

## Theoretical Framework on Teachers' Lives and Identities: Teachers' Stories about Environmental Education

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to describe reflective process of developing theoretical framework on teachers' lives and identities, and provide some theoretical developments in relation to organising concepts and methodological concerns about identity, discourse and narrative as reflections and deliberations on the research inquiry led. It also engages in critical debates on theoretical and conceptual categories and assumptions that underpin research inquiry on teacher's lives and personal and professional identities by re-examining two developed analytic angles and methods. In doing these, it uses current doctoral research project on Korean teachers' stories about environmental education as illustrative of the work based upon such a framework.

**Key words:** teachers' lives, identity, story, discourse, environmental education

### Introduction

Research development in teachers' lives has been provided rich resources for theorising teacher's work within social and historical context, illuminating teacher's personal life and identities and their interactions with professional life as a teacher (Carter & Doyle, 1996; Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996). Teachers' life historical, autobiographical narratives and stories tell their own conceptions, perceptions, and experiences about what education should mean and what teacher responsibility is to achieve such a goal. Furthermore, teacher's personal theories of pedagogy and teaching provide various discourses that can contest dominant, unquestioned educational ideology and discourse.

My research interest in teachers' lives began in the early stage of my doctoral study. The research aimed to analyse and interpret the ways Korean teachers make sense of their environment-related pedagogical activities. In a contrast to more globalised educational discourses around environmental concerns such as 'environmental education (EE)' and 'education for sustainable development (ESD)' that tend to promote impositional and normative interpretations for practice, through, for example, state-mandated school curriculum development projects, the research concern was to investigate teacher's own experiences and stories of motivations, commitments, and the sense of professionalism. Also, the research concerned with theoretical understandings on the gaps between the prevailing rhetoric that education must be charged with a prominent role in consciousness-raising and stimulating action, and the actualities of school education where these initiatives are subjected to marginalisation within traditional curriculum system. In so doing, looking into teachers' stories brought into fore teacher's personal identities and their interactive modes with professionalism and responsibility in teaching about the environment as a critical focus of inquiry in which dominant discourse of environmental education and ideology of education in general can be critically examined in relation to various forms of teacher's internalisation, negotiation, or externalisation.

This paper aims to describe research processes in which the researcher's own understandings of theories and teacher narratives develop through continuous dialectical relationships, and provide some theoretical developments in relation to methodological concerns about identity, discourse and narrative as reflections and deliberations on the research inquiry led. By doing this, it also engages in critical debates on theoretical and

conceptual categories and assumptions that underpin research inquiry on teacher's lives, and personal and professional identities.

### **The initial research framework**

The initial interest of the research was premised on the key question, "what does it mean by environmental education teacher?" In contrast to policy-driven documents and research literature that assume an assigned teacher responsibility as a crucial component for implementing EE at school (UNESCO-UNEP, 1990; Fien & Sterling, 1996), more recent research on teacher's thinking and practice points out the gaps between such a rhetoric and actualities (Cho, 2002). In fact, in my own experiences and observations about environmental education practice in Korea, it seems teachers' personal motivations and commitments rather than policy-driven initiatives are the things that bring about changes in teaching practices. Therefore, the first phase of fieldwork aimed at investigating two teachers' perspectives and experiences related to environmental actions and education. At this stage, narrative inquiry was adopted as a favoured qualitative research method, with a notion that people reveal their intentions, beliefs, desires, knowledge, and values through narratives (Bruner, 1996). Then, the fieldwork produced life historical stories through which teachers' personal and professional commitments are woven into environmental education theories.

But critical reading of interview texts prompted me to re-engage in teachers' stories and to identify an analytic angle concerning 'narrative style' – the term invented to examine the way in which a teacher switches narrative voice, from critical to moderate, where she recognises conflicting discourses, hinting at a problematic relationship between agency and structure. Thus, I felt, more focus should be put on the *gaps and spaces* in the realities that teachers encounter and challenge in order to make changes, as follows:

- how teachers' motivations can/cannot be put into action and practice;
- difficulties and challenges that teachers encounter in doing these;
- the extent to which teachers' own conceptions and perspectives are differing with that to which they show a critical attitude, such as policies and socially dominant discourses.

### **Theoretical concerns on teacher identity**

The theoretical orientation of the research challenges prevailing frameworks that underpin research in teacher's thinking and practice. Firstly, in line with previous research on teachers' work and career (e.g. Sikes *et al* 1985; Nias, 1989), rejecting 'technical rationality', e.g. abstract subject knowledge (Carter & Doyle, 1996), it aims to interpret the meaning of teaching, its complexity, and the interactions between personal and professional lives. However, the study assumes teacher identity as being constantly negotiated by the operation of surrounding discourses, which lends itself to examining broader social and cultural context of education and related social and environmental influences that continuously produce the ways of legitimating certain teacher subjectivities. Thus, rather than assuming that teachers' stories about their life-span experiences enlighten a process of cognitive development as a teacher, the study stresses spaces as well as constraints for such a development, and teachers' strategies to create opportunities and resources in pursuing personally favoured self-concept. By doing this, teachers' stories can acquire methodological legitimacy as interpretive texts with which to understand dialectical relationships between teachers' own initiatives, personal dispositions, acquired cultural knowledge, and broader societal impacts.

Secondly, this perspective then critically examines the efficacy of policy-driven educational initiatives (school innovation or effectiveness slogans, in general, and EE/ESD),

investigating the gaps between that which such rhetoric intends to engineer a change in teaching practice, and the realities and teacher subjectivities produced by discursive power. This is to stimulate discourses of professionalism and professional development that may often disregard the necessity of situated knowledge about teacher's agency, reducing it too easily to preconceived 'categories', or placing it onto 'emancipatory' projects, by investigating the discursive teaching self (MacLure, 1993).

To be concrete, the issue of teacher agency and a sense of professionalism developed and sustained by teachers should be illuminated by deep understandings on the dialectical, interactive modes between teachers' personal and professional identities in which teachers take up, negotiate, or distance subjectivities that discourses make available. In fact, teacher narratives seemed to create potentially individualised versions of reality in which the teacher constantly engages in re-interpretations and reflections on social, cultural, and educational opportunities and constraints, and subsequently contribute to developing their own version of environmental education.

### **Identities, stories, and discourses: developing and re-examining analytic devices**

With these theoretical concepts and perspectives in mind, analytic devices were further invented in two ways. The first attempt was to investigate the diversity in the visions and ideals of environmental education using classical narrative analysis approach. Narrative analysis examines the storied nature of human recounting of lives and events, with the focus on 'how do people make sense of what happened?' rather than 'what actually happened?' (Bryman, 2004). In seeking to understand how teachers construct their stories about environment-related teaching activities, teachers' stories were examined in terms of their narrative structure whereby their pedagogical visions and ideas are narratively constituted by mutually connected, common themes, such as motivations and commitments, perspectives on the environment, subject teaching, concerns about pupil' learning, and reflections and learning. This approach to teachers' stories is in parallel with Hart's narrative study on the Canadian elementary teachers' environmental education practice in which teachers' stories are assumed to be 'elements of personal practical theories as well as some dimensions of underlying value systems that present themselves in everyday life' (Hart, 2003).

While narrative analysis sheds light on the realities that teachers recognise, 'identity work' analysis more focused on the modes and contexts that create such diverse personal theories and realities. This method, originally developed by Snow and Anderson (1987), investigates (in) congruency between socially assigned and personal identities, concerning sociological inquiry around 'the theoretical function of identity as a kind of interface or conceptual bridge linking individual and structure'. Identity work denotes 'the range of activities individuals engage in, in order to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept'. For this study, the idea of identity work was appropriated for investigating how teachers construct selves by making use of narrative resources and discursive possibilities available to them.

These analytic angles illuminate the relationship between teacher's consciousness and responsibility, revealing various ways of constructing preferred, positive self-concept as a teacher in which teachers strategically adopt certain subjectivities within discursive environments for developing a sense of agency. However, there still remain theoretical and methodological concerns in conceptualising the relationship between teacher narrative and dominant discourses. Firstly, interview discourse may induce certain ways of telling stories that leads to disguising other forms and modes of teacher subjectivities and their dialectical

relationship with discourses. For example, there seems to be gaps, which never close down, between what a teacher means by ‘environmental’ or ‘ecological’, prevailing uses of such categories, and potentially, my use and understanding of them. Where a teacher makes sense of ideas and experiences related to such themes, there is always a ‘hailing’ process in which social and cultural categories and models sneak in and speak themselves through teacher’s voice. This make difficult to re-conceive the matter of agency as something teachers own, as identities are always in flux, never quite settled down, problematising to assume teacher story as reflecting stable relationship with discourses, i.e. counter-narrative or necessarily oppositional discourse. Secondly, it further requires re-examining the ways of identifying what ‘dominant’ discourses are, and the modes by which they impinge on teacher subjectivities. These problems associate with social constructionist critique of the relationship between subject and reality, and demand researcher’s reflexivity on what kind of social reality this research implicitly aims to achieve, and subsequently, how the research can make sound theoretical argument about the issue related to ‘whose’ narratives the stories are.

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