



This paper is taken from

*Teaching Citizenship
Proceedings of the seventh Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2005

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 389 1

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Folkesson, A., Hartsmar, N. (2005) Negotiating identity and citizenship in teacher education, in Ross, A. (ed) Teaching Citizenship. London: CiCe, pp 141-146.

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit at the time of the conference, and for the initial stages of editing this book
- Lindsay Melling and Gitesh Gohel of IPSE, London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Negotiating identity and citizenship in teacher education

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Introduction

The first term of Teacher Education at most Universities in Sweden has, since 2001, nearly always been a period in which students study in mixed groups: they will have had different graduation profiles, from Pre School to FE College, and will also be mixed by their choice of subject. This is because students are expected to work *in* and *with* heterogeneous groups, which is one of the main principles of the Swedish Teacher education reforms. The correlation between parental social background and educational choice is well known: higher parental socio-economic status predicts a higher level of education for their children. In the current case, where students studying traditionally academic education, such as for being a FE College teacher, studying in the same program as Pre-school teachers, it is interesting to understand what happens to teacher identity. The aim of this paper is exploratory and twofold.

Firstly we want to study the background variables of who the new teachers are. Secondly we want to analyse how they express their identity in interactions. To do this, we used two different instruments; a quantitative for the study of a large group and a qualitative small-scale study of four students.

Who are the Teacher students?

The sample consisted of 180 students in their first term in the Department of Nature, Environment and Science (NES) at the University of Malmö. The majority studied mathematics, and a minor group chose science. As to graduation profile, the students fall into two groups, here called Teachers of Early Years (going to teach children from 1 to 12 years) and Teachers of Later Years (to work with youth, from 13 to 19 years).

Nearly two-thirds were female, with an average age 26. The vast majority were in the age range 19 to 33, a small number were between 34 and 51. To identify ethnic variables, we identified the language spoken at home – Swedish, Other language and Swedish, and Other language. About two-thirds had a Swedish background and 30 (about 17%) were categorised as having an immigrant background. We identified social class by parental educational level: only 16% had both parents with higher education. Considering parents separately, less than one-third of them had higher education.

The students completed an attitude questionnaire in the second week of their first term. Examination results were used as a result variable. The questionnaire was created from self-evaluation research, and further developed by Svingby and Malmberg¹. The items deal with Academic self-concept, Group work attitudes Motivation and learning style, Motivation of educational choice, Knowledge attitude. A factor analysis was conducted for each of the five groups of items; the reliability and the alpha coefficient were calculated. Three of the group variables were not used since the reliability was considered

¹ Malmberg, C, & Svingby, G. (2004).

too low. Some of the employed group variables can also be considered uncertain (less than 0.70) but as this survey was an exploratory study, we still chose to use those who were above 0.60). The factor analysis resulted in different group variables which are used to describe our students' identities related to attitudes to Academic studies, Group work, Motivation and learning style, Teacher education and knowledge.

For academic self-concept, two kinds of attitudes were noted, The Academic and The Non-academic. In the Group work attitude we could identify The Team worker, The Solitary and The Elitist. Motivation and learning style items were grouped into The Minimalist, who gave the least possible efforts to their studies, The Engaged, The Unengaged and The Memorizer.

The most prevalent reason for choice of Teacher education was the group of Super teachers, who wanted to become good teachers, develop the school, and were interested in pupils and their subject as well as their own development as learners. Focussing on pupils or on subject was also chosen as single items. The final group of questions were supposed to measure knowledge attitude. Factor analysis did not show the three different attitudes that were clear in the instrument. But when computing the alpha coefficient for each of the three, named as objective, personal and changeable, it was shown that two concepts could be used: The Objective knowledge attitude and The Personal approach to knowledge.

In short, most students had an above average positive academic self-concept, although this was not very positive. Few had a negative academic self-concept. There were more Team workers than there were Solitarys and Elitists. Most students were Engaged, but not on a very high level. The vast majority regard themselves as future Super teachers who were interested both in the pupils and their subjects. The attitude to knowledge was average, on both the objective and personal attitude scales. The results presented below show how identity, related to age, sex, ethnicity and class, can explain some of these attitudes to study and the results of their first exam.

The older students seem to have a more positive academic self-concept, but this does not mean the opposite was true for the younger students. There is nothing in this study that explains which student has general difficulties due to a negative academic self-concept. Age seems to explain the engagement. Younger students also tend to perceive knowledge as objective.

More male students have a positive academic self-concept; more of them are also elitists and minimalists, whilst the female students tend to be more engaged and more interested in pupils. This difference does not imply that subject interest or lack of engagement is dominant among male students, neither can we claim that the female students have a more negative academic self-concept.

Ethnicity does not explain academic self-concept. There is predominance for students with an immigrant background to take on a more elitist attitude than the others. They tend to agree more with both the objective and the personal attitude towards knowledge than other students. It is possible that both language difficulties and cultural background, due to learning traditions in schools and in their family history, lead them to memorise more. The small group of students who only speak their mother tongue at home seem to memorise more than the others.

Students with more educated fathers seem to have a more positive self-concept and are more elitist. Mothers' educational level only explains a more personal attitude to knowledge, particularly with students who have a less-educated mother. As this was the least reliable variable, perhaps too much attention should not be given to this, but as this was also found with students with an immigrant background, it might indicate that students who grew up at a distance from academic cultural beliefs may feel more secure if they rely on themselves and their personal beliefs.

Students who intend to work in the Later Years have a more positive academic self-concept and are more focussed on the subject, and the future teachers in the Early Years are more child-focussed. This cannot be interpreted as though these attitudes are dichotomised. The differences are significant, but the mean value for both shows that both student groups agree to a high level. There are no differences for Motivation, Learning style, Teacher education choice or Knowledge attitude.

Results of the first written examination were used as an outcome variable. More successful students had both parents with higher education, but success rate was not explained by a positive academic self-concept, nor by the fathers' educational level, but the educational level of the mother.

In order to understand more about these complicated identities, we used multivariate analysis to understand, for example, differential impacts of class and ethnicity and gender. But we also need to examine how these students can be described from the micro perspective. The following section deals with our second research question; how identity is expressed.

How do the teacher students express their identity?

Our understanding of identity assumes that this is dynamic and changes over time and in varied contexts. At a group level, identity often is expressed in collegiality, loyalty and affinity. Identities are influenced by and interplay with society as a whole. In the following we show that situational contexts have a strong influence on how individuals position their identities.

A group of four students voluntarily recorded their group meetings on CD. Each recording lasts about 80 minutes. Short excerpts from the dialogues will be illustrated and discussed below.

Three female and one male Swedish student, Lina, Carin, Amelia and Pierre, recorded their dialogues on the following topics:

- their own positive and negative school memories; for dramatization in the 45-group; (beginning of term);
- preparation for a simulated parent-teacher meeting to discuss taking a class to a campsite. One student would act as the teacher, the others as parents (mid term); and
- assessment of fellow students' home exams (end of term).

Bakhtin² viewed identity as being made relevant through dialogues. Language acts are social, and identity changes when students act and position themselves in the dialogues.

² Bakhtin, M. (1981).

The situations here are immediate, and at the same time influenced by earlier experiences of discussing tasks given by teachers throughout the educational system. These conversations are part of a larger intertextual weave and may be seen as linguistic scaffolding³. In interacting, the students use previous knowledge, are challenged by the other group members and try out new thoughts. In this sense, each one of them also brings a historical dimension into the talk. This is by Linell⁴ seen as a contextual resource that may or may not have influence on the interaction.

School memories

The group decided to make a film of their memories. Lina contributes with a bad school memory. She knows how to edit and is confident in planning the script. She explains how diminished she once had felt because of an insensitive teacher and she has numerous ideas about how this could be illustrated. During her first year in school the teacher has handed out new books to write in. Lina misspells a word and is not allowed to use the book for some time. This occasion changes her self-image as a writer.

Carin shares a good memory of how she, 'not so good in maths', suddenly is the only one in the class who can solve a problem. Showing the solution on the black board gives her a feeling of being good enough. When she now is describing it, she acts and sounds, however, as if she does not really trust her present abilities.

L: Let us write that, C is not so good at maths.

A: C is lousy at maths. She is the worst.

P: A bit weak! /.../

C: As if I am extremely bad but having decided to become a teacher!

Reading the whole transcript might lead one to believe that the conversation is just for fun. Listening to the voices gives another view: the feeling of uncertainty shown by Carin triggers the others to go too far in joking about it. Carin is still unsure how to position her identity as a future maths teacher. While Amelia supports Lina and Carin in their choices for the film, Pierre is more or less anonymous and silent. When he says something it is just making funny remarks. Neither Amelia nor Pierre suggests any memories of their own.

The parent-teacher meeting

The picture changes completely when they have to find strategies for the parent-teacher meeting. The discussion is about 'others'. They repeatedly come back to the position that they do not have enough information about the class. If any problems will arise, they are considered to be of an ethnic character.

C: It says (instructions) that the children are by different origin. /.../

L: It must be something (meals) that works for everyone.

³ Wertsch, J. (1998).

⁴ Linell, P. (1998).

P: Halal. (Slaughtered according to Muslim rules) /.../

C: The girls have to swim first and then the boys. Some are not aloud to swim, some have to have lots of clothes on and some may not show anything at all. /.../

Later on they worry about parents coming to the camp bringing alcohol.

L: Such a parent cannot come!

A: If he wants to come and cook?

L: Muslims do not drink, do they?

A: That is what they say but I have worked on a ferry and I know. They are not better at all.

Considering the whole discussion, it is Carin who steps forward and reminds the others of the importance of having the correct information. She tries to reason the way she thinks a teacher would. Lina worries about the risk of being appointed to be the teacher in the simulated situation. Amelia positions herself as the one who knows about the others (Muslims). Pierre's voice is only heard in funny remarks or in occasional words interposed in the others' sentences.

Assessments of fellow students' written home exams

From criteria determined by teachers and students, all base groups were to assess coded home exams. The base group members had to agree on comments to the authors and give one of the final marks, 'pass', 'make minor adjustments' or 'failed'. Teachers assessed the same texts. The writers and assessing groups then compared the teacher's comments with those of the students, and discussed similarities and differences. Pierre is absent. The others read and assess four texts.

Lina takes the lead and comments on her mother's ability to help her with academic stuff like this. While Amelia and Lina try to give comments based on concrete examples in the text, Carin more often agrees on their comments than elaborating on her own. They confuse quality with quantity and give a great effort in all texts to see 'how much' is in it.

C: It has got sustainable development.

A: It has got pedagogy, gender, ethnicity, ethics, special needs and practice. /.../

L: I have written: 'Could have come up with his own material instead of using headlines from lecturers. It is rubbish and filling up and then it does not pass.

In previous years teachers only saw the final comments and marks given by each base group. In most cases, teachers' and students' assessments were fairly close, which had led us to think that students grasp the idea of assessment by given criteria. However, listening to the discussion provides a deeper understanding of how these students position themselves as understanding the theoretical base and how they rely on personal ideas and feelings of what might pass or be failed.

Challenging and negotiating identities in the centre and the periphery

Using Giddens⁵ terminology of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’, the students in the three base-group meetings position themselves, or are positioned, in the periphery while the others are in the centre. The centre, according to Giddens, is those who set the rules of the game, and who produce and reproduce all kinds of norms, deciding who is included or excluded, and have admittance to symbolic capital (see also Giampapa⁶). All of them act according to situational conditions. This might be described as versions of the self in relation to others: it implies an active role in creating different identities.

The pronouns ‘I’ and ‘we’ in the talks, implicate a relation to ‘they’ or ‘you’, the others, and in that way constitute a positioning and negotiating in social relations. As Engblom⁷ points out, the ‘we’ and ‘they’ may be both situated and valid for a specific situation here and now or go beyond the situated, including people outside the talk. Those who participate may in this way move in and out of situations and make identities relevant in different groupings.

In discussing ethnicity, in this context they position themselves with a ‘we’-identity, while ‘they’ are the ones they need to know more about. They complain about lack of information, but their utterances also show that there are things that they as individuals or as a group ‘know’ about ‘them’. In this sense they position their own identities in the centre where the ‘known’ is, while the ‘unknown’ is put in the periphery.

Further research

As has been shown, different research questions and instruments give different ideas of teacher student identities. To understand more about similarities and differences we need to go more in depth with the material. We also need more data about the rest of their studies, and especially to focus on whether this new system of Teacher education is producing greater understanding and tolerance of different perspectives, or if existing differences will persist or even increase.

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