

## **The construction of social identities through narratives in the classroom\***

*La construcción de las identidades sociales a través  
de las narrativas en el salón de clase*

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### **Abstract**

One of the most important ideas in social sciences is perhaps the concept of identity and the way these identities emerge from people. This paper shows some preliminary results of a research project which is being carried out with students from a public institution in a small town. Through the students' narratives and semi-structured interviews they freely express their thoughts and opinions about specific situations reflecting their multiple identities and the way these social identities emerge from students' life experiences.

**Key words:** identity, social identity, social categories, narratives, social context.

### **Resumen**

Una de las ideas más importantes en las ciencias sociales tal vez es el concepto de identidad y la forma como estas identidades emergen de las personas. Este estudio muestra algunos resultados preliminares de un proyecto de investigación que se está llevando a cabo con estudiantes de una institución pública en un pueblo pequeño. A través de las narrativas de los estudiantes y de entrevistas semi-estructuradas, ellos expresan libremente sus pensamientos y opiniones sobre situaciones específicas reflejando sus múltiples identidades y la manera en que estas identidades sociales emergen de las experiencias de vida de los estudiantes.

**Palabras clave:** identidad, identidad social, categorías sociales, narrativas, contexto social.

## **Introduction**

Language and society play an important role in our daily lives because through language we can explore and communicate not only feelings but thoughts, points of view, and the interpretations we can make from the world. It means that language is an essential feature of human identity. When we listen to someone speaking, we can immediately say many things about this person. We may guess his/her gender, age, educational level or profession, in other words, cultural and social background. All in all we can not deny the existing relationship between language and society.

As there is a relationship between language and society, there is a link between language and identity as well. Human beings construct their identities according to the circumstances they are facing and depending on the context human beings assume different roles. For example, at the settings in the school two different roles are defined: teacher and student. It is important to highlight that the relationship between teacher and student is different from the relationship that students can establish with other students and the relationships that students have at home with their relatives. They behave and adopt different attitudes and behaviors depending on the context. The conception of social identity as a site of struggle is an extension of the position that social identity is multiple and contradictory, Weedon (1997). In consequence, this research project will be focused on the way multiple social identities emerge from students' life experiences.

Talking about social identities includes factors such as socioeconomic status, parental education, parental employment, type of housing, and family size among others. From my experience I have noticed that students come from diverse backgrounds and have different perspectives, needs and goals. It is true that we belong to a family and this is the place where we learn how to interpret the world we are surrounded by and we get knowledge that is not taught in schools, such as knowledge of high culture, then, there is a connection between this social issues and the way they perceive the world.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Since this research project is going to be focused on social issues, identity and social identity are concepts to be considered as below.

### **The Concept of Identity**

From a perspective of a socio-cultural analysis, we need to understand how the concept of identity functions nowadays. According to Turner, Hogg, et al (1987), identity is defined as the self. This self has a process named self-categorization because it is reflexive, it can be taken itself as an object, and it can be categorized, classified, or named itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories, thus, we can say that through this process of categorization we shape our identities. It is a process that is a part of any person, by being part of a community, in our family, in our neighborhood, in our work, in our school or university; we are forming our identity all the time.

Rephrasing Norton's words, the concept of identity refers to how people understand their relation to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future. Peirce (1997) sums up some characteristics of identity as follows: identity is as complex, contradictory, and multifaceted, identity is as dynamic across time and place, identity constructs and is constructed by language, and finally, identity construction must be understood with respect to larger social processes, marked by relations of power that can be either coercive or collaborative.

Nowadays there is an interest in issues related to learner identities in language and literacy education, some theorists (Hall, 1992; Weedon, 1997; Peirce, 2000) give a conception of identity which highlight the sociocultural rather than the psychological, and conceives identity not as static and unidimensional but, as dynamic, multiple, and a site of struggle. This concept allows teachers understand the way students perform and behave, depending on the context the interaction takes place at a specific moment.

### **Social Identity**

It can be said that social identity is the awareness that a person has about belonging to a social category or group. Hogg and Abrams (1988) define a social group as a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category. As Hogg and Abrams (1988) make clear, the social categories in which

individuals place themselves are parts of a structured society and exist only in relation to other contrasting categories, for example, a teacher versus a student; each has more or less power, prestige, status, and so on. Besides, it is pointed out that the social categories precede individuals; they are born into a society that is already structured. Once in society, people develop their identity or sense of self from the social categories to which they belong to. However, each person over the course of his/her personal history is a member of a unique combination of social categories; therefore the set of social identities making up that person's self-concept is unique.

Peirce (1995) argues that language learners have complex social identities that can only be understood in terms of power relations that shape social structures, then, a learner's social identity is, according to Peirce, multiple and contradictory. Learning is successful when learners are able to construct an identity that enables them to impose their right to be heard and thus become the subject of the discourse.

Ochs (1996) defines social identity as the encompassment of participant roles, positions, relationships, reputations, and other dimensions of social personae, which are conventionally linked to epistemic and affective stances. That is to say, the sociocultural context of a student from a rural area, does not offer the same opportunities of a student from the urban area and these aspects influence the attitudes and expectations that a student can have when they express the desire to belong to a community or group.

According to Woodward (1997), identities in the contemporary world derive from a multiplicity of sources; from nationality, ethnicity, social class, community, gender, and sexuality, among others. Relating these sources to our environment, except from nationality, they are the ones we find and experience in our classrooms and that is what we have to face when we are members of any particular community, the role of social class, gender or religion which play an important issue in our context, not only in an academic one but in the social one as well.

These authors have similar points of view, we can say that their theories and concepts are concerned with the way individuals feel identified and behave as a part of social groups, adopting attitudes depending on the context and the group they are interacting at a specific moment. Power relations exist and we assume different attitudes, for example, it is not the same when we, as English teachers, are in front of the students and teach them than when being in a meeting with the principal of the school or being with our relatives at home, we adopt different roles; we are teachers, students, employees or just mothers, brothers, sisters, and children.

## **Research design**

**Setting:** This research is taking place at a public school named NuestraSeñora del Carmen. This school is located in Susacón, a small town in Boyacá.

**Participants:** The participants of this research are the researcher (the teacher) and 12 students. The teacher has a BA in Spanish-English from the UPTC and around 5 years of teaching practice in high schools. The students are in tenth grade, most of them come from rural areas and their ages are ranged between 15 and 18, the group is coeducational.

### **Type of study:**

This is a case study; Anderson (1993) states that case studies are concerned with how and why things happen. The investigation explains contextual realities and the differences between what was planned and what actually occurred. Case study is not intended as a study of the entire organization, it is rather intended to focus on a particular issue, feature or unit of analysis. This research method allows me to identify the way social identities emerge from my students and analyze the way students construct their identities within a group in the classroom.

## **Data collection**

### **Narratives**

According to Czarniawska (2004), narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected. This was the first instrument used to collect data, the students were provided with some situations about facts related to their lives, for example, family, school, work, religion, among others, in which they expressed their opinion. Through these narratives the researcher expected to explore the way students perceive the world and the way they experience different facts in their lives.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

The semi-structured interview consists of specific and defined questions determined beforehand, but at the same time it allows some elaboration in the questions and answers.

The semi-structured interview is used to collect qualitative data by setting up a situation which allows the respondents talk about their opinions on a particular subject.

### **Classroom observation**

According to Seliger H. and Shohamy E. (1995), observations have always been considered a major data collection tool in qualitative research, the main use of observations is for examining a phenomenon or a behavior while it is going on. The main advantage of using observations for collecting data is that they allow the study of a phenomenon at close range with many of the contextual variables present, a feature which is very important in studying language behaviors and how students interact among them.

### **Research Process**

#### **Demographic survey**

In order to select the students to work with, I applied a survey in which I got personal information about my students (See annex # 1). Then, the information was tabulated and I decided to select one student from each of the existing rural areas in the town and five students from the urban area. They are 12 in total.

#### **Students' narratives**

The students were provided with some specific situations about typical lives, what they had to do was to write their point of view about the situation, if it was possible to compare it to their real lives and tell their feelings and thoughts about this situation, also, there were some questions at the end of the situation that they had to answer by expressing their opinion. It is relevant to highlight that the six situations they were delivered were in Spanish, their native language, due to their poor level of English. An example of a situation is:

#### **Situación # 3**

*En nuestro medio se presentan problemas, desigualdades sociales, violencia social, irrespeto por las leyes y los valores, violación de los derechos humanos, etc. La única forma de sobrevivir a estos problemas y hacer convivir a sus ciudadanos, es mediante actitudes de tolerancia. La convivencia no es otra cosa que la posibilidad de vivir en sociedad en forma armónica y respetuosa. Para lograr este estilo de vida es necesario*

*cultivar actitudes como el respeto, el civismo, la justicia, el diálogo y la tolerancia. Teniendo en cuenta estos aspectos contesta las siguientes preguntas:*

- 1. ¿En qué te pareces y en qué te diferencias de tus compañeros? ¿Cómo haces para integrarte con ellos?*
- 2. Tu comportamiento o trato, ¿es igual para con todas las personas que conoces? ¿Por qué?*
- 3. En tu municipio, ¿hay iguales oportunidades de educación para todos los niños?*

## **Data Analysis**

The main framework of analysis for this project was narrative inquiry; stated by Clandinin and Connelly's (2000). I selected it because it focuses on experiences of individuals, in this case of the students, it is chronological, it uses re-storying, it is collaborative between the researcher and the participants, and it incorporates context and place which are the aspects I am taking into account.

The first step in the process of collecting data was to apply a survey (see annex # 1) in order to get some demographic information. The results showed me that in the group of twenty pupils there were five students who live in the urban area and the other fifteen students who live in different rural areas, then, I decided to select the five students from the urban area and seven students from the rural areas, one per each township, it allows me to make a comparison between the urban and the rural students as well.

After having selected the participants of this project, the students signed a consent form where they authorized me to use their information in order to be analyzed for this project and for academic purposes. Then, I started to give them the situations, one different per class, as long as I read the students' narratives I planned what to ask in the semi/structured interviews in order to compare, clarify or amplify the information and start coding it to establish the categories explained in the findings.

## **Preliminary Findings**

As the main purpose of this project is to explore what social identities emerge from the students' narratives, the results of the data analysis are grouped into the next categories:

### **Compromise with the family**

I named this preliminary category like compromise with the family because students from rural areas have a strong feeling of gratitude, love and admiration to their families. In the following lines it will be shown how they value the support from their parents, they are aware of the responsibility that their parents have in relation to their education and they try not to disappoint them, they try to get satisfactory results because their parents expect too much from their children.

*"He aprendido que todo se puede lograr en la vida. Y así es como estoy en estos momentos, con mi esfuerzo y con el de mis padres que me apoyan en todos los momentos difíciles de esta etapa de estudio". (Student # 1).*

*"Recuerdo una vez que perdí sociales y me correspondió recuperar trayendo a mi mamá. Nunca pensé que me tocara a mi traer a mi madre para pasar la materia y me da pena con mi mamá cada vez que me acuerdo, me siento mal porque no era justo con mi mamá". (Student # 2).*

*"Hoy en día me siento feliz por mi familia, por su apoyo". (Student # 3).*

In these students' answers we can clearly appreciate what Pierce states about identity, the students are describing the way they understand their relation to the world and how they understand their possibilities for the future. These students are speaking about their life experiences, they show through their narratives that they have learnt, not a specific knowledge that can be taught at schools but a knowledge they have constructed throughout their lives.

### **Social adaptation**

When we experience changes we face new things, these could be positive or negative depending on the way we feel. The social adaptation which I refer in this case is the transition that students experiment from being in a small primary school and finish 5th grade to start 6th grade in a bigger high school. For most of the students (urban and rural) it is not easy to get used to the new context because of many factors, for example, the teachers, the subjects, their friends and the schedule. Even though, there are two rural students who think that the transition was easy for them.

*"Al ingresar al colegio fue muy difícil adaptarme porque algunos compañeros se fueron a estudiar a otro colegio". (Student # 4).* In these words we can see how the student finds adaptation difficult for her. Her friends from the primary school were not going to be with her anymore so she felt that she had to start the process of making new friends again which is not easy.

*"En grado sexto para mi fue muy duro adaptarme porque uno llega a sexto todo tímido y a la vez con miedo". (Student # 5).* The student is showing a feeling of fear because she has to face new experiences, this fear is toward things already mentioned as teachers, classmates, friends, subjects, and methodologies.

*"Mi proceso de adaptación fue un poco difícil ya que era muy tímido, aunque aún lo sigo siendo. En secundaria todo es diferente, aquí se tiene un docente para cada materia y son cosas que cuando ingresé a sexto me parecieron raras" (Student # 6).*

But, there are other students who think that the transition was not too difficult, that his process of adaptation to the new school was almost natural. He says: *"El cambio de colegio para mi no fue tan brusco, el primer día no tuve buenos resultados pero me fui adaptando y esto me llevó a querer más a mi institución, en grado séptimo ya estaba más adiestrado". (Student # 7).*

Few urban students express that it is easy, most of the rural students express that it was difficult to get used to the new context because of the teachers, the subjects, the schedule and the new people. This is a clear example of how the relations of power play an important role in the social world of students affecting their social interaction. It takes time to adapt to their new world; meanwhile they construct their identity and establish relations with other persons.

## **Emotions and feelings**

All human beings have strong feelings about the things we like. What I want to express with this category is the happiness rural students feel when they come from their houses to the school which is in the town. Student # 8 is a rural student who lives in a very far township, it takes him two hours and a half to get to the school. He says: *"Lo más que me gusta de ir al colegio es cuando salimos para la casa porque podemos jugar en el parque y ver gente". (Student # 8).* For rural students it is almost a happening to come to the town, they express their happiness because they feel that they are in an important place, at least they

see different people from the few neighbors they can see at their farms. It does not matter how long he takes to get to the school, he is not interested in studying, he only waits for the time to leave the school and hang around the town. In some way it also implies that this student feels isolated when he is not at school, that this is the place to get in touch with people.

### **Rural students vs. Urban students**

Despite the students in the classroom are under the same conditions, they have the same opportunities and the same teachers; there is a rivalry between the students who live in rural areas and the students who live in urban areas. When the teacher asks them to make groups of work they do not want to be mixed, there is a notorious difference and they express their wish of working as they want. Both of them, rural and urban students show their feelings in their narratives as follows:

*"Los estudiantes del pueblo se creen de mejor estrato". (Student # 9).*

*"Los de las veredas son muy diferentes a nosotros en todo, empezando por la forma de vestir, por eso, aunque estemos en el mismo salón y traten de integrarnos siempre van a haber diferencias". (Student # 10).*

*"Claro que los del campo nos diferenciamos de los del pueblo, por ejemplo nosotros somos más colaboradores y decentes, ellos creen que porque viven en el pueblo y no les toca ver los animales o cocinar con leña pueden tratarnos como quieren". (Student 7).*

As we can see, they insist on their differences, not only in the way they behave, but also, in the way they are dressed, if they are forced to work together they just do the task and get back to their original group, the good point is that there is respect among them. Here we can see the construction of an identity marked by relations of power, there are two groups involved in this construction, the ones who think they are better because they live in the town and the ones who feel less because they come from rural areas, the only good thing is that this relation of power is not coercive but collaborative.

### **Conclusions**

Nowadays the theory of social identity has been used to refer to specific categories related to social sciences such as: class, gender, religion, family, and background, among others,

allowing people, in this case the researcher, to understand why the students behave in a particular way at every moment or situation.

Another important conclusion is that some categories of social identities as gender, socioeconomic status, and social background are present in our academic and social contexts all the time and they are really important because they help people to show who they are and how is the interaction with other people. These categories are social constructions and they emerge from different manner in every individual. These categories are present into the spaces we reside, not only in the school, but also into our homes and everywhere.

Rephrasing the concept of social identity, I can say that not only my students but also all the human beings belong to a particular social group. There are many different groups as different roles we assume but what I can conclude is that people can not maintain these roles all the time; they change depending on the moment and the persons. As Norton (1997) stated: identities are multifaceted and dynamic across time and place.

Students always want to be recognized for any aspect but beyond this recognition what they really need is to be accepted in the group, this acceptance is what allows them to show the identities that are immersed in each one. It could happen that a group accepts a behavior but not the person or vice versa, the person but not the behavior, students need to show that they are different and need to be included into a group in order to enhance their self-esteem.

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## ANNEX # 1

### SURVEY

A través de esta encuesta se busca obtener información sobre el origen familiar de los estudiantes, los resultados serán analizados con fines investigativos.

1. ¿Cuántas personas habitan en su hogar? Especifique el número \_\_\_\_\_

2. ¿Quién en su grupo familiar es profesional?

- a. Mi papá \_\_\_\_\_
- b. Mi mamá \_\_\_\_\_
- c. Mi papá y mi mamá \_\_\_\_\_
- d. Nadie \_\_\_\_\_

¿Cuál profesión? \_\_\_\_\_

3. ¿A qué estrato social pertenece?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5

4. Su lugar de vivienda está ubicado en la zona:

- a. RURAL \_\_\_\_\_
- b. URBANA \_\_\_\_\_

5. ¿Cree que aprender inglés es importante en el medio en el que usted vive?

SÍ \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_ ¿Por qué? \_\_\_\_\_

6. ¿Cree que saber inglés tiene beneficios?

SÍ \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_ ¿Cuáles? \_\_\_\_\_