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Novice Teachers’ Narratives of Seeing the Spectrum from a Lense of Social (In)Justice: Preservice’ Teachers’ Well-Remembered Events of Gender-based Pedagogical and Policing Practices in Elementary School Settings

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Novice Teachers’ Narratives of Seeing the Spectrum from a Lense of Social (In)Justice: Preservice’ Teachers’ Well-Remembered Events of Gender-based Pedagogical and Policing Practices in Elementary School Settings

Background/Purpose

Despite very recent and hard-earned progress in national and state legislation explicitly prohibiting discrimination and bullying based on gender identity, expression, or sexual orientation, new teachers continue to report that their professional preparation programs do not adequately prepare them to address both the subtle and serious classroom-based bullying scenarios which routinely marginalize a particular group of students, those who identify as lesbian gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) students (Jennings, 2007). To be sure, we, as a teacher education community, need to push forward in our work to develop socially just teacher education curriculum and tasks which prepare teachers to acknowledge the importance of the “in between” and nuanced life spaces of the students they will teach, the students who represent a spectrum of being between the symbolic gender binary of the letters X or Y.

Fortunately, a number of recent research studies can be supportive of this goal. This growing body of research has begun carefully to provide evidence to help us understand that middle and high school classroom settings are situated places where harmful adolescent peer-policing toward the gender binary “X” or “Y” routinely occurs (GLSEN and Harris Interactive, 2012; Robinson & Espelage, 2001; Stoudt, 2006; Mora, 2012).

Adding to these important lines of inquiry, very recent work (proposal authors, 2014, 2015) has made use of narrative methodology to explore and uncover the specific ways elementary schoolchildren interact with one another about the spectrum of gender identity and/or expression. In addition, this body of work has uncovered several recurring and thematic school-placed plot patterns of student humiliation and shame, e.g. lived-out school stories of student shame and sorrow which routinely occur as a result of gender policing.

Yet even with these new and important lines of inquiry to propel us forward in our work toward socially just teacher preparation, much less is presently known about how preservice teachers’ perceive and interpret the everyday pedagogical practices of their mentor teachers as they daily interact and engage with students’ representative of a spectrum of gender identity and expression. The present study examines this important question through a careful and iterative analysis of the school-based narratives of a cadre of preservice teachers placed in elementary school settings with experienced and practicing teachers.

Theoretical Framework
We developed our research agenda within the context of advocacy research (see Creswell, 2009) with a focus on marginalized children and youth. For this paper, our central objective is to provide results from a tightly focused and careful analysis of a corpus of preservice teachers’ narratives of well-remembered events written during their field-based practicum. We focus on the analysis of preservice teachers’ stories related to concerns regarding teachers’ pedagogical and/or “policing” practices toward gender “nonconforming” students, with a specialized focus on the manner and means by which mentor/practicing teachers (knowingly or unwittingly) “police” toward the gender binary. Our analysis of this smaller but very important subset of preservice teachers’ field-based narratives has begun to uncover particular themes of how patterns of humiliation and shame are shaped in school over time and how stereotypical gender roles and relationships are perpetuated in the contexts of schools.

Perspectives/ Frameworks:

Two distinct frames provide both the background and impetus for this work: (1) recent studies of bullying and peer regulation of sexual identities among adolescents in school settings, and (2) narrative (story) research in teacher education.

*Perspective 1: Statistical Studies of bullying and peer regulation/policing of sexual identities in school settings*

It was not until the start of the present millennium that scholars began focusing energy and large-scale statistical efforts on investigating bullying in school settings. Fortunately, these recent large-scale statistical and survey studies have begun to provide a powerful and clear picture about the magnitude of the bullying problem with respect to the lives of LGBTQ students in school settings (see, for example, Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Birkett & Espelage, 2009).

*Perspective 2: Narrative Research: Storying School Experience and Understanding Issues of Social Injustice in Teaching*


For the present study, and in order to move forward toward richer and deeper understandings regarding the impact of preservice teachers’ narratives on their developing understandings about teaching toward a social justice perspective, we developed a research agenda designed to explore the cognitive understandings and personal sense-making strategies used by novice teachers to “story” classroom
events concerning gender “non conforming” elementary students they routinely observe in the field.

**Data Sources**

As has been noted, this study is a part of a larger, multi-year and on-going effort at a large Southwestern Research I University aimed at understanding the developing storied knowledge of novice teachers (see, for example, proposal authors, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). For the present paper, we direct our focus to the school-based storied experiences of preservice teachers with gender nonconforming elementary school students, with an especial focus on 271 narratives with a storyline about “policing” toward traditional gender roles. Using basic narrative elements (characterization, context, plot structure, thematic implications, reaction/impact), we describe the potential impact the actual storied experiences preservice teachers have on their developing understandings of and confidence about teaching toward goals of social justice in classroom settings.

**Methods and Context**

Participants in this study were enrolled in the first course in the teacher preparation professional sequence. This course focuses on general classroom processes and instruction. Attached to this 4-unit course is a 45-hour field component, wherein students are placed with a mentor teacher for a full semester and, during their field experience, complete various assignments aimed at reflection on course content and its application to teaching. Two major assignments were designed weekly with a narrative focus in mind: (1) well-remembered events (WRE’s) from the field (written and detailed descriptions of well remembered events of preservice teachers’ own choosing from their field-placement observations and/or teaching); and/or (2) personal well-remembered events, i.e. stories from preservice teachers’ own school days, which they found themselves thinking about often or retelling. From a larger corpus of 1500 narratives, we have selected and analyzed a subset of 271 narratives imbued with themes of inequity and social injustice through a range of teachers’ “policing” action and reaction patterns toward gender nonconforming students.

For purposes of this study, these well-remembered event narratives were reviewed and carefully analyzed in order to identify the basic story structures (characters, sequence, plot, pattern of action) embedded in the texts. Using iterative and thematic qualitative analysis techniques, including constant comparison methods (see Bogdan and Biklen, 2007), attention then turned to a detailed documentation of thematic elements in these stories and to possible implications for the development of a socially just curriculum for teacher education.

**Results**

In the group of 271 “policing” narratives from four semesters, there were powerful and well-remembered events which preservice teachers recalled about
their experiences with gender nonconforming students during their own K-12 student days and drawn from their current and ongoing field experiences in elementary classrooms. Our iterative analysis resulted in several thematic and prominent plot and story patterns.

In an attempt to capture carefully these story patterns, we drew upon writer’s language both to develop emerging thematic coding categories and to “title” plot patterns in classroom narratives concerning gender nonconforming students. To render succinctly our findings for this proposal, we briefly describe these narrative themes and plot patterns and below. Each of these themes and plot patterns will be unpacked carefully and in our paper. They are as follows:

**Theme 1: Unexamined Everyday Practice**

**Plot Pattern 1: Division of Labor, Divided by Gender**

(a set of narratives descriptive of teachers’ gendered practices commonly used to get manual and organizational tasks accomplished with efficiency). In many of these narratives, for example, young girls are politely but routinely prohibited from such tasks as moving boxes to specified locations (no matter their size or weight), from holding the door open for moving into hallways (as this task is often regarded as “polite” boy behavior), while girls are often assigned to groups in which young males outnumber females in order to “keep the boys on task.”

**Plot Pattern 2: Literally Speaking: “LINE UP BOYS AND GIRLS”**

(narratives in this plot pattern are replete with examples of gender-based line-up procedures for student movement to lunch, playground, and art or assembly rooms). Some teachers appeared to use these gendered lineup procedures to spark competition between girls and boys to see who can behave better as journeys are made to different school places.

**Plot Pattern: Boys will be Boys: Unequal Affordances and Advice That sometimes you just have to “Let it Ride”**

(stories of teachers “explaining away” male misbehavior). This set of narratives carries with it a common thread of teachers’ gender based explanatory frameworks regarding what constitutes misbehavior. These gender-based frameworks often appeared to create a calculus of inequitable practice based on “expected” assumptions based on “boy” vs. “girl” standards for behavior.

**Plot Pattern: Double Trouble: Difference Draws Both Peer Derision and Teacher Desists**

(a set of narratives about established patterns and sequences of unfortunate events related to treatment of gender nonconforming students). The sequence, sadly follows a predictable plot line: (1) A nonconforming student gets taunted or teased by peers, (2) suffering long, these students sometimes get frustrated and strike back, (3) when they do push back, they strike back strongly and they, not their oppressors become the (mistaken) target of teacher desists.
**Theme 2: Binary Bifurcated Curricular Experience: What Boys Like to Read and Do, What Girls Like to Read and Do**

**Plot Pattern: A new take on Separate But Equal?**

(A collection of narratives about divided content choices and task enactment opportunities for young boys and girls). As one example, narratives make it explicit that many experienced teachers share practical understandings that boys and girls generally prefer different books and engaging in quite different academic activities. A number of preservice teachers’ well remembered events attempted to respectfully counter the claims about what girls like to read and do vs. what boys like to read and do. Yet these same preservice teachers also expressed fears that their mentor teachers might ultimately be right, since, for the most part, elementary students often were very enthusiastic about these gender based activities.

**Theme 3: Heteronormative Naïveté and Numbness**

**Plot Pattern 1: Stories of Mistaken Identity**

(stories of teachers who publicly made heteronormative assumptions about students’ gender identity, precipitating or escalating victimization of “mistaken identity” students). In these narratives, teachers assumed incorrectly the gender identity of their own or others’ students because of students’ non-conforming presentation.

**Theme 4: Getting Gender-Based Laughs: Benign or Belittling Jokes About the Gender Binary?**

**Pattern 1: Well-loved teachers, well worn humor?**

(a set of narratives about teachers’ light-hearted jokes (as delivered) and comedic improvisational interactions about gender non-conforming students). These events, which often came off as light-hearted moments for both students and the experienced teachers who initiated them, provoked ambiguous reactions for preservice teachers.

**Scholarly Significance and Conclusions: Toward a Politically-Relevant and Socially-Just Teacher Education Curriculum**

Directly summarized, two disparate paradigmatic lenses continue to inform us that gender nonconforming students have been in harm’s way for long periods of time in school settings, and they remain at peril as they attempt not only to strive but carry the hope to thrive in classrooms today.

Taken collectively, the narratives examined in this study provide a powerful voice for revising the teacher education curriculum toward goals of equity and social justice. Specifically, the voices in the narratives we studied ask of us: How will our work as scholars and teacher educators impact the lives of teachers, who will soon spend their days in the company of children, children who may not define
themselves in stereotypical or reductionist binary terms. Perhaps we can begin to imagine teacher preparation programs built upon a paradigm of pride in teaching and learning, a paradigm which embraces a vision of varied perspectives and a spectrum of seeing and being.

References


