The Ideological Becoming of International Graduate Assistants in A United States University

Mary Louise Gomez and Amy S. Johnson Lachuk

Contact Information

Mary Louise Gomez
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Department of Curriculum
and Instruction
Phone: (608) 263-6527
mail: mlgomez@wisc.edu
http://literacy.education.wisc.edu/
literacy/people/gomez-mary-louise

Amy Suzanne Johnson Lachuk
University of South Carolina
204 Wardlaw College
College of Education
820 South Main Street
Columbia, South Carolina 29208
803-777-2476
johnsoa6@mailbox.sc.edu
http://sc.academia.edu/
Amyjohnsonlachuk/CurriculumVitae

ABSTRACT

This paper draws on a Bakhtinian theoretical framework to trace the ideological becoming—or development of ways of viewing the world and their place in it—of international graduate assistants working in a Midwestern United States teacher education program. Ideological selves are developed when persons negotiate available resources in their environment—people, discourses and contexts. We interrogated the experiences and outcomes of these for international graduate assistants as they negotiated challenging teaching contexts and made future career plans.

KEYWORDS: Bakhtinian theoretical framework, Ideology, Resources, Challenging teaching contexts.

El devenir ideológico de alumnos graduados internacionales en una universidad de los Estados Unidos

RESUMEN

Este documento se basa en un marco teórico bakhtiniano para trazar el devenir ideológico —o el desarrollo de formas de ver el mundo y su lugar en él— de alumnos graduados internacionales que trabajan en un programa de Educación en Midwestern en los Estados Unidos. Las claves ideológicas se desarrollan cuando las personas negocian los recursos disponibles en su entorno: personas, discursos y contextos. Hemos indagado en las experiencias y resultados de estos alumnos internacionales ya que han mostrado tener habilidades para negociar nuevos contextos de enseñanza desafiantes y han sabido establecer sus planes de futuro.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Marco teórico bakhtiniano, Ideología, Recursos, Desafíos de los nuevos contextos de enseñanza.

Teaching assistants. Teaching Contexts Identity

Teacher education programs in the United States are attempting to increase the diversity of their faculties to provide more global, multicultural perspectives to their students. Given these circumstances, we wondered what experiences international graduate assistants encountered during their doctoral programs, and how these experiences influenced their future career choices. We traced the ideological becoming—or development of ways of viewing the world and their place in it—of international graduate assistants as they worked in an elementary teacher education program in the Midwestern United States. Using life history methods, Mary Louise devised a study of international graduate assistants investigating the following questions:

- What are the experiences of "ideological becoming" of international graduate assistants in a predominantly white institution (PWI) of higher education in the United States?[1]
- What are the outcomes of ideological development for international graduate assistants with reference to their future goals and careers?

Theoretical Framework

Russian philosopher Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1981) asserted that an ideological self develops when a person negotiates available resources in her environment—discourses, contexts, people—who they are and what they speak and do. Such a process is what has been called "ideological becoming" or "how we develop our way of viewing the world, our system of ideas…" (Freedman and Ball, 2004, 5). In using the term "ideology," Bakhtin is not necessarily referring to "a consciously held political belief system," but "refer[s] … to the way in which members of a given social group view the world" (Morris, 1994, 249).

Bakhtin (1981) wrote that ideological development emerges from the "intense struggle" that takes place "among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values" (p. 346). Our interactions with others within social contexts are crucial for what we learn about the world, our place in it, and who we understand ourselves to be. Freedman and Ball (2004) explained

---

1   In this paper, we refer to doctoral students who are employed in teaching and supervising teacher candidates as graduate assistants. We refer to undergraduate students in our elementary education program as prospective teachers. And we call those persons who host prospective teachers in their classrooms and enable them to practice their pedagogy on students, cooperating teachers. The term "supervise" prospective teachers' practices refers to observations and conversations about their teaching in a school classroom that observed and critiqued by a graduate assistant.

"that when diverse voices interact, we struggle to assimilate two distinct categories of discourse: (1) authoritative discourse, and (2) internally persuasive discourse" (p. 7). Authoritative discourse is "a prior discourse" that "is given in lofty spheres, not those of familiar contact" such as that of religious dogma or scientific truth (Bakhtin, 1981, 342-343). Internally persuasive discourses are those that individuals find more resonant with their own worldviews. Through this struggle among discourses, persons develop ideologically.

Contexts of the Study

Graue and Walsh (1998) draw attention to the fluid, dynamic, and social nature of a context—or a "culturally and historically situated place and time, a specific here and now" (p. 9). They argue that contexts are relational, that they shape and are shaped by actors—their perceptions and intentions. Nested contexts for this study are Lake City,[2] a community of 250,000 where State University is located, its public schools (where graduate assistants supervise the classroom practices of prospective elementary teachers), and the State University campus.

Lake City is a middle class, English-speaking community with a majority (84.5%) White population. Over 92% of Lake City residents graduated from high school and 48% hold a bachelor's degree. Median household income is over $40,000 per year with 15% of people living below the poverty line. 12.7% of people speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census, 2010).

 Lake City enrolls nearly 25,000 students in its schools, a stable enrollment since 1992-1993—when 80% of its K-12 public school students were White while today, only 49% are White (Lake City Schools Website 2008-2009). In the past 20 years, there also have been large increases in the number of low-income students. The K-12 population of English language learners reflects a 500% increase since 1991-1992, and a 10% increase since 1999 (Lake City Schools Website, 2008-2009), most of whom are Spanish speakers. Lake City high schools have far lower graduation rates for African Americans and Latinos than Whites and Asians. Few teachers of color are employed in this city; most are monolingual in English (Lake City Schools Website, 2005).

In 2009, when M. L. Gomez initiated this study, State University enrolled 28, 690 undergraduates of whom 23, 321 are White. 3, 936 who are "ethnic minorities", and 1, 423 who are from international contexts. (State University Data Digest, 2009-2010). It also enrolled 9, 116 graduate students of whom 5, 909 are white, 2, 216 are from international contexts, and 993 are classified as

---

2   The names of all people, geographic places, and institutions have been given pseudonyms.

"ethnic minorities" (State University Data Digest, 2009- 2010). State University also has a predominantly White faculty—of 2,022 faculty, 1, 817 are White (State University Data Digest, 2009- 2010).

From 2004-2011, while Mary Louise was chair of Elementary Education at State, the program admitted a total of 700 students (100 per year). Of these, fewer than 10% were students of color and few were from international contexts (Education Academic Services, State University, 2010). Most students enrolling in the program are from small towns and suburban areas of the Midwest. The program requires four semesters of professional course work and practica and a fifth semester of full-time student teaching. It employs 13 faculty members—10 Whites, 2 African Americans, and 1 Latina. Graduate teaching assistants are employed to conduct all of the supervision of prospective teachers and teach many courses to them as well. The program's mission is to educate teachers who are school leaders and embrace an approach to teaching that is multicultural and oriented to social justice for all people.

What this means for international graduate assistants is that they are entering contexts where whiteness, middle class Midwestern U.S. values, and the hegemony of the English language hold a great deal of influence in the community and on campus. These intersections of race, ethnicity, social class, and language backgrounds create living, studying, and working conditions that may be unfamiliar and disconcerting for these students. Next, we detail how we collected and analyzed data for our research project.

Methodology

Working with two graduate assistants, Mary Louise used life history methods to interview 9 international graduate assistants for our study. We did so because we have found that in talking about their lives, participants frequently draw on narrative forms to exemplify particular points they are making to us as researchers (see Gomez, 2010; Johnson, 2010). Cole and Knowles (2001) wrote that life history research, "…is about understanding the relationship, the complex interaction, between life and context, self, and place (p. 11). Extending Cole's and Knowles' notions about what individuals' stories do, Linde (1993) argued that life stories: "make a primary evaluative point about the speaker or about some event framed as relevant specifically because it happened to the speaker, and that, stories "…have extended reportability; that is, they are tellable and told and retold over the course of a long period of time" (p. 21).

Life history methods afford researchers occasions to: understand patterns in people's lived experiences; highlight relationships of these patterns to ways they might be interrupted; and create compassionate responses to people's experiences

(Bertaux and Berteaux-Wiame, 1981). All of these were appealing as we listened to international graduate assistants narrate difficulties they encountered in their work lives, and considered how we might address these.

Data Generation and Collection

Between May 2009 and May 2010, we conducted semi-structured life history interviews with graduate assistants whose home countries were Chile, India, Korea, Pakistan, and Spain. Interviews typically lasted for 2 hours and encompassed experiences in their family lives, their K-12 schooling experiences, their prior teaching experiences, and their work experiences in graduate school. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. We often interviewed participants a second time to follow up on responses that were intriguing, required clarification, and/or were related to patterns found in the data.

While questions concerning racism were not posed directly, all respondents spontaneously named experiences they had as racist. Participants understood the racism directed at them as being related to their skin color, language background or accented English, presumed religion, and/or imagined politics. Participants expressed a great deal of anger and sorrow over these experiences. These were unexpected to them in a prestigious U. S. university, and particularly in a department that espoused ideals of social justice and equity in schooling.

Data Analyses

Methods of qualitative analysis (Graue and Walsh, 1998) were used to identify themes in the interview transcripts. We began inductively by each reading the transcripts on multiple occasions, noting patterns within and across interviews. We maintained themes on which both of us agreed and then reread the data to verify these, including: (1) prospective teachers bypassing a graduate assistant when there was a problem or conflict and going directly to a faculty member to complain; or (2) refusing to engage graduate assistants' questions in seminar meetings. These themes alerted us that graduate assistants experienced prospective teachers' continual questioning of their knowledge and authority.

Analyses were deductive in that the researchers read the data patterns against our own personal and professional knowledge, including our conceptual framework. That is, data patterns were read against a body of research literature concerning the experiences of graduate assistants (Barber and Morgan, 1987; Jacobs and Friedman, 1988; Borjas, 2000; Fleisher, Hashimoto and Jacob, 2002). We also read these against our personal experiences as former graduate assistants. Next, we introduce our three study participants.

Study Participants

Sergio Garza

Sergio Garza is a 37-year old former secondary school teacher from Chile who is studying for a doctorate in Curriculum Theory. Like many of his peers who are international graduate assistants at State University, Sergio's family members are highly educated and hold privileged positions in their home country. For five years, Sergio has supervised prospective teachers in their final semester before certification.

Sharvani Mehra

Sharvani Mehra is a 32-year old former elementary teacher from India who is studying for her doctorate in Multicultural Education. Like Sergio, she supervises prospective teachers and teaches a weekly seminar to them. Her family members also are educated professionals. In her second year of supervising student teachers, she said that when she first came to Lake City that she had felt very isolated from her Hindu religious community and was extremely lonely. She referred to this time as "very difficult" and that it "told me how different I was from most other people in this Midwestern city."

Su-dae Park

Su-dae Park is a 30-year old doctoral student studying Early Childhood Education who teaches and supervises prospective teachers in the first semester of their program. Born and raised in South Korea, she moved to the United States at age 23, joining her parents who had immigrated to New York City. She, too, comes from an educated, upper-class family, but this did not protect her from experiencing "overt racism" in the United States.

> I [formerly] only saw it [racism] in the movies. I can feel it now, all over my body (her emphasis). When I came [to the United States], my boyfriend and I were on the subway and he (also Korean) had a bad cold. He was sneezing and coughing, and a White man yelled at us, "Go back to your country! You are spreading germs all over us!"

Su-dae said that she was humiliated at this interaction that was echoed in subtler, complex, and hard to understand ways in her teaching and supervision at State.

Ideological Tensions in "Becoming" Teacher Educators

Tensions in Who Possesses Knowledge About Teaching

Sergio Garza recounted several anecdotes that illustrate how he felt that his expertise on teaching was not acknowledged. He asserted that when he commented on prospective teachers' pedagogy, both the prospective and cooperating teacher tended to be defensive about his suggestions. Discussing these, Sergio drew on a discourse of combat and negotiation: "They (the prospective and practicing teachers) often throw the first punch, and we have to be very diplomatic." Sergio often felt like he was under assault. He recalled one cooperating teacher saying: "I do not think that you know *anything* about U.S. schools." He replied that for several years he had attended the very school in which she was teaching—when his father had studied in the United States. Sergio felt this did not credit him in the teacher's eyes as she then became silent.

In terms of her teaching at State University, Sharvani stated that she finds it is challenging teaching majority White prospective teachers. This, in part, has to do with the authoritative discourse on race and culture with which such prospective teachers engage. Sharvani stated that she personally feels more comfortable leading her weekly seminars when there are *at least* (her emphasis) one or two students of color enrolled. These students, often from immigrant families, share some of Sharvani's experiences as newcomers to the United States. She believes that prospective teachers of color engage with different discourses on race and culture than their White peers saying, "I understand students who are from immigrant families and feel, like me, they have lost as well as gained so much." With this statement, she underscores that fewer tensions exist between her own authoritative and internally persuasive discourses and such prospective teachers.

She recalled challenges she has faced in working with White cooperating teachers who invalidated her knowledge both by being silent and avoiding eye contact with her during post-observation conferences. She said, "[They] often see supervisors as "outsiders" to begin with and I am not sure about how they see the race piece of our interactions or my interactions with them. … The "outsider" notion exacerbates this. I am not sure where [they] see me or who I am or what I know." Sharvani understood that the supervisor and cooperating teacher relationship was by its nature one that might result in contested outlooks on teaching. However, she also saw both the cooperating teachers and prospective teachers as making assumptions about her grounded in racism and ethnocentrism.

Su-Dae Park narrated a story about a day when she had conducted an activity in her seminar in which had asked prospective teachers to listen to statements about race and social class, and to stand in various places in the room depending on whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements that she read aloud.

After the activity, an African American student approached her and said that he had to go home because he was so upset. He said that he had felt isolated from his peers during the activity, as he often was the only student standing in a particular location. Su-dae explained to the student that she, too, frequently had stood with him. Nonetheless, he left class, angry with her and his classmates.

Because of this incident, Su-dae felt that she was not an adequate teacher educator. She repeated, "I am a failure, a failure." She had not intended this outcome and now recognized that the activity only had served to highlight the differences between one student of color in the group and his White classmates, rather than helping them all to understand their varied perspectives. Su-dae felt that the student's negative response to the activity also invalidated her professional knowledge.

These anecdotes represent ways that Sergio, Sharvani, and Su-Dae confronted authoritative discourses on race within their graduate assistantships. Within the history of the United States circulates a discourse on "who" is believed to possess knowledge and expertise—that is, persons from White backgrounds frequently contend through their behaviors that only persons with similar backgrounds are knowledgeable and expert. When the White prospective and practicing teachers question Sergio, Sharvani, and Su-Dae's knowledge and expertise, they engage with such an authoritative discourse. In their responses, then, Sergio, Sharvani, and Su-Dae attempt to manage tensions between this authoritative discourse and their unique internally persuasive discourses, asserting that they do possess knowledge of the U.S school system. Sergio explained that he attended that very school when questioned. In doing so, he repositions himself as knowledgeable within the interaction. Sharvani said she prefers to work with international students or students of color because the tensions between their worldviews seems to be more manageable. Su-Dae, interestingly, was more sensitive to the student's questioning of her knowledge and ability—for his questioning led to her questioning of herself.

Tensions Between Discourses on Race and Culture

In other instances, graduate assistants recounted tensions in how racial and cultural differences are approached and negotiated. Sergio recounted how he had many conflicts with White prospective teachers who are personally pleasant with him, but use the anonymous course evaluation form to voice concerns. He described how prospective teachers say "racist things on the evaluation form, things they have never said to my face." In addition, he recounted how prospective teachers have undermined him by bypassing speaking with him about a concern, and instead complaining to his faculty supervisor. Sergio made changes to his weekly seminar syllabus that would help him build greater rapport with students.

He also said that he started to take on new practices as a supervisor, starting "supervisory conversations with three positive comments about prospective teachers' practices." In spite of such efforts, however, Sergio still felt that prospective teachers questioned him and his knowledge.

Sergio stated that he had experienced the authoritative discourse of racism as a child both in the United States and England. However, he had not expected to face so many conflicts with educated adults at a university in the United States. As a result of such tensions, he felt emotionally affected: "I do take these things very personally. They hurt me." Such tensions have resulted in Sergio shifting his career plans. Instead of remaining in the United States and working as a teacher educator, he plans to return to Chile: "I want to go home, away from all this, all the complaints and the questions about me and what I know," he said. He strongly believes that the complaints and questions focus on his ethnicity, language background, and international status.

As with Sergio, Sharvani grappled with what she perceived as authoritative discourses on race and culture engaged by White prospective teachers. From her vantage point, differences in race and culture needed to be engaged with, and only then can people work through these conflicts. Yet, the White prospective teachers were often quiet during seminars she led, refusing to engage with her.

Sharvani also noted that prospective teachers seemed to avoid dialogue around topics related to the mission of the program, including social justice, equity, and differentiation of instruction for students who experienced learning difficulties. She said, "They don't use the words 'social justice' or 'equity', or talk about the concepts either. It is so frustrating and disheartening. I wonder—are they talking about them somewhere else, but not with me?" Sharvani believed that White prospective teachers were reluctant to tell her what they were thinking as they differed from her on many dimensions. As we see it, the silence that Sharvani described experiencing arose from prospective teachers' own ideological tensions. Not only were the prospective teachers avoiding discussing topics that were critical to Sharvani, to her teaching, and their teacher education program as well, but they did so because the authoritative discourses they engaged with framed such conversations as "impolite" and preferably, to be ignored. Whereas, the program engaged with a discourse on teaching for social justice and cultural diversity, the White prospective teachers engaged with a much more prominent discourse circulating within the United States—that racial and cultural differences should not be discussed publicly. Likewise, Sharvani's experiences in the United States have enabled her to see how important such discussions are for White prospective teachers' future practices. She engages with such internally persuasive discourses in her teaching; yet feels unsuccessful in helping prospective teachers do similarly.

Sharvani reported that some prospective teachers were reluctant to listen to her supervisory comments, and "just wanted to go back in the classroom and teach." These students nodded and appeared to listen to her comments, but Sharvani believed that they quietly were ignoring her because she lacked experience teaching in U.S. public schools. Ignoring her feedback is another way that prospective teachers slighted Sharvani and invalidated her expertise. Like Sergio, Sharvani has determined that such behaviors on the part of prospective teachers can be addressed through building stronger rapport and relationships. Recently, she has begun talking more about India to prospective teachers she supervises. She hopes that such conversations might alleviate students' feelings of estrangement from a supervisor from another country, culture, and religious background.

Su-Dae's vignette concerning the African American student who felt ostracized by her activity also stands as an example of how prospective teachers engaged with authoritative discourses on race and culture in the United States. The African American student that Su-Dae described approached the situation as though discussing and highlighting racial and cultural differences was negative, and positioned him differently within the classroom. He did not wish to acknowledge his racial difference from the rest of the class, perhaps believing that such open discussion would further alienate him from his peers.

Circulating within the United States is an authoritative discourse about racial and cultural differences that encourages Whites to avoid confronting such differences. Talking about difference opens possibilities for conversations where varied viewpoints on racial and cultural differences may surface—group members thus may be challenged on their positions concerning race and racism. They also may become uncomfortable when seeing how their positions differ from those of peers. When the White prospective teachers bypass confronting Sergio on his teaching style, are silent during discussions on race with Sharvani or when Su-Dae describes an African American student not wanting to discuss racial differences, all see their students as participating in such an authoritative discourse.

In contrast, Sergio and Sharvani's internally persuasive discourse prompts them to seek out avenues for confronting such differences, particularly with White teachers. Engaging with an internally persuasive discourse, these graduate assistants try to build rapport and strengthen relationships with White prospective teachers. In spite of their efforts, tensions between the two discourses are too great, and their attempts at dissolving these ultimately are thwarted.

Discussion and Implications

In reading Sergio's, Sharvani's, and Su-Dae's life history interview transcripts, we identified the following ideological tensions that they encountered in their

practices as teacher educators. The first was tension between an authoritative discourse in the United States on how race influences Whites' beliefs about who possesses knowledge. This discourse was in tension with graduate assistants' own internally persuasive discourses regarding their expertise. The second involved authoritative discourses on how differences in race and culture in the United States should be grappled with—which is that such differences should not be discussed openly and if possible, should be ignored. This discourse stood in tension not only with the authoritative discourse of the teacher education program but with graduate assistants' internally persuasive discourse that beliefs about race and culture must be discussed openly to create a more equitable and just U.S. society.

The stories of Sergio, Sharvani, and Su-dae all show how they learned the significance of building relationships with prospective teachers if they want to influence their practices and to carry on discussions about race, inequity, and culture. Without such relationships, prospective teachers are apt to dismiss teacher educators and their knowledge, particularly those from international backgrounds.

These three international graduate assistants learned that becoming a teacher educator often requires assisting prospective teachers in negotiating ideological discourses. That is, prospective teachers at State University not only had conflicts with the discourses of their graduate assistants but also with those of their teacher education program, particularly regarding issues of race, culture, and social justice. The graduate assistants recognized that discourses about such issues as social justice and equity are difficult for prospective teachers to take up and practice, particularly when their cooperating teachers are unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable with these.

These three graduate assistants now have little interest in pursuing faculty positions at institutions in the United States. Perhaps this is because they felt overwhelmed by challenges encountered in preparing White prospective teachers to teach for equity and social justice. Such a tendency is disheartening because of critical needs in the United States for teacher educators who represent diverse social, cultural, and national backgrounds.

International graduate assistants face challenges that are not resolved easily. Hearing their stories are important for faculty in designing graduate programs that will nurture all who prepare for careers in teacher education. In predominantly White institutions such as State University, those different from the majority understand that they continually will be scrutinized and questioned. Faculty members also need to continually assess the goals and outcomes of the institution and its programs, especially when these are grounded in social justice and equity. Faculty members also can acknowledge subtle ways that racism and ethnocentrism circulate within institutions, and can validate the experiences of graduate assistants from international backgrounds.

References

BAKHTIN, M. M. (1981). Discourse in the novel. In M. Holquist (Ed.), *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M. M. Bakhtin.* (Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist). Austin: University of Texas Press.

BARBER, E. G., and MORGAN, R. R. (1987). The impact of foreign graduate teaching assistants in engineering education in the United States. *Science* 236, 4797.

BERTAUX, D., and BERTAUX-WIAME, I. (1981). Life stories in the baker's trade. In D. Bertaux (ed.), *Biography and society* (pp. 169-189). Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

BORJAS, G. J. (2000). Foreign-born teaching assistants and the academic performance of undergraduates. *The American Economic Review* 90(2), 355-361.

COLE, A., and KNOWLES, G. (eds.). (2001). *Lives in context. The art of life history research.* Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.

Education Academic Services. (2010). *Data concerning students of color enrolled.* State University.

FLEISHER, B., HASHIMOTO, M., and WEINBERG, B. A. (2002). Foreign GTAs can be effective teachers of economics. *The Journal of Economic Education,* 33(4), 299-325.

FREEDMAN, S., and BALL, A. (2004). *Bakhtinian perspectives on language, literacy, and learning.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

GOMEZ, M. L. (2010). Talking about ourselves, Talking about our Mothers: Latina prospective teachers narrate their life experiences. *The Urban Review* (42), 81-101.

GRAUE, M. E., and WALSH, D. J. (1998). *Studying children in context: Theories, methods, and ethics.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

JACOBS, L. C., and FRIEDMAN, C. B. (1988). Student achievement under foreign teaching associates compared with native teaching associates. *The Journal of Higher Education,* 59(5), 551-563.

JOHNSON, A. S. (2010). Rachel's Literacy Stories: Unpacking One Preservice Teacher's Moral Perspectives on Literacy Teaching. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice,* 16(1), pp. 97-109.

Lake City Schools (2008-2009). Lake City: Website.

— (2005). Lake City: Website.

LINDE, C. (1993). *Life stories: The creation of coherence.* New York: Oxford University Press.

MORRIS, P. (1994). *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Volosinov.* London: Edward Arnold.

State University Data Digest. (2009-1010). Information concerning numbers of students of color enrolled. State University Data Digest: Website.

U.S. Census. (2000). http://www.census.gov Downloaded 05.04.10.