

Teacher Identity from a Bourdieuan Perspective

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This paper draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu to understand the resistance of teacher education graduates to their University learning and the alignment with the field of education. This is a perplexing and perennial problem in teacher education. Bourdieu's theory offers concepts that allow this situation to be theorized through notions of identity and the wider social, cultural arena within which identity can be construed.

Constructing a Teacher Identity

Bourdieu's work has been most useful in theorizing how preservice teacher graduates come to gain a sense of self as they become teachers. In particular, his notions of field, habitus and cultural capital are most relevant. To a lesser extent, his notions of trajectory and symbolic violence are of value in rethinking the different orientations and rewards for engagement in contemporary educational contexts. Each of these constructs are discussed below and linked to Bourdieu's theoretical project.

Field

By better understanding the dynamic and power of the objective and subjective structuring practices of the field, there is a better opportunity for understanding the resistance to change despite the power of new ideas. In the case presented here, the preservice teacher had been exposed to new ways of teaching mathematics when in the University context, however, when undertaking practicum and in light of her own experiences as a student (12–13 years of schooling) she had been positioned so as to recognize what was seen as legitimate ways of working in the field. These practices were often in contradiction to those of the University context. Indeed, the often heard remark — “forget what they teach you at University, this is what counts, this is really how you teach it in the classroom” gives significant sway over what constitutes appropriate teaching methods in the “real world” of the classroom. As such, the power of the practicum often supercedes the on-campus experiences. This is achieved through both the objective structuring practices of the field (the high status of the practicum — whether explicit or implicit) and the subjective structuring practices (how they feel about teaching mathematics and what makes them comfortable in that teaching). Often the preservice teachers learn early on in their preservice education that compliance with supervising teachers means better prac results which enhance employability. In many states, the academic record does not hold as much sway as does the practicum experiences when it comes to employment. As such, students learn to take on the dispositions of the field rather than counter positions being developed through on-campus learning. As such, the on-campus experiences are often devalued within the field to such an extent that they become secondary to the practicum experiences.

Habitus

Within a Bourdieuan approach, the habitus is a central construct which aligns closely with identity. For Bourdieu (1979), “The habitus is a system of durable, transposable dispositions” which predispose the participant to act, think and behave in particular ways. While there has been some criticism of this construct as being deterministic, Bourdieu and others (Harker, 1984) argue that the habitus can change over time and across circumstances. The habitus is a product of history which is both of product of, and produces, individual and collective practices. Similarly, the habitus with which one enters a particular context can reshape practices within that context. Thus, there is a mutual constitution of both habitus and context. For preservice teachers, their primary teaching habitus has been shaped by 12–13 years of schooling where they have been enculturated into what constitutes appropriate ways of being within that context.

These are internalized so that they need to be reconstituted into a secondary habitus — one which aligns with the expectations of teacher preparation. However, as argued above, the field shapes what is seen as appropriate ways of being and where this aligns with the primary habitus, there is a stronger probability that there will be resistance to change. In this case study, the habitus (or identity) of the preservice student has not been reconstituted significantly by the preservice experience. Indeed, it may well be that the field has not provided the catalyst for such reconceptualisation of the primary habitus. For the student, it may be more comfortable to remain within the primary habitus, a habitus that has been reinforced by the field.

Capital

Bourdieu’s theory cannot be considered as discrete entities but rather each concept interrelates with the others. Where status is gained in a field, it is via the accumulation of capital within that field. What is seen as capital in one field may not confer status in another. Consider the capital a speaker of BBC English has in the media and most everyday exchanges. This form of language becomes a form of capital that can be exchanged for goods — for example, money through salary as a news reporter. The more that one has of this form of language, the better the bartering power in salary negotiations. However, in another arena, such a counter-culture group such as young people who engage in hip-hop, this form of language will hold little value and hence be of little capital. In contrast, within this field, a different language will convey status and power, and hence be a form of capital.

Within the field of (teacher) education, participants who have those dispositions (i.e. habitus) that are seen as valued by those in power, are more likely to be able to trade such dispositions for status. That is, in Bourdieuan terms, the habitus becomes a form of capital that can be exchanged for goods (Bourdieu, 1983) — whether salary or a job. Those who have more of the dispositions valued by the structuring practices within the field are more likely to be positioned more favourably than those who do not have such dispositions. Thus for the students who display the habitus that is valued within the field, they are more likely to obtain jobs within schools. As such, there is a strong motivation to acquire the capital of the field so that in this case, the preservice student has been exposed to four years of study where there have been competing value systems — that of the University where particular attributes have been valued as opposed to that of the field where other attributes have been valued. To obtain a position within that field, those characteristics

valued by the field are more likely to hold the graduate in better sway for a position upon graduation. As such, there is considerable pressure on the graduate to conform to the practices within the field if she is to obtain a position within that field.

Habitus, Field and Identity

By drawing on the constructs proposed by Bourdieu, it becomes possible to theorise how the four years of a preservice program creates opportunities to develop particular dispositions towards the teaching of mathematics. However, this learning cannot be considered without considering the wider field of education where the graduate is likely to gain employment. To be seen as a credible agent within that field, particular dispositions are more likely to be rewarded. Within the University context, such dispositions may align with more innovative approaches to teaching mathematics. In contrast, within the practicum context different dispositions may be seen as more valuable. Depending on where status is conveyed (the formal examination process of the University or the employment and concomitant salary of the school sector), graduates may have greater or lesser status conveyed upon them depending on how they align with the structuring practices of the field. As such, the developing identity of the graduate teacher is strongly influenced by both the objective and subjective structuring practices within that field.

References

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