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Portraits from the Journey of Teaching English Language Learners: An Inquiry into Teacher Identity Construction

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In Thailand...

I have a passion to become an English teacher because of an inspiring event that I experienced when I was young. It was as memorable as if it had happened yesterday. While I was reading a book at my aunt’s house, I saw an astonishing scene off in the distance. My aunt was crying in the middle of a group of students. In all my years of knowing her, I had never seen her cry. The only thing I could remember about her was the picture of a solemn teacher who always harshly disciplined students. Many students were scared of her and some of them even hated her.

After an astounding moment, I staggered slowly towards the crowd, and I saw a beautiful jasmine garland sitting peacefully in my aunt’s hands. Then, I heard my aunt say to the students, “Thank you for visiting. You really made my day.”

A boy in the crowd replied, “It’s our pleasure to pay homage on Teacher’s Day. Because of you, we’re here today. Thank you for teaching us, our beloved teacher.”

Because of the wonderful moment that those students gave to my aunt, I have been determined to dedicate my life to being a good teacher. As a result, I went to a College of Education. I chose to major in English because it is the subject that I love. During four years in college, I enjoyed learning the content and pedagogical knowledge to become an English teacher. I also sought an opportunity to exercise my pedagogical skills. After graduation, my ambition to be a good teacher did not waver, even though there was a high demand for people with good English skills in other professions; 80 percent of my classmates decided to work in the business sector, which offers a higher salary and compensation, compared to those of teachers. At that time, I was considerably surprised by the fact that many of my friends did not enter into the teaching profession, even though they initially expressed an interest to become teachers and had trained to become teachers for years. Since then, it has been my determination to understand this phenomenon better. When I examined the literature, I found that understanding how teachers construct their teacher identities might quench my curiosity.

Literature Review

In the field of Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE), teacher identity has gained interest from researchers (Alsup, 2006; Ajayi, 2011; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Lasky, 2005; Menard-Warwick, 2008; Simon-Maeda, 2004;
Trent & Gao, 2009; Tsui, 2007). The review of literature suggests that it is challenging to define the term teacher identity (Beijaard et al., 2004) because prior research has used different perspectives. Teacher identity has been explored in terms of self, emotions, and narrative and discourse (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

In the review by Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), teacher identity was defined as a perception of self in a particular context. The notion of self in the literature has evolved from the stable single self to the multiple multifaceted selves (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006). For the multiple selves, researchers have conceptualized this notion several ways. For example, Lauriala and Kukkonen (2005) proposed the three dimensions of self: the actual self (the one individual prevails), the ought self (the one society recognizes), and the ideal self (the one individuals try to achieve). Day et al. (2007) argued that how one acts in the profession, the professional self is interwoven by the personal self.

Apart from conceptualizing teacher identity as self, prior research has defined teacher identity as emotions (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Zembylas (2003) argued that, “the construction of teacher identity is at bottom affective, and is dependent upon power and agency” (p. 214). Teachers’ emotions alter teacher identity and consequently teaching. Contextual change such as educational reform might also affect teacher identity because high levels of emotions were involved. As a result of connecting teacher identity with emotions, Zembylas (2003) concluded that an examination of the emotional aspects of teacher identity development yields a richer understanding of the teacher self.

Further, teacher identity has been defined as narratives and discourses about themselves and their practices (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Individuals express themselves through stories they tell others (Søreide, 2006). Connelly and Clandinin (1999) described the power of narrative as an indicator to understand teacher identity because telling stories is an act of identity enactment. Sfard and Prusak (2005) used the term “identity-making as a communicational practice” (p. 16). It should be noted that the act of telling stories requires interaction, and this interaction is often referred to as discourse. The concepts of discourse and narrative are inseparably linked (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Alsup (2006, p. 187) developed the term “borderland discourse” to describe how student teachers engage in personal and professional discourse while learning to become teachers. The notion of discourse leads the field of education to pay more attention to the stories of teachers.

Evidently, it is useful to conceptualize teacher identity from different perspectives; however, the need to use a holistic framework to understand teacher identity is legitimate since it might provide a better insight. Olsen (2008) offered a holistic framework to research teacher identity construction. The framework is known as the six windows of entrance to the construction of teacher identity, which are: reasons for entry, teacher education experience, current teaching practice, career plans, prior personal experience, and prior professional experience. These windows provide a powerful framework to engage in exploring the process of teacher identity construction. Olsen (2008) argued that each entrance “acts as an opening into the holistic, circular mix of how any teacher’s past, present, and future are linked; how the personal and the professional are in many ways inextricable;
how context and self interact; and how each teacher component mediates (and is mediated by) the others” (p. 24).

In this study, I have attempted to address the research gap by exploring how teacher identity is constructed through the window of reasons for entry into the profession (Olsen, 2008). An understanding of reasons for entering into the profession illustrates an interrelationship between teaching, teacher practices, and career plans, which may mediate or influence the teaching profession and students (Hayes, 2008; Olsen, 2008). The focus on successful teachers is an important research area that allows teacher educators to learn how to support their students to become successful teachers and student teachers can be informed and inspired.

The findings in this study can be added to the knowledge base of the SLTE field to foster the future design of effective teacher preparation programs. As teacher educators better understand how teachers construct their teacher identities, they can better support “meaningful professional preparation that serves teachers’ careers, the students they teach, and the profession of teaching as a whole” (Olsen, 2008, p.23). The following research questions guided this study:

1) What motivates people to become teachers for English Language Learners (ELL)?

2) How are ELL teachers’ identities constructed?

The Study

To conduct an inquiry into teacher identity construction, I was influenced by Crotty’s (1998) framework. Crotty (1998) said that researchers should have four elements to guide their research process: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods. Schendel (2009) explicated these four elements as interconnected and nested within each other. Figure 1 presents the relationship of these four elements.

Figure 1. Nested Elements in Social Research (Schendel, 2009).

Epistemology is a theory of knowledge that covers researchers’ beliefs of the acquisition, status, limit, and possibility for knowledge. Within epistemology, theoretical perspective is nested and serves as a philosophical stance to acquire knowledge. The theoretical perspective informs the research methodology, defined as a plan of actions or designs that links choices of methods with expected outcomes. Guided by a methodology, research methods are used to collect the data (Crotty, 1998).

Narrative as Epistemology

In this study, I was guided by narrative epistemology. Bruner (1990) defined a narrative as a series of sequential events that contain meaning and discourse. Bruner (1990) said that narrative is an interplay between its part and the whole; the events delineated in a narrative take the meaning from the story as a whole, and the story as a whole is constructed from its separated parts. Bruner (1990) argued that narrative is a natural, universal, and fundamental ability of all human beings. He emphasized that narrative is
“mode of thinking, as a structure for organizing our knowledge, and as a vehicle in the process of education” (p. 119). He sees narrative as a “construal of reality” (p. 130). In daily life, we tell and retell narratives as a way to acquire knowledge (Waterhouse, 2007). Telling a story is purposeful and subject to interpretation, not explanation (Bruner, 1990).

Waterhouse (2007) said that “the creation of knowledge through story-telling is the way in which the story-teller is reflective on the process and the story, in a way that creates new understanding and increased awareness” (p. 274). Specifically, Søreide (2006) argued that identity is narratively constructed. As we tell narratives, we construct our identities simultaneously because telling narratives increases self-awareness, which in turn brings out the knowledge of our identities. In other words, a narrative is ultimately a source of knowledge and a reality of ourselves (Søreide, 2006).

**Theoretical Perspectives**

Due to the complexity of teacher identity construction, Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005) called for the employment of multiple theoretical lenses. In this study, I looked through the lenses of two sociocultural theories: identity and community of practice (Wenger, 1998) and identity and agency in cultural worlds (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, & Cain, 1998). These two theories were used because they are connected and appropriate as frames for analysis.

Wenger (1998) described identity construction from the social theory of learning perspective, regarding identity construction as a way of becoming a member in a community of practice. A community of practice is a social structure of learning that individuals actively participate in and reify their experiences into “thingness” (Wenger, 1998, p. 58). Based on this perspective, one does not become a teacher by learning a set of skills and competences, but one actively engages in a community of practice, trying to adopt an identity.

Wenger (1998) argued that the process of identity formation is a twofold undertaking between identification and negotiation within communities of practice. He defined identification as modes of belonging that individuals create from engagement, imagination, and alignment. Engagement is a process of relating and distinguishing ourselves to others, so that we gain a sense of who we are, for example, I gain a sense of who I am as a teacher because I compare myself to other teachers. Imagination is a process that allows us to envision ourselves as who we are across space and time. I understand my teacher identity when I envision what I do with other teachers from the past and around the world. Alignment is a process of making sense of who we are by making a connection between communities of practice and ourselves. When I talk with my fellow teachers about teaching our students, it helps me reflect on what I do as a teacher and reinforce my sense of self. I realize that we share the same passion: teaching our students.

The second component of identity formation is negotiability, which is a fundamental concept for making meaning. Wenger (1998) defined negotiability as an ability to make meaning, take responsibility for, and engage in cooperation with others in a social configuration. Negotiability consists of two aspects: economies of meanings and ownership of meanings. The economy of meaning is a global concept that addresses different statuses.
and powers of knowledge that are used in the process of negotiation in social configuration. The ownership of meaning refers to the degree in which individuals negotiate meanings as their own. These two notions are important for individuals to engage in the process of meaning negotiation (Wenger, 1998).

Another theoretical lenses that I employed was identity and agency in cultural worlds (Holland et al., 1998). Holland et al. (1998) proposed a heuristic theory of identity formation from a cultural perspective by challenging the sociocultural and constructivist perspective in its inefficiency to address the creative aspect of the self and identity construction. They argued that identity is constructed and improvised through multiple contexts of activity. In this study, I used one of the contexts called figured world as a framework for analysis. Holland et al. (1998) described figured world as a context that is socially and culturally constructed and used as an interpretative framework in which particular characters are acknowledged, certain acts are signified, and specific outcomes are valued over others. As individuals engage in this figured world, they have expectations of how people should interact based on position, power, and other cultural resources around them. The interaction in a figured world is improvised; we shift ourselves based on our interactions (Holland et al., 1998).

**Portraiture Methodology**

To investigate teacher identity construction, I wanted to employ a research methodology that would allow me to capture the complexity of identity construction and present the findings in a manner that reaches out to audiences beyond the academic arena. With those reasons in mind, I found that portraiture methodology provides a relevant epistemological and methodological frame of collecting, coding, analyzing, interpreting, and presenting the data.

Portraiture methodology was originally developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) to document the culture of six high schools in the United States. Portraiture shares other qualitative research approaches, such as phenomenology, case study, ethnography, and narrative, yet Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) claimed that it is unique in its combination of “empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, and humanistic sensibilities and scientific rigor” (p.3). Portraiture methodologists have attempted to capture a central story, crafted from emergent themes, that requires context as a frame of interpretation. The portraitists nurtured the relationship as a means to collect the data and included the researcher’s voice throughout the research process. The product of portraiture is called a portrait; it is rigorous and authentic, blurring the boundaries between art and science.

Portraiture is susceptible to a critique from the traditional investigation perspective that attempts to look for ways of fixing things or providing better-informed actions (Hackmann, 2002; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) argued that the traditional effort to document failure often leads to blaming victims and inaction; therefore, she created portraiture with an attempt to search for “goodness.” In portraiture, goodness does not imply idealization, but it includes imperfection, weakness, or vulnerability of a phenomenon perceived by its participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Goodness in this study is inherently seen in the choice to investigate successful teachers’ journeys. The focus of such
Teachers allows an interpretation of imperfection and vulnerability that the successful teachers experienced throughout their journeys of becoming successful teachers.

**Methods**

**Participants.** To identify the participants, I chose to study teachers who had maximized what I wanted to study, were easily accessible, and hospitable to my inquiry (Stake, 1995). I contacted fellow teachers and asked for references of successful ELL teachers. The teachers used their own professional judgment to determine the teachers, and I respected their decisions. The referred teachers were contacted via e-mail explaining the purpose of the study and were instructed to make an appointment to discuss the research project further in order to determine the intent of potential participants.

Jessica and Laura (pseudonyms created by the participants) agreed to participate in this study. Jessica has been teaching English Language Learners for fourteen years, and she is now the director of a newcomer program to teach newly-arrived immigrants and refugee students. Laura has been teaching English Language Learners for twenty years. At the time of the interviews, both of them worked at the same school in the northwestern mountain area of the United States. Jessica and Laura were recommended because of their passion, devotion, and commitment to teaching English Language Learners.

**Data Collection.** After being granted site permission and individual consent, the participants were interviewed two times in a room at their school in which they were comfortable and free of disturbances. The interviews were postmodern, reflexive, dyadic, and semi-structured; I actively engaged and reflected upon my experiences during the interview process (Ellis & Berger, 2003). The interview framework focused on the participants’ sociocultural backgrounds, reasons to teach English Language Learners, teacher education experiences, current teaching practices, and future career plans (Olsen, 2008). Each interview took approximately thirty to forty-five minutes.

In addition to the interviews, the participants were observed teaching eight hours over the course of a semester, focusing on typical days in their classes and their interactions with students. After each site visit, I wrote detailed field notes immediately (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) and analyzed the preliminary findings of impressionistic records (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) before entering the site again. Moreover, participants were asked to show artifacts, such as inspiring photos, books, and teaching preparation documents. I used the artifacts to advance our discussion on teacher identity construction.

**Data Analysis.** The data set included four interviews, sixteen hours of observations, and artifact collections. The process of data analysis began simultaneously with the data collection process (Merriam, 2009). I transcribed the interview data by myself, paying attention to the transcript quality, as suggested by Poland (1995, 2002). I included symbols, such as pauses and overlapping, in the transcript to help me engage in the data analysis. This transcription process was considered to be a type of performance narrative analysis (Riesman, 2008). After transcribing, I sent the transcripts to the participants to review their personal transcriptions.

Before the data analysis, I wrote down my biases and assumptions, trying to be...
aware of my voice (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). To analyze the data, I employed the thematic narrative analysis method (Riesman, 2008). I treated the participants’ interviews as individual sociocultural texts and analyzed them accordingly. First, I made notes of the interesting points, which aimed to develop an initial sense of the participants’ teacher identities. Second, I looked for common themes to emerge from the analysis. Third, I constructed a storyline to form a narrative by writing a mini-story on the basis of the broad themes that were identified in the second step. Last, I knitted those mini-stories into a portrait trying to capture how the teachers interpret, form, and negotiate their identities. The stories were shared with the participants, with an attempt to enhance the trustworthiness of the data.

**Trustworthiness.** Trustworthiness is a term of the qualitative research paradigm referring to the quality of qualitative inquiry (Merriam, 2009). To strengthen the trustworthiness, I used the triangulation technique through multiple data collection methods. I also used the member check technique by consulting with the participants about whether my tentative interpretation reflected their original intent (Merriam, 1995). Then, I made my assumption explicit so that the readers can understand how I arrived at my conclusion (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Last, I used the audit trail technique, describing the detailed process of decision-making throughout the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

**Ethical Considerations.** In the current academic environment, social science researchers are encouraged to conduct ethical research due to concerns from previous unethical studies in the history of biomedical research and social science studies (Kitchener & Kitchener, 2009). First and foremost, this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct research with human participants. I used procedural ethics (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) as ethical principles to help conduct this study. These principles included: beneficence (to do good), non-maleficence (to do no harm), autonomy (participant’s rights), justice (to be fair), and fidelity (to be honest).

Apart from procedural ethics, I also took the stance of relational ethics (Ellis, 2007). Relational ethics recognizes “mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work” (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). From this stance, I developed positive interactions and relationships with the participants, asked ethical questions to myself constantly, and practiced “process consent,” which makes sure participants still want to be part of the study. This relational ethical stance helped me gain access and rich data from the participants.

**Results**

**Jessica**

It was a bright sunny day...

I had an appointment with Jessica to interview her about her experiences of becoming a teacher for ELLs. Jessica is a middle-aged woman with blonde hair. She always has a smile on her face as she talks with students. Her eyes communicate passion and commitment to help ELLs. During the interviews, she described herself as an “open-minded, strict, and dedicated teacher.” As a teacher, Jessica wants her students to love school and for them to feel welcome when they come to school.
I first met Jessica in 2010, the first semester of my graduate student life in the United States. At that time, I observed her classes, and I worked with her immigrant and refugee students. I have known since then that she is one of the most successful ELL teachers I have ever met. She has always worked well with students, cared about them, and been committed to her job.

The school that Jessica is currently working at is located in mid-west of the mountain area in the United States. According to Jessica, there are approximately 290 ELLs. These students came from thirteen different countries and spoke sixteen different languages. During the interviews, Jessica mentioned, “The most diverse class had eleven different languages spoken.” Listening to her, I could not help but exclaim, “Wow!”

When I asked Jessica why she had decided to become an ELL teacher, she narrated back to when she was young. Growing up, Jessica always knew that she wanted to be a teacher. “Some people just don’t know what they want to do, but I knew from the start. It’s so weird that I can never remember anything else, but I wanted to be a teacher.”

With motivation at a young age to become a teacher and a passion about other cultures, Jessica decided to pursue a bachelor’s degree in kinesiology with an emphasis on physical education and a minor in Spanish. I wondered why she wanted to study in two seemingly unrelated areas. As if she could read my mind, Jessica answered, “I decided to study physical education because I enjoyed cross-country running. Since I also had a passion for learning languages and exploring different cultures, I wanted to keep my Spanish as a minor.” Jessica concluded that her multiple areas gave her the “flexibility” to teach at any school.

During her college life, Jessica felt that the focus of her classes was only pedagogical; learning how to teach. She narrated, “There wasn’t a big focus on diversity and how to meet the needs of diverse students. I remember I learned about teaching students and not so much about when I have several students in my classroom and they maybe can’t read or write. Another kid who speaks English only, another kid who speaks Spanish, another kid who speaks..., you know that wasn’t spoken about.”

After graduation, Jessica began her teaching career as a physical education teacher at an elementary school, where she was exposed to immigrant and refugee...
students during her second year of teaching. At first, she was frustrated teaching these students because she wanted to meet their needs. Jessica felt that the teacher preparation program did not prepare her well enough to deal with diverse classes. After a while, she found out that she loved teaching English to ELLs more than teaching physical education because, as she reported, “It’s more rewarding.” As a result, Jessica decided to pursue an endorsement in English Language Acquisition (ELA).

When I asked her to clarify “more rewarding,” Jessica’s eyes glistened and flooded with delight. She answered, “For physical education, it’s only fun, but I felt by teaching English, you’re actually changing someone’s life. It’s so neat to help the students acculturate into a new culture, but then also help them to feel welcome here. And you’re helping them to make friends and to find a sense of belonging. That’s probably the most rewarding to me.” Jessica also added that she chose to teach ELLs because it matched with her personal interest, as she loved learning about other cultures and languages. She also loved working with immigrant and refugee parents. She loved the moment when she became a part of their lives.

“What’s your goal in teaching English Language Learners?” I shifted the interview to another topic. Jessica smiled and answered, “I want them to feel good when they come to school. I want them to love learning. And I want them to love education. I want my students to feel good and welcome when they come to school.” I agreed with Jessica that fostering affective variables such as the love of learning and self-confidence are most necessary for immigrant and refugee students. Most of the time, these students come to the United States, feeling undervalued, bad, and less than everyone else. Teachers need to provide comfort and a non-threatening environment to these students, and that is exactly what Jessica does with her students.

“Where do you see yourself ten years from now?”

Jessica answered, “I don’t know. My principal has talked with me about being the principal some days, but I don’t. I’m convinced that I never want to be that. I love teaching and I’m totally satisfied with what I’m doing.”

The bell rang to signal the beginning of a class. Jessica told me that she had to teach the next class and asked me to walk with her to the classroom. I accepted the invitation. Jessica grabbed her books and markers. We walked together to her class. As we opened the room, the students looked at us and smiled. They were ready to learn. When I glanced at Jessica, I could see a very happy woman who was ready to change someone’s life.

Her final words in the interview echoed in my head, “I want to continue teaching ELLs. I don’t know. I just love teaching so much.”

She doesn’t know? But I know why she saw herself teaching those students.

Laura

It was a cold, snowy day...

I drove my golden bronze Camry, turning the heater on and heading to the school where Laura was committed to help her ELLs become successful. Laura is a soon-to-be-retired teacher, whose journey to becoming a teacher has been developing since she was young. She described herself as a caring teacher, who wants her students to love learning and put effort in education. From a researcher’s perspective, I was
impressed by her teaching strategy and classroom activity sequence.

After I arrived at the school, I checked in at the school’s office, received a visitor badge and headed to Laura’s classroom. We hugged and greeted each other. After greeting, Laura took me to a lobby, next to her classroom, where we could conduct the interview. “Let me make some tea for us,” offered Laura. She came back with cups of herbal tea for both of us. The scent of tea floated into the atmosphere. I heard a familiar voice in the next room. “Is that Jessica?” I asked. Laura nodded her head and smiled. Jessica and Laura worked at the same school. I sipped the tea, cleared my throat, and started the interview.

When I asked why she decided to enter the teaching profession, Laura described an intricate web of incidents that collectively contributed to her motivations to become a teacher. When she was young, Laura liked to play the role of a teacher with her brothers. This role-play implanted the love of teaching into Laura. She also always liked school and liked to help people. Laura narrated, “Sometime in middle school, Vietnamese refugees came to my school. I liked helping them learn English.”

“So, all of these experiences made you want to go to a teaching program during college?” I asked with a smile.

Laura replied immediately, “Well, I didn’t get a bachelor’s in teaching.”

“You don’t have a bachelor’s in teaching?” I asked, surprised.

Laura continued, “I got a BA in history. When I was a student, I loved studying history, so I decided to pursue a degree in history.”

“Why did you shift from history to teaching English?” I was curious.

Laura told me that after graduation, she decided to work with at-risk youth in an outdoor education setting, but she did not like the experiences, so she decided to join the Peace Corps and volunteered to teach English on an island. The experience during the Peace Corps enhanced Laura’s motivation to come back to school and pursue a master’s degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

When I asked what was so special about teaching English as a Peace Corps volunteer, Laura said, “Probably a huge part of me wanted to be an English teacher for students in other countries because I also learned so much from them. I learned about their cultures and traditions. I still remember the most memorable moment during this volunteer time. My eighth grade students passed an English test to get into a high school. They had to leave the island to study in the mainland. I remember I heard the news over the radio. The whole country heard this news.” As a teacher, I was fulfilled after listening to this story. I could see that the success her students had was part of her motivation to become a teacher.

While pursuing a master’s degree in TESOL, Laura had a clear goal that she wanted to teach in public schools. Even though the purpose of this program was to prepare students to teach at the university level in an intensive English program, Laura made the adjustment in her readings and research that geared toward her interests. Since the program did not match her expectations, Laura felt that the program did not prepare her well enough to teach ELLs, who had diverse needs and were different in their first language proficiencies.

After getting a master’s degree, Laura got a job as an English teacher.
She was assigned to establish an English Program, serving immigrant students from Mexico. As a teacher, Laura was expected to do “everything.” She had to figure out the tests, curriculum, and assessments by herself. She remembered she felt shocked when she had diverse students in her class. According to her, some of them were not literate in their first language, and that was a huge difference from what she learned during the TESOL program.

Even though the job was busy, Laura said that she loved the job because she had rewarding moments. Laura replied, “I remember working with a boy who was so quiet. The other teachers thought that he didn’t know English at all.” Laura paused and continued, “When I went there to create the English Program, I found out that the teachers never gave him a proficiency test, so I tested him. He actually knew a lot of English. I found that he had special needs. Ultimately, I was able to place him legitimately.”

It has been two decades since she started teaching English.

Like Jessica, Laura wants to continue serving these students.

Discussion

The purposes of this study were to investigate motivations to become ELL teachers and to examine how teacher identity was constructed. For motivations to become ELL teachers, the results revealed that the two teachers decided to enter this teaching profession because they love working with ELLs.

Initially, Jessica and Laura did not have a specific career goal to become ELL teachers. Both of them reported having a broad goal to be “some kind of teacher” at a young age, and they later narrowed down their goals to be more specific: becoming ELL teachers as they were exposed to the ELL population. The two teachers used their own personal interests as a resource to narrow down their career goals.

Personally, Jessica liked languages and cultures because she grew up traveling abroad. Laura liked to help other people, and she said she got a lot of gratification out of helping them. While teaching ELLs, Jessica and Laura reported that they gained “rewarding moments.” These rewarding experiences contributed to their motivations to become ELL teachers.

The motivations to enter the teaching profession were a multilayered web of experiences that the two teachers used to make meaning, interpret, and reflect upon as they gradually stepped into the teaching profession. Their motivations to becoming ELL teachers were developed and recreated continuously. Even though the two teachers were already in the teaching profession, their motivations were not fixed. They still constantly reflected upon their experiences of why they became teachers, and this reflection was part of constructing a teacher identity.

The teacher identities of Jessica and Laura were developed long before they actually stepped into the teaching profession. They started thinking about becoming teachers when they were young. Growing up, both of them embodied the roles of teachers, such as role playing as the teacher with their friends and siblings. This embodiment was created through imagination by using a set of meanings from the social configuration of what it means to be a teacher. According to Holland et al. (1998), Jessica and Laura were engaged in the figured world of teachers. This figured world of teachers is a frame of understanding that the two teachers used as a resource to interpret the meaning of
being a teacher. To elaborate, in their culture, teachers are expected to exhibit certain behaviors such as teaching and grading, and being a teacher assumes a different status in society. By performing the roles of teachers at a young age, Jessica and Laura recreated their sense of self; they replaced their images from a normal child to a pretend teacher (Holland et al., 1998).

In order to become ELL teachers, Jessica and Laura had to learn to become teachers. Jessica learned to teach physical education, whereas Laura initially majored in history but later shifted to teaching English after she came back from the Peace Corps. During this experience, both of the teachers reported that their teaching preparation program did not prepare them well enough to teach in the real world. For example, Jessica felt that it was difficult to learn about classroom management. From a teacher identity construction perspective, Jessica was not struggling with a strategy to control her classroom; rather, she was struggling to develop a teacher identity, take power in class and see herself as a teacher. This suggests that the process of learning to teach is more complicated than learning a set of skills (Wenger, 1998).

From a social learning theory perspective, Wenger (1998) described the process of identity construction as becoming a member in a community of practice. In the case of Jessica and Laura, the community of practice is the school that they go to work at every day. They get through their everyday lives by interacting with students and other teachers. At school, they identified themselves as ELL teachers. The students and other teachers perceived them as ELL teachers. This identification becomes part of their teacher identity (Wenger, 1998). Jessica and Laura were actively engaged in the community of practice as they taught their students in order to help them acculturate into a new community. They also imagined their interactions with other students in the world. For example, when Jessica mentioned teaching the most diverse class, she felt that she met students from “all over the world.” Jessica and Laura also aligned their teacher identity with the community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Implications
The findings in this study indicated that the two ELL teachers possessed a rich personal history of motivations to become teachers, and they had preconceived ideas about the meaning of being a teacher. The teachers did not enter the teaching profession as a blank slate; rather, they brought their personal histories with them. These findings provide a theoretical implication for the SLTE field to value students’ biographies. SLTE teacher educators need to make these biographies visible (Olsen, 2008), bridge students’ biographies to the real world of teaching, and encourage reflections throughout the professional program. These practices will be vital to the curriculum of the field to prepare their students to become successful teachers.

Limitations
This study consisted of potential limitations as follows. First, I relied on the participants’ memory of reasons to become teachers. To minimize this limitation, I sent out broad interview topics to the participants ahead of time so that they could prepare their stories. Second, I relied on the participants’ honesty to tell stories of their lives. I did not know if the stories they told were true, but I respected their
decisions whether or not to tell certain stories.

**Future Research**

The present study illustrates the need to focus on teacher identity construction as a central conversation in the SLTE program. Future research should examine, construct, and develop the curriculum in teacher preparation programs that focuses on the development of teacher identity. What should the teacher preparation program look like? Are there interventions to enhance the development of teacher identity? These questions are needed to pursue another level of knowledge.

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**References**


