

Title

Negotiating teacher professional identity in mentor-mentee interaction: A conversation analysis of post-observation mentoring in a Chinese middle school

Research Overview

This study investigates how teacher professional identities (TPIs) are interactionally negotiated within post-observation mentoring sessions between a mentor-mentee teacher dyad in a Chinese middle school. Using conversation analysis, it reveals how they manage epistemic authority, institutional hierarchy, and face concerns in pursuing mentoring goals while maintaining collegial relationships.

Purpose of Study

This study aims to unpack the real-time negotiation of TPIs through talk between a novice teacher and her mentor in post-observation meetings, by first, identifying moments when their situated identities emerging in the conversations depart from their default identities, and second, examining their employment of various interactional resources to reconstruct identities while working towards institutional mentoring goals. It contributes to research on teacher identity and mentoring practices, with implications for fostering collegial teacher relationships within hierarchical structures.

Research Methods

This study forms part of a larger ethnographic project of early career teachers in public middle schools in China. Within the institutionalised mentoring (*Shifu-Tudi*) system, mentors were expected to observe their mentees six times per semester and provide feedback following each observation. Data were extracted from three audio-recorded post-observation sessions involving a mentor-mentee dyad. Each session lasted ten to twenty minutes and was conducted in Mandarin. At the time of data collection, the novice was in her first year of teaching at the school and the mentor had over twenty years of teaching experience.

This study adopts a conceptual lens that while default identities are assigned to align with institutional expectations (Richards, 2006), they are simultaneously renegotiated and reconstructed in real-time interaction. In their default roles, mentors are expected to hold both epistemic authority (access to specialised knowledge) and deontic authority (the right to determine others' future actions), whereas mentees are typically positioned as compliant recipients of guidance (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012). Analytical focus was therefore placed on how incongruences between default and situated identities are developed and addressed. In particular, conversation analysis was used to examine turn-taking, epistemic positioning, and face concerns in sequences where participants negotiated their TPIs.

Results and Discussion

Throughout the sessions, the mentor maintained dominance through both local practices (e.g. extended turns and rhetorical questions) and global structuring of feedback sequences (e.g. positive remarks followed by critiques), whereas the mentee generally displayed alignment with the mentor's feedback with limited contribution. Critically, despite unequal control over the conversations, there were moments when the mentor and mentee departed from their respective default roles and dynamically negotiated their TPIs.

The mentor was observed to mitigate deontic authority through several interactional strategies. First, evaluative feedback was often framed as personal experience using euphemistic expressions, such as 'I would' or 'I personally feel', to soften the force of critique and leave room for the mentee to make her pedagogical decisions. Second, the mentor occasionally took an empathetic stance by, for example, disclosing her own teaching challenges in response to the mentee's display of vulnerability. These non-assertive interactional choices were leveraged to downplay the mentor's deontic right while maintaining epistemic authority.

The mentee, while largely orienting to a novice identity, demonstrated moments of disagreement. Rather than expressing disagreement bluntly, the mentee displayed her epistemic access while managing interactional tension. For example, she invoked higher institutional authorities to justify her pedagogical decisions, used laughter and incidental accounts to mitigate face concerns, and misaligned with the mentor's pragmatic cues (e.g. treating rhetorical questions as genuine inquiries). These practices indicated not only sensitivity to power asymmetry but also active negotiation of professional identities throughout the mentoring sessions.

These negotiation processes suggest that identities are not determinative but interactionally accomplished. Both participants used a range of interactional resources to pursue mentoring goals of providing and receiving feedback while maintaining collegial rapport through facework. Especially within such contexts that prioritise respect, deference, and hierarchy, momentary departures from default identities provide insights into mentor-mentee relationships and teacher professional identities.

By foregrounding the micro-processes of identity negotiation, the study (1) reconceptualises mentoring as an interactional accomplishment which is continuously recalibrated by situated language choices, and (2) empirically illustrates how mentee and mentor teachers balance authority and collegiality in real-time conversations, highlighting how mentoring interactions constitute as a space that may enable or constrain teacher agency (Wagner & Lewis, 2021). The implications of this study extend beyond the immediate institutional context, offering a nuanced perspective for culturally responsive teacher education across diverse educational environments.

Key words

teacher professional identity; mentoring practice; conversation analysis; teacher education

References

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