

Note From the Field

Centering Student Teachers' Perspectives Through Collaborative Inquiry

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In this *Note From the Field*, I describe the intentional decisions I made to center the perspectives and sense-making of student teachers themselves in my research on student teachers' learning and identity development during a practicum semester in Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). I explore a critical incident from the practicum seminar that emerged as particularly salient to student teachers, tracing the ways student teachers navigated its meaning over time and across contexts. I argue that attending to student teachers' experiences and insights raises challenging questions that all teacher educators must consider.

Nearing the end of my coursework and already planning to focus my dissertation research on the intersections between language teacher identity and the Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) curriculum, I came across a recently published volume, *Reflections on Language Teacher Identity Research* (Barkhuizen, 2017). Richards (2017) raised a question that my dissertation research speaks to: "how do teacher-learners negotiate their identities during a teacher-education course in relation to its particular activities and relationships?" (p. 143).

My dissertation research explores various *images* of language teachers and language teaching—which I define as sets of ideas about what language teachers are, do, and say—that student teachers in a graduate practicum course encounter and negotiate, particularly in relation to their own (imagined) identities. I am informed by a feminist poststructuralist vision of identity as subjectivity (Norton, 2013; Weedon, 1987) and a view of teacher learning as "influenced both by the identities teacher-learners bring to the classroom with them as well as by the discourses and activities that shape the practices of teacher education" (Richards, 2017, p. 143) and as happening through and against socializing forces in multiple, concurrent communities of practice (Freeman, 2016). I intentionally designed my study to center the perspectives and sense-making of *the student teachers themselves*. In doing so, I position them as valid generators of knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) about the practices and goals of teacher education. I have approached this study as a collaborative, relational, and emergent project, attending from the outset to both my own positionality as researcher and teacher educator, as well as to the rich potential for theory-building in student teachers' own insights.

As I write this *Note From the Field*, I have completed the bulk of data collection for my dissertation research and am now working my way through the set of fieldnotes, interview transcripts, video and audio recordings, and artifacts that I collected as I followed 28 student teachers—8 of whom served as focal participants—during their TESOL Practicum semester. For these student teachers, the practicum involved multiple contexts and interlocutors: a) a weekly graduate seminar with required readings, at least one in-class “teaching demonstration,” written and video-annotation analysis of their own teaching practice, and a multi-stage “action research project;” b) planning and teaching an English language class for speakers of other languages, typically two hours weekly;¹ and c) periodic observations and post-observation meetings with a mentor assigned by the TESOL graduate program. To understand how student teachers experienced and navigated these contexts, my data collection methods included both observing and recording their naturally occurring activities in all three contexts, collecting focal student teachers’ practicum assignments, interviewing focal student teachers monthly, and facilitating biweekly inquiry group meetings with small groups of focal student teachers.

The one-on-one interviews and inquiry group meetings have been particularly rich data sources for this project, in that they have provided space for student teachers to co-construct meaning—with each other and with me—as they made sense of their individual and collective experiences within, across, and beyond the practicum contexts. As the semester progressed, I planned focal themes, often structured around the creation or review of artifacts, for each semi-structured interview, attempting to focus in each on aspects of the practicum that were emerging as relevant to student teachers (e.g., Interview 1 [September] involved outlining a “memoir” of student teachers’ “experiences of becoming a language teacher;” Interview 4 [December] asked student teachers to describe the norms and activities of their practicum seminar, as well as to identify events that had been particularly “meaningful” for their own learning). In the inquiry group meetings, I attempted to listen and facilitate without overdirecting the conversation; each meeting opened with an opportunity for student teachers to share whatever was on their minds, which allowed them to collaboratively process issues as diverse as responding to difficult students, choosing courses for the next semester, dealing with anxieties over grades, or contrasting their experiences as “L1” and “L2” English teachers (Inquiry Group Fieldnotes 190918, 191002, 191106, 191107)—these discussions offered me powerful glimpses into the issues that these student teachers considered important, challenging, and transformative over time. I also facilitated activities and discussions within the inquiry group, including the creation and descriptive review of multimodal artifacts, that supported student teachers to make sense of their experiences and dynamic identities. Beyond simply forming a data source for my study, the inquiry group work has also been a meaningful and productive space for student teachers to develop a sense of peer community (Inquiry Group Fieldnotes, 200222), to learn about research and begin to see themselves as educational researchers (Grace Interview 5, 200314), and to develop their confidence as professional teachers (Yin Interview 4, 191220).

¹All focal student teachers in my study (and almost all student teachers in these practicum sections) worked with adult English language learners including immigrants, recently arrived refugees, and/or members of the university community. Most taught alone or with peer co-teachers and were responsible for planning and implementing language lessons with little or no curriculum provided.

My methodological framework prioritizes understanding student teachers' *emic* perspectives on their own practicum experiences. Analytically, this has meant attending to the topics and moments that have emerged as relevant to student teachers, then tracing how these (re)emerge (or do not) and how their meanings shift or solidify over time and contexts (Wortham & Reyes, 2015). As Tripp (1993) describes them, critical incidents often "appear to be 'typical' rather than 'critical' at first sight" but are moments that, via analysis, shed light on important patterns, values, and systems (pp. 24–25). My use of ethnographic observations and recordings has been instrumental in allowing me to go back and revisit moments that later emerged as "critical," often as student teachers (re)told and discussed them with each other and with me. Paying attention to and revisiting such critical incidents has helped me to understand more deeply how these student teachers have experienced their practicum contexts and envisioned their own learning.

An early example of an incident that seemed straightforward to me at first, but quickly emerged as having deeper meaning to the student teachers involved, happened during the fourth meeting of one of the practicum seminar sections (Practicum Fieldnotes, 190919). During that class, Emilia² and Shuang³ facilitated the section's first teaching demonstrations, short activity sequences that they planned and implemented with their classmates playing as pretend students. As a graded assignment for the practicum course, the teaching demonstration was expected to be a 15-minute "original language lesson" that "must be student-centered and communicative;" student teachers were required to provide the class with copies of their materials, lesson plan, and a cover sheet detailing assumptions about the language learners, lesson context, and assumed prior knowledge (Teaching Demonstration Assignment). Following each teaching demonstration, the instructor invited both the facilitator and their classmates to reflect and share feedback orally; a graded written reflection was due one week later.

An hour into the class meeting, Emilia volunteered to facilitate her teaching demonstration first. Emilia introduced her vocabulary-focused activity as designed for pre-literate, "absolute beginner," adult learners of English, explaining that these were the students at her practicum fieldsite. To prepare for her activity, she moved multiple tables together, then dumped out a suitcase full of her own clothing (e.g., shirts, sweaters, dresses, scarves). For the next fifteen minutes, with everyone standing around the table piled with clothes, she guided her faux-beginner-level classmates—one of whom repeatedly feigned misunderstanding—to "find all the ...," count each item type, sort various categories (e.g., length, color, pattern), and practice saying and spelling the name of each clothing type. She had also set up a "scavenger hunt" activity that would have required groups of students to find colored pictures of clothing taped up around the room to match provided worksheets, though time ran out before they could do this activity. Following Emilia's teaching demonstration, her classmates and instructor provided positive feedback, praising her "flexibility" in responding to incorrect responses and how "lively and engaging" the activity had been.

² All names are pseudonyms.

³ Not a focal participant

Next, Shuang facilitated her grammar-focused activity, which she introduced as for intermediate-high adult learners of English. She explained that the activity would focus on tag questions,⁴ designed to be helpful for adult learners in their daily lives. Shuang first led a fast-paced review of the situations, structures, and expected responses for tag questions. Her elaborate PowerPoint presentation used animation, arrows, icons, boxes, and multiple colors to show the relationship between the negative or affirmative base statement and its matching tag question, including highlighting subjects, verbs, pronouns, and responses. After a few minutes of this, Shuang transitioned to a partner “game” that required students to write, then ask and answer questions that fit given question tag structures; those who prompted the most different responses from their partner were declared winners (and received candy). Following Shuang’s teaching demonstration, her classmates and instructor praised the fun and engagement of the game, but also offered suggestions for how to both make the review more interactive and allow students more freedom of expression during the game.

As the discussion wrapped up following Shuang’s teaching demonstration, the instructor offered a “general comment,” which connected to both Emilia and Shuang’s activities but was also clearly meant for the whole class. She said:

I want to make one more general comment. This is something [other TESOL instructor] and I talk about a lot. And it’s about materials. We are always so impressed by the visual quality of your materials, like they’re always beautiful, right? They’re always beautiful. You make beautiful PowerPoints, complex PowerPoints that showed the mathematical formula. Anything that was visually spectacular. I was super jealous. I was thinking I wish I had that much PowerPoint skill. [Emilia] brought half her closet today for us. She had a suitcase, she had, you know, she had these post it notes with all the little pictures. Incredible, absolutely incredible, really an example of your care and your compassion. But I’m going to balance that with something else. Just like we want to balance meaningful interaction with time. We want to practice, we want to balance materials preparation with planning and investment. And something that [other TESOL instructor] and I worry about a lot is that we feel like when you go out after here, you’re never going to have this much time. (Practicum Fieldnotes, 190919)

The instructor went on to ask the student teachers to think about how busy they would be when, following graduation, they will have full-time teaching jobs—as opposed to the two hours per week that most were currently teaching for their practicum. She talked about her own struggles to find time for even seemingly mundane tasks and joked that she only had a PowerPoint for an earlier class discussion because she had reused it in multiple contexts. The instructor wrapped up the gist of her point with the advice to “keep it simpler,” encouraging student teachers not to make materials just because “it’s fun” but to consider how much they are “investing” and always whether they could “show that in a simpler way” (Practicum Fieldnotes, 190919). Ultimately, this advice seemed to be based on a

⁴ *Tag questions* refer to the transformation of statements into questions through the addition of a short phrase; in English, this requires the use of auxiliary verbs. For example, one of Shuang’s exercises required students to transform the declarative statement, “She has a car.” into the question, “She has a car, doesn’t she?” (Practicum Fieldnotes, 190919).

vision of the future the instructor imagines for these student teachers—when they will be working full-time, teaching many hours every day, and unable to devote so much time and creative energy to planning single lessons or activities—and a desire to help them develop a pedagogical approach *now* that will serve them *then*. Although she draws on examples from Emilia and Shuang’s demos to situate this advice, the instructor also presents this as an ongoing and shared concern among the TESOL faculty through her reference to conversations she has had with another faculty member that many of these student teachers respect and have taken and/or are taking other courses with.

I was originally struck by the instructor’s comment as a form of critique, and I wondered how Emilia and Shuang had understood it in relation to the preparation and care they had both clearly invested in their teaching demos. It was not long, however, before I would realize that it was salient in deeper and broader ways to the focal student teacher participants in my study. Later that same day, I met with four student teachers from this practicum section, including Emilia, for our first inquiry group meeting (Inquiry Group, 190919). Toward the end of that meeting, I facilitated an activity in which each of the student teachers sketched a model of student teacher learning during the practicum as they envisioned it; they each shared their model with us, and we collectively described patterns that we saw. During our subsequent discussion, the student teachers talked about influences on their current teaching and how they sometimes felt torn between meeting the needs of their students and fulfilling the expectations of their TESOL instructors. In relation to this, Linda raised the point of the advice their instructor had offered earlier that day, observing that there is also a “conflict between our actual teaching and our classroom demo and our future real teaching.”

Through an emotionally charged complaint about the instructor’s comment, Linda surfaced multiple issues (Wagner & Lewis, 2019, in review) that center around the differences between these student teachers’ current and future teacher identities. First, as student teachers only teaching a few hours a week for their practicum, she pointed out that this *is* their time to be “a creative or revolutionary teacher” and that it is important to “seize the chance” to experiment. Second, and relatedly, she argued that the instructor’s vision of their future teaching workload should not be used to evaluate their *current* pedagogical decisions. And, third, to much agreement from her peers, Linda declared that the teaching demonstration is a *distinct activity* from actual teaching and that its planning is largely governed by the desire to “impress the teacher, your classmates” (Inquiry Group, 190919). Linda’s critique, thus, did not necessarily disagree with the premise of their instructor’s advice—that as full-time teachers *in the future* they would be more limited in how much time they could devote to activity and materials design—but rather to the extension that therefore *right now* and *for the teaching demonstration assignment*, they should also be following this same principle. Linda’s points reverberated throughout the practicum semester.

First, the idea that the practicum serves as an important time for student teachers to experiment pedagogically as they develop their own teaching approach (Richards & Farrell, 2011) also appeared frequently in focal student teachers’ discussions of their experiences in interviews with me. In fact, a tension between being “creative” and being “repetitive” was one that many student teachers talked about in relation to designing activities for both the teaching demonstration

assignment and their practicum teaching (e.g., Emilia Interview 2, 191009; Linda Interview 2, 191010; Grace Interview 2, 191021). Of all the focal student teachers, Linda may have identified most strongly with the importance of creativity, even to the point of setting a rule for herself to not repeat the same activity at any point during the practicum semester (Interview 2, 191010). For other focal student teachers, the pressure to be creative *now* existed in tension with an imagined future teaching in public schools or institutions that they expect to be governed by strict structures and rules (e.g., Grace Interview 2, 191021; Yin Interview 1, 190913). Emilia, though, informed by her mentor teacher's encouragement to build routines for adult refugee learners, generally felt less pressure to always try new things, and she would eventually suggest that this may have been part of the instructor's point when she suggested that they should not, as Emilia paraphrased, "go overboard with the materials" (Interview 2, 191009).

Linda's second point, that the admitted reality of a future when they would be teaching full-time and unable to dedicate significant time to planning single activities should not be used to evaluate the effort they put toward planning during the practicum, builds on her first point. Throughout the semester, focal student teachers often discussed how much time they were spending on lesson planning, with some even treating it as a sign of personal/professional development when they realized they were dedicating less time to preparation as they progressed through the semester (e.g., Inquiry Group Fieldnotes, 191017). They were also aware that the time and effort they were putting into aspects such as curriculum design (which most were doing from scratch, without textbooks or syllabi) and writing formal lesson plans was a chance to learn skills that could be transferred to less time-consuming versions of such tasks in the future (e.g., Leena Interview 4, 191216). How much time and effort student teachers should be devoting to preparation also raises the question of how this is to be judged; multiple times, both in the aforementioned inquiry group meeting and in a later interview, Emilia expressed a feeling that her instructor had misjudged how much time it actually took her to prepare for her teaching demonstration, especially because she chose to demonstrate activities she had actually taught at her practicum fieldsite that week⁵ (Inquiry Group, 190919; Emilia Interview 2, 191009). She explained it this way: "I know that I gave the appearance that I'd prepared a lot. But like I knew myself that like, I just threw my clothes like in, in a suitcase and then just came" (Emilia Interview 2, 191009).

Finally, Linda's statement that the teaching demonstration assignment is distinct from "real" teaching, both during the practicum and in their imagined future careers, and carries a performance aspect, reflects a nuanced understanding of the layered identities and complex tasks that such an assignment carries for student teachers (Bell, 2007; Skinner, 2012). While this relates to the first point, in the sense that student teachers often talked about a pressure they felt to be creative across the practicum contexts (e.g., Linda Interview 2, 191010; Grace Interview 2, 191021;), there was also a sense in which they felt they were performing for both the instructor and their peers. The reality of this performance aspect may be validated by the fact that focal student teachers frequently commented on the post-

⁵ This was in contrast to some of her peers, who designed new activities for the teaching demo, sometimes even imagining teaching contexts quite different from their practicum fieldsites (e.g., Peggy Interview 2, 191022).

demonstration comments they received from their peers (e.g., Emilia Interview 2, 191009), reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of each other's demonstration activities (e.g., Grace Interview 2, 191021), and described their responsibility in teaching demonstrations as "showing" their pedagogical skills (e.g., Yin Interview 4, 191220). In part because Emilia had taught the activities that she demoed to her actual learners at her practicum fieldsite earlier that week, the distinctions between "real" teaching and the teaching demo were particularly salient for her. She even marked this distinction explicitly in her written reflection paper, within an account for the fact that she "lost track of time" and was not able to implement the scavenger hunt activity:

...I do think that for *my particular teaching context* (i.e., beginner/novice students), taking time to reinforce and practice new vocabulary via repetition/iteration to ensure understanding would be more beneficial to my students than strictly adhering to the time limits delineated in my lesson plan. Nevertheless, *in the context of a teaching demonstration* where my 'students' are actually my peers and when there is a specific amount of time allotted, time management becomes a significantly more important consideration. As such, in future teaching demonstrations, I would wear a watch so that I can surreptitious track the time during the course of each activity. (Emilia, Teaching Demonstration Reflection, 190926, emphasis added)

Emilia's reflection here provides a direct contrast between her practicum teaching and an in-class teaching demonstration, and to me, she expressed frustration over the difficulty of trying to show how she actually taught novice-level, pre-literate adult refugee learners within the time limit of the teaching demonstration, both of which were criteria she felt her instructor used for evaluation (Emilia Interview 2, 191009).

Examining this piece of advice from the perspective of these student teachers is not just an attempt to make sense of why it bothered them so much—though as a language teacher educator, that in and of itself would be a useful endeavor. It is also, I contend, an opportunity to understand how student teachers are navigating and making sense of the language teacher education curriculum (Richards, 2017) and, in the vein of a critical incident (Tripp, 1993), to begin to see patterns underlying that sense-making. Attending to and tracing the moments and topics that have emerged as relevant to student teachers across their practicum semester offers a way to build theory from the perspective of student teachers themselves and to consider the interrelated components of the practicum as they experience them.

My initial analysis and reflections on this incident and its reverberations throughout the practicum semester have raised the following questions: Is the practicum a time for student teachers to focus on developing pedagogical and professional skills for their current teaching contexts or their future ones, or somehow, to balance both? Whose vision of their imagined futures as TESOL graduates and full-time language educators should guide that focus, that of student teachers or of their instructors? And, what is the relationship between a demonstration lesson taught in the practicum seminar to classmates-playing-language-learners and a student teacher's pedagogical practices in their "real" (practicum and future) teaching contexts?

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