and what they *do* (that is, their role of a teacher). While this is discussed by Nias (1989) and Britzman (1991), it remains as an assumption in their research and writing, without clarification or reference to any implications for teachers. Gee's work comes close to addressing the issue of the connection between *identity* and *roles*, in that he acknowledges the idea of *dimensions of identity* in discourses that are linked to roles. He calls for the use of these *dimensions of identity* in discourse "as a lens" for understanding and researching schools and education, rather than teachers themselves, for the ways in which people are recognised as "being a certain kind of person" (Gee, 2000, p. 100), by others external to that person (rather than by the person themselves), and with a view to determining which of these *identities* operates when, why and how (rather than seeing a relationship between identity and change). This provides another opportunity and perspective for the employment of *identity* in research.

The holistic¹, all-encompassing nature of the teacher is also mentioned in the literature. The use of the term 'holistic' refers to the philosophical theory that "wholes" are "more than the mere sum of the parts" (Delbridge, Bernard, Blair, Peters, & Butler, 1991, p. 841).

¹ The use of the word 'holistic' makes reference to the philosophical theory that 'wholes' are "more than the mere sum of the parts" (Delbridge et al., 1991, p. 841).

For this research, each teacher, when viewed through the lens of their identity, was considered as a “whole” being, more than the sum of the parts. While *identity* is considered to have components to it, the wholeness of each person’s identity was assured. This ‘wholeness’ of the person of the teacher—in the amalgamation of personal elements—is alluded to in the following quote from Hargreaves and Fullan (1992), and referred to in more detail below:

Teachers teach in the way that they do not just because of the skills they have or have not learned. The ways that they teach are also grounded in their backgrounds, their biographies, in the kinds of teachers they have become. Their careers, their hopes and dreams, their opportunities and aspirations, or the frustration of these things—are also important for teachers’ commitment, enthusiasm and morale. So too are their relationships with their colleagues (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992, p. ix).

While Hargreaves and Fullan refer to teachers’ work lives with a view to discussion on teacher development, rather than a statement about teacher identity, it is an acknowledgement that there is a ‘wholeness’ about teachers—they are not just their practice, their career or their history. They are the totality of numerous elements which, in combination, make them who they are. Hargreaves and Fullan refer to skills, background, biography, career, hopes and dreams, opportunities and aspirations, frustrations, commitment, enthusiasm, morale and relationships with colleagues. Goodson reflected this when he said that studying teachers’ life and work could “develop insights which locate the teacher’s life with the deeply structured and embedded environments of schooling” (Goodson, 1997). PAGE # This holistic aspect implies the unity of many parts of teacher’s lives, some of which are mentioned by Hargreaves and Fullan in the above quote, to form the whole-ness of what is referred to in this study as *identity*. While it is important for research purposes to investigate the ‘parts’ of the ‘whole’ much of the research literature leaves teachers as fragmented beings, failing to reconnect the parts, and in doing so to acknowledge that the whole is indeed more than the sum of the parts.

This idea of the ‘person-ness’ of the teacher, is reflected in Goodson’s (1981) statement about the teacher when he claims that:

In understanding something so intensely personal as teaching it is critical we know about the person the teacher is. Our paucity of knowledge in this area is a manifest indictment of the range of our sociological imagination (Goodson, 1981, p. 69).

While Goodson’s discussion is about the value and importance of life history study

(Goodson, 1997), he assigns value to the “person the teachers is” and decries the lack of research in this area. He also says:

Life experience and background are obviously key ingredients of the person we are, of our sense of self. To the degree that we invest our ‘self’ in our teaching, experience and background therefore shape our practice (Goodson, 1997, p. 146).

Here we can see the acknowledgement that the teacher’s self, as the amalgamation of elements, is heavily invested in the tasks of teaching, a point that was also acknowledged by Nias (1989). This adds to the complexities and depth of the issue of the self/identity of the teacher. Goodson also refers to the ways in which teachers “experience and background” have a shaping effect on teachers’ practice. In this research the focus was on the ways in which teachers’ experience of change impacts on them, through the filtering lens of their identity, and that the “experience and background” are key ingredients in the sense of self, the identity. Goodson (1997) went on to discuss the importance of studying such issues as teachers’ lifestyle (in and out of school), life cycle, career stages, career decisions and critical incidents, seeing them as influential in understanding the person of the teacher. He reflected the need to situate and locate the ‘selves’ of teachers within the broad contexts of their work lives. This situating and locating of *identity* in the contexts of work life was both acknowledged and reflected throughout this research.

The definition of *identity* for this research

The following quote by Palmer (1998) is one that was significant in determining the nature of the term *identity* as it was employed in this study. While this quotation was influential in terms of a definition of identity for this study, it is not promoted as comprehensive or definitive. It was, though, a starting point.

By identity I mean an evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute my life converge in the mystery of self: my genetic makeup, the nature of the man and woman who gave me life, the culture in which I was raised, people who have sustained me and people who have done me harm, the good and ill I have done to others, and to myself, the experience of love and suffering—and much, much more. In the midst of that complex field, identity is a moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make me who I am, converging in the irreducible mystery of being human (Palmer, 1998, p. 13).

There are several characteristics of this statement by Palmer that are drawn upon in this discussion.

Firstly, it is worth noting Palmer's use of the word *evolving*. While a modernist view of identity may have considered identity as fixed, permanent and clearly definable, the postmodern view indicates that identity is "under construction" (Danielewicz, 2001) and is continually forming and reforming. This is the stance taken in this study. This kind of *evolving identity* has been evidenced in research into teachers' work and lives and the process of formation and maintenance of a teaching identity as teachers progress through their careers (Britzman, 1991; Danielewicz, 2001; Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1994; Nias, 1989).

Secondly, identity, as it was conceived for the purposes of this study, is not fixed or unified but, as Danielewicz (2001) indicates, is a "conditional, restless, unstable, ever-changing state of being" that "can never be completed" (p. 3). It is constructed from the contexts, experiences, social interactions and relationships that are brought together in each teacher's life. Identity is 'contextual' in that it is dependent on the contexts and situations of teachers' lives; it is 'restless' in that it is developing and evolving; it is 'unstable' in that it is both dependent on and created through interactions with others in the teacher's world, and thus is ever-changing and never-completed. It is indeed, as Palmer indicated, "*a moving intersection.*"

Thirdly, Palmer observes that "*all the forces that constitute my life converge.*" This foregrounds the perspective that each person's identity is the drawing together of all the interconnected aspects of a person's life. These are noted by Palmer (1998, p. 13, see above quote) as the 'inner and outer elements' of family and 'genetic makeup'; 'culture', including ethnic and religious experiences; morals and values; relationships; and the emotions that accompany social existence. This is by no means a comprehensive list of the 'forces' and elements that constitute one's identity. There are others, and no list of them could be exhaustive or definitive. Palmer also indicates that identity is determined from the deeper, more personal responses to experiences and by choices that have wrought harm or ill to oneself and to others (Palmer, 1998). This perceives of *identity* as the convergence of "all the forces that constitute my life" (Palmer, 1997, p. 13), even more elements than Goodson's (1997, p. 146) "key ingredients" or "life experiences and background".

Palmer also emphasises the implication of the importance of the relational and social aspects of identity. The relationships that form and determine each person's identity include the family, friends and working colleagues with whom one is in contact (Palmer, 1997). It also encompasses, in this postmodern era, virtual people: that is, people we may 'meet' on the internet, in emails, as characters in films or in books who, in some way, influence our lives. Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe (1994, p. 47) state that identity is "the result of a process of social construction that goes on throughout the life cycle." We see ourselves in relation to others. We know ourselves and are known, and this occurs in a socially constructed world (Danielewicz, 2001). But the experience of each person's life is dependent on the nature of the contexts, culture and levels in which each of us exist (Cooper & Olson, 1996). The relational aspect of our identity and the ongoing nature of this social construction of our identity are closely linked to each other. There is a myriad of variables that determine how these social and external experiences are internalised for us and assist in the creation, reformation and maintenance of our identity (Cooper & Olson, 1996; Danielewicz, 2001).

Gee (1999), in defining the ways in which understanding is created from language, acknowledged this socio-cultural aspect, highlighting the "personal, social and cultural knowledge, feelings, values, identities and relationships relevant in the interaction" (p. 83). This linking together of *identity with personal, social and cultural knowledge, feelings and values* is reflected in the understanding about identity that this researcher has utilised in this study. Identity is seen as a combination of elements or characteristics that include knowledge, feelings, values and beliefs.

The socially situated nature of identity is reflected in much of the literature. This implies that one's identity exists in relation to other people (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Danielewicz, 2001; Gee, 1999, 2000; Nias, 1989, 1998). We not only see ourselves in relation to others—like, unlike, with or against—but the interaction with others continues to form, transform and challenge our identity. As we exist in groups of humans, interact and converse with others, our identity is created, formed, challenged and reformed in the process of living. This inter-relational and developmental nature of identity links to the way

that it forms, allowing identity to be continually challenged and re-formed as one reacts with life's experiences (Palmer, 1997).

The understanding that accommodation of the beliefs and individuality of teachers in the process of change and the introduction of innovations is evident when Bell (1994), in his discussion about teachers' work, noted: "Any attempt to understand teachers' work must therefore begin by recognising that teachers are not cardboard cut-outs. Behind what they do lie values and beliefs which are a product of past and contemporary events" (p. 52). This is the basis for the awareness of both the individuality and the importance of teacher identity in the study of teachers in contexts of change.

There are elements of our lives that are inherently interconnected. These elements are interpreted by others and by ourselves as each person's *identity*. The elements include genetic disposition and makeup, personality, physical characteristics, family experiences, religious encounters, gender preferences, educational background, ethnicity and culture. In tandem with these are our understandings, knowledge, beliefs, values and feelings (Gee, 2000). Each of the 'parts', for example one's religious belief system, may be similar if not the same as another person's. However, the convergence of the 'parts', when considered as a whole, are what is perceived by self and others as constituting identity. In bringing together these component 'parts', at any particular situated socio-cultural moment, *identity* is perceived to be unique in that we each have different but similar genetic dispositions and makeup, personality, physical characteristics, family experiences, religious encounters, gender preferences, educational background, culture and ethnicity, roles, understandings, knowledge, beliefs, values and feelings.

Identity, as it was conceived of for this study, was therefore the socio-culturally situated, momentary perception of a person that includes the following components and descriptors as drawn from the above literature. The position was taken that *identity* is framed as the following:

- Identity is comprised of one's genetic disposition and makeup, including personality and physical characteristics; family experiences, religious encounters; gender; educational background; ethnicity and culture. One's identity can be considered as

the convergence of each person's roles, knowledge, beliefs, values, feelings, and understandings.

- identity is socially, culturally and relationally constructed and maintained, with language and dialogue playing a major part in its construction, maintenance and development
- identity is created and recreated through experiences and is continually being reformed, challenged, transformed or stabilised on a moment-by-moment basis. It is understood that identity is ever changing and flexible
- it is holistic in that it represents the amalgamation of the 'parts' of our lives and
- each person's identity is unique in that it may have similar attributes and much commonality with others' identities, but it is never identical to another person's identity.

This represents the amalgam of forces (Palmer, 1997), elements, features and characteristics that combine to create what is meant by the use of the term *identity* in this study. This conception of identity is supported by the literature in that all these characteristics of identity are evidenced across the literature. What is important for this research was the existence of an all-encompassing, holistic and discretely unique *identity* that incorporated the combination of elements.

The next section of this paper outlines the benefits and options in using identity as a research tool to investigate what happens *to*, *with* and *for* participants.

Benefits and options for using 'identity' this tool

This paper asserts that there are distinct benefits in selecting this construct of identity as a research tool when investigating what happens *to*, *with* and *for* people in given contexts.

Three benefits are noted here and are as follows:

1. The use of identity as a research tool retains the uniqueness of participants, allowing for a range of understandings, positions and stances in the research findings
2. The use of identity as a research tool provides a mechanism for deepening understandings about the effects of situations, events or specific contexts on participants

3. The use of identity as a research tool provides a safeguard against reducing participants to a single aggregated voice and thus denying their individual contribution or perspective about the event or specific context.

These three points will be discussed in sequence.

1. The use of identity as a research tool retains the uniqueness of participants, allowing for a range of understandings, positions and stances in the research findings.

Research reports about the effects on participants of particular situations, events and contexts are often concerned at the ways in which the individual *identity* of each of the participants has been blended with those of the others. The potential for each participants unique opinion and contribution to the research evaporates as individual accounts are merged and aggregated to 'strengthen' to form a mass of data, a in unison voice. While it is acknowledged that there is research 'strength' in numbers and unity gives power, the benefit of qualitative, post-structural research permits and encourages the individual voices to be heard and heard loudly. This notion of utilising individual identity provides an avenue through which this distinctiveness of the participants and their unique and inimitable voice can be heard. The variety of voices though was able to provide research 'strength' through the scope of understandings, positions and stances that were evident in the research findings. Multiple voices gave manifold positions, stances and a range of understandings about the participants and the phenomenon or event in the investigation. This worked well for this research and demonstrates the value of its employment in allied qualitative research projects that seeks to hear the voices of individual participants and understand the effects of contexts upon them.

The second claim in support of the use of the notion of identity as a tool for research is that:

2. The use of identity as a research tool provides a mechanism for deepening understandings about the effects of situations, events or specific contexts on participants

This deeper understanding was sought in the research. The focus was on breadth and depth of appreciation of how the contexts of change impacted on these teachers. While the study started with a narrower focus—literacy change for early childhood teachers—the participants broadened the focus to encompass many more areas of change that had

impacted on them. With this flexibility of permitting a broader focus, depth of data was achieved. The teachers talked frankly and honestly about the ways in which they felt a range of changes in their teaching lives had impacted on them. From there, data analysis, using an three levels of analysis and Gee's analytical framework of questions (Gee, 1999) provided the basis of understandings about what was happening with, for and to these teachers in the contexts of change. The variety of stances and positions that were permitted through the use of the notion of identity led directly to deeper understandings. This was what had been sought.

The third of the claims about the benefits of using identity as a tool for research is that:

3. The use of identity as a research tool provides a safeguard against reducing participants to a single aggregated voice and thus denying their individual contribution or perspective about the event or specific context.

As a post-structural, qualitative researcher seeking to maintain the integrity of the individual participants, reduction to a single aggregate voice was of concern in this study. The acceptance of individual voices, and the provision of a conduit for their voices to be heard was important. The research was positioned against the backdrop of a strong obligation to 'hear' these teachers' 'voices', and amplify them to the wider educational community, not to reduce them to a single aggregate message. Methodologically the use of *identity* can provide a holistic view of each participant, maintaining their individual 'story', perspective and opinion. It minimises the diminishing effect of aggregating the participants into one group—where their individual voice is clouded by the voices of others. It permits different and sometimes conflicting opinions and seeks to deepen and broaden rather than condense understandings.

It must be noted though, that this 'tool' for research is not a viable option for all research projects and would provide challenges, for example, in dealing with large numbers of participants. However, if the aims of the research are aligned with those outlined above, this paper asserts it provides another tool for the researcher in their methodological toolkit.

Conclusion

Drawing from elements and characteristics of *identity* as overviewed in the literature, an understanding about what is meant by the use of the term *identity* in this study has been arrived at. It is conceptualised as being holistic and individually unique, comprised of a convergence of all the elements of life experiences, physical characteristics, personality, roles and background, genetic makeup, ethnicity and culture. It includes a person's understandings, knowledge, beliefs, feelings and values. This study acknowledged that identity is socially and relationally constructed, unique to each person and comprises an array of elements that continually form and reform as each person lives their life.

Having outlined the ways in which the notion of *identity* has been defined for the purposes of this research project and listed three of the benefits of utilising it as a research tool, one key purpose of this paper is to encourage further investigation about, and research using, the construct of *identity*. Further academic conversations on the topic area invited and the call goes out to researchers to consider the use of *identity* as a tool for researching what happens *to*, *with* and *for* people in given contexts and the effects of situations, contexts and events on people. As researchers well understand, people are complex. This tool provides another option to deepen our knowledge and appreciation about the vast complexities with which researchers struggle when investigating humans in specific circumstances.

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