

## THE DIASPORA SENSIBILITY IN TEACHER IDENTITY: LOCATING SELF THROUGH STORY

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The concept of diaspora describes the dispersal of persons from their traditional homeland, across national and cultural borders. We explore diasporic (dis)location as it disrupts and recreates teacher identity. The nomadic movement across borders in professional development is best understood through narrative; hence we examine the self-constructed narratives of three participants in a graduate class representing diverse cultural backgrounds who traced their complex and shifting teacher stories as a construct to understand the complex shifts in their identities. In a rapidly changing global migration, these narratives provide insight into the navigations and negotiations of diasporic journeys and shifting, evolving perceptions of teacher identities.

Key words: teacher learning, narrative as heuristic, dialogic, transnational migration, transnational dislocation

Le concept de diaspora évoque la dispersion des personnes loin de leur pays d'origine et le franchissement de frontières nationales et culturelles. Les auteures explorent la dislocation de la diaspora et son lien avec la rupture et la recréation de l'identité d'enseignant. Le nomadisme au-delà des frontières dans le perfectionnement professionnel se comprend mieux à travers des récits ; les auteures examinent donc les comptes rendus personnels de trois participants dans un cours du second cycle

universitaire. Venus d'horizons culturels différents, ces participants relatent leurs histoires complexes sous le signe du changement comme un construit visant à élucider la transformation de leurs identités. Compte tenu de l'évolution rapide et complexe de la migration à l'échelle internationale, ces récits permettent de mieux saisir les navigations et négociations des périples de la diaspora et l'évolution des perceptions des identités des enseignants.

Mots clés : apprentissage chez les enseignants, récit et migration heuristique, dialogique et transnationale, dislocation transnationale.

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The concept of diaspora challenges the “cultural and historical mechanics of belonging” (Gilroy, 2000, p. 123) because it describes the dispersal of persons from their traditional homeland, across national and cultural borders. *Diaspora*, the ancient Greek word signifying the scattering or sowing of seeds, conjures up images of resettlement and migration, often as forced resettlement due to expulsion. The term now also refers to the postmodern construction of identity within and against the borders of nations and languages. Cultural theorist Paul Gilroy (2000) maps this personal development onto a “critical space/time cartography” (p. 117) that interrogates the concept of belonging. He traces new forms of national and ethnic belonging that are interstitial, trans-border, nomadic, and multifaceted.

These new forms of belonging seem more appropriate in making sense of lives that are disrupted by migration. Global economic migration and resettlement delineate cartographies of empire and territoriality, opening up a new cultural space – “a third space where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences...” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 218). Diasporic subjects live the dialectic between globally dominant paradigms and the localized lived experiences by which they negotiate new meaning for those same paradigms. Bhabha argues that the diasporic identity is both transnational and translational: it is rooted in specific historical and cultural displacement, and it troubles relationships to language in general and to mother tongue in particular.

In the context of a global education market, the concept of diaspora lends itself as a means of theorizing teacher identity that often moves

through a diaspora sensibility due to the autobiographical crisis that marks induction into the profession. As teachers develop, they cross many borders, both social and epistemic. Diaspora, in such an instance, pertains to the personal journey across those borders and to the nomadic identity and altered sense of belonging that emerge. Teachers dwell in the hybrid space of contested authority and between the institution and their lived history. Aside from this internal trajectory, teachers also live historical trajectories, often involving movement across national borders. Stories of teacher migration are common because of the dictates of a global professional market, and because of the assumption that teaching and learning are somehow universal and can be easily translated from one context to another.

#### CONTEXT

This article arose out of the collaborative and shared experiences of a graduate class in education entitled, "From Student to Teacher: Professional Induction." Each week members reflectively evoked and reconstructed their understanding of teaching and teacher identity in narratives that traced their developing teacher induction and identity. The chronological development of the course (from entrance into teacher education to teacher induction in the schools) was reflected in the teacher narratives that served as parallel texts to the weekly class readings.

Three members of the class, Xiahong and Suyin (females) and Shaozu (male) emigrated from Mainland China and Hong Kong. Shaozu and Xiahong had been teachers in Hong Kong and China, respectively; Suyin became a teacher after her arrival in Canada. Their narratives and readings of the class text revealed particularly complex, reflexive, unfixed teacher identities. They traced their stories across national and personal borders to sites of otherness beyond their home country, following paths of immigration and diaspora to Canada where they continued the ongoing and ever emergent process of self-making through telling narratives. Each was involved in the construction of a cultural identity in which the "unstable points of identification or suture" (Hall, 1990, p. 226) coincided with significant moments in their teacher development. Each belonged within the national border and to the teaching profession in contradictory ways. Each came to recognize

the power of conjuring a metaphoric sense of place to ground an identity within Canada, a multicultural nation. The same sense of place, although sometimes troubling, was also at the root of their understanding of membership in the teaching profession. The haunting sense of an origin outside of Canada came from their distinct family histories. All lived a unique relation to their home country and believed their teacher identity was woven into the storied terrain of their lives as they moved across real and symbolic borders.

Creating narratives for each class allowed the three participants to use a deliberate construct for re-viewing and reconstructing their fluid and shifting teacher identities and selves. The narratives became “telling” to both the writers and the readers (Kooy, 2006). Geertz (1973) speaks to the power of story, noting that humans, as “symbolizing, conceptualizing, meaning-seeking” animals, are driven “to make sense out of [their] experience, to give it form and order” (p. 436). Bruner (2002) suggests a complex sense of story as a construct for finding, rather than merely or more simplistically, solving problems. This “finding” suggests an active process, a way to make meaning through constructing narratives.

The complementary narratives created for the class built on the premise that narrative is the very stuff of teaching. Teachers tell and hear stories in hallways and staff rooms. Even in such brief encounters, tellers set the stage, construct a plot, and provide characters and a real-life problem. Carter and Doyle (1996) found that “biography, narrative and life history [are] at the centre of teaching practice, the study of teachers, and the teacher education process” (p. 120). Increasingly, inquiry into teaching includes narratives as legitimate and valuable research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999) that provide holistic accounts of individual learning and acknowledge the interconnectedness of the intellectual, social, emotional, and moral aspects of people’s lives. Yet, although teachers intuitively portion out stories in and of their daily teaching lives, few recognize that each telling allows a re-viewing, a making sense and meaning, a way into professional understanding (Carter, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 1999; Kooy, 2006). Those who hear the stories also expand their understanding and scope of teaching, developing a repertoire of teaching narratives not unlike readers who with each

reading expand their store of experiences and their possibilities for thinking. They have more to work with. Hence, teacher narratives reveal what stories *do* for both creator and listener. Narrative provides a richness and comprehensiveness of detail well suited to the description of educational experiences (Carter, 1990, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 1999; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kooy, 2006).

In this article, we map a terrain where three distinct participant narratives intersect, using metaphoric descriptive topographies of place to convey the depth of each story. These descriptive terrains set the scene for each narrative. Each is a symbolic site of identity negotiation. Each site of negotiation begins with the topographical metaphor and evolves into a narrative about teacher identity development. Each site is thus an intersection between professional development and the experience of border crossing.

This small group's diversity and history of displacement made a metaphorical framework a viable mode for highlighting the connectedness of their diasporic identities. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) use metaphor to "comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally" (p. 193). Langer (1957) observed that metaphor "does not really make a statement of the idea it conveys; but it formulates a new conception for our direct, imaginative grasp" (p. 23). Metaphor is rooted in the Greek words for "bearing across" and describes a movement of ideas into images. Rushdie advocates for this effective conflation of metaphor with migration. Rushdie observed that:

Migrants – borne-across humans – are metaphorical beings in their very essence; and migration, seen as a metaphor, is everywhere around us. We all cross frontiers; in that sense, we are all migrant peoples. (Cited in Kumar, 2000, p. 13)

The analyses and conclusion of the stories are partial and suggestive, like the descriptive topographies that introduce each site of negotiation, adding another layer and offering a possible vantage point for understanding the co-construction of self and story. Like the stories, the analysis of the stories is also steeped in perspective. By no means is our interpretation intended as the theoretical grounding for the illustrative story, nor the objective view on the various sites of identity negotiation. Instead, we hope it helps the reader carve out the complexity and multi-

dimensional terrain of shared stories on the educational landscape.

As education scholars, the three participants worked within different research methodological strands. The focus, direction, and even the conception of story that each member of the international group held were transformed through the interactive collaboration. Carter's (1993) article, "The place of story in the study of teaching and teacher education," proved pivotal for all three. Carter's careful analysis of story and thorough consideration of the possible roles for teacher stories proved crucial in clarifying a vision of how personal narrative can function as a heuristic and form of research. For researchers wrestling with questions about rigor and validity, Carter presents narrative as a valid epistemological alternative to describe the event-structured expertise of a teacher.

The teaching and learning stories emerged from three very distinct locations, each exhibiting a radically different perspective on the role of story in teacher development. Although the three teachers did not explicitly discuss this difference in their narratives, their movement across national and personal borders marked each story with this difference. The topographical metaphors sustain that difference of the distinct stories (and the distinct relation to story) into one connected terrain. Each distinct location of the teachers' narratives documents a unique path across the story landscape and underscores the significance of place in the development of teacher identity. Each teacher's journey links East and West and shifts traditional cultural boundaries that may have separated the participants prior to their encounter. Like any other map, we hope ours suggests nonlinear directions and possible detours.

Each of the three narratives that follows embraces a topographical metaphor to explore the particular journey: Suyin uses a river, Shaozu, the woods, and Xiahong, the valley. The three narrators speak in their own voices to their own diasporic experiences, journeys, and complex shifting teacher identities in the context of their metaphorical landscape entity.

SUYIN: *THE RIVER*

An old river runs through arid land. It meanders around moguls of blonde grass. A deer darts through the grass and risks a drink at the

river's edge. A road, re-paved many times, follows the river and at times conceals it. The water moves quietly and smoothly, almost too quietly, as though anxious about its destination. The barren, treeless horizon blinds the unshielded eye.

I arrive in Canada and am reluctant to return to social work. I volunteer in a day care centre and teach heritage language on Saturdays, although I know nothing about teaching. I have a strong Chinese accent when I speak English, and I am sensitive to the dilemmas of translation. I am hired as an "intervention educational assistant" who knows how to use sign language for a multiple-handicapped girl in a public school for physically challenged students. We communicate in a third language, neither Cantonese nor English. As a newcomer to both the country and the school system, I begin the process of familiarizing myself with the school culture. I observe how health workers take care of students with different needs. The hands-on, activity-based methodologies and teaching resources impress me. I find myself powerfully drawn to this life and begin thinking about being a special needs teacher.

When I apply to a teacher education program, my acceptance is conditional on my first completing a Teacher Apprenticeship Program organized by three local school boards. The program allows me to work in a classroom for six months with an experienced associate teacher. I eagerly begin the program with an associate teacher in a kindergarten class where two students, who cannot speak English, are challenging the system. I enjoy the challenge and the opportunity to help. I want these children to risk a drink at the river's edge.

I begin my formal teaching training and my new associate teacher expects me to know everything about teaching. She asks me to sit in the teacher's rocking chair and present her lesson to the twenty-two children and a few of their parents. Though I feign confidence, my legs tremble. There is no sense of nurturing a third space where difference might be cultivated. This experience shakes me to my very roots.

My second teaching placement in the program in a Catholic school takes place in a combined grade. The attitude and expectations of the associate teacher are remarkably similar to the first. I begin to doubt my abilities to teach and even my desire to enter the profession. The arid landscape encroaches on my passion to help those who are marginalized

within schools. I feel betrayed by language itself, as though I have been silenced.

Having made the enormous decision to pursue teaching as a career and to complete a teacher education program as well as an additional qualifications course in special education, I am rudely awakened to the fact that few, if any, teaching positions exist. No school boards are able to hire new teachers in the saturated market. I wait. I am desperate. Reluctantly, I re-enter my earlier profession. Only some years later, when the need for teachers arises, I enter teaching and begin the winding journey, dividing the terrain with the river, dividing and touching my languages and cultures.

In my teaching, I see myself as a river, offering solace to the thirsty. Students with special needs sense my purpose and seek me out. Sometimes I am drained by their demands. My stories are almost always about struggle, hardship, and survival, as though the concept of necessity has embedded itself within me. I teach in my second-language, haunted by a feeling of being once removed.

#### SHAOZU: *THE WOODS*

The sounds of red-winged blackbirds travel across the marsh. The birds dive and twist, their flight a series of sudden shifts, angling low to the ground and between the reeds. The sky is large and empty and the place is very peaceful. The gray bark of a resting willow tree awaits the light of spring. A boardwalk winds through the reeds and stops at the edge of a pine forest.

As an expert in my field, and unable to find work, I take a teaching position and cultivate a warm and nurturing classroom environment. I enjoy chatting and playing sports with my students. I organize outings and play an active role in extra-curricular activities. Student-teacher rapport proves exciting and inspiring for me. I am able to conduct my lessons in a comfortable, open environment where students share their opinions freely. My practice is in stark contrast to the other teachers who insist on absolute silence and strict discipline at the post-secondary level, as is the cultural habit in Hong Kong. Unlike them, I am the unfettered bird, free to respond to the events and students.

Despite my joy at engaging students, I slowly slip into the standard



teacher-centred pedagogy. Rote-memory work begins to dominate the learning environment. With time, I become a more effective teacher in the eyes of the institution. I am good at delivering the curriculum materials in a logical, well-planned, sequential, structured, and organized manner. But I begin to find myself unable to motivate students. I have no idea how to turn the tide, to return to the elation of the freedom. I fail to understand what caused such a great change in my teaching life. How did I get to this place where I feel trapped and I do not recognize my place?

After twenty years of teaching, I attend a teacher workshop where my ideas about teacher practice are turned upside down. I am astounded by the radical suggestion that students learn differently through active, cooperative pedagogy. I begin to develop an awareness of the importance of diversity in learning style. I begin to question my truths. I wonder what will happen to my teaching. What will happen to student learning? How will I change my teaching strategies? How will the students respond? Will they be more motivated to learn? Will they be able to pass their exams? And finally, how will my own learning change? I am moving; a light begins to filter in and brings a new sense of my surroundings. I am connecting with my earlier self, my teacher identity.

My wife and I decide to emigrate to Canada, hoping that our children will enjoy better educational opportunities and develop a good command of English. I am now on the boardwalk at the outer edge of the forest. It is dusk and the light plays across the reeds. I leave the boardwalk and enter the forest after a lifetime of teaching; I arrive in Canada, and enroll in a graduate education program. I leave behind my ossified teacher identity, the pat and easy plots that placed me on the road to the traditional teaching model of the expert. Now I live in the language of self-discovery and my stories grapple with challenges of self-expression in a foreign language. I have risked everything to enter the unknown forest.

XIAHONG: *THE VALLEY*

The richly verdant valley stretches towards the west. Ancient grapevines trail the side of a slow incline. Narrow dirt paths trace the pickers' paths along the edges of the hills. Clouds gather in rings around the valley's

perimeter. The rain races down through the dug ditches and collects in pools at the crossroads. In the spring, there is flooding.

In my homeland, I am dedicated to helping my students learn the English language. My own command of the global medium has emerged after years of hard work. I know first hand the challenges of second-language acquisition. Many years of struggling often result in inadequate language skill. Often, students' fears of making mistakes prohibit their participation. They are afraid of being laughed at by others for their poor pronunciation. They are afraid of losing face. My common refrain at the start of each class is, "Put your face into your pocket."

As an English instructor, I am aware that English serves as an entry pass for better opportunities. This richly verdant valley stretches toward the west. I am conscious of wanting to find the "golden key" to "open the English language door" for my students. But I begin to doubt my motives. Clouds gather in rings around the valley's perimeter. I am less certain about language and learning. I feel the need to rethink my understanding of language.

To that end, I invite some American colleagues to help instructors in my department improve our communicative competence in English by hosting a weekly seminar meeting. We experience hands-on communicative activities, and are able to see the theory in practice. I find myself moving toward integrating communicative components in my classes. I turn my attention to the field of language education. I naively believe that individual language teachers can single-handedly change language education. I tentatively embrace interdisciplinary and intra-disciplinary collaborations. I become more uncertain and ambivalent. Eventually, I begin to dimly see the roadblocks and limitations that slowly creep up on the horizon and block my view. Encased in my own culture and context, I recognize my need to change my perceptions and language.

In putting my face to the West, I am increasingly aware that learning English means interrogating culture, identity, privilege, and access. My gaze westward reflects ideals – only clear springs, hopeful possibilities. The magnet and mystery of the West do their work. I arrive in Canada expecting only the clear pools and eternal spring in an ever-verdant green valley.

When I first arrive in Canada, I feel like a little frog, a champion in a remote pond, who plunges into the Ocean and suddenly finds she can hardly swim. My studies help me to see that professional development is a life-long process. I begin to see teachers as researchers. This especially impresses me. My own learning moves into a broader context. It rains prodigiously. It is spring. All around me, the valley reveals new growth, new bursts of green and wild flowers.

My perspectives on language education and the role of a language teacher evolve in the new context. I no longer look for the "golden key" to open the language door. I soon realize that the ultimate goal of language education is to "help create a society of multicultural, bilingual and insightful citizens who see the world as a place for all" (Young & Kimball, 1995). The rain races down through the dug ditches and collects in the pools at the crossroads. In the spring, there is flooding in the valley.

#### RETRACING THE DIASPORA OF TEACHER IDENTITY

*Life can only be understood backwards,*

*But it must be lived forwards.*

Soren Kierkegaard (1996, p. 63)

The retrospective glance reveals the invisible forces at work in teacher identity development. Retracing the steps along the journey and revisiting the sites of identity negotiation suggest connecting themes. The journey metaphor serves as an interpretive instrument that forces the reader to highlight the way each location is a dwelling on/in the experience of language as cultural pedagogy. Indeed, the entire terrain seems saturated with the recurring issue of language and its relation to identity. Each narrative, although beginning from distinctive starting points (secondary teacher, social worker, university language educator), reflects the navigations and negotiations that mark the diasporic journeys and shifting perceptions of the three complex and evolving teacher identities.

Suyin's site, the river, is a place of thirst, longing, and despair, a place of haunting absence in which the English language divides identity. She dwells on those moments of exclusion from the institution

and relates her struggle to the issue of linguistic membership: "I teach in my second-language, haunted by a feeling of being once removed." The story reflects a strong sense of dislocation. She recounts the jarring experience of learning to teach in someone else's classroom, in someone else's language, and focusing on children who themselves are dislocated from the shared language of the school community. The river seems to meander fitfully through an unwelcoming terrain with little growth and little potential for belonging.

The second narrative by Shaozu enters the wooded terrain that begins with the decision to leave his teaching post in Hong Kong and move to Canada. This he does with two goals in mind: the hope that his children will develop a good command of English and his own entry into graduate education as a means to navigate his way into developing an altered sense of his teaching self and knowledge. His account traces a series of radical shifts in his identity, each meant to contrast with the previous stage in his teacher development, possibly because he was the oldest of the three participants when he emigrated and felt that he had abandoned a well-established, although conflicted, cultural identity in Hong Kong. He associates his new found "upside down" awareness with his movement to Canada.

His story dwells on the border between mastery methods and the unknown. Listeners to his narrative can hear the caution and risk, the fear and excitement, the abandonment of home and comfort, and the open embrace of a new, but possibly dislocating membership in the teaching profession. The ever-present English language lurks beneath the journey, itself the vehicle for the telling, and yet also the means by which otherness is erased. Shaozu grapples with the discomfort of displacement; he is uncomfortable in English and struggles to express his own learning, while trying to imagine a new teacher identity that locates him within this new discomfoting language.

Xiahong, the third narrator, takes readers to the valley where she assumes a more critical position with regard to language use, naming how pedagogy fails to wholly or seamlessly transport the learner across borders of linguistic belonging. She tentatively moves towards a more political stance, suggesting that, "Learning English means interrogating culture, identity, privilege and access." She becomes aware of the need to

critique the market model of English as a “golden key” opening up the door of economic opportunity. She sees the citizenship issues beneath the goals of language learning. She begins to articulate a position that conceives of language as never purely instrumental; it always produces an excess of supplemental meaning through its lived experience. The story intimates how speech is regularly flooded with indeterminate and unintentional significance. The successful language teacher, suggests the author, learns to recognize the radical alterity of language use, even when, or perhaps especially when, the language is English as a second language, that “golden key” of opportunity.

In all three instances, the terrain is submerged beneath the emergent issue of language. The English language, in particular, permeates each diaspora and interferes with each participant's sense of belonging. All three teachers are forced to locate themselves in relation to the normative status of English. This article begins with the concept of place, both metaphorical and physical, and evolves into a sustained reflection about language and identity. The map reveals how a relation to language mediates a sense of place and belonging. Belonging cannot happen without language. And yet, language always abandons, opening into vast gaping holes of metaphoric possibility (Barthes, 1985). The paradox of all subject positions is that language is both necessary and insufficient to ensure a sense of identity.

Theorizing the subject as a site of transgressed borders means recognizing the potential for radical displacement. Before anything else, language stakes its claim on individual identity and belonging (Gadamer, 1989), and informs the development of teacher identity across national borders. The diaspora sensibility recognizes and grapples with the desire to belong to both place and language, problematizing the traditional concept of membership, and tracing an exploratory, restless movement (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4) through the fluid ideological medium of language.

The participants in the research reported in this article negotiate a relational position on the postmodern terrain “where language is understood as a system of competing discourses” (Lather, 1991, p. 118). The location in this terrain is always nomadic, situated but transient, a “moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex

figures of difference and identity" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2).

This nomadic movement across borders and through professional development is best understood through narrative (Carter, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Dewey, 1938). "Teacher education," Clandinin and Connelly (1999) suggest, can be thought of as "a narrative history of life experiences" (p. 27). These experiences occur in and out of schools and are constituted as "narrative life constructions" (p. 10). This conception of narrative as dialogue, as multiple and layered conversation and collegial interaction (Beattie, 1997; Grimshaw, 1989; Noddings, 1991), provides a portal both to know others and ourselves, construct identities, and reflect on teacher knowledge (Kooy, 2006). Within interpretive communities where narratives intersect and interact, teachers expand their imaginative capacities, (re)create the stories of their professional lives, and (re)construct their sense of belonging in the profession (Beattie, 1995; Kooy, 2006; McIntyre, 1998).

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