

# Identity as Pedagogy: A Work in Progress

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*Abstract: Reggio Emilia philosophy understands teaching as relationship (Malaguzzi, 1994). Høveid and Finne (2014) extend the notion of relationship as a space created between two people shaped by how we enter and engage in that space. Pedagogical relationships are influenced by how we understand our identity, which, in this study, is defined as the inner and outer forces that shape who we are (Palmer, 2017). This study will explore how identity enters teaching in profound ways; when teaching is relationship, identity is pedagogy. Residing in an ecological paradigm and theoretically situated in feminist, critical, and humanist theory, as well as the work of Dewey, I engage with a group of teachers in a narrative inquiry into teacher identity, utilizing appreciative inquiry as a structure for our conversation. Together, we seek to co-construct and illuminate how we might consider pedagogy through reflections on our evolving teacher identities and explore how identity might be seen to shape pedagogical relationships.*

*Keywords: Arts-Informed Research (AIR), Appreciative Inquiry, Graduate Studies, Qualitative Research*

## Purpose

In Reggio Emilia schools teaching is relationship (Malaguzzi, 1993; Edwards, 1994). Høveid (2012) and Høveid and Finne (2014) in writing about teaching relationships draw on Buber's (1958) notions of I and thou to define the space between us. They extend the concept of teaching as relationship as defined and shaped by how we enter relational space, what we bring to it, how we see others, and most profoundly, how we see ourselves. Our identity influences and informs how we enter pedagogical relational spaces. By identity, I mean "an evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute my life converge in the mystery of self... [the] intersection of the inner and outer forces that make me who I am, converging in the irreducible mystery of being human" (Palmer, 2017, p. 14). Emanating from Palmer's (2017) definition of identity is where exploration of identity enters teaching in powerful ways; when teaching is relationship, identity is pedagogy. We teach who we are.

Understanding teaching as relationship contradicts the traditional banking approach (Freire, 1972/2000) or what Schön (1983) might term a techno-rational approach, in which many school systems remain situated operating prescriptively with standardized curricula and teachers as functionaries (Osmond-Johnson, 2015). Where techno-rational approaches (Schön, 1983) are favoured, initiatives targeting learning outcomes, teaching scripts, and prescriptive methodologies to disseminate information erode the place of relationship and human connection in teaching. Professional learning, also positioned within a techno-rational approach, focuses on providing techniques with little acknowledgment of relationship as central to learning (Hunt, 2019).

To challenge such systems and offer a reimagined vision of teaching, we can look inside ourselves and consider how we might be agents of change. For example, intimately knowing ourselves, challenging our beliefs, and reflecting on our stance towards relationships in our teaching can educe opportunities to reconsider who we are as teachers. Critical reflection provides opportunities to stir ourselves, to disturb, to transform (Greene, 1986, p. 81). Acknowledging that we teach who we are, and thus beginning with ourselves, can provide insights into becoming and creating a reimagined education system.

Investigating teaching as identity, this research seeks to illuminate examples of how teachers might think differently about pedagogy by reflecting on "the inner and outer forces" (Palmer, 2017, p. 14) that make us who we are. It examines how those forces are lived in pedagogical relationships. Through reflection, connection, and discovery, anticipated opportunities will arise to challenge the techno-rational role of the teacher. By starting with consideration of self, insights into how we can teach more authentically may surface, enabling us to view ourselves in a more honest light as we co-construct our understanding of identity as pedagogy.

## Theoretical Framework

This research draws on Palmer (2017), understanding that a theoretical positioning is also "an intersection of the inner and outer forces that make [us] who [we are]" (p. 14). My researcher identity is a convergence of the works of theorists to whom I have been exposed and by whom I have been influenced. The theoretical nexus point from which I approach this research sits in an ecological paradigm (Sterling, 2015) and draws on feminist theory (Noddings, 1995a, 1995b, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2017; bell hooks, 1994, 2000), critical theory (Freire, 1970/2000), humanist theory (Palmer, 2017; Aloni, 2013), and the work of Dewey (1916, 1938) around experience and

continuity, and seeks to examine the “myriad of stories and lives that compose a life” (Clandinin, 2019, p. 140). The dynamic intersection of the influence of these theories comprises the theoretical framework of this research.

## **Preliminary Literature Review**

Literature establishing the scholarly context of this research has been explored in the following areas: Teaching as relationship; teacher identity; identity work as professional learning; professional learning identity work; and identity work that moves toward praxis.

### **Teaching as Relationship**

A tenet of this study is that all learning is relational. Reggio Emilia philosophy (Malaguzzi, 1993; Edwards, 1995) is foundational to how I approach this research study. In Reggio Emilia philosophy, relationships are the “fundamental, organizing strategy” of education (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 1). These underpinnings contribute to and inform pedagogical relationships and shape how both teacher and student engage in pedagogical relationships. Van Manen connects pedagogy with “friendship, love, or family,” compelling in all these terms is relationship; they “evoke relational significance” (van Manen, 1994, p. 141). Nel Noddings (1995a, 1995b, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2017), calls us to act in caring ways in our relationships. She writes that we understand ourselves through our many relations, and our “individuality is defined in a set of relations” (Noddings, 2013, p. 51). The teacher, when entering the pedagogical relational space with the child, “affect[s] the whole person . . . in his or her particular way . . . for a limited time—yet with consequences that are infinite and lifelong” (van Manen, 1994, p. 162). Martin Buber (1958) contributes to the literature around pedagogical relationships and the relational space between I and thou. In relation to others, both I and thou are understood in how we know each other. Høveid draws on Buber’s thinking in that we share of ourselves in the pedagogical relational space (Høveid et al., 2014). Pedagogical relationship is shaped by how we enter relational space and understand ourselves and each other therein.

### **Teacher Identity**

The nexus of identity is dynamic. Our experiences, influences, and stories in our lives converge in response to situations and become a voice we offer to the world in each moment in time (Dewey, 1938; Clandinin, 2019; Palmer, 2017; Høveid, 2012). Høveid (2012) suggests, “[W]ho you are as a teacher or leader is a very personal matter, because you are, and you become, a teacher and/or leader in relation to all the others in the web of relations of which you are a part” (p. 251). This is echoed by Nel Noddings (2013): “individuality is defined in a set of relations” (p. 51). Our interactions and experiences converge and reconverge, offering us spaces and ways to know and define ourselves; in essence, they become the lens through which we see the world and the stance from which we enter pedagogical relational spaces. We continually draw forward our stories in relation to others, contextually understanding ourselves through narratives and stories. Palmer (2017), Clandinin (2019), and Clandinin and Connolly (1991, 1994, 1996, 2000) situate this research in an understanding of identity as ever-evolving, responding to life and context.

### **Identity Work as Professional Learning/Professional Learning as Identity Work**

Teacher professional identity is core to the teaching profession (Mockler, 2013; Sachs, 2001). It provides a framework for teachers to construct their ideas of “how to be,” “how to act,” and “how to understand” their work and place in society (Sachs, 2000, as cited in Beauchamp et al., 2009, p. 178). There is much to guide this research in how we understand the necessary shift away from techno-rational approaches (Schön, 1983; Sachs, 2000) to “democratic” views of professionalism (Sachs, 2001; Whitty & Whisby, 2006). Democratic professionalism opens space for teachers to see themselves as agents of change (Whitty & Whisby, 2006, p. 35). Liebernam (2008) posits teachers grow professionally through the realization of their own identities. Professional learning is powerful for teachers when they have the opportunity for “formation and mediation of teacher professional identity” (Mockler, 2013, p. 42). “[Teacher] identity mediates what makes its way into the classroom by how consistent or inconsistent it is with what they believe” (Batey et al., 2008, p. 129). The development of who one is as a teacher and what one brings to the pedagogical relational space is a personally reflective process (Greene, 1986). Professional learning is identity work beginning with the teacher knowing and considering who they are as a person, all that makes them who they are, and what they offer in pedagogical relationships.

## **Identity Work that Moves Towards Praxis**

Nesting systems (Sterling, 2015) describes education through an ecological paradigm; each system and each part of the system is influenced and shaped by the system. In turn, it influences and shapes the system. Professional learning can open space for teachers to be agentic and transformative in begetting change within a system—it can move towards praxis (Freire, 1970/2000; Greene, 1978/2018; Lather, 1986). Empowerment to see ourselves and become different in our own contexts might move us towards praxis. Professional learning that moves us towards praxis is “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 126).

## **Methodology**

Through narrative inquiry, this research seeks to understand our journeys of identity by exploring and storying experiences that shape us. Engaging with our storied experiences provides an opportunity to view ourselves simultaneously from inside, outside, past, and future (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Palmer 2017). Nested within the narrative inquiry, appreciative inquiry (AI) provides a framework to ponder our storied experiences. Shared consideration of our stories through the AI framework is intended to highlight what is best in our work and offer these for consideration as ways to bring light to how experiences intersect as identity. What brings light also reveals shadows through which we learn, grow, and become ourselves; we will also consider these shadows during the research process. Semi-structured group interviews based on an AI framework involving questions and responses, elicitations, written reflections on interviews and shared stories will provide opportunities to reflect on how we enter pedagogical relationships and contemplate how we can bring the best of “what gives life” to a system (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 7), through which positive change might be generated.

## **Educational Significance of the Study**

As Leggo (2008) writes of story-tellers and artists, narrative inquirers attempt to “frame fragments of experience in order to remind us that there is significance in the moment, in the particular, in the mundane” (p. 5). Understanding of each educator experience is unique because every story is acted and understood from an individual journey—our own identities. As Palmer (2017) writes, these stories are the convergence of all that comprises us. This study is a way to contribute to the conversation of knowing ourselves and our stories as a conduit to change, challenge, and reimagine ourselves and our system. When space opens for another to remember their own experience or see their experiences reflected in that of others, “the true fecundity of the instance comes into play” (Jardine, 1992, p.55). This research may act as both a mirror for participants to see who we are and a window through which others may peer and realize how their stories and ours are connected. Explorations and understandings of the opportunity to connect to another’s world experience might bring light and understanding to our own and are central to this research.

## **Results, Conclusions, and/or Interpretations**

Results, conclusions, and/or interpretation will be forthcoming as the research-in-progress is completed.

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