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## **Advancing a Baradian perspective on the field of identity work: An empirical analysis of the complex discourse-materiality identity construction**

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### **Abstract**

Conceptualizing identity in processual terms as identity work has long been acknowledged within the broad field of critical management and organization studies. However, recent studies show that the process by which identities evolve is still under-explored. Although extant research has considered how discourse and other symbolic means play a part in this process, this article expands such perspectives by foregrounding the relationality of discourse-materiality in identity construction processes. Using the example of an empirical analysis taken from a case study within education in Denmark, the author examines the process of identity construction by considering the ways in which discourse-materiality works to perform identities. The author combines insights from new materialist thinking with organizational discourse studies in the development of an analytics to approach the process of identity construction – coined as identity intra-activity. In doing so, the article demonstrates how an informal middle-management positioning of selected teachers is performed within its organization. By advancing the notion of identity intra-activity, the findings enable an understanding of identity work as materialized by multiple discursive-material and embodied resources – all enacted in/through the teachers' practices – creating a petri dish for examining the co-constitutive role of discourse-materiality and enabling new ways of thinking about identity work.

### **Keywords**

Identity work, discourse, materiality, co-constitution/relationality, new materialism/Karen Barad

## 1 Introduction

Identity has long been a core construct for understanding a range of phenomena in the broad field of critical management and organization studies. Despite various definitions and developments, a pivotal turn towards conceptualizing identity in processual terms as identity work and struggle has been increasingly acknowledged (Svenningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Snow & Anderson, 1987). This particular conceptualization discusses whether identity is to be treated as a fixed essence or rather as a “temporary, context-sensitive and evolving set of constructions” (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008, p. 6), thereby arguing for a fluid and ‘non-fixed’ understanding of the process of identity construction. Thus, identity is not only an inner state, but also always a political and negotiated practice subsumed into the regulatory dynamics of societal structures and discourses (Muhr *et al.*, 2019).

Although it is more than a decade since calls for a better understanding of the dynamics of identity work were voiced (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), recent studies show that, in fact, the concept of identity work is still under-surveyed (Brown, 2015). This includes research on the process by which identities are constructed and come to be. Such research concerns explorations of the particular ‘ingredients’ or resources (e.g. discourse and other symbolic means) out of which identities can be said to be crafted (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004; Altheide, 2000; Halford & Leonard, 2006). Indeed, the need for such explorations has been recognized in the literature (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008), and while scholars have provided important insights regarding the relationship between identity construction and multiple human/non-human agencies (e.g. Thomas & Davies, 2005; Bergström & Knights, 2006; Ainsworth, Grant, & Iedema, 2009; Plotnikof, 2016), in this article, I propose to push this type of inquiry even further. In doing so, I consider discourse and materiality to be identity-ingredients/resources, constituted through each other, and thus transcending entity perspectives of discourse and materiality as ontologically separable elements (Hultin & Introna, 2019). This means that the relationship between multiple discursive-material and embodied resources is foregrounded and, specifically, I attend to the resources that can be said to produce, or perform, identity work.

Following this claim, I ask: *how can we understand the process of identity construction by considering the ways in which multiple resources produce identity work?* In order to enable an analysis that is sensitive to the multiple resources that partake in the construction of identities, the work of new materialist theorist, Karen Barad, becomes a promising source of inspiration (Barad, 2003, 2007, 2011). In her seminal article (2003) on posthuman performativity, Barad redirects the focus from language as the main point of interest towards the discourse-materiality relationship. This perspective has become increasingly recognized within critical management and organizational discourse studies (Iedema, 2007; Putnam, 2015; Hardy & Thomas, 2015; Kuhn *et al.*, 2017; Dille & Plotnikof, 2020) and furthermore has stimulated a co-constitutive perspective on discourse-materiality, arguing a relational frame through which to investigate a wide array of phenomena (Scott & Orlikowski, 2015; Kuhn *et al.*, 2017; Hughes *et al.*, 2017).

In this article, I examine the complex constitutive dynamics of identity work by introducing a perspective of discourse-materiality with inspiration from Barad (2003) and organizational discourse studies (Iedema, 2007; Kuhn *et al.*, 2017). I specifically utilize Barad’s concept of intra-activity (Barad, 2003) as a form of analytics and introduce the notion of ‘identity intra-activity’ as a way to explore how the relationship of discourse-materiality performs identity work. The proposed analytics has been developed for a case study of a new informal middle-management position recently given to chosen teachers as an effect of the latest school reform in Denmark, and the article’s findings provide an empirically based account of the performativity of discourse-materiality in identity work. As the analysis will illustrate, this performative view is central, because it allows us to see what would otherwise potentially go unnoticed. Namely, that identity construction processes are subsumed and governed within a range of discursive, material and embodied resources and practices that have local effects and that shape, or condition, the identity work. In terms of the current case study, this relates to simultaneously becoming (or being) a teacher and an informal middle manager. Thus, by offering an analytical conceptualization on the basis of new materialist thinking and organizational discourse studies, the article creates a petri dish for examining the co-constitutive role of discourse-materiality and thus enables new ways of thinking about identity work.

This article, then, specifically seeks to contribute to processual and performative perspectives within identity scholarship (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Harding *et al.*, 2017; Hultin & Introna, 2019) and furthermore responds to invitations (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008) to push a research agenda on the co-constitutive ‘play’ between the diverse discursive-material resources in identity work. I commence by reviewing the literature on identity work within critical management and organization studies, touching only briefly on the various influences on conceptualizing identity, and connect this literature to perspectives on discourse-materiality relationship. Against this background, I then develop the proposed analytical conceptualization with inspiration from new materialist thinking and organizational discourse studies, and illustrate and discuss its operationalization in relation to a case study of an informal middle-management position within education. In the article’s findings, I present an empirical analysis of how discourse-materiality works to perform identities, thereby offering insights into the construction processes of identity work. Finally, I discuss how

identity intra-activity can contribute to advancing our understandings of identity work, including the implications of allowing such a conceptualization to guide future research practice.

## 2 Studies of identity work

Identity has long been used as a term across the broad field of critical management and organization studies to understand the complex relationship between self, work and processes of organizing (Brown, 2001, 2015; Ybema *et al.*, 2009a; Alvesson *et al.*, 2008). In one of the key texts mapping the field of identity scholarship, identity is characterized as a popular frame through which to investigate multiple phenomena and something that seems to “be linked to nearly everything: from merges, motivation and meaning-making to ethnicity, entrepreneurship and emotions to politics, participation and project teams” (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008, p. 5). Naturally, this manifold use has prompted a variety of influences conceptualizing identity, which also reflect different theoretical orientations. One such theoretical differentiation in the literature relates to distinctive versus fluid understandings of identity. The former emphasizes assumptions about stable identities and inherent core characteristics (Albert & Whetten, 1985), whereas the latter builds on assumptions that treat identity “as a temporary, context-sensitive and evolving set of constructions” (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008, p. 6). The term ‘identity work’ was coined (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) to capture the complexity of this latter fluid and dynamic understanding. It implies an interest in the process of identity construction and the agency that actors employ when conducting their identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Svenningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Although the concept of identity work offers a form of demarcation in identity scholarship, there is still great variety within this (sub)field, resulting in a body of literature that is rich in its diversity of approaches, foci and theorizations (Brown, 2015, p. 24). One theorization, which is of primary interest to this article, focuses on processes of becoming (Watson, 2008) and sees identities as being continuously crafted. From this perspective, there is no fixed identity, but only *identities*, in ongoing construction through discourse (Ainsworth, Grant, & Iedema, 2009; Bergström & Knights, 2006; Webb, 2006; Halford & Leonard, 2006; Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004; Altheide, 2000). This perspective rests on assumptions that see stability as merely momentary (Brown, 2015, p. 27) and identities as always negotiated and contested (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008; Alvesson, 2010). Despite a multitude of studies practising under the banner of ‘identity work’ – implying an interest in identity on processual terms across theorizations – there continues to be little research exploring “the process by which identity evolves...” (Ibarra, 1999, p. 765). This is echoed by Alvesson *et al.* (2008), who point to areas of development relating to identity work in the context of organizational life, and call for future research that directs attention towards the ‘what’, i.e. the resources or ingredients out of which identities are crafted and come to be (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008, p. 18). This call addresses the need for research exploring different conceptualizations of agency; for example, related to how discursive and material realities take part in producing identities.

In this article, I pick up on this invitation to further explore how the different resources at play contribute to the construction of *identities*. In this way, I aim to propose a conceptualization that goes beyond the ways in which different discursive elements influence processes of identity construction (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004) and echo extant literature that enables a performative perspective on discourse and materiality (Bergström & Knights, 2006; Harding *et al.*, 2017; Hultin & Introna, 2019), and thus a more fluid understanding of agency, to the study of identity work. In doing so, I also draw upon insights from the field of organizational discourse studies (this will be described in the following section), and the analysis will demonstrate how discourse-materiality relationships are made present and agentic and elucidate the performativity, or materialization, of *identities*.

### 2.1 Connecting studies of identity work to literature on discourse-materiality relationship

Throughout the past 30 years, an increasing focus on the constitutive processes that produce organizational realities has developed within the broad field of critical management studies, and particularly within organizational discourse studies – abandoning the perception of organizations as *a priori* entities of existence. This development was triggered to a large degree by the so-called ‘linguistic turn’, focusing on how language, rather than reflecting social reality, in fact produces it (Rorty, 1967). This turn, and the inherent insights into the significance of language’s constituting role, has arguably contributed to an interest in discourse, especially amongst scholars concerned with discourse and communication (Phillips & Oswick, 2012; Cooren *et al.*, 2011; Kuhn & Putnam, 2014; Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2014).

Recent years, though, have been characterized by intense debates about whether an over-emphasis on discourse in a language-restricted sense has led to a disregard of materiality. Specifically, these discussions concern the degree to which discourse and materiality should be viewed as a classic dualism or rather as entangled and co-constitutive features of everyday organizational life (Iedema 2007; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Philips & Oswick 2012; Putnam 2015; Martine & Cooren 2016; Kuhn *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, these discussions regarding both the conceptualization of

discourse and materiality and the relationship between the two have produced productive theoretical advancements (Iedema, 2011; Mumby, 2011), resulting in alternative views on the ‘status’ of discourse and materiality and their relationship (Iedema, 2011; Putnam, 2015; Hardy & Thomas, 2015; Scott & Orlikowski, 2015; Kuhn *et al.*, 2017).

In particular, these views propose an entirely different perspective on materiality, centring on meaning, and specifically on *how* materiality acquires meaning and comes to matter through its entanglement with discourse. In effect, therefore, materiality is not disregarded from this perspective, neither is it merely a physical ‘thing’ or distinct object; rather it becomes meaningful, and becomes ‘something’, because it is constructed through a complex intersection of discourses, practices, power relations etc. (Mumby, 2011). As a consequence, under these assumptions, dualistic views of discourse and materiality are challenged and transcended when organizing processes, such as processes of identity construction, are viewed as relational (Kuhn *et al.*, 2017). This understanding of relationality draws upon notions of discourse and materiality suggested by Barad (2003, 2007), who proposes that they only ‘exist’ when joined together, that is, when entangled – and come into being as a result of their intra-action:

“The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither is articulated/articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other.” (Barad, 2003, p. 822)

As a response to the above developments, increasing analytical efforts have been directed towards investigating how this relationality and intra-activity play out in processes of organizing (e.g. Iedema, 2007; Kuhn *et al.*, 2017). However, this focus on relational becoming, or constitutive entanglement, seem for the most part to have bypassed the field of identity work (for exceptions see Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Hultin & Introna, 2019), leaving room for further explorations of the ways in which the relationality of discourse and materiality influence the precarious, in-flux and ever-evolving processes of identity construction. In particular, the ‘ingredients’ or the discursive-material resources out of which these identities are in fact crafted, i.e. performed, are yet to be better understood.

In this article, I argue that, if we are to move the research on identity work forward, we need to develop analytics that in fact embrace entanglement in the process of identity construction. That is, analytics that think across discursive-material resources, and see the mutual entanglement that is in fact performative and thus facilitating of the process of transformation and becoming. This involves a re-direction of our analytical focus, from the human subject as being at the centre of identity construction processes to embracing the multiple agencies that intertwine and take part in this process – the human subject being one agency amongst many non-human ones.

### **3 Identity intra-activity: Approaching discourse-materiality in the process of identity construction**

Taking particular inspiration from Barad (2003, 2007, 2013), I propose the notion of identity intra-activity as a form of analytics and a way to explore discourse-materiality entanglement relating to the identity work of informal middle managers within education. Identity intra-activity becomes an analytical conceptualization of the construction process and demonstrates how the identity work of the teachers enacting this position emerges through the relationality of discourse-materiality. In other words, identity intra-activity demonstrates how the entanglement of multiple discursive-material resources performs particular identities, shedding light on our understanding of the complex relationship between self, work and organizing/organization.

Barad’s perspective on the relationality of discourse and materiality is founded upon agential realism (Barad, 2003), a theorizing that is often subsumed under the label ‘new materialism’. With clear reference to a Foucauldian notion of discourse, Barad’s (2003) conceptualization centres on the proposal that discourse can never be seen as an isolated entity existing separately from materiality. That is, discourse cannot exist without being materialized; instead, it only exists due to its relation to the material and vice versa. As a consequence: “Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither has a privileged status in determining the other” (Barad, 2003, p. 822).

Thus, a key concept, and the premise of becoming in Barad’s universe, is entanglement (Barad, 2003, p. 818). This concept highlights the relationality of ‘things’, or resources, such as discourse, materiality, body, time, space etc., and Barad views these as ‘forces’ that, when entangled, become co-constituting of phenomena. Entanglement is thus not simply to be intertwined, it is to lack an independent existence and is facilitated by what Barad coins as ‘intra-activity’ (Barad, 2007, p. 30) – an essential play-on-words contrasting with the usual ‘interaction’: “which presumes the prior existence of independent entities/relata” (Barad, 2003, p. 815). This suggests that discourse and materiality emerge – as ‘matter that comes to matter’ – from/through their intra-action. As such, Barad’s thinking demonstrates that the becoming of phenomena is in fact a mattering process (Barad, 2003). Indeed, this is where Barad’s development of

Foucault becomes clear, because the concept of intra-action pays further attention to *how* the discursive-material resources are ‘bound together’ and made possible in/through practice. By implication, practices are therefore considered ontological (Scott & Orlikowski, 2015, p. 698) and involve ongoing, local and material (re)configurations that are features of the phenomenon at hand. As such, the term (re)configuration (Barad, 2003) articulates an understanding of phenomena as ongoing/fluid, without clear beginnings or endings. Clearly, (re-)configurations are therefore not just radical and well-defined changes, comparable to a change from one distinct identity to another, but rather they materialize in multiple practices as specific features and nuances of a phenomenon, and are: “...traces of what might yet (have) happen(ed)” (Barad, 2014, p. 168). In this sense, a phenomenon, such as in this case the identity work of middle managers, is dynamically produced-in-practice via an ongoing intra-activity and is hence: “... – not a thing, but a doing” (Barad, 2007, p. 151).

With reference to the above, Barad’s framework is therefore a thinking that centres on how discourse-materiality comes to matter through intra-activity. This will, as I will show, allow me to approach discursive-material intra-actions as agencies that perform identities. By foregrounding intra-activity as the fulcrum of the mattering process, ‘relations’ become the crux from which everything evolves – they are: “...a buzzing hive of activity – an ‘assemblage’ of ongoing performances and enactments” (Kuhn *et al.*, 2017, p. 32). This means that organizational phenomena, such as identities, only exist within particular discursive-material relations and are constantly performed, that is (re)enacted, and thus ever-unfolding, emerging, contingent and precarious. This is an activity, then, that incorporates multiple resources; material and discursive, social and scientific, human and nonhuman, and natural and cultural (Barad, 2003, p. 808). Clearly then, these assumptions do not privilege any one resource in the production of phenomena, but see all resources as potential sources of agency when intra-acting. Agency can therefore not be located with any particular resource; rather, it is determined in the specific mattering process and flows continuously through practices that then constitute certain conditions of possibility (Juelskjær, 2016, p. 757) under which the enactment of, for example, identity work materializes.

At the analytical level, focusing on intra-activity will illustrate what Barad calls an agential cut (Barad, 2003, p. 815); that is, situated ‘versions’ of the world, involving specific material (re)configurations. It is via this agential cut that the emerging and precarious properties and boundaries of, for example, a seemingly stabilized identity materialize (come to matter) and hence allow us to gain insight into the becoming of this identity. In relation to the analytics I propose, this means that different intra-actions produce ongoing (re)configurations of the identity work in question. For this process, I coin the term ‘identity intra-activity’. The analytics, then, aligns with an understanding of identity not in entity terms, but rather as performative discourse-materiality ‘multi-ties’ or emerging identity transformations. Identity intra-activity therefore helps the analysis to focus on the different resources of intra-acting identities and thus helps to explain specific construction processes involved in the mattering processes of identity work. These include elucidating how particular relations materialize different identity (re)configurations, which, as the analysis will show, produce certain conditions of possibility for the teachers in question when enacting their position.

In this section, I have described the theoretical foundations upon which the proposed analytics, identity intra-activity, rest. To sum up, the aim of this analytics is to contribute with an analytical conceptualization of identity construction processes. In effect, the analytics offers a way of thinking about the mattering process (i.e. process of becoming) by enabling the intra-activity that performs particular identities. In what follows, I will demonstrate this by presenting an empirical analysis of performing identities.

## 4 Setting the scene: context and methodology

Throughout the past decade, selected teachers within primary and secondary public education in Denmark have been given increasing organizational responsibility, with the broad purpose of helping to organize local expertise and achieve school improvements. The primary task of the teachers concerned is still classroom teaching, and most of their working hours are spent in this activity. The new responsibilities are therefore a form of addition to their professional work as teachers. In effect, this means that the selected teachers are given the (extra) responsibility of strengthening and stimulating certain educational and pedagogical initiatives within the school and amongst their colleagues. Examples include promoting methods of classroom management or cultivating professional development via collegial supervision, coaching and mentoring. Since the latest Danish school reform of 2013 (UVM, 2013), these teachers have also become central to supporting and implementing educational initiatives relating to this reform. Undeniably, this development changes the traditional professional identity work of a teacher, as the teachers in question are positioned in new ways with varied degrees of informal and shared leadership responsibilities, prompting novel identity issues relating to this expanded professional identity work and collegiate social dynamics.

The research upon which the present article is based took place during the autumn of 2018 over the course of five months and was designed as a multi-site and multi-method piece of fieldwork. It aimed to follow the continual discursive-material unfolding and local enactments of this informal positioning, including issues relating to identity work. The fieldwork was inspired by ethnographic approaches within organization studies (Czarniawska, 2007; Ybema *et al.*, 2009; Cunliffe, 2009) and aimed to produce ‘thick descriptions’ of micro interactions in the field: “...captured through a blend of methods” (Cunliffe, 2009, p. 231), including field notes, attending meetings and informal gatherings, participant log writings, vignette writings, participant observation and exploratory interviews.

Due to the study’s discursive-material perspective on the identity work of these teachers, I wanted to trace the performative flow of the daily enactment across actors, practices, time(s) and spaces. Also, considering the informality of this new position, requiring the teachers to enact ‘ad hoc’, that is, in passing, during lunch breaks, while teaching etc. it became pertinent to develop methods that were sensitive to precisely this cross-cutting enactment. Hence, the ethnography was not focused on one organizational site or carried out in one particular context, a pre-discursive entity to enter and uncover. Rather, it was designed as an ethnography that would elucidate the complex discursive-material identity constructions as they played out across several ‘spheres’ and actors. The primary participants in this fieldwork were five teachers enacting the position in question, and secondary participants were teacher colleagues and school management, the latter primarily participating in interview settings. All the participants were chosen because they were staff members with direct involvement in the daily flow of this position.

The observational fieldwork involved tagging along in as many different naturally occurring contexts as possible (in meetings, at lunch, between classes etc.) and furthermore engaging in brief conversations with the field participants when needed. This meant, for example, asking questions regarding certain events, understandings etc. and from time to time presenting early analyses to the participants in order to discuss the material and make room for them to comment on it, thus allowing the participants to reconstruct meaning and thereby nuance the constructions. Field note ‘jottings’ were produced on the spot in a notebook or on the computer, depending on the context. Full notes were written up at the end of each day, and subsequently immediate themes (distinguishing between local ‘codes’ and analytical ‘codes’) within and across the data were entered into an electronic empirical log alongside ‘superficial’ registrations of ‘when, where, who and what’.

Weekly participant log writings were produced by the five key teachers, including both text and images. The logs provided a continuous insight into the identity work being performed during the everyday professional life of these teachers, as they were encouraged to write up the, sometimes trivial, day-to-day minutiae of their practices of encounters, conversations, events, tasks and their reflections thereon – using words and images.

Lastly, the fieldwork resulted in exploratory interviews and focus groups that were conducted with all of the field participants, both in ‘formal’ interview settings and in situ – in the school yard, in the coffee or lunchroom, in hallways etc. Both formal and informal ‘set-ups’ covered key themes relating to this new position and the inherent identity work, including enactments of everyday practices, work history, good/bad experiences of enacting this position, dilemmas, etc. The ‘formal’ interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the in-situ interviews were recreated from memory and written up during breaks or later the same day.

The produced data set was subsequently ‘equated’ in the sense that all data were subject to detailed thematic analysis inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Hughes *et al.* (2017), using qualitative analysis software (NVivo). This involved a theoretically inspired coding, whereby the analysis is driven by research questions and the process of focusing the data thus simulates a form of Q&A, in which the data ‘answers back’ in relation to the research interest and questions. In relation to the current study, I asked: *What local ‘matter’ seems to matter in the identity construction when enacting this position?* That is, what materialized/what mattered in the specific enactment and what possible discursive-material and embodied resources were at play? This questioning created a form of analytical direction and a categorization of the data (observation data, log writings and interview data) by producing a set of ‘bounded’ empirical material. This initially involved coding interesting features associated with the question posed and subsequently organizing these codes into major categories representing local (re)configurations/features of their identity construction. These categories were then broken down into intra-acting concepts that consisted of collated discursive-material data about practices, or enactments, that were relevant to each category, hence elucidating a form of lived, embodied and relational becoming. For example, as I will later explain, concepts such as, ‘claiming space(s)’, ‘juxtapositioning of time(s)’, performing availability and tropes-in-use highlight the discursive-material practices that helped craft the major category/(re)configuration: ‘seizing one’s position’.

These analytical steps aim to demonstrate how each (re)configuration is always realized in discursive-material practices and intra-acted, that is, comes to be/comes to matter, through a relationality to other, related practices. A particular identity intra-activity, then, illustrates an agential cut, that is, a specific, situated ‘version’ of the identity construction. In the forthcoming analysis, this version of the identity construction is labelled ‘seizing one’s position’. It is via the cut that the emerging and precarious boundaries of each category materialize and allow us to temporarily see the contours of the identity work being performed. This highlights that it is through the process of on-going intra-activity that phenomena come to matter and that the concept of intra-activity sensibilize us to see not only the intra-

action, but also the phenomenon that is intra-acted; here, particular identity (re)configurations. In the proceeding section, all data excerpts used in the analysis have been translated from Danish to English.

## 5 ‘Seizing one’s position’

To illustrate identity intra-activity and the analytical process of unpacking ‘performing identities’, I will develop an empirical analysis relating to one of the major categories/(re)configurations – seizing one’s position – produced by a preliminary analysis across the data. The analysis presented is an example of the analytical movements throughout the study of identity work relating to the inherent case study. The development has two main objectives: firstly, I aim to show that, by considering the discursive-material resources that run throughout the teachers’ practices, we gain insight into a particular (re)configuration of the teachers’ identity work, enabling us to see how the act of seizing one’s position is materialized as something that ‘matters’ when simultaneously being/becoming a teacher and an informal middle manager. Secondly, the analytical conceptualization, identity intra-activity, is presented as an avenue for explorations of discourse-materiality relationality in identity scholarship.

‘Seizing one’s position’ became evident as one of the major categories when focusing the full body of data by posing the research question: ‘What local “matter” seems to matter in the identity construction when enacting this position?’ Throughout multiple movements during the process of analysis, four concepts were developed by continuously coding with a sensitivity towards discursive-material data that addressed particular enactments of this category, i.e. practices that incorporate material and discursive, social and scientific, human and nonhuman, and natural and cultural resources related to the category (Barad, 2003). These concepts were written up with a form of overarching discursive-material label, each elucidating a situated and embodied practice of the particular category, these being: claiming space(s), juxta-positioning of time(s), performing availability and tropes-in-use. The following analytical development of the concepts that make up ‘seizing one’s position’ demonstrates how the intra-action between them takes part in performing this particular identity-(re)configuration. It is structured using small introductory contextualizations that situate the analytical process in the local realities of these teachers and are collated from thick descriptions across the data.

### 5.1 Claiming space(s)

*Most spaces in schools are designated as common spaces that ‘belong’ to particular groups. Classrooms and playgrounds belong to the pupils, the teachers’ lounge belongs to the teaching staff and the administrative spaces belong to the school’s management. Sometimes, if belonging to a group with no designated space, you become space-less and impelled to create your own (work) space within a common space, thus changing the ‘nature’ of both the space and work practices.*

The category of seizing one’s position became particularly evident in relation to some of the informal practices that enabled the teachers to establish a recognizable and visible position within the organization. Accordingly, this category centred especially on space and the practice of ‘claiming’ various physical and symbolic spaces, which helped to materialize a form of recognition and visibility. The teachers enacting this position typically did not have a claimed physical space that was theirs to prepare for a supervision, keep materials, have meetings etc. This meant that they often had to do their work ‘on the go’; that is, they carried relevant materials with them all over the school and found empty spaces to work on an ad hoc basis. To deal with these circumstances, as mentioned above, the teachers found ways of ‘claiming’ different physical and symbolic spaces. For example, when one of the teachers was asked to document a pertinent aspect of her week in her log writings, she took a photo of a bookcase that she had unauthorizedly ‘claimed’ in the teacher’s lounge containing the tools and materials relating to her new position. In the photo, one can see the bookshelf overflowing with different ‘props’, like papers, books, learning games and formal folders, communicating that “this is someone’s space; don’t touch!” The diverse props on the shelf and the appearance of something overflowing are all discursive-material resources that run throughout the practice of claiming space. They facilitate the materialization of the identity work relating to becoming a visible ‘organizational other’; a person who needs space, specific materials, books etc.

Other teachers enacting the same position had developed similar practices and had claimed space in their schools by putting down strategically placed symbolic and material artifacts. For example, when teacher Linda claims a common meeting room by leaving certain formal-looking papers like tests and academic books on the table, it signals: this room is occupied by someone who is not only doing normal teacher-lesson-planning, but also ‘heavier’ organizational stuff. Even though this did not act as a bullet-proof solution, it did, according to Linda, often make her colleagues use other spaces for meetings etc.

In both examples, ‘claiming’ as a discursive-material practice is a manifestation that concretely and practically enables a positioning related to the ‘on-the-go-ness’ and the ‘otherness’ of their work, but the practice is also a concrete embodiment of the discursive-material resources out of which the particular (re)configuration of their identity work is crafted. That is, the discourse-materiality entanglement displayed in the bookcase of formal props and overflow, as well as the symbolic artifacts left on the meeting room table are, as quoted earlier: “...a buzzing hive of activity – an ‘assemblage’ of ongoing performances and enactments” (Kuhn *et al.*, 2017, p. 32) that temporarily materializes as something that has come to matter when enacting this position. Thus, this practice is co-constituting of and performing the identity (re)configuration of seizing one’s identity.

## 5.2 *Juxta-positioning of time(s)*

*The school is structured in and through time(s). The bell rings, alluding to a linear time structured through clocks and calendars. The bodies in the schools move to the beat of this linear time, leaving behind a past and moving towards a future. Other times occasionally appear, they challenge the clock-time with ‘demands’ of meaning and ‘what makes sense’.*

Another practice, which intra-acts with ‘claiming space’ in the making-up of the current category, relates to the juxta-positioning of times, concerning the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ ways of enacting this position. As will be described below, times, such as old times and new times, are discursive-material resources which are incorporated into this practice and take part in enabling the materialization of seizing one’s position.

Regardless of the fact that this positioning of the teacher is a relatively new one, there are ongoing developments within the expectations of these teachers, both formally and informally, and juxtapositioning old versus new makes this a form of practice that contributes to crafting this position as ‘something’ particular. This practice is commonly enacted during professional development sessions between the teachers under study (mentors) and colleagues (mentees) and works to concretely enable the materialization of the ‘something’ that they can offer to their colleagues. The practice will often allude to old times and ways of doing things as insufficient or less progressive, as opposed to a newer and modern time with more long-lasting, efficient and meaningful methods. As teacher Sally points out during one such session:

“The old way, I usually come in as an expert and take over the lesson, but in this new way, I’m a facilitator, we develop something together that’s also valuable for you after I leave the room.”  
(Fieldnotes, 09.26.18)

By referencing old versus new times, and thereby materializing the past and the future as subtle, yet useful, discursive-material agencies, a new and more meaningful positioning manifests itself in the dialogue between Sally and her colleague. Namely, a positioning of Sally as a facilitator of learning, as opposed to an expert.

Also, during meetings between the teachers and the school’s management, while strategizing how best to evoke the ‘right’ conceptualization of their organizational responsibility, teacher Mike comments:

“The new way is a positive message, it’s cool and it’s development. It’s not what the teachers on the floor want though. What they want is the old way, it’s a ‘fix it’, a quick solution, which does not lead to their development. It leads to us fixing it.” (Fieldnotes, 10. 22.18)

Again, this juxta-positioning of old and new times can be seen as materializing a certain positioning. In this latter quotation, the juxta-positioning of time(s) becomes an agency that produces the possibility of change in the expectations and desires of their colleagues. In other words, time, as a discursive-material resource, becomes an agency that invokes the past (i.e. the old ways) in the present, with hopes of changing the future. This shows that time(s) are co-constituting of an identity (re)configuration as the teachers draw upon the past to construct their current situation and imagine their future – the juxta-positioning of time(s) is therefore a discursive-material practice that enables the category of seizing one’s position.

## 5.3 *Performing availability*

*Entering the teachers’ lounge, ‘looseness’ is felt, the smell of coffee is in the air. Papers, books, folded up posters, bags, jackets are spread out in one big tangle of ‘break-time’. When they sit down, it means being approached – as an expert, an advice-giver, a helper. Colleagues needing just ‘a quick word’, colleagues with worries about pupil achievement, colleagues with IT problems...*



Throughout the data, performing availability, i.e. always being ready to be approached and ‘invoked’ as an organizational other, an expert or resource, was evident as a key form of practice relating to seizing one’s (new) position. This activity incorporated both discourse-materiality relating to the presence of the teachers’ bodies during school hours – at lunchtime, when teaching, passing by etc. – and matters of affect relating to this presence.

Concretely, the teachers’ bodies are discursive-material resources that run through the practices of performing availability, since their mere presence in a room means being approachable and invocable as an available expert. Even in situations where they are clearly engaged in other activities unrelated to this position, e.g. eating lunch with colleagues, teaching a class, immersed in their own lesson planning etc., the mere presence of their body means that they are ‘open for business’:

“Well, of course, it’s nice to be of use. No doubt about that. But that’s also why I go home if I need to correct some of my own pupils’ papers or do my own lesson planning, because it’s only at home that, um, I can sit undisturbed. Otherwise it gets all muddy and I’m constantly interrupted.” (Lissy, interview, 11.11.18, p. 13)

Similar observations were made when tagging along with another teacher, Kirsten, into an all-staff meeting. While Kirsten was getting ready to give her presentation, hooking up her laptop, checking her slides etc., colleagues were queuing up to ask her questions regarding pupils who prompted some concerns, and good advice on this and that, although she was obviously very preoccupied (Kirsten, Fieldnotes, 25.10.18). Both Kirsten and Lissy seemed to accept this invocation of their ‘otherness’ or expertness by the mere presence of their bodies, and generally ‘played along’, answering questions and simply developing personal strategies for how to then get things done, such as Lissy’s decision to work from home.

Performing availability, which was related to body-presence, was also described by teacher Elisabeth as always being willing to ‘put on the yes-hat’ (a Danish figure of speech), even if that meant being hailed while carrying out other activities. Putting on the yes-hat was yet another discursive-material resource enabling availability and is also directly related to matters of affect, including feelings relating to letting colleagues or management down by not responding promptly to requests and thereby not living up to her worth:

“It’s important that I feel I can deliver a certain product, umm, with a certain quality to my colleagues... for example, by quickly resolving the challenges they face or the requests they pose. It’s important for me that they feel I’m doing what I’m supposed to, I think.” (Elisabeth, interview, 11.20.18)

Matters of affect are, in this case, co-constitutive of her identity work, since always being able to deliver and say yes is manifesting as part of performing availability. Bodies and matters of affect are, thus, discursive-material resources that can also be seen as forces or ‘currents’ of availability that participate in the construction process, that are part of a (re)configuration/version of their identity work.

#### 5.4 Tropes-in-use

*In meetings, in classrooms, when eating lunch with colleagues, imagery of what these teachers do is ever-present. This imagery ‘attaches itself’ to practices – as vibrant matter – that may or may not be picked up as elucidators of ‘what they do’: It’s a gift, help-to-self-help and quick-fixes.*

Tropes-in-use relate to practices that incorporate the use of figurative language as a discourse-material resource, and these tropes become evident across the data as useful agencies throughout the teachers’ practices when they talk about their tasks and responsibilities within the schools. Often, the teachers have to navigate contrasting expectations, as alluded to in the quotation in the last section, when teacher Mike comments on how the new way of enacting his position is in conflict with what is desired by his colleagues: “It’s not what the teachers on the floor want” (Fieldnotes, 10.22.18). Clearly, this contrast is facilitated by what is framed as ‘the new way’, which is a development instigated by the school’s management, positioning the teachers in question in between expectations from ‘the floor’ and expectations from management. The tropes are co-constitutive of the new positioning and enable the negotiation of meaning and navigation of expectations that will (hopefully) lead to a particular future practice: that is, as Mike again points out: “something sustainable, not just a quick fix” (Fieldnotes, 11.29.18).

One such recurring trope is the word ‘gift’ and the depiction of their task, whether it be advice-giving, mentoring or co-teaching, as a gift they give to their colleagues by facilitating co-reflection of their colleagues’ teaching and thus of their professional development: “It’s important that we articulate, that this (read: their ‘service’) is a gift – we can

talk about our reflections of why they do as they do and develop their teaching practices” (Elisabeth, Fieldnotes, 10.04.18).

By enacting “it’s a gift”, the trope becomes a discursive-material resource that runs throughout the practice of tropes-in-use that help to materialize imagined future tasks (i.e. the development of colleagues’ teaching practices). These tropes, then, are discursive-material resources that convey their transition into something new when engaging in conversation about what they have to offer. For example, in different contexts, such as in feedback sessions with colleagues, over small-talk at lunch, but also at strategy meetings with school management where the ‘right’ conceptualization of their work is discussed. Particularly in the latter context, another prevalent trope in the data is enacted. Here, the teachers’ work is described as tasks that should facilitate “help-to-self-help” (Fieldnotes, 10.23.18). This discursive-material resource supports the notion of moving beyond the above-mentioned quick-fix and involves solving concrete tasks for colleagues related to issues such as special-Ed aid, and the trope enables a materialization that provides support for long-term changes by assisting the development of colleagues’ teaching practices. This trope-use is discussed as a way of encouraging colleagues to embrace the new way, and therefore also enables it. As one of the teachers points out during a meeting: “talking about help-to-self-help also helps to succeed with helping-to-self-help” (Fieldnotes, 10.23.18). As such, the use of tropes also becomes strategic in the sense that certain future work practices are made possible by ‘talking in tropes’. This implies that, similarly to claiming space(s), the juxtapositioning of time(s) and performing availability, discursive-material resources flow in/through these practices and participate in the co-constitution of ‘seizing one’s position’ – demonstrating the intra-acted identity work.

## **6 Readings across discourse-materiality: ‘Tracing’ identity work**

With reference to the above analytical development of the discursive-material practices that help to make up the current category, employing parts of a Baradian universe demonstrates that the process of becoming ‘something’ is a process of mattering, as it is only when ‘things’ come to matter through their relationality to other things that ‘something’ in fact becomes; that is, materializes. The analysis gives an insight into the process of identity construction by showing how a particular version of the teachers’ identity work is transformed, processed and (re)configured through the discursive-material resources that run in a comprehensive assemblage through the teachers’ practices. These intra-acting practices produce the particular, yet temporary, agential cut relating to their identity construction which, as the analysis shows, has certain local (and future) implications/effects. For example, when the mere presence of the teachers’ bodies in the lunch room means ‘available’ and thus leads to practices of leaving work in order to work (from home), we are led to see an implication of the intra-acted becoming, that of seizing one’s position, as well as some of the embodied ‘ingredients’ in this construction process, such as bodies and matters of affect; elements that would otherwise perhaps go unnoticed. In Barad’s own words, this is because they are nothing in themselves: “Outside of particular agential intra-actions, ‘words’ and ‘things’ are indeterminate” (Barad, 2003, p. 820). Relationality and the process of intra-activity are therefore at the crux of the mattering process. Indeed, this highlights that agency is fluid and does not belong to any one particular element, resource, subject or object (e.g. an artifact, a body or a particular discourse); rather, agency is ‘accomplished’ via the intra-activity and thus has a transformational potential. This implies that, not only do discursive-material resources run in/through practices, but they also take part in conditioning the identity work by making particular practices possible and constraining others, or rather, they co-produce “spaces of possibility” (Juelskjær, 2019, p. 15). In relation to the (re)configuration of seizing one’s position, this involves an ongoing identity struggle, or ‘identity dance’, between the constraints and possibilities of simultaneously becoming/being a teacher and an organizational other. For example, when choosing to go home to get things done; when always seeming to be available in order not to potentially disappoint colleagues or to show your organizational worth/expertise; or when claiming common space in order to have simple working conditions, such as a designated work area and a bookcase and thus to be a legitimate organizational ‘other’ with a particular task besides teaching. We see the identity-dance of being a teacher and ‘an other’, but we also see the performative ‘nature’ of discourse-materiality, as new spaces of possibility, or organizing, are produced.

Clearly then, the concept of identity intra-activity is not invested in pointing to either discourse or materiality and discussing their specific form of agency in a specific situation, rather the concept articulates a position in which this perspective has been shifted to a more ‘fluid’ understanding of agency. Therefore, tracing identities and how they emerge when investigating identity construction becomes a process of being sensitive to discursive-material resources that matter in the data when identifying practices, but the process also involves reading across intra-actions and seeing the temporarily stabilized phenomenon in question. As Barad states: “It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the ‘components’ of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful” (Barad, 2003, p. 815). To extend this quotation, I therefore argue that identity intra-activity offers a process-sensitive way of thinking about the mattering process by sensibilizing us to see not only the

intra-action, but also the particular identity (re)configuration that is made possible, as well as the constraints and possibilities of such materializations.

## **7 Discussion: Implications of identity intra-activity**

### ***7.1 Intra-activity as a way of thinking about identity work***

In this article, intra-activity is presented as the crux of everything that evolves and as a way of thinking that permits us to better understand processes of organizing, such as, for example, processes of identity construction. With this processual emphasis, the analytics that I am offering therefore contributes to conceptualization that allows us to view identity as something that is always in the act of becoming rather than a distinct entity. Moreover, the analytics pushes a becoming perspective further by approaching identity work in/through the entanglement of discourse and materiality. This shifts the focus from discourse as constitutive of identity work to the relationality of discourse-materiality as constituting, that is discourse-materiality is ever co-present and co-producing of identity work. In this article, becoming builds on insight into the local discursive-material practices out of which the identity work is crafted and performed, and the conceptualization thus brings a situatedness to the analysis. As a consequence, I therefore argue that thinking with intra-activity contributes to presenting identity work as a multidimensional phenomenon – dynamic and emerging – since this type of thinking sensibilize us to see the specific intra-actions of identities-in-action, locally, displaying the agentic activity across ‘tangible’ dimensions, such as, for example, hierarchical structures, organizational roles and positions – both formal and informal – but also across those that are less tangible. This includes matter such as affect, materiality, discourse, bodies, space, temporality and more, thus highlighting how identity constructions do not only occur in tangible and well-defined moments and well-defined contexts, but rather, they are expressed across a complex assemblage of moments, contexts and matter – in “... the inexhaustible dynamism of the enfolding of mattering” (Barad, 2007, p. 237). This also means that the human subject is but one of multiple agencies at play, intra-acting identity (re)configurations and thus not granted a privileged position. Therefore, the analytics I suggest also supports and expands existing debates (Hultin & Introna, 2019; Scott & Orlikowski, 2015), arguing for a decentering of the intentional human subject as the primary actor in identity work by instead foregrounding the performative flow of discursive-material practices, which moreover constrains us from reproducing: “assumptions of subject and object as separate entities and identity as a realizable goal” (Hultin & Introna, 2019, p. 1364). Identity intra-activity aspires to contribute to questioning such ‘clear cut’ distinctions and perceptions of pre-existing entities and privileged positions, and by doing so it also allows for an investigation of how discourse and materiality condition the possibilities of identity work.

### ***7.2 A new materialist and process-sensitive analytical approach to guide future research?***

As highlighted in the section on connecting studies of discourse-materiality relationship to identity work, scholars have called for studies that attend more carefully to the ways in which discourse-material resources influence ‘non-fixed’ and ever-evolving identity construction processes. In compliance with a ‘non-fixed’ understanding of identity, an investigation taking inspiration from new materialist perspectives seems to be an obvious match and a fruitful theory-method ‘fit’ in order to foster greater understandings of how multiple resources influence and take part in this process. This is because the underlying assumptions of the precarious, contested and momentary ‘nature’ of organizational phenomena, such as identities, are shared. Therefore, the implications of allowing a new materialist analytical framework to guide the research practice of identity work are promising because the ‘fit’ may foster a greater sensitivity to identities-in-action, that is identity-practices, due to the attention to discursive-material resources that help us to (temporarily) untangle the entanglement. This means that the fit offers the potential to achieve insight into the ever-precarious and emerging, yet constitutive, resources that take part in crafting identity (re)configurations ‘at play’, illustrating the process of playing as well as the (re)configuration. In this sense, identity intra-activity helps to produce a process-sensitive analysis by recognizing all the playing agencies through their entanglement – they become ‘data-in-motion’ loaded with situatedness, embodiment, ‘friction’ and vibrancy, and pointing to spaces of possibilities.

Indeed, then, although still only a promising avenue for exploration, the proposed analytical approach and the suggested implications for future research practice echo Brown (2015) and his invitation to fellow scholars in a recent review of the (sub)field of identity work to go beyond the mere use of identity as a descriptive category and instead employ it as an analytical tool, because:

“Identity work, which implies agentic activity, is suited to the task of analyzing people and events across levels of analysis and research foci because it helps fix attention on identities-in-action and unpick processes of continuity and change, rather than apply labels to notional end states.” (Brown, 2015, p. 33)

The aim of this article is to stimulate further engagement with explorations of the processes of becoming, impermanence and change, that embrace the multiple situated and embodied resources. Identity intra-activity, as a new materialist and process-sensitive analytical approach to and conceptualization of the identity construction process, is perhaps a viable option for exactly that.

## 8 Conclusion

In this article, I have proposed an analytical conceptualization of the investigation of identity work by introducing a co-constitutive perspective on discourse-materiality in identity construction processes, taking inspiration from new materialist theorist, Karen Barad, and organizational discourse studies. The proposed conceptualization, identity intra-activity, seeks to enable an exploration of the co-constitutive intra-activity of discourse-materiality that performs particular (re)configurations of identity work, i.e. particular features, *identities*, or identity transformations.

Building on a case study of the emergence of a new, informal middle-management positioning of selected teachers within public education in Denmark, I have shown that, by considering the multiple resources that work to perform *identities*, we gain insight into a temporarily stabilized agential cut; a (re)configuration of the teachers' identity work. This enables us to see how the (re)configuration of seizing one's position is materialised through multiple discursive-material and embodied resources that run throughout the teachers' practices. This creates a petri dish for examining the situated enactment of their identity work and, by implication, highlighting that the teachers' practices are already subsumed and governed in discursive, material, political and a range of other 'forces' which should not go unnoticed in our analysis of identity construction processes, because they take part in conditioning the identity work by producing certain spaces of possibility. The findings therefore make it possible to attend to the complexities of becoming and their potential inherent effects and help us to understand identity work as characterized by multiple situated and embodied resources. Identity intra-activity, I argue, therefore sensibilize us to see not only the intra-action (the becoming/transformation), but also the phenomenon that is intra-acted. It does so by enabling the intra-activity that performs particular *identities* and thus produces a new way of thinking about identity construction. As such, the article's findings and the proposed analytics also facilitate a platform to expand relational views of discourse-materiality in the existing literature on identity work.

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