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Crossing borders and pushing boundaries: Positioning, emotions, and liminality in teacher education

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Borders indicate boundaries, or limitations. Often times, teacher educators feel bound to be and act in specific ways, as determined by outside voices. We are positioned within normative frames, or larger storylines about education and teachers, that affect the “repertoire of *acts*” we have access to (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 5). Therefore, positioning theory is relational, and positions are socially-situated, which deeply impact and connect to matters of the *self*. As teacher educators, societal beliefs about teaching and teacher education influence how we are positioned and how we position ourselves, thus impacting the stories we tell about ourselves (Johnston, 2004). As self-study researchers, we sought to explore how positioning reveals the explicit and implicit patterns of reasoning evident in the ways we act as teacher educators towards both our students (teachers) and those in the public arena.

Positioning also reveals the way emotional labor impacts our acceptance and/or resistance of these positions. Emotional labor is conceptualized as the “management of feeling” through either *surface acting*, changing one’s appearance in order not to show a feeling, or *deep acting*, suppressing an unsuitable emotion or working to induce a suitable emotion (Hochschild, 2012, p. 35). With that, emotions we experience, and the unconscious appraisal process of evaluating these emotions, cannot be “separated from the relational, social, cultural and political contexts in which they occur” (Forgasz, Berry, & McDonough, 2014, p. 82).

To understand how both positionality and emotional labor impact our work as teacher educators, we also recognized liminality as an important concept that highlights the complexity of becoming a teacher educator. Liminality, derived from the Latin term *limen*, means threshold. Van Gennep (1909) describes thresholds as phases individuals go through in rites of passages, the act of becoming. As teacher educators, the *preliminal* stage involved a metaphorical “death”, leaving the K-12 classroom behind. The *liminal* stage, implied an actual passing through the threshold marking the boundary between being a classroom teacher and becoming a teacher educator. Lastly, during the *postliminal* stage, we began living with the new identity. To Turner (1969),

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liminal individuals, people in the transition phase, are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (pp. 94–95). As teacher educators, navigating both societal positions and emotional labor, we understand liminality as “a dramatic cultural phase” (Pierce, 2007) impacting the stories we tell about ourselves as teacher educators.

The field of self-study offers a wealth of insight into the process of becoming a teacher educator (Garbett, 2012; Arizona Group 1995), the challenges based on cultural myths (Bullock, 2012), the limits and complexities of our roles (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2008), using teaching portfolios to support the transition from teacher to teacher educator (Hamilton, 2018), and identity construction in the academy (Bullock & Ritter, 2011). However, this particular field of study, as well as the field of self-study of teacher education practices generally, has limited transnational comparative perspectives (Mena & Russell, 2017). Additionally, self-study research on the transition from teacher to teacher educator often focuses on challenges in the academic context, for instance concerning a specific department (Hamilton, 2018; Bullock & Ritter, 2011), but rarely brings in a societal level that reaches outside the academy. Therefore, we seek to fill a gap in the literature by offering a context in which we, three teacher educators from different parts of the world, made sense of the ways positioning, emotions, and liminality impact our work in teacher education from both a personal and societal standpoint, with hopes that the comparative perspective not only grows our own understandings of *being* and *becoming* teacher educators, but also contributes to the field.

Therefore, we explored the following research questions: How does our emotional labor as teacher educators impact our possibility to resist particular positions, specifically when considering the outside voices influencing and attempting to influence these positions? How might teacher educators use theories of positioning and emotional labor to take a line to and resist boundaries that limit us within the profession?

Methods

Participants

Elizabeth, an associate professor in the United States, met Martin and Katarina, doctoral students, while conducting research in Sweden. Martin has since graduated and now serves as an assistant professor in Sweden. Katarina is currently completing the final semesters of her doctoral program.

Data collection and analysis

To answer our research questions, we used autoethnography self-study methods (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). First, we engaged in an academic written discussion about teacher education and identity formation, resulting in seven lengthy written responses shared in a google document over a 3-month period of time. Then, we each wrote three personal narratives as a way of “bending back on the self to look more deeply at self-other interactions” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740), thus embracing Skerrett’s (2008) notions that personal biographies shape teacher educators’ identities and influence the lived experiences of teaching and researching. Topics included: becoming teacher educators, emotional work in teacher education, and influences of cultural models.

We followed up with face-to-face/online conversations, enacting Coia and Taylor’s (2009) argument that “real-time dialogue” is critical “to process and discuss meaning” (p. 177). Through the analysis of our narratives, we uncovered the normative constraints in our unfolding story-lines, which at times were similar, and at other times, were distinct and unique. From here, we incorporated Richardson’s (2000) method of writing as a form of inquiry, exploring and engaging with the data through writing. Combining these various methods became a way to systematically analyze our data (Samaras & Freese, 2009). Within the analysis, we each individually read and reread the written documents to uncover recurring themes. Then, through dialogue, we determined three themes: vulnerability, need, and loss. In each, we noted tensions, which led

us to further unpack the relationship between the three concepts of positioning, emotions, and liminality embedded in these themes. The transnational perspective sharpened our view of our own practice, while also making us sensitive to our own preconceived ideas about the different national education systems. Thus, we each wrote about one of the themes, but when we shared our writings with each other, we uncovered extreme overlaps as we used similar data points to illustrate each assigned theme. For example, much of what highlighted vulnerability also highlighted need and loss. With that, we noted these themes incorporated two distinct perspectives—personal and societal. Thus, we present our data points in the outcomes with these two perspectives and then share our analysis of the themes framed by our theoretical lens.

Outcomes

Personal perspective

Our narratives covered the transition from being a teacher to being a teacher educator. We noted initial uncertainties leading to emotional labor in the form of surface acting, i.e. changing our appearance to hide our feelings (Hochschild 2012, p. 35), but also ways we gave up this surface acting to position ourselves through vulnerability within the classroom. Elizabeth outlined her worries about whether learning was meaningful to her students and asked them how they felt about the learning experiences. Martin did not hide from his students the fact that he was a new teacher educator, and Katarina shared mistakes she made as a teacher with her students. All three authors received positive responses from the students, in many cases explicitly mentioning their appreciation for our transparency and the sharing of mistakes.

We also noted how this wish to be transparent was a way of acknowledging the fact that we were in a liminal phase between teacher and teacher educator. We often experienced feelings of loss of identity on a personal level that were linked with this transition.

Elizabeth. Elizabeth reflected on her own feelings during the beginning phases of her career, “I often felt like a fraud . . . I didn’t know it all, yet I was positioned as an expert.” However, she reflected later,

Starting my 11th year at the university, I no longer harbor insecurities. If I let the ‘demons’ talk in my head, I might hear doubts about my knowledge or experience level, but, I feel confident in what I can share with my teaching candidates. I continue spending time in classrooms, connected to what is happening in schools. I do not feel like a relic in the university, but rather an integral part of the education system.

Martin. Martin recounted an incident early in his career as a teacher educator illustrating how “insecurity might make people put on a mask”.

Once we had a session before lunch and another after lunch. A few students left after the first part, without telling me. I remember how disappointed I felt. It was impossible for me not to think they left because they thought the first part was not as good as they expected. I slept badly, reflecting upon the event. I could not let it go, so I decided to ask them why they left and explain how it made me feel. I told them that they would probably experience the same emotions when they became teachers.

Katarina. Katarina described the first few years as a teacher educator as a period of joy. She felt close to the students and connected in their choice of occupation. Gradually, though, that feeling was replaced by something else, feeling separated from her former teacher identity. In the liminal phase, she questioned what her identity had become:

Had I distanced myself so far from being a teacher into being a teacher-educator? And was that not being a teacher in my mind? Is there a way back to the joyful community of we-the-

teachers? Am I an academic now that traditionally regards teaching as something inferior to researching? How did this happen?

Societal perspective

On a societal level, presuppositions and taken for granted ideas about what teacher education is and should be created feelings of loss of pride and self-confidence, while also imposing feelings of being devalued. To manage our emotions, we engaged in surface acting due to vulnerability in relation to societal discourse, presuppositions, and policy around teacher education. Additionally, accountability culture caused loss of authenticity and joy in teaching. Examples of this emerged from the narratives.

Elizabeth. Elizabeth revealed her trepidation with the ever-shifting U.S. legislation in education, identifying two themes—failure and accountability. She believed these regulations were limited in logic and no longer positioned teachers as professionals, writing: “I fear the presuppositions society holds about teachers and that these presuppositions will ‘win’ out, thus crippling and tumbling our teacher preparation programs. That is, people believe anyone can teach.”

Martin. Martin shared his understandings that in Sweden, research in pedagogy and educational science has been criticized for not taking evidence and best practice into account; it is said to deal with issues that do not improve results in large-scale studies, such as PISA. This personally affected Martin when his dissertation was given as an example of such ‘needless’ research in a Swedish newspaper. This article positioned him as not only “not needed, but as a detriment to teacher preparation”. Martin was saddened and angered by society’s disregard to what he considered important research as he wrote, “But the problem is that the presuppositions vented in the article shape public opinion about educational science and, in the long run, about teacher education”.

Katarina. Katarina shared an instance where she was about to teach a course where one of the students had just published an Op-Ed article criticizing Swedish teacher education programs. Curious, Katarina searched out the student and found her on Twitter actively debating teacher education with teachers, students, head teachers, union representatives, researchers, and teacher educators, building the discourse. To Katarina, this student’s positioning of her as a teacher educator was a negative voice, which overshadowed other voices in the class and moved her to behave/act in ways that felt ‘far from me’. That is, the discourse was so strong in society that it most definitely affected students. Knowing this, Katarina lost self-confidence and inadvertently changed her teaching. She wrote, “Was I influenced by a discourse I did not agree with, turned into a kind of teacher educator I did not want to be, with low expectations for students, throwing suspicion on them?”

Discussion

Through the data, we came to recognize the ways we intentionally both used surface acting and gave up surface acting to position ourselves within our liminal phases in relation to the three themes of vulnerability, need, and loss within our personal classrooms and the larger societal dialogue.

The meta perspective of teaching about teaching implies that there is vulnerability in the balancing act of how transparent to the inner workings of a teacher’s thoughts and decisions one can be. In the preliminal and liminal phases, all three authors struggled with the new identity of teacher educator, negotiating the line between how he/she was being positioned and how he/she hoped to position him/herself. Elizabeth worried about not being qualified enough to be a teacher educator—being perceived as a “fraud”. Martin described an initial worry that his knowledge was not enough, or that he wouldn’t be good enough as an instructor to keep his students engaged in the learning. For Katarina, she acted out a confidence that was not there by putting on a smile, or keeping her head high. In these cases, vulnerability was covered up.

However, over time, surface acting was no longer needed due to a greater confidence, and vulnerability became an important pedagogical asset. All three authors described difficult situations as teacher educators where they, sometimes as a last resource, opened up and showed their inner workings as teachers to their students. These were threshold moments, in some ways a path out of the liminality (Turner, 1969) of not-yet being a teacher educator, where the authors received positive feedback from students following this transparency just *because* they were open about their worries or mistakes. In this way, vulnerability became a new behavior in the “repertoire of *acts*” we had access to (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 5) while navigating our own positioning as teacher educators.

While vulnerability in relation to teaching became an asset, there was a new vulnerability induced by outside voices in relation to societal discourse, presuppositions, and policy around teacher education. Our narratives uncovered a desire, as teacher educators, to feel needed. However, our different national contexts made us sense this in distinct ways. With that, we identified specific ways our emotional labor was a direct result of the ways we felt positioned by the outside voices. The perceived discourse, in both the U.S. and Sweden, positions teacher education as a scapegoat for the supposed failure of the school, or even the nation. In addition, teacher educators are deprofessionalized through the accountability culture. However, a subtle difference emerged in our narratives between the U.S. and Sweden in regards to need. In Sweden, Martin and Katarina shared how teacher education is seen as important, yet requires great improvements. On the other hand, Elizabeth shared the societal discourse that says ‘anyone can teach’, and consequently there is no need for teacher education.

Each author explored how he/she performed emotional labor to hide his/her fear and sadness regarding this view of teacher education on the societal level. Thus, how we were positioned by others impacted the acting we performed. Within the classroom, each author felt empowered when the students showed appreciation for the instruction. But, we also experienced angst when the societal presuppositions crept into the classroom, feeling somewhat restricted in our abilities to combat these presuppositions. However, Martin had the unique opportunity to resist the societal positioning as he responded in writing to the article critiquing his research, thus defending his beliefs on a national level.

Loss of teacher identity was part of the personal level, a difficult border to cross for beginning teacher educators, it seemed. As Turner (1969) pointed out, liminality is “the realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (p. 97). These feelings can be traced in the narratives by both Martin and Katarina as they each described the transition from being a classroom teacher to being a teacher educator. Both identified a sense of self was lost in the process of becoming teacher educators, which could be explained by feelings of being neither here nor there—not a classroom teacher anymore, but not yet fully an incorporated identity of teacher educator. Elizabeth, as more experienced, already crossed the border. Still, all three authors had lingering tensions due to an unwillingness to identify with how public opinion regarded teacher education in general.

Specifically, feelings of loss were often connected to a societal discourse that embraced a non-disputable truth, both in the U.S. and Sweden, that teacher education, in general, fails to produce good teachers. Because language is constitutive of the social world (Fairclough, 1992), this discourse is almost impossible to oppose, despite the absence of evidence. In the U.S., policymakers believe they know what it means to teach because their own experiences mean more than research (Saphier, 1994). This is what Lortie (1975) referred to as “apprenticeship of observation”. According to Elizabeth, “the idea creeps in that we don’t need teacher preparation programs, especially out of the university, because anyone can teach based on personal experiences as a student in the school systems”. This discourse leads to loss of self-confidence and dignity. In Sweden, the media let academics in various fields vent unfounded, sweeping opinions about the ills of teacher education. Additionally, bolognization of higher education has been going on for the last decade or so, to the effect that higher education is becoming standardized, bringing the accountability culture in its trail. The constant evaluations, where students anonymously judge the courses, and, in effect, teacher education, may make the teachers less willing to experiment

and improvise. Thus, the joy and pleasure of teaching vanishes to some extent, interlinking the societal and the personal.

Implications

From the data and analysis, how the students position themselves/are positioned by us seemed to be crucial to the “repertoire of acts” we can access (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 5) in relation to both the students and society as a whole. Therefore, we propose two ways by which to discuss the complexities of these relationships as they relate to the field of teacher education. Although both can be applied transnationally, we recognize the importance of understanding the national/local context when determining the stance.

First, teacher educators can position themselves together with students, future teachers. In this, they retain their identities as teachers, giving up the surface acting to position themselves as co-learners, outside the negative societal discourse. For example, when we showed our vulnerability, we aligned ourselves with our students. This act of *not* surface acting could be considered a form of resistance.

Alternately, teacher educators can position themselves as separate from students, future teachers, as they align the students with the negative societal discourse. This positioning demonstrates more insecurity and emotion management because surface acting is based on the division created by society’s presuppositions between teacher educators and students. Thus, emotional labor limits the ability to push the boundaries toward full connectivity with students, and could be seen as a defense mechanism. As teacher educators, when under attack, we may want to take the easy way out and surface act not to lose face.

However, resistance could come in the form of addressing the presuppositions through discussion, making the students aware of public opinion about school and teacher education, how it is discursively constructed and how and by whom students, teachers and teacher educators are positioned. Thus, positioning theory may help teacher educators, together with students, take a line to and resist boundaries that limit within the profession.

Engaging in these forms of activities are signs that we have not lost hope in our ability to produce change through our actions within teacher education and ultimately in society. Therefore, this inquiry inspires us to collaborate with other teacher educators to continue considering the complexities of crossing borders and pushing boundaries as acts of resistance to societal presuppositions.

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