

“Learning to Teach” and Teacher Development: Insights from the Narrative Therapy Approach

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The problem of teachers’ “learning to teach” is discussed in the context of teacher knowledge, modes of knowing, and the theory-practice dichotomy. It is contended that in valuing narrative and practical knowledge, teacher narratives capture the complexities of teachers’ school and classroom experiences and are important in teacher development. The narrative therapy approach provides a perspective for conceptualizing teacher education, which acknowledges that teacher changes and development occur when personal and professional identities are recognized as being inextricably linked in the retelling and rewriting of teacher narratives.

Key words: teacher education; teacher development; narrative therapy; Hong Kong

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From time to time, explanations for the failure (or lack of success) of education reform in Hong Kong have commonly pointed to the shortcomings (or lack of contributions) of teacher education or teacher development. Thus, our teachers are blamed, in one way or another, for the increasingly severe behavioral problems of students in school as well as the ever-declining academic standards and achievement among students in primary and secondary education (see Chan, 2000). As a consequence, teachers' competencies are likewise questioned, as indicated in the revised certification requirements and the implementation of benchmarking examinations for language teachers and subsequently for all teachers (see Education Commission, 1995). Further, the view that highlights the inadequacies in teacher preparation has prompted suggestions for extending pre-service or prospective teachers' limited teaching practice to prolonged school-based internship. Nonetheless, it seems natural that in promoting our students' "learning to learn" (Curriculum Development Council, 2001), our teachers' "learning to teach" (e.g., Borko & Putnam, 1996; Carter, 1990) should be taken seriously as part of the problem if not part of the solution.

The Changing Views of Teacher Education

However, the approaches to teacher education or teacher development as well as the conceptualization of teacher knowledge have undergone great changes over the past several decades (see Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001). Specifically, for prospective teachers, teacher education is no longer seen as a one-time process of teacher training wherein student-teachers are equipped with methods in teaching particular disciplines or subject areas and sent out to teaching practice. Similarly, for experienced teachers, in-service teacher training is no longer seen as a process of makeup training or periodic staff development wherein experienced teachers congregated to receive updated information about effective teaching processes and techniques. In contrast, the general orientation of the new approaches to teacher education or teacher development

is more social constructionist than transmission-oriented, with the recognition that both prospective and experienced teachers (like all learners) bring prior knowledge and experience to all new learning situations. In addition, it is now generally understood that teacher learning takes place over time rather than in isolated moments in time, and that active lifelong learning requires opportunities to link previous knowledge with new understandings.

More specifically, new approaches to teacher education or teacher development are now informed by research about how teachers think about their work (Clark & Peterson, 1986), with the emphasis on what teachers know as well as what they do, what their sources of knowledge are, and how these sources influence their work in classrooms (Barnes, 1989). In summary, the important issue that teacher educators have to address in teacher education or teacher development is the question of what teacher knowledge is, what the knowledge base for teaching is, and whether there is more to teaching than the skilled applications of something called know-how.

Modes of Knowing and the Theory-Practice Dichotomy

With this view of the changing conceptualization of teacher education or teacher development, “learning to teach” is inevitably a complex problem related to teacher knowledge, which is intertwined with epistemological issues. In this connection, Bruner’s (1985) distinction between paradigmatic knowing and narrative knowing is relevant. Specifically, paradigmatic knowing has its roots in scientific modes of thought, and represents the world through abstract propositional knowledge. In contrast, narrative knowing is organized through the stories that people recount about their experiences. Although both paradigmatic and narrative ways of knowing are essential for making sense of the world, one mode has often been emphasized at the expense of the other in teacher education. For example, researchers especially those in educational psychology, in striving to be scientific, have focused on paradigmatic and propositional knowledge based

on scientific thinking that is abstract, impersonal, logical, predictive, and free of social contexts, and in so doing, they tend to dismiss narrative knowledge as irrational, vague, irrelevant and even not legitimate. On the other hand, educators especially those in teacher training have traditionally argue that no one should be permitted to teach until he or she has been told how to perform, and has developed practical or professional knowledge based on field experiences in the unique school and classroom contexts. In this regard, practice-oriented knowledge emphasized by teachers in their expression and exchange through the narrative modes of anecdotes and stories is unequivocally valued over theoretical knowledge.

Interestingly, the issue of teacher knowledge can also been considered from the perspective of the theory-practice dichotomy (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Munby et al., 2001). Specifically, scholars and researchers in education have long valued experiential learning and practical knowledge, but they also believe that experiences in schools and classrooms do not provide authentic or uncontested “truths,” as all experiences are interpreted through particular perspectives. Thus, in academic circles, theory has often held a privileged position over experience, and excessive attention to experience has been criticized as reflecting a lack of critical and scientific rigor. Contrary to this view, teachers often reject theory as too abstract, too difficult, and too removed from experience or practice. Some of our prospective teachers might even resist theory, saying that they simply want to know what to do, to be told what will or will not work in classrooms, and that philosophizing or theorizing does not count as much as the immediate day-to-day classroom management and decision making. Based on somewhat different reasons, our experienced teachers might also resist theory. For them, theory could be another attempt by academics or researchers with more power to impose another mandate on them, seeking to control and regulate their practice. Naturally, they tend to see theory as abstract and acontextual, incapable of being useful in the real school or classroom contexts. Thus, it is no surprise that different emphases have initiated different calls for either “more research” or “more time” to make up the

inadequacies in teacher preparation in theoretical and practical knowledge, respectively (see Munby et al., 2001).

Accordingly, academics and practitioners could interpret the learning-to-teach problem somewhat differently. For the academics, there is always the call for more research and theory building. With the assumption that there is an adequate knowledge base for teaching, the problem becomes one of putting theory into practice, or translating knowledge from one form into another, that is, from propositional to procedural knowledge. For practitioners or teachers, the problem is mainly one of disentangling the meaning of the complex school and classroom experiences as they bear on teaching, emphasizing the importance of meaning making for teacher development. Based on considerations of both perspectives, the integration of theory and practice, with emphasis on both paradigmatic and narrative knowing, requires teachers not only to put theory into practice but also to ground experience in theory.

Thus, in teacher education or teacher development, the major concern is not that a teacher's school experience (acquired either in the accidental apprenticeship in childhood schooling experience or the deliberate apprenticeship in teacher training) is too personal or local, and therefore invalid. The major concern is that such experience is often left untheorized. In this connection, it is contended that without the opportunity for a critical analysis of school experiences, teachers would have no way to see how their experiences are constructed and therefore can be reconstructed in and through language, institutional and cultural contexts. Hence, teachers need the theoretical language to help them see the competing and conflicting narratives of learning and teaching. Along the same line, Bromme and Tillema (1995), for example, maintain that teacher education should move beyond integration to fusion of experience and theory, and suggest that action and reflection may bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical action. Indeed, it is believed that the reconstruction and reconsideration of experiences through narratives is crucial for teachers in their learning to teach and teacher development.

Teacher Narratives and Narrative Research

In many ways, teacher narratives appear to capture well the complexities of school and classroom practices, which include not only what teachers do but also what students learn as a result of school experiences. Interestingly, narrative descriptions of school and classroom practice are not new (see Gudmundsdottir, 2001; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000). In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, in Europe and North America, teachers normally contributed by writing narrative descriptions of what they had done in school. It was only after the establishment of universities and teacher training colleges with the profession of teacher educators that teachers' voices in the official discourse were silenced. Indeed, to legitimize education as a "scholarly discipline," teacher educators at the time chose to adopt the positivist or empiricist stance in research, and to distance themselves from the narrative discourse practiced by teachers. Thus, teachers' stories were generally dismissed as mere anecdotes, and they often remained unexamined and untheorized.

More recently, teacher educators and the younger profession of educational researchers are rediscovering that narrative research lends itself to the description and analysis of school and classroom experiences. Narratives reemerge as a legitimate way of conducting research on school and classroom practices when teachers' voices are heard as coauthors of studies of their own practices, both as storytellers and in their autobiographies (e.g., Levin, 2003; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000). In view of the confusing usage of the term "narrative," Fenstermacher and Richardson (1994) claim that "narrative" has been applied in at least three different ways. First, "narrative" may refer to a piece of writing that is different from the traditional research (qualitative and interpretive) report. Second, "narrative" may refer to a form of inquiry, both in defining units of analysis and finding a story in the data. Third, "narrative" may be used as powerful teaching tools. While narratives can be referred to in either one of the three ways, the actual use of narratives as descriptive accounts of school experiences, as a form of inquiry,

and as teaching tools for teacher development could be at times inseparable.

In developing narratives, teachers attend to two levels of story making (see Gudmundsdottir, 2001). At the first level, episodes from the complex school experiences are selected. At the second level, the selected episodes are combined into a narrative or a story. Despite that different narrators could select similar episodes to place in respective stories because these episodes could be so striking and so representative of teachers' school and classroom experiences, different narrators might still infuse these episodes with different meanings because they could be operating from distinct theoretical perspectives. This trafficking between individual episodes (first level) and the narrative (or theory at the second level) and how they give meaning to each other constitutes narrative interpretation, which refers to both the phenomenon under study (practice) and the inquiry process itself (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

In valuing teacher knowledge and teacher perspective, and with a growing understanding that teachers embody their knowledge in narratives, teacher narratives through, for example, journal writing, have also become tools for teacher development (e.g., Connelly & Clandinin, 1986). Specifically, teacher educators might invite pre-service and in-service teachers to tell, reflect on, and dialogue about stories from their teaching lives. In this manner, narratives are used to organize school experiences so that teachers can tell others about these experiences, and therefore, initiate the kind of dialogue that is necessary for the type of reflection that is essential for teacher development. Further, when teachers narrate their experiences to other teachers, they are in fact putting their experiences and ideas into circulation among colleagues, and contributing to a collective enterprise of meaning making about the complexities of school and classroom practices.

The telling and writing of teachers' stories, and subsequent narrative and collaborative reflection are clearly intended to contribute to teachers' professional development. Thus, the use of narratives of exemplary or influential teachers in Chinese culture is not uncommon in Hong Kong (e.g., Hayhoe, 2000). However, more importantly, it is now recognized that in

going beyond the telling and writing of teachers' stories, their retelling and rewriting contribute to teachers' personal as well as professional development and might lead to awakenings, transformations, and changes in teachers' school and classroom practices (e.g., Connelly & Clandinin, 1994). While the teacher education literature has less to say about such reconstruction or transformation, the psychotherapy and the narrative therapy literature certainly can shed more light on teachers' personal development, which is inextricable from their professional development.

Metaphors, Psychotherapies, and Teacher Education

Psychotherapies, which ultimately deal with individuals' positive development, contribute to our understanding of teachers' personal and professional development. Recently, many therapists have raised questions on the traditional notions of psychotherapies under the mechanistic model or the romantic model (McKenzie & Monk, 1997). The therapies under the mechanistic model utilize the faulty machine metaphor, which promotes ways of speaking that require therapists to locate, identify, and label problems in the client. Translated into the domain of teacher education, this metaphor invites the teacher educator to employ techniques and strategies to identify and correct the deficits, inadequacies, and malfunctions within the teacher, and help the teacher develop competencies and skills in teaching. The alternative therapies under the romantic model utilize the "peeling the onion" metaphor, subscribing to the view that the inner core of the client is covered up by protective layers like the layers of an onion. These layers or defenses have been put up during the client's development to protect him or her from harm and pain. In teacher education, this metaphor encourages the teacher educator to help the teacher unlearn undesirable prior knowledge or undesirable teaching behaviors so that the teacher is able to express his or her inner truth, authenticity, and spontaneity in teaching.

More recently, narrative therapy as a postmodern form of practice, which comes close to the narrative approach in teacher education or teacher

development, has emerged (McLeod, 1996). Narrative therapy utilizes the narrative or story as the guiding metaphor. Accordingly, people create stories about themselves, their lived experiences, and their relationships with others, and they make sense of their lives by assembling significant events together in dominant plots. They experience problems when their narratives do not sufficiently represent their lived experiences, or significant aspects of their lived experiences contradict these dominant narratives. In teacher education, this metaphor encourages the teacher educator to take up a co-authoring role with the teacher to help the teacher restory an alternative story that the teacher prefers in his or her school and classroom practice. Nonetheless, narrative therapy may provide fresh insights into conceptualizing teacher development, and an overview of narrative therapy is in order (see Besley, 2002; Drewery & Winslade, 1997; Freedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990).

An Overview of Narrative Therapy

Michael White from Australia and David Epston from New Zealand first developed narrative therapy within the framework of social constructionism (White & Epston, 1989, 1990). In developing this novel and coherent approach as a postmodern form of practice, the two therapists drew upon the ideas and themes developed by scholars from different fields, including Edward Bruner (ethnographer), Jerome Bruner (psychologist), Michel Foucault (French historian of systems of thought), and Gregory Bateson (biologist and systems theorist).

White and Epston (1990) recognize that the narrative metaphor has a temporal dimension that emphasizes order and sequence, and is appropriate for the study of change, the life cycle, or any developmental process through time. Invariably, a narrative embodies an active protagonist who represents an image of a person through time, and who can reflexively monitor the story he or she tells. In addition, a person's life narrative is always selective and does not encompass the full richness or totality of his or her lived

experiences, so there are always some isolated experiences that are unnoticed or unstoried. The selection of life episodes to be storied, however, is powerfully shaped by dominant discourses or social practices that are sustained by taken-for-granted assumptions and shared viewpoints. With this view, White and Epston (1990) maintain that people make meaning of them and of their lives through storying their experiences, and argue that stories are not merely reflections of lives but are constitutive of lives in that stories shape people's lives and their relationships with others. Thus, the goal of narrative therapy is to help people develop alternative stories as opposed to dominant but unsatisfying stories, clarify the choices they wish to make, and re-author their stories that they will experience as more helpful (Winslade & Monk, 1999).

To help a person achieve the goal of re-authoring his or her life story, the narrative therapist engages the person in therapeutic conversations to understand his or her problem-saturated life story using a curious and not-knowing stance, respecting that the person has expert knowledge of his or her own experiences. Then the narrative therapist seeks to unmask the dominant discourse and deconstruct the problem by externalizing conversations, asking questions that give the person the opportunities to explore various dimensions of the problem, and asking questions that reveal the unstated cultural assumptions that contributed to the original construction of the problem (White, 1993). In addition, through subtle shifts in language, the narrative therapist separates the problem from the person, inviting the person to name the problem and to experience the problem as external. Using mapping-the-influence questions, the narrative therapist explores the influence of the problem on the person and the influence of the person on the problem. In the process, the person is enabled to identify hidden meanings, gaps or spaces, and evidence that conflicts or contradicts the dominant and problem story. By establishing past and recent "unique outcomes" or positive and helpful experiences, and developing explanations of the significance of these experiences, the person is enabled to experience a sense of personal agency in developing a counterplot or a plot of the alternative story. The

person would then be invited to choose to continue to live by the problem-saturated story or to change to position himself or herself in the alternative story.

The alternative preferred story is often a fragile account of lived experiences that stand in direct opposition to the dominant problem story. To enhance the survival of the alternative story and to promote personal agency, an appreciative audience is often recruited to bear witness to the emergence of the person's new description or identity and his or her performance of the alternative story. The audience could include people significant to the person, such as family members, relatives, and friends. To further strengthen the reconstructive process, progress can be documented through using therapeutic documents, which might include visual elements, letters, statements, certificates and creative writing, and enlisting written feedback from how the audience has experienced the performance of the alternative story and the new and preferred identity of the person (see Payne, 2000; White & Epston, 1990).

The Narrative Therapy Challenge to Teacher Development

The narrative therapy approach challenges the traditional view of teacher education that focuses primarily on content knowledge and pedagogy and excludes personal development in considering professional development of teachers. If the development of a professional identity is accepted as inextricable from the development of a personal identity, then the narrative therapy approach should be most relevant, and provides new vistas for conceptualizing teacher development in terms of personal and professional development through the telling and retelling, or the writing and rewriting, of teacher narratives. In this regard, parallels between the narrative therapy process and the process of teacher development can readily be drawn.

In traditional teacher education, the teacher educator is regarded as an expert who knows more about the teacher's school and classroom experience than the teacher does himself or herself, and who identifies

deficiencies in the teacher and prescribes strategies and skills for the teacher to improve his or her teaching. The implicit model is the mechanistic model with the faulty machine metaphor, and has the effect of locating any deficiencies in teaching within the teacher. In contrast, the narrative therapy perspective suggests that teacher has expert knowledge of his or her own school and classroom experience, and could create new knowledge within the crucible of the classroom. Thus, the assumptions about the teacher educator's expert knowledge and objectivity, and the teacher's skill deficits may inadvertently privilege the educator's voice and limit the extent to which the teacher may influence the school and classroom experience and his or her contribution to learning and teaching. Further, while the teacher educator may have the co-authoring role in creating and rewriting of the teacher's narrative, the teacher educator should not elevate their relationship as primary and all-important, or as one above all other relationships in the teacher's meaning making of school and classroom experiences, which might inadvertently exclude and marginalize the contribution of the teacher's relationships and life outside the school and classroom settings.

Traditionally, teacher narratives have very often been romanticized. When teachers study reading, writing, and pedagogy in contexts that also encourage them to actually read, write, and compose their ideas and histories, then pedagogical or "content" learning takes on new meaning as it comes to be connected with their ongoing development as individuals. However, after the initial writing or telling of the stories, teachers often fall short of the next crucial step of reflection and critique. In this regard, teacher educators may, according to the narrative therapy approach, help teachers raise questions such as: What are the contexts in which these stories are told? Where are the gaps, the silences, the tensions, and the omissions? What narratives from other lives might contradict or complicate these stories? Who might be privileged by these narratives? What positions and relationships do these stories reinforce? When teachers engage in ongoing reflection, critique, and revision of these teacher narratives, they become more

appreciative of the multiple and complex interplay of the personal and the social in teacher development.

Broadly conceptualized, from the perspective of the narrative therapy approach, the teacher does not solely possess or exercise power in the control or choice of his or her lived experiences, and the teacher needs to negotiate power with others, including the teacher educator, in his or her everyday life and social relationships. With this view of power-sharing, the teacher educator emphasizes accepting the equal validity of each knowledge and voice, while acknowledging that some voices might have more meaning-making power than others, which has an impact on the relationship between the teacher educator and the teacher. Specifically, the teacher educator adopts an optimistic and respectful stance, one that is not-knowing, tentative and curious, to help the teacher uncover hidden assumptions, inconsistencies, and contradictions in the teacher narrative of school experience, bringing into focus the teacher's easily discounted or overlooked details of competence and accomplishments, and empowering the teacher to find his or her own voice (see Drewery & Winslade, 1997; Winslade & Monk, 1999). Thus, it is the power-sharing and collaborative nature of the work between teacher educators and teachers, and the constant negotiation of interpretation with others that has made self-reflexivity and self-scrutiny more possible. This view has also highlighted the interpretative nature and multiple meanings of teacher narratives. It is the stories of the teachers and other new stories, which teachers and teacher educators write and rewrite together through selecting different school and classroom episodes and creating different plots based on similar or different episodes, that continue to teach us about teachers and about teaching.

Teacher Development as Personal and Professional Development

The notion of recruiting an appreciative audience in narrative therapy suggests that it is important that personal and professional development are

brought into dialogue, and teachers should be given the opportunity to tell, write, and reflect on their own stories of learning and of selfhood within a supportive and challenging community. Specifically, by allowing these teacher narratives to be read in dialogue with other teacher narratives, teachers will be able to see the multiplicity of paths that teacher development may take. The interplay of multiple and often conflicting narratives of professional and personal history may stimulate reflection and critique, and provide new insights that initiate and sustain teachers' capacity to resist confining cultural narratives and to write new narratives of teaching and living as well as new narratives of identity and practice, thus re-authoring themselves as teachers and as individuals. More importantly, teachers are enabled through narratives to author their own development, personally and professionally.

In summary, teacher narratives can become the means by which teachers can unmask dominant discourses and revise the prescribed narratives and roles of their personal and professional lives. Such narrative investigation allows teachers to connect professional learning and their practice as teachers with their ongoing development as individuals. In the active use of oral or written language, identity and practice may be revised and forged anew. Teacher narratives force teachers to re-articulate, re-interpret, and re-evaluate their school and classroom experiences and their lived experiences outside school and classroom settings, and teacher narratives can move teachers toward action in co-creating both the personal and professional aspects of teacher development.

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