

Studying the complexity of classroom life: dimensions of identity construction in a bilingual fifth grade

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In recent years, the concept of identity has been broadened and new ways of understanding what constitutes identity, how identity is formulated and (re)formulated, and how identity is understood as relating to both individuals and collectives (e.g., nation, state, local group, or even a classroom) have been proposed. Many theorists focus on identity from an adult point of view; however, recently work on the invented and incomplete nature of identity has begun to explore how children develop identity/identities, as they move among home, community, and schooling contexts. In this article, we present an argument that identities within a classroom are not givens, but are formulated in and through the developing discourses, practices and ways of structuring interactional spaces for collective and individual activity. Using an Interactional Ethnographic Approach (Castanheira, Crawford, Dixon & Green, 2001; Santa Classroom Discourse Group, 1992a), we explore how developing local identities were related to the ways in which the teacher and students formulated who can do and/or say what, to and with whom, when, where, under what conditions, for what purposes, and with what outcomes.

On the situated nature of identity: a conceptual argument, research approach and methodology

To examine how collective and individual identities are interrelated and result from developing local cultural practices, we drew on Giddens' (1990) theory of structuration, Fairclough's (1992; 1993; 1995) theory of critical discourse analysis, and Bakhtin's arguments on the dialogic nature of language and the existence of social languages (Bakhtin, 1986; Bloome

& Egan-Robertson, 1993). Giddens' (1990) theory provided a productive theoretical language to talk about the ways in which the social system of the classroom was constructed in and through the actions of class members. He discussed the notion of structure as "structuring properties providing the binding of time and space in social systems" (Giddens, 1990, p. 64). For him, structure is both "the medium and the outcome of the human activities which it recursively organizes" (Giddens, 1987, p. 61). Thus individuals' actions, as well as social and/or institutional structures, are in a constant process of being produced, reproduced or redefined as a result of the situated interactions of the members of a social group and the possibilities for intervention in a potentially malleable world (Giddens, 1990). From this perspective, members of a class are simultaneously shaped by traces of life in other classrooms and social settings (knowledge), and by the on-going process of constructing the local social system for living within their current classroom (See Collins & Green, 1992; Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1992a; b for a discussion of this process in classrooms).

Fairclough (1995) proposed a theoretical perspective on the relationships between talk or writing, discourse practices, and social practices, constituting discursive events. This conceptualization enables us to understand that as members of a group interact they are drawing on, as well as producing, a complex set of practices, through which identity potentials, as well as content information and norms and expectations, are formulated, developed and, in so doing, made publicly available.

To examine how a fifth grade teacher initiated classroom practices with students and others (e.g., student teacher, teacher's aide, parents and researcher) that shaped the construction and take up of potential identities for both the collective and the individual-within-the-collective, we undertook a multi-step process of analysis, each from a particular angle of vision. The first

analysis examined how the teacher initiated and engaged students in structuring the flow of conduct and patterns of organization across time and events of the first morning. The second analysis involved identifying key transcript segments that made visible how the collective was “discursively constructed”, that is, talked and acted into being on this first morning. These analyses constitute telling cases (Mitchell, 1984) that provide a basis for making logical inferences about the initiation of collective identity potentials, a previously unexamined theoretical issue.

The ethnographic corpus included videotapes and fieldnote records (ca. 200 hours), artifacts, and informal and formal interviews (Castanheira, 2000). Classroom demographics mirror those of the school. Seventy-three percent of the students participated in the free lunch program, and 24 of the 28 students were classified by the school as either transition 1, (8 primarily Spanish dominant writers learning to read and write in English); transition 2 (16 students becoming more fluent in writing and reading in English); or English readers and writers (4). The teacher held a bilingual credential and had 27 years of experience (pre-k-6 and community college) at the time of this year of the on-going ethnography.

Constructing the Collective: Creating Identities for the Tower Community

Building on Giddens’ (1990) notion that structure is both “the medium and the outcome of human activities which it recursively organizes”, and our previous work on classrooms as cultures (e.g., Collins & Green, 1992; Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse, 1992a; 1992b; 1995), we explored different angles of analysis to examine the question of how participants contributed to the structuring of classroom life and how identity potentials become available to them in this process of constructing classroom life. These analyses enabled us to examine how, in the moment-by-moment interactions, the teacher initiated principles of practice with the students and

others in the class, and how these practices shaped particular identity potentials on this first morning.

The first analysis involved the construction of a running data record¹ of the flow of conduct among differing configurations of members (Castanheira et al., 2001). Table 1 provides a 2 minute segment (8:12-8:14:14) from the full running record that illustrates the flow of conduct that occurred during this unofficial beginning of school time.

Table 1
Running Record of Actions: Shifting Angles of Interactions Observed

Time	Reconstruction of Actions Observed from Fieldnotes and Videotape Records
8:10	[From 8:00-8:10 the camera is being set up. The camera begins recording at 8:10]. Some students are already present. Students continue to arrive; some with parents. Adults greet students and parents; students select places to sit and begin coloring their name tiles. [The official beginning time of school is 8:30.]
8:12:11	BY (teacher) ¹ talks in Spanish to Israel ² and his mom. As Israel's mom leaves the classroom, BY points in a direction to Israel and follows him as he moves to the chair at the table where he sits down, joining four boys who had arrived earlier--Bill, Amos, Roberto, Reynaldo
8:12:23	Reynaldo gets up and looks around room and then sits down again.
8:12:25	SK (teacher's aide) comes from the right side of the monitor to the left side and disappears again.
8:12:41	Esteban's hands are visible on the monitor coloring his name tile that was given to him when he arrived. Two other boys, Joey and José, are sitting at his table, also coloring their tiles.
8:12:53	BY walks to the table where Amos is sitting, leans over and greets Amos. She offers her hand and says, "I'm Ms Y. How are you? [inaudible] back to Jefferson? You were here last too?" [Amos' response is inaudible] BY says, "Third grade. So you are coming back to Jefferson this year?"
8:12:55	BY straightens up and walks over to KG (the student teacher). They start to talk.
8:13:00	Joey is singing. He looks at José, who stops coloring and looks over at Joey's paper. José holds his paper up facing Joey and Esteban. Joey and Esteban look at his drawing and then go back to their own work. Israel gets up from his chair and walks to BY.
8:13:08	BY talks to Israel in Spanish, "vas necessitar [inaudible]. Then louder to the rest of the group: "You need to share these pencils. You should probably be moving to marking pencils. You should be finishing in about ten minutes."
8:13:11	Reynaldo says something to BY. Karen is watching them.
8:13:17	Joey, José and Esteban continue to color their name tiles.
8:13:30	SK walks from the back of the room to table 4 and begins talking to José. He holds up his work for her to see. She stands between Joey and José, watching Esteban as he colors his name tile.
8:13:33	Alejandro is leaning with his elbows on table 6, looking at Geraldo, who is talking to him.
8: 14:14	BY walks to the white board and faces students. She tells them that they will have 10 more minutes to finish what they are doing. (approximately the beginning of official school time).

¹ A bracket, (), indicates information that the students did not have available at that time.

² All names of students and school are pseudonyms. Initials are used for adults.

As indicated in Table 1, students entered at different times and were directed to sit at one of 6 table groups in the classroom. The different times of entry were important to consider for both those present and for those entering at later points in time. Both groups had the opportunity to engage with a number of texts: the teacher's (or other adults') personal greeting(s) made as they entered; comments that they overheard as others entered; the artifacts on the walls; the physical arrangement of the classroom (e.g., its shape and the placement of tables and work spaces), and the visible and auditory patterns of activity of other students already present. Each of these texts were available to be seen, heard, read, interpreted, and then used, as cues to guide the newcomers entry into the class and their actions once in the class. Additionally, as each student contributed to the construction of the text, they were given opportunities to take particular positions. How they took up these positions and the choices they made in interacting began a process of local identity formation and display.

Analysis of the patterns of activity across time in this two minute segment (Table 1), as well as the larger running data record, led to the identification of a common set of practices that were part of the process of being greeted and welcomed to the class. For example, all students, and those who entered with them, were greeted in English or Spanish based on the teacher's prior knowledge of the home (or dominant) language, given a task to do, and invited to chose a place to sit at one of the six table groups. Each of these actions, while part of the greeting, were instrumental in initiating a set of practices that shaped entry into the class and initiated a process of defining the identity potentials that would be afforded members of the class.

One pattern of practice will be examined to illustrate the discursive construction of practices, processes and identity potentials available to students in this two minute segment of this unofficial time period of the first morning. This pattern was related to the use of languages

in the classroom. Table 1 begins at 8:12:11 as Israel and his mother entered the classroom, walked to the area near table group 1, and were greeted in Spanish by the teacher. The choice of Spanish was available to be overheard by others in the classroom (Larson, 1995), particularly those at the table groups nearest to Israel and his mother. This use of Spanish foreshadowed and served to confirm a pattern of practice that, with each new interactional partner, was being developed--the choice of language for speaking and writing (e.g., in the events on the remainder of the day and on subsequent days). Across days and instances of occurrence, this pattern would become a principle of practice (Frake, 1977 as cited in Spradley, 1980) that members would come to anticipate and to use to guide their work in subsequent events (Tuyay, Floriani, Yeager, Dixon & Green, 1995). The shift between languages marked the teacher as bilingual, part of her developing public identity, while signaling that both languages were valued as resources in this classroom, part of the collective's identity potentials. The analysis of this pattern of practice, one of the practices identified in the two-minute segment of the running data record (Table 3), showed the complexity and richness of "data" potentially available to members. We use the term potentially in that not all members attended to all cues (data), that people entered at different points in time and, that individuals were involved in a range of activity within a common type of event.

From the Unofficial Beginning of School to the Formal Beginnings of the Collective

In the previous section, we illustrated how analysis of the flow of conduct provided evidence that the process of structuring the community and what would count as appropriate activity within the community were begun during the "unofficial" time prior to the "official" beginning of the first whole class activity. In this section, we examine the transition from this interactional space with its distributed range of activity to the construction of a single, focused

interactional space that marked the formal onset of the collective within this developing community. We present an analysis of the introduction of the chime (an insider or folk term) as a way of shifting members’ actions from distributed interactional spaces to a whole class space with a single focus. Table 2 represents the transcript segment from the activity that began when the teacher moved to the space in front of the whiteboard and rang the chime at approximately 8:45.

Table 2
The Chime: Creating a Collective Orientation and Initiating a Cultural Practice

Line	Teacher’s Actions		Students’ Actions	Discursive Choices	Consequences for Community Practice
	Verbal	Non-verbal			
168		T rings chimes	Students stop what they are doing and look at the teacher.	Theme: chime as a signal	Establishing a collective signal for constituting
169	oh				
170	that was great				
171	we should try again	Teacher waits for	J is reading a book.	Congratulates students for their precision and gives another opportunity	whole class interactional space
172	hablen bastante	few seconds and	Students laugh and start	To “practice”	
173		rings chimes	Pretending to talk to each other. Joseph continues		
174		again.	to read his book.		
175		(pause)			
176	oh				Reaffirming the meaning of the signal
178	that is great				
179		(pause)			
180	joseph			Calls on student who was not	
181	that would be a signal			Participating in	
182	for you to look up			in group activity	
183		(pause)			
184	una campana		(translation: one tolling and you have to hear)		
185	hay que escuchar			Interwoven use of Spanish and English	Positions Spanish and English Speakers as her interlocutors demonstrates the place for using S and E
186	it may be that you				
187	you know				
188	you are in the middle				
189	of doing something				
190	o que están				
191	trabajando en algo				
192	y si oyes				
193	esa campana				
194	tienes que mirar arriba				
195	y escuchar				
196	a cualquier persona				
197	que está hablando				

As represented in Table 2, after ringing the chime, the teacher began her talk by evaluating positively students’ actions in response to the chime (168-170). All of the students but one stopped working and reoriented their attention to the teacher; the student who did not

reorient, Joey, continued reading a book he had begun during the previous event (students' column lines 171-175). The teacher did not comment but invited the students to "try again/hablan bastante" 171-172). In response to her invitation, students laughed and started pretending to talk to each other. The teacher rang the chime a second time. Once again, Joey, did not take up the invitation and continued reading his book. The teacher elected to respond again by repeating her positive evaluation, "oh/that is great" (176-177), acknowledging that the students had once more taken up the expected and anticipated actions.

Her actions and the related talk showed how she was able to discursively accomplish the physical reorientation of space and activity. Thus, the chain of talk and action constituted an instance of community-orienting discourse, and began the establishment of a cultural practice of this group—the use of the chime as a signal to move to whole class space and to attend to the person ringing the chime. The second invitation was an instance of instrumental discourse that had the effect of creating a referential language for one of the ways in which changes in the flow of conduct would be signaled in this developing collective.

Her next actions made it clear that she was aware that not all students had taken up the opportunity to practice and to participate in the construction of the referential or instrumental discourse. As indicated above, Joey had not taken up the expected actions. This time, she called on Joey, restating what she expected to occur in response to the chime "Joey/that would be a signal/for you to look up" (180-182). Joey, then, put his book away and joined the collective in attending to the teacher. Her restatement to Joey was said in the same tone that she used to tell the class to try again. It was not said with a negative tone, suggesting to Joey, and to the class, as an overhearing audience, that they were still learning how to engage in this form of cultural practice, the transition from one type of event with differentiated interactional spaces to one with

a common focus. The teacher's next actions confirmed this interpretation and made visible to the class that she had not meant to sanction Joey negatively. Rather, her choice of response to Joey's actions showed that she used his actions as a point of contrast and as an opportunity to redefine his actions as not unique, but as something that might happen to anyone of the class members who were involved in their work. After commenting individually to Joey, she immediately turned to the class and in a public voice began to provide a narrative summarizing the entire chain of actions and possible issues that the students might face (i.e., being in the middle of doing something, 188-189). Her actions also made visible different positions and their related identities that students would take up—there are times to act as an individual-within-the-collective and there are times that you are part of the collective that will be addressed as a whole.

The teacher's actions made visible the importance of the chime as a sign for transitioning. Further, her response to Joey and the way in which she used it to address the entire group were also instrumental for members in that it discursively inscribed a set of conditions under which they too might have a similar experience. The discursive construction of the links between the past and present actions of individuals and the group inscribed a possible future for students and potential actions and identities within this community. It also showed that the actions of members were material resources to be used to create what would count as appropriate practice.

If we return to Table 2, a second set of practices that were both instrumental and community orienting become visible. Analysis of the discursive choices the teacher made in terms of the languages she used to welcome the students made visible a number of practices. The choice of using both Spanish and English to construct her narrative reinforced the use of two languages as resources for learning about community actions and for accomplishing classroom tasks described. The use of the two languages was instrumental in maintaining a single

collective focus with the entire class. It was also community-orienting in that it did not separate students into two groups by speaking one language and then the other, which would have required one group to wait for their turn with the teacher. Further, the ways in which she switched between English and Spanish/Spanish and English showed that both groups of students faced a common task of listening across languages. Thus, the choices she made in the use of the two languages also served as community-orienting discourse practices and as moments for providing information to students about how the class would function as a bilingual community.

The examples above, while small moments in time, foreshadowed a set of local practices and principles of practice that extended students' understanding of how languages would be used within this developing community and about the social consequences for all of these types of discourse practices.

Concluding Remarks on the Relationships of Classroom Discourse and the Social Construction of Identities

The analyses presented in this article provide insights into the constructed nature of the discourses of the classroom and their role in identity formulation and formation. As demonstrated in the analysis of the first morning of school these discourses constituted a local referential system that was simultaneously part of, as well as the outcome of, the structuring of everyday life. The analyses of the developing nature of these discourses provide support for Giddens' (1987) theory of structuration, and show how structures are "both the medium and the outcome of human activities, which it recursively organizes" (p. 61). These local referential systems can be viewed as constituting a language of learning available to students, regardless of language backgrounds, ability levels, or institutional labels. By creating a referential system in which process, practice and community were both objects of study and ways of working in community, the teacher created opportunities for students to see, hear and understand what was

required, valued and important. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1986) notion of speaker/hearer and hearer/speaker, the community identity that is formed suggests that the group as a whole becomes an implicated hearer that individuals-within-the-community can address, drawing on all of the historical and material resources that were constructed at the community level. This way of viewing identity potentials and identities as both of individuals-within-the-community and of the community-as-a-whole, argues for a view of identity as dialogically and historically constructed within a group, and as a material resource for both the collective and individuals-within-the-collective.

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¹ A *running data record* is created by identifying and representing in narrative form the sequence of activity constructed by members. Each point on a running data record represents a change in activity among actors or a shift in the angle of vision (e.g., a shift in which actors' actions are being represented). This record provides a representation of the flow of time and activity of the group, or members of the group.