Meaning Making, Labeling, and Self in Symbolic Interactionism: Teacher Identity and Everyday Life

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Symbolic interactionism helps explain the meaning of labels in education and how this impacts teacher identity and professionalism. This article will explore elements of the symbolic interactionism theoretical framework: everyday life actions and interactions, meaning-making, language, labeling and symbols, identity, and teachers' self. Implications will follow.

Keywords: Symbolic interactionism, teacher identity, self

Symbolic interactionism is a framework that explains how relationships with other people and things impact our behavior and construction of the self (Jones, 2019). This framework details how our society is created and remains through repeated interactions into which we invest *meaning* (Carter & Fuller, 2016). Meaning-making and the ideas of self, action, and interaction are themes in this framework (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013). Labels in education reflect a symbolic language structure. The symbolic interactionism theory provides a framework for understanding how labels reflect meaning-making. In education, meaning-making impacts how teachers develop their identities and perceptions of themselves as professionals. This article will further explore concepts of symbolic interactionism: everyday life actions and interactions, meaning-making, language, labeling and symbols, identity, and self. Implications and applications of these concepts of symbolic interactionism to and for teacher identity, learning, and teaching professionalism will follow.

MAJOR CONCEPTS OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

The symbolic interactionism framework is a social science perspective studying human group life and human conduct (Blumer, 1969). Herbert Blumer studied and developed the ideas of symbolic interactionism in his 1969 publication *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Erving Goffman and George Herbert Mead were central U.S. theorists in developing and explaining symbolic interactionism. Mead's and Blumer's explanations of symbolic interactionism describe how humans make meaning in everyday life. Humans act toward things based on the meanings given to or inherited about the thing, the meaning in social interactions, and meaning-making through interpretations we make in everyday and repeated encounters (Carter & Fuller, 2016; Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013). Goffman's work shows how meaning-making in symbolic interactionism happens with the labeling of objects. Symbolic interactionism can also help us understand the sense of self humans feel and our present and changing identities. Our daily interactions shape how we see ourselves and who we think we are personally and professionally. In everyday life, we interact with others where creation and meaning-making happen. People attribute meaning to certain words or behaviors that reinscribe their meaning among a group, so different contexts, groups, and experiences lead to different shared meanings.

Everyday Life

Daily, humans are involved in social acts or interactions where they "note, interpret, and assess the situations confronting them" (Blumer, 1969, p. 50). Waskul (2008) explains that symbolic interaction is something people do in everyday life, as it is the "active, reflexive, creative, and communicative doings" (Waskul, 2008, p. 117) we have each day that creates meaning. This ability to create meaning in these ways is a human quality, the foundation of the self and society. A person's daily life calls for them to acknowledge, interpret and assess things they need to act (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interactionism explains that through everyday interactions, whether with family or a larger social group, people make decisions on how to act, making up their social life. Goffman (1959), in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, explains that humans choose their actions based on a working understanding of the outcomes they assume they will produce.

Actions and Interactions

Since humans are part of multiple social groups and subgroups, many interactions and subsequent interactions occur. Work by Blumer (1969) details Mead's (1934) description of the two forms of social interaction: non-symbolic and symbolic. Blumer explains that non-symbolic interaction happens when someone responds *immediately* and *directly* to the action of another person without interpreting the action; this is an automatic, habitual reflex. Symbolic interaction occurs when there is an *interpretation* of the action, such as when a person reflectively acts toward another, having given thought to both action and reaction. Jennifer Chamberlain-Salaun et al. (2013) explain that for interaction to be symbolic, it occurs in the present when actions are interpreted for meaning and directed, adapted, and change ongoing acts. It is with this understanding of actions and interactions that symbolic interactionism is based.

Meaning in Labeling and Language

Meaning-making in symbolic interactionism also happens with labeling objects, including people. Goffman (1959) and Blumer (1969) explain that humans assign meaning to things, whether these be social objects, such as roles and identities that people take on (student, mother, or friend), or physical objects, such as a book or a tree, or abstract objects like morals, doctrines, or ideas such as justice. The meaning may also differ depending on our identity because of our relationship to the object. The meaning created by labeling something using language or symbols is a social process. Labeling the thing sets its meaning and determines how we see it, act toward it, and talk about it. Objects would only have meaning with the processes. Labeling also impacts our sense of self. Citing David Hargreaves's (1998) research on labeling theory, Andrew Jones (2019) explains that the words used to describe a person or their behavior influence their behavior and sense of identity. When someone is labeled, whether in a positive manner, such as a scholar, or a negative manner, such as a delinquent, it could lead them to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where they become the thing they were labeled.

Identity and Self

Symbolic interactionism can also help us understand the sense of self humans feel and how they construct their present and changing identities. Humans see themselves through social interactions with and in relation to others. By responding to others after interpreting their actions, the self is created and affirmed, or rather a human being can be an object of their action (Blumer, 1969). Blumer (1969) gives the example of a young male student from a lower-income family who is in debt from trying to become a doctor. This student bases his actions and thoughts of himself on the "object" he is (student, in debt, lower class). The meaning of these labels forms his current self and the self he is becoming. Chamberlain-Salaun et al. (2013) show that symbolic interactionism explains the self as continually developing through self-interaction by reflecting on oneself and acting toward oneself as one may act toward others.

IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATION

A professional identity for teachers is a way of "becoming" a teacher and can look like efficacy, motivation, responsibility, commitment, and professionalism (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Akerman & Meijer, 2001; Kastner et al., 2019; Walkington, 2005; Pillen et al., 2013; Noonan, 2019; & Mockler, 2011). Teacher identity relates to the symbolic interactionism framework that explains the human concept of self as continually developing through self-interaction. Humans develop self by reflecting on themselves and acting toward themselves as one may act toward others (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013). Teachers develop their identities through their relationships with students and the labeling in public education.

The Impact of Labeling in Education on Teacher Identity and Professionalism

Symbolic interactionism helps explain the meaning labels in education take on and how this impacts teacher identity and student identity, construction of self, and engagement. Teacher identity, efficacy, and professionalism in classroom teaching have been lost or redefined. Teachers lost their identity after once being free to plan curricula *with* colleagues *for* their students. They once had the agency to work with their professional teacher colleagues, utilizing their pedagogical content knowledge, explained as teachers knowing how to share knowledge by adapting lesson plans, developing appropriate and responsive instructional strategies for students, and explaining things effectively (Schulman,1986 in Berger & LeVan, 2019). The professionals in the classroom could once be what they were educated and intended to be--teachers. With the arrival of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) framework in 2010, education saw a new and stronger emphasis on written, scripted programs in every grade and subject area. Symbolic interactionism can be applied when understanding that the labels of these educational frameworks and subsequent required professional learning brought a different meaning to being a teacher. The new and required actions of teachers operating under these frameworks changed their identity. Instead of passionate people with pedagogical content knowledge, trusted to enact the art and science of teaching, they are now expected to be robotic, following scripts and programs that are not responsive to their students or include a love of teaching and learning.

Furthermore, the rules with these frameworks are strictly forced on teachers, claiming to be in alignment with the CCSS within the state-mandated RTI Framework. This militant and sweeping adoption of expensive scripted programs written by those unknown to teachers and students and strict adherence to an RTI framework has taken the teacher and student voice out of the equation

and erased teacher identity and professionalism. Teacher identity should be allowed to be multifaceted. Jean-Louis Berger and Kim LeVan's (2018) research acknowledges that teachers manage multiple selves in building and performing professional identity. If allowed to form, these multiple selves will influence their instructional practices, professional development, and attitudes toward educational change (Berger & LeVan, 2018). The mandates and policies enforced on teaching, learning, and assessment stifle teacher identity. As symbolic interactionism would explain, teachers' actions and reactions to these frameworks in their everyday teaching life have left them to question their teacher identity and wonder what has happened to the art and science of teaching, the joy, and satisfaction that come with it, and why they joined the profession in the first place. Overall, mandates and policies created to uphold these frameworks contribute to the deskilling of teachers and the teaching profession. Who are teachers as professionals today, and what is their identity among the mandates and scripts? How might losing identity and professionalism impact student achievement and teacher retention now and in the future?

Humans develop self by reflecting on themselves and acting toward themselves as one may act toward others (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013). A teacher's identity in everyday life is not (and should not be considered to be) fixed or stable: it is continuous, non-linear, and ever-changing. The identity of a teacher is naturally and continually shaped and reshaped concerning others (their students and their families, colleagues, and administrators) and by the current political and school environment (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Akerman & Meijer, 2001, Kastner, et al., 2019, Walkington, 2005, Pillen, et al., 2013, Noonan, 2019, & Mockler, 2011). As symbolic interactionism would explain, as well as research by Insuk Han (2021), professional identity is related to the self-perception of a teacher within their profession, including the perception of how others define them. Symbolic interactionism would tell us that identity determines and is determined by how one perceives oneself. Identity is formed through actions, work on multiple selves, and attention to emotions. As professionals, teachers should be given the time and opportunity for their selves to develop.

Shifting Professional Learning and Labeling

Professional learning for teachers is part of their everyday life that shapes their identity. Often, mandated professional learning needs to be more collaborative and reflective; it is driven by what David Hall and Ruth McGinty (2015) see as levels of compliance to the frameworks mentioned earlier of RTI, CCSS, and current state mandates and policies of the month or year. The focus on compliance to programs and frameworks removed from the individual classroom of teachers and students, rather than actual teacher development to serve students, results in a professional learning experience that is highly manufactured and manipulated by marketization, metricization, managerialism, and compliance. There needs to be more attention paid to the development of teacher identity and pedagogy but rather a focus on mandated policy and curriculum to achieve compliance through fear of professional penalties.

Several studies highlight the importance of teacher collaboration in their professional learning. Through interacting with others, as symbolic interactionism would explain, teachers can define their teaching challenges from different perspectives and form diverse instructional strategies (Han, 2021). Professional learning for teachers that includes collaboration (action and reaction) with others can stimulate criticality and reflective dialogue. Han's (2021) research has essential recommendations for teachers' professional learning in their identity formation, including that school administrators provide time for "spontaneous collaboration" or interactive problem-solving through research, narrative activities like diary writings, recordings, conversations, and the

development of lesson plans. Studies by Karen Goodnough (2010) and Catherine Beauchamp & Lynn Thomas (2009) cited collaborative action research as a critical professional learning structure that develops a strong sense of teacher identity and improved pedagogy. In their self-study, Lynn Kastner et al. (2019) agreed that their supervisors needed to continue providing time and support resources to enable communities of practice, writing groups, and collaborative research, including self-studies, to foster their growing development and identity as new music educators. Understanding symbolic interactionism in how humans make sense of their world and shape identity can and should help craft teacher professional learning if it is to be responsive to the humans it serves. When time and space are given in professional learning opportunities, actions in teaching can be interpreted and directed, adapted, and changed as needed. Teacher professional learning should ultimately lead to a chance to reflect on their daily actions in the classroom with students to change instruction and meet learning needs.

CONCLUSIONS

Learning and understanding the symbolic interactionism framework can influence how teacher education and professional learning experiences are crafted. Reflective practice and mentoring that encourages teachers to challenge their experiences and beliefs, question themselves, dialogue with others, position themselves as a learner, and build on their leadership, preferably within a community of the same subject practitioners, are all professional learning practices that school administrators should intentionally create time and structures for within and after the school day (Walkington, 2005, Pillen, et al., 2013, Schutz & Koffman, 2017; Giovanelli, 2015). Even a bit of time each day for reflective talk and storytelling that allows teachers to position themselves as learners together is beneficial for fostering a healthy teacher identity (Cohen, 2010).

Paying attention to fostering a healthy sense of teacher identity, with an intentional and continual focus throughout a teacher's career, is not an indulgence but a professional necessity (Jones, 2019). Because self-identity and behavior of individuals are often influenced by the words used to describe them, care should be taken with how teachers are treated and developed. The self-fulfilling prophecy explained in the symbolic interactionism framework as it applies to teachers and teaching should be that of a professional who cares about the actions of teaching and student learning.

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