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# The Dynamic Process of Student-Teachers' Construction of Identity as Future Teachers\*


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## **Abstract**

This paper reports the findings of a qualitative narrative-inquiry study aimed at exploring what English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student-teachers' life stories revealed about their identity construction as future teachers. The project was carried out with eighth-semester student-teachers from a public university in Tunja, Boyacá (Colombia). Hence, the data collection drew upon written life stories and in-depth interviews. The findings suggest that critical factors helped student-teachers construct their identities as future EFL teachers. These factors are all tied to the student-teachers' previous experiences as language learners themselves, a connection and affiliation they established with their teacher-educators as projected images they have of themselves as future teachers. Moreover, real teaching experiences were opportunities for student-teachers to make sense of the myriad of issues in education, which made them develop positions towards education as future teachers.

**Keywords:** identity, teacher identity, life stories, English as a Foreign Language, student-teachers, agency.

## **El proceso dinámico de construcción de identidad estudiante-profesores como futuros profesores**

### **Resumen**

Este artículo presenta los hallazgos de un estudio narrativo cualitativo que tuvo como objetivo explorar lo que las historias de vida de los profesores en formación de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (EFL) pudieran revelar acerca de su construcción de identidades como futuros maestros. Este estudio se llevó a cabo entre estudiantes de octavo semestre de la Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia. Por tanto, la recopilación de datos se basó en historias de vida escritas y entrevistas en profundidad. Los hallazgos sugieren que hay algunos factores críticos que ayudaron a los profesores en formación a construir sus identidades como futuros profesores de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera. Estos factores están ligados a las experiencias previas que los profesores en formación vivieron como aprendices de idiomas, y la conexión y afiliación que establecen con sus educadores como imágenes proyectadas que ellos tienen de sí mismos como futuros profesores. Además, las experiencias reales de enseñanza fueron oportunidades para que los profesores en formación construyeran sentido de los innumerables asuntos que fluctuaban en la educación, lo que los hizo desarrollar posturas hacia la educación como futuros maestros.

**Palabras clave:** identidad, identidad del maestro, historias de vida, inglés como lengua extranjera, profesores en formación, agenciamiento.

## **Le processus dynamique de construction de l'identité des élèves-enseignants en tant que futurs enseignants**

**Résumé:** Cet article est le résultat d'une étude narrative qualitative qui visait à explorer ce que les histoires de vie des professeurs d'anglais langue étrangère en formation pourraient révéler sur leur construction d'identité en tant que futurs enseignants. Cette étude a été menée auprès d'étudiants du huitième semestre de l'Université pédagogique et technologique de Colombie. Par conséquent, le recensement de données eut comme point de départ des histoires de vie écrites et des entretiens approfondis. Les résultats suggèrent que certains facteurs critiques ont aidé les enseignants en formation à construire leur identité en tant que futurs professeurs d'anglais langue étrangère. Ces facteurs sont liés aux expériences antérieures des enseignants en formation professionnelle en tant qu'apprenants en langues, et au lien et à l'affiliation qu'ils établissent avec leurs enseignants en tant qu'images projetées qu'ils ont d'eux-mêmes comme futurs enseignants. En outre, les expériences d'enseignement réelles ont été l'occasion pour les stagiaires-enseignants de comprendre la quantité de questions fluctuantes dans le domaine de l'éducation, ce qui leur a fait développer des attitudes à l'égard de l'éducation en qualité de futurs enseignants.

**Mots clés:** identité, identité des enseignants, histoires de vie, anglais langue étrangère, enseignants en formation, agencement.

## **O processo dinâmico de construção da identidade de estudantes-professores como futuros professores**

**Resumo:** Este artigo apresenta os resultados de um estudo narrativo qualitativo que teve como objetivo explorar o que as histórias de vida de professores de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira (EFL) em formação poderiam revelar sobre sua construção de identidades como futuros professores. Este estudo foi realizado com alunos do oitavo semestre da Universidade Pedagógica e Tecnológica da Colômbia. Portanto, a coleta de dados baseou-se em histórias de vida escritas e entrevistas em profundidade. Os resultados sugerem que existem alguns fatores críticos que ajudaram os professores em formação a construir suas identidades como futuros professores de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira. Esses fatores estão ligados às experiências anteriores que os professores em formação tiveram como alunos de línguas e à conexão e afiliação que estabelecem com seus educadores como imagens projetadas que eles têm de si mesmos como futuros professores. Além disso, as experiências reais de ensino foram oportunidades para os professores de formação inicial darem sentido às inúmeras questões flutuantes na educação, o que os fez desenvolver atitudes em relação à educação como futuros professores.

**Palavras-chave:** identidade, identidade docente, histórias de vida, Inglês como língua estrangeira, professores em formação, agência.

## Introduction

Research seeking to understand the nature and factors that underpin the process of teacher identity construction is a topic of paramount importance in education. In general, teacher identity is connected to the professional identity of a teacher with a focus on the pedagogical and didactical components (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Lamote & Engels, 2010). For this study, we identified the need to explore the ways student-teachers construct their identity in a teacher education programs in Colombia. Research studies on teacher identity have recently emerged to meet this research deficit since teacher identity “is of vital concern to teacher education; it is the basis of meaning making and decision making” (Bullough, 1997, p. 21). Institutions, stakeholders, and teacher education programs should holistically understand the experience-based factors integral to teacher identity construction. In doing so, changes in the curriculum can be made, thereby, promoting spaces for reflection to improve teaching and learning processes.

We found a considerable number of attempts to define identity, and authors share a common notion that identity construction is a dynamic, ongoing process (Beijaard et al., 2004; Flores & Day, 2006; Torres & Ramos, 2019), which changes over time due to a range of internal and external factors (Veen & Slegers, 2006; Flores & Day, 2006). Identity also involves a constantly changing process of interpretation and reinterpretation of day-to-day lived experiences (Kerby, 1991). Student-teachers' lived experiences in their undergraduate teaching programs are created and recreated during an active process of learning to teach because future teachers are expected to explore and respond to the needs of their contexts (Trent, 2011).

Identity construction is a broad term that relates to a myriad of dimensions, such as identity and self, personal and professional, person and context, self-image and sub-identities, and agency. However, the connection established among these terms is still unclear (Beijaard et al., 2004). Thus, this study sought to unveil factors from a teacher education program at a public university that influence the ways student-teachers construct their identity as future English language teachers.

The question that guided this study was: What do EFL student-teachers' life stories reveal about their identity construction as future teachers? The main objective of our qualitative narrative-inquiry study was to analyze what EFL student-teachers' life stories revealed about their identity construction as future teachers. We believe that teacher educators could enable future teachers to act as agents of innovation and change in education through linguistic, pedagogical, didactic, and practical knowledge. Additionally, we felt that changes might be implemented if teacher educators knew the individuals they are preparing to be teachers, which includes their expectations and the ways they imagine and situate their professional lives in the world.

Understanding the critical factors influencing student-teachers' identities construction and reconstruction can help us develop a deeper view of their careers, roles, and objectives as future EFL teachers. Moreover, this study also contributes to

our understanding and acknowledgment of what it means to be a teacher in today's schools and how student-teachers cope with to the different challenges fluctuating in such contexts.

## **Literature Review**

The theoretical bases we discuss in this study accounted for different authors' points of view and research about the following topics: identity, teacher identity, and life stories.

## **Identity**

Several authors have drawn on the term "identity" in the literature. The concept of identity has taken on various meanings, and it is seldom defined properly in literature (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004). Nevertheless, authors who have attempted to define identity seem to share a common perspective that identity construction is a dynamic, ongoing process (Beijaard et al., 2004; Flores & Day, 2006), involving interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences as one lives through them (Kerby, 1991).

This paper takes into account Wenger's ideas regarding identity construction. The notion of identity emerged from the constantly changing process of becoming a certain person with goals, dreams, and roles in a society (Wenger, 1998). In that respect, the sense of belonging and engaging with a variety of groups, called communities of practice, are factors taking part in the process of identities construction (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In this sense, student-teachers have the opportunity to construct knowledge and make meaning on who they really are and what they expect from their profession. Therefore, student-teachers must embark on becoming active and crucial members within a society of change. Wenger (1998) further stated that "the degree to which we can make use of, affect, control, modify, or in general, assert as ours the meanings that we negotiate" (p. 200) permeates who we are. In this line of thought, Nagatomo (2012) claimed that "when members are recognized and adopted within a community, mutual engagement leads to a shared ownership of meaning" (p. 83). Thus, the sense of belonging to a community, as one of many essential factors of identity construction, is a dynamic process in which student-teachers envision and affiliate themselves to certain types of teachers who currently contribute to society.

## **Teacher identity**

Teacher identity is broadly acknowledged as playing a crucial role in teacher development (Rodgers & Scott, 2008), and the concept of teacher identity has gained attention in studies conducted on education (Alsup, 2006; Atkinson 2004; Cohen, 2008; Day & Kington 2008; Trent, 2011). Hence, teacher identity, as one type of identity, has been widely defined (Beijaard et al., 2004). For example, Murphey (1998) and Singh and Richards (2006) have defined it as the conceptualization that teachers

attach to themselves, whether it be conscious or unconscious. Meanwhile, Gee (2000) defined the term as a "certain kind of person in a given context" (p. 99).

In this vein, Hoffman-Kipp (2008) believed that teacher identity is "the intersection of personal, pedagogical, and political participation and reflection within a larger sociopolitical context" (p. 153). In this respect, teacher, or student-teacher, identity is related to the attributions they give themselves determined by their own contexts. In addition, Cooper and Olsen (2008) asserted that teacher identity "is continually being informed, formed, and reformed as individuals develop over time and through interaction with others" (p. 80).

Literature also suggested that teacher identity, as well as any type of identity, is not static or predetermined (Beijaard et al., 2004; Maclean & White, 2007; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Rather, it is dynamic, created, and recreated during an active process of learning to teach (Trent, 2011). Thereby, the concept of "self" is vital when dealing with teacher identity. At times, the connection between identity and self is unclear, as well as the relationship between personal and professional (Beijaard et al., 2004). In some cases, "self" and "identity" have been used interchangeably in teacher education literature (Day et al., 2006). However, the literature suggests that "self" is a relevant constituent in identity as it is part of the ongoing and dynamic process in identities construction. According to Rodgers and Scott (2008):

Self will subsume identity(ies) and will be understood as an evolving yet coherent being, that consciously and unconsciously constructs and is constructed, reconstructs and is reconstructed, in interaction with the cultural contexts, institutions, and people with which the self-lives, learns, and functions. (p. 739)

In this research study, we understand the "self" within the words reported by Trejo (2010). The author claims that "self" is conceived as "emerging from the integration of multiple identities, which are profoundly intertwined with the social context and morality" (p. 49). This assertion means that it is likely that student-teachers display aspects of their "self" or "selves" to construct their identities as future EFL teachers.

In terms of previous research about teacher identity in student-teachers, Nagatomo (2012) carried out a study to examine how professional identity was developed among four teachers, who were new to teaching English at the university level in Japan. The study revealed that younger teachers' educational experiences are different than those of older professors. Thus, the younger teachers had a different outlook toward English language teaching when entering the profession.

Anspal *et al.* (2012) explored student-teachers' professional identity development in a teacher education program in Estonia. The participants were 38 students across different cohorts from the first to the fifth year of a primary school teacher education program. The authors reported that the practice periods appeared

to be highly influential for identity development. The study also suggested that teacher educators can guide students to cope with the challenges they might encounter. Quintero (2016) also found that mentors, classmates, and family members play a role in pre-service teachers' construction of their selves. Quintero (2016) conducted a pedagogical intervention in which he intended to bridge life stories and narrative perspective to examine pre-service English language teachers' (re) construction of their true selves through a three-step introspective practice (Retrospection, Interpretation, and Prospecption). Data were collected by means of life stories. The findings suggested that relatives, teachers, and classmates are social actors that play an essential role in pre-service teachers' shaping of the *self-as-teacher*.

In order to understand the processes pre-service teachers go through during their final teaching practicum, Izadinia (2013) chose 29 empirical studies that focused on student teachers' identities. The main instruments used by these studies included reflective practices and interviews. They reported changes in student teacher's identities that included: cognitive knowledge, sense of agency, and voice. The review suggested that pre-service teachers became active participants in the learning and teaching process when becoming members of a community, which in turn helped develop their teaching identities.

As such, identity construction occurs when interactions take place in specific settings and social contact. Thus, identity formation is also related to contextual factors. In this sense and at a national level, Fajardo (2014), focused his study on understanding how teachers' identities were co-constructed and shaped through their interactions. He followed the Conversation Analysis (CA) approach to collect and analyze spoken interactions. English classes were video recorded as a way to gather data, and a two-hour lesson was transcribed. The reported findings showed that the teacher exerted levels of power through control and regulation of social actions taking place in the classroom (social context). The events that take place in the classroom characterize the way identities are co-constructed through interactions, where asymmetric power relationships between the teacher and student empower the role of the teacher.

Lamote and Engels (2010) delved deeper into the development of student-teachers' professional identity. The participants were students enrolled in a three-year course in secondary education teaching at the bachelor level. Data were collected by means of questionnaires, which were filled out by students from two colleges. The questionnaire included four scales: commitment to teaching, professional orientation, task orientation and self-efficacy. The results revealed that the main difference in professional identity among the students was based on gender. Male students were more concerned with dealing with discipline, and female students focused more on student involvement.



### 1.3 Life Stories

For qualitative narrative studies, life stories play a significant role, not only to collect data, but also to better understand student-teachers' realities. Life stories are proposed within a model in which the term "story" is understood in three different perspectives (Barkhuizen, 2014). The three perspectives are described below (Barkhuizen, as cited in Quintero, 2016, p. 112).

First, *story*, in lowercase, involves personal thoughts, perceptions, and interactions of the life story of the author. Second, *Story*, with initial capital letter, refers to policies where the author has less power; this is a story in an institutional context. Third, *STORY*, with fixed capital letters, represents the laws of government ministries or laws of a country (p.112).

For the purpose of this study, the first perspective of "*story*" was emphasized and followed to account for the process of student-teachers' identity construction as future EFL teachers. In addition, we considered Barkhuizen's (2014) characteristics of a story, which involve the three components of "who", "where", and "when" in the narrative storytelling process.

Stories "help to make sense of, evaluate, and integrate the tensions inherent in experience: the past with the present, the fictional with the "real", the official with the unofficial, personal with the professional" (Dyson & Genishi, 1994, p. 242). In other words, stories help us transform the present and project a better future in contrast to the past. Stories are part of the meaning-making process in teaching and learning, as well as the landscape we live in as teachers and researchers (Elbaz, 1991). Life is carried along through experiences that are told and narrated. Teachers are located within specific and varied contexts, where they live day-to-day experiences worth sharing. In this sense, Bruner (1994, as cited in Dyson & Genishi, 1994) claimed that life is not "how it was, but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (p. 36).

In this line of thought, stories provide the individual with opportunities to draw upon one's identity, which makes life stories useful resources in identity expression (Miller, 2002). Moreover, student-teachers can feel freedom and comfort in talking about themselves and their lives through a natural and spontaneous story. Beijaard *et al.* (2004) reported that "through storytelling, teachers engage in narrative "theorizing" and, based on that, teachers may further discover and shape their professional identity resulting in new or different stories" (p. 121). In connection to this, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) referred to teachers' professional identity in terms of "stories to live by" (p. 4). Therefore, teachers' professional identity construction is a changing and dynamic process shaped by the myriad of daily situations that are part of the individual.

## Research Methodology

This study is deliberately qualitative because it focuses on gaining a deeper descriptive understanding of the way student-teachers construct their identity as future EFL teachers. For our study, we did not account for data measurement and validation. Instead, our goal was to make sense of the reality in light of what the data revealed. Qualitative research asks that researchers study subjective experiences “in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.10).

In addition, we followed some principles of Narrative-inquiry Research in the sense that we pursued a narrative style to portray identities. Webster and Mertova (2007) mentioned that “Narrative inquiry provides researchers with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories, [...as humans] experience through the construction and reconstruction of [them]” (p.1). In this sense, life stories, which took the form of narratives, were a fruitful instrument to understand the way student-teachers constructed their identities as future EFL teachers.

Finally, we followed the seven basic steps in regard to narrative studies, as stated by Barkhuizen (2014): identify phenomenon to explore, select one or more participants to study, collect the story from that participant, restory or retell the individual's story, collaborate with the participant/storyteller, write a story about the participant's experiences, and validate the report's accuracy.

## Setting and Population

The research study took place at a public university in Tunja, Colombia in a Modern Languages undergraduate program. The program emphasizes the necessity to educate professional foreign language educators with a broad vision of pedagogy and research, as well as a strong communicative competence. Learners in their first semesters are immersed in a process of acquiring theoretical bases to put into practice in later semesters. When students are in their eighth semester, they start their teaching practices at different high schools. Given the previous and the focus of this study, the participants were eighth-semester student-teachers. In this undergraduate program, student-teachers are expected to act as agents of change and innovation in the schools where they carry out their teaching experiences.

The participants for this research study were six English language student-teachers in their eighth semester. Their ages ranged from 21 to 24 years. These student teachers had gone through an academic process in which they had developed their linguistic and teaching skills. Accounting for ethical issues in this research study, a letter of permission to conduct the research study was submitted to the Curricular Committee of the Modern Language program. A consent letter was also given to the student-teachers at the very beginning of the process.

<i><b>PARTICIPANTS</b></i>	<i><b>AGE</b></i>	<i><b>SEMESTER</b></i>
G.T.J	22	8th semester
Sofia	21	8th semester
Juana	21	8th semester
Mary	23	8th semester
Camilo	22	8th semester
Susan	23	8th semester

**Table 1.** Participants

### **Data Collection Instruments and Procedures**

We used life stories (narratives) and individual in-depth semi-structured interviews as data collection instruments. The student-teachers provided a wealth of data through written life stories, which were part of a semester long project. They narrated and reflected on personal and professional experiences. Though the life stories were not part of a graded course assignment, the student-teachers wrote their life stories as a means to reflect and create meaningful dialogue with their teachers. The student-teachers wrote five life stories, and these were compiled together to create a larger document, which was a narrative in English. These narratives accounted for introspective and narrative data that were framed within a reflective process. As McAdams (1985) mentioned, “people have stories in their minds, and these internalized and evolving narratives about their past, present, and imagine future provide people with a sense of meaning” (p. 1). We also provided student-teachers with the guidelines to write their life stories.

The student-teachers’ written life stories were focused on the following prompts:

Life story 1: “Recall an experience you had at school that was critical for you as an English language learner. Try to think about places, people, and events. Explain what happened, how you felt, and why those situations were relevant to you. You can use diagrams, drawings, and/or pictures to portray your experiences”.

Life story 2 and 3: “This time, try to think about the experiences you have had as a student-teacher of the Modern Languages Program (first teaching practices, academic events, a class, a subject, and/or a professor) that was remarkable for you. Narrate how and why those experiences have affected or changed you as a student-teacher, and what this means to your future”.

Life story 4 and 5: “As you are going to become an in-service teacher very soon, illustrate your short/long term goals you have towards language teaching practices and

professional growth as an English language teacher. Provide reasons why you drew those expectations and/or predictions in your future professional life”.

The main objective of the stories was to document student-teachers' experiences, issues, concerns, expectations, and situations that were relevant and/or had influenced their life as English language learners and student-teachers. In this reflective process, we invited the student-teachers to recall and reflect upon academic experiences, people, or places that have influenced their life as language learners and student-teachers. We asked student-teachers to narrate those academic experiences in a written way describing what, when, where, and how those events happened. We were also aware of the fact that the language used to write their stories (English) could limit the content of their stories. That is why, we invited the participants to use diagrams, drawings, and pictures to complement their stories.

While reading their stories, we understood that each student-teacher had lived his/her process as future EFL teachers differently. However, we found themes that were common among all the student-teachers' life stories. In order to better comprehend their stories, we interviewed each participant.

The aim of the in-depth interviews was to expand on the information that was found in the narratives. Doing so would help us gain a deeper understanding of the student-teachers' life stories. We also considered that the function of a narrative is collaboration between the researcher and participant (Riessman, 2008). Therefore, we asked questions that gave us the possibility to co-construct the stories they had written. The questions for the in-depth interviews were delivered in Spanish (native language) in order to establish a harmonic and natural environment that favored the student-teachers' storytelling. We asked questions related to time, feelings they faced during the experiences, specific places, spaces, and people involved in the process. The interview helped us clarify events represented in their life stories. The interviews were transcribed and indexed using the following codes: interview, pseudonym of the participant, and length.

## **Data Analysis and Findings**

We analyzed the data following the principles of narrative analysis, which allows the researcher to gain a better understanding of the human dimension portrayed in the narratives. In this sense, we followed three models of narrative analysis proposed by Riessman (2008): thematic analysis, structural analysis, and dialogic analysis. We used the thematic analysis to find common elements across the participants' experiences in their written life-stories. Initially, we read each one of the stories written by the participants. We found that although each participant had a different story to tell, there were some commonalities in their stories. So, we decided to use a phrase that could summarize those common experiences: *To be or not to be and the human perspective in education*.

After reading the life stories, we carried out the in-depth interviews. In addition to complementing the information from the life stories, we also followed a structural and dialogical analysis by paying attention to how the participants told their stories. In other words, we paid attention to their feelings and paralinguistic features. While asking questions to clarify events in the participants' stories, we could co-construct participants' stories through a dialogical analysis. To develop the two analysis, we transcribed the interviews and looked for details. After doing so, we found two main topics to answer our initial question: What do EFL student-teachers' life stories reveal about their identity construction as future teachers? The main topics were *Ambivalence Between the Sense of Identifying or Disaffiliating as Future Teachers* and *The Path to Becoming Critical Educators*.

Once we found the main themes, we explored them in depth and linked them to the definitions of identity and teacher identity we had adopted for this study. Identity, as stated by Wenger (1998), emerges from the constant process of becoming a certain person. This process is mediated by the roles one plays in society among many other actors. Teacher identity is developed over time through interactions with others and the context (pedagogical, political, and sociopolitical) (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008; Cooper & Olson, 1996).

To confirm the accuracy of the data and its interpretation, we went back to the narrators and shared our analysis throughout the study.

### **First Theme: Ambivalence Between the Sense of Identifying or Disaffiliating as Future Teachers**

It was evident that the student-teachers moved back and forth when making decisions about their profession. At times, they fluctuated between being doubtful or convinced about their choice of becoming an EFL Teacher. Their doubts were due to the experiences they had as learners with their prior teachers and having to cope with real teaching experiences. On the other hand, their teaching experiences had also become incentives to persuade themselves to continue the process of becoming teachers.

In this sense, teacher educators were crucial in the student-teachers' formation because they were the source of ideologies, conceptions, and routes to follow or avoid on the path to becoming a teacher. The student-teachers had to decide whether to take, adapt, adopt, follow, or avoid those components based on their own criteria and positioning as future teachers.

### ***Teachers as Meaningful Others in Identities Construction***

Apart from focusing on language teaching, the undergraduate program provides students with the opportunity to learn from different teacher educators on disciplinary and human dimensions. These aspects have contributed to the student-teachers' formation as learners and future teachers. The student-teachers have

projected their self-image toward their future based on prior teachers' behaviors, actions, roles, and ideologies. Accordingly, these teacher educators have left student-teachers with impressions which become the projected mental images of the ideal teacher they would like to become (Calderhead & Robson, 1991). The previous statement is illustrated by a comment made by G. T. J. as she explains how her teacher educators helped co-construct her projected image of a teacher.

"I have faced up hard circumstances with demanding teachers, but I love those situations and those teachers. Because I strongly believe, that the more teachers demand you, the more successful you are. At Modern Languages program I have had demanding teachers in different subjects, or areas so I think that they have contributed to my formation as language learner and language teacher. But I have had bad teachers, and they have contributed as well. I do not want to be like them". [Sic] (G.T.J, Life Story)

By reading and analyzing this excerpt, G.T.J recognized that the quality of contribution she received in her formation depended on the type of teacher educator she had, especially from those teacher educators she considered as demanding. She linked the teacher-educators academic demands with a students' success in life. Also, she stressed that the teacher educators who were not good also gave her insights, so as to not imitate them as a future teacher. It seemed that G.T.J has an influencing image of her teacher educators as mirrors to follow or avoid. This relates to language teachers' identity construction through role modeling (Higgins, 2017, as cited in Barkhuizen, 2017). Teacher educators play a crucial role in student-teachers' decisions regarding the type of teachers they would like to become. G.T.J. positioned herself on the side of the demanding teachers, and she emphasized the influence of her role models as a way to express her affiliation. In line with the role teacher educators play in student-teacher's identity construction, Sofia narrated her experiences in the undergraduate program,

"Alongside the degree, there have been many teachers whose I have learnt so much. We as student teachers could assess how we want to be when we will be in-service teachers. Those good and bad teachers have brought to my life many experiences. Some of them I would like to replicate with my students, some others I never want to live again". [Sic] (Sofia, Life Story)

In this case, Sofia acknowledged her progress in learning thanks to several teacher educators in the undergraduate program. In the last lines of the extract above, Sofia implicitly mentioned that she knows the characteristics of a good teacher, and she wants to revive those qualities with her future students. The sample above conveys Sofia's understanding of her hopes and desires as a future language teacher. Her hopes might be part of the imagined identities she has constructed under the individual perspective of identity construction, which involves the way she would like to look at her own "self" (Barkhuizen, 2017). This "self" as a future teacher is constructed through a decision-making process of choosing and rejecting features of

“who” she wants to be as a future in-service teacher, which is based on her informed prior experiences as a language learner.

### ***Viewing Teaching as A Social Practice***

The student-teachers' teaching experiences at different schools helped them construct informed visions and conceptions about education, which was a common theme in the data analysis. The following extracts illustrate the participants' vision of education. These excerpts account for principles of identity formation like the multiple “selves” an individual might have (Norton, 2011). In the first excerpts, Susan and Camilo described the concept of “selves”:

“we as human beings are full of complexities in several aspects of our lives, and that our development as learners, in this in relation to language domains, needs to be accompanied for teachers who care about students' feelings, emotions and life in order to integrate an essential part of learning: the human itself” (Susan, Life Story) [Sic]

“Looking towards my future, as English language teacher I would be characterized

by my commitment with students, taking into account the way they learn, their needs, and the context they are involved in. An English language teacher is characterized by his/her sincerity, patience, calm and good attitude to handle hard situations” (Camilo, Life Story) [Sic]

In Susan's perspective, she first recognized that we are human beings with a lot of subtleties that should be taken into consideration in the learning process. Doing so would require teachers who really care about their students in the entire personal dimension (feelings, emotions, needs). Thereby, the ethics of teaching form the boundaries of the teacher's responsibilities, in which a teacher is considered a person who is deeply concerned for her pupils' learning and well-being (Anspal et al., 2012). Along the same line, Camilo discussed his wish to become a supportive, helpful, and caring teacher. The important features within this transformative dynamic are framed under the initiative of considering the needs and characteristics of the learners.

### **Second Theme: On the Path to Becoming Critical Educators**

By nature, teachers can be reflective professionals due to the need to continually analyze fluctuating realities within the classroom (Schön, 1983). We noticed that the student-teachers adopted a critical perspective of education once they were immersed in their teaching practices. The student-teachers also started to develop critical skills that forced them to go beyond methodological and instructional ability (Aguirre & Ramos, 2011).

In this vein, student-teachers showed their interest in understanding their future students' realities and the human dimension within a balanced level of power as a way to think about, negotiate, and transform the dynamics in the classroom (McLaren, 2003). In this regard, it is possible that the student-teachers were trying to become critical agents because they connected the school context with the social context (Pennycook, 2005). Consequently, "teaching is not about transferring knowledge or contents nor is it an act whereby a creator gives shape, style, or soul to an indecisive and complacent body. There is, in fact, no teaching without learning" (Freire, 2001, p. 11). In accordance with this, another relevant issue involved in student-teachers' identities construction is related to reflection and action based on that reflection.

### ***Real Life Teaching Experiences: Cornerstones in Professional Vocation***

In most undergraduate education programs, student-teachers are asked to take a practical component as part of the curriculum. The student-teachers had their first teaching experience in a course called English Didactics II. While developing their teaching sessions, the student-teachers could construct their identities as future teachers. In this regard, we found that the student-teachers faced relevant situations, identified real phenomena occurring at the schools, and made-meaning of their teaching experiences by reflecting about them.

"I remember of the first time I was teaching and it was a small group of eleventh graders. At that moment I thought it was easy, one enters and realizes that reality is much more complicated because one should always keep in mind that people have different particularities. On that day, some students arrived and they seemed to be indisposed. There was a student who treated me differently and for me it was a very complex situation, even because I was observing the students and many of them looked like older than me" [Sic] (Interview, Camilo, 04:04)

Camilo narrated his first teaching experience, and he claimed that his beliefs changed when confronted with reality. He was aware of the fact that each person is a unique individual, and everybody is different. In his experience, he faced situations in which students were unwilling to be in class. A mixture of feelings arose, and he felt uncomfortable in that situation. These are genuine problematic situations that Camilo must deal with in his practical realization as a student-teacher and future teacher.

### ***Acknowledging the Importance of Praxis***

Teachers are expected to be active and innovative agents who seek to transform communities through action (McLaren, 2003). The following lines show a brief illustration of the reflective processes made by the student-teachers.

"Societies are changing, so the attitudes of young people are not the same as those of a few years ago, so it is our duty being innovative, being updated,



reflecting and investigate upon our teaching practices in order to take action and evolve in our methodologies and practice in general” [Sic] (Interview, G.T.J, 16:14)

“When I felt that things were not going very well in class, I reflected upon whether the way I was explaining to my students was good or whether I had to use other dynamics and activities, so I implemented different strategies in the class” [Sic] (Interview, Juana, 03:52)

In the two excerpts above, G.T.J. and Juana agreed on the significance of reflecting upon teaching experiences with the goal of looking for alternatives for improvement. Explicit attention has been paid to the didactical dimension, which appears to be a crucial interrelated component when addressing teacher identity (Beijaard et al., 2000). Having student-teachers reflect upon their own values, beliefs, feelings, teaching practices, and experiences helps shape their professional identity (Izadinia, 2013). For the purpose of this research study, reflection contributed to the student-teachers' construction of imagined professional identities, which are projected for their future work as teachers.

“In that moment, when I was doing my first teaching practice in a rural school, I asked myself why children had those conditions. So, I started to comprehend Colombia has inequality and education is not the exception. I tried to do the best, I could. I designed my materials and I planned my classes as clear and easy as I could. My little students were very happy and excited about English Classes. It was wonderful for me. I raised awareness about how we learn English, and how we as English teachers have to promote in our students the love for English” [Sic] (Mary, Life Story)

Mary questioned herself about the particular conditions students face at the school where she did her teaching practice. In the same way, she emphatically disagreed with the inequalities in the educational system in Colombia. Teaching experience encourages student-teachers to take action in their role as a pre-service teacher. In Mary's case, she witnessed the positive results and motivation of her action in her students. Cook (2009) explained that experiences act as learning opportunities for new teachers. By reflecting on their experiences, student-teachers can recognize areas of dissonance, manage the disequilibrium of their first teaching experience, and create a site of struggle, growth, and new understanding. Similarly, Dewey (1938) supported the notion that “we do not learn from experiences, we learn from reflecting on experience” (p. 78). In other words, student-teachers went through a process in which they taught, reflected, and took actions upon reflection.

## Conclusions

This research study revealed that student-teachers extrapolated their lived experiences as learners to their own initial teaching contexts to envision themselves as future teachers. They always made the connection between their own experiences as learners and the current situations occurring at the schools where they had their

initial teaching experiences. Prior experiences as learners created the solid preexisting foundations they already had in the process of constructing their identities as future teachers. Consequently, multiple experiences are intertwined on a day-to-day basis within different social contexts and situations.

The student-teachers constructed their identities based on behaviors, actions, attitudes, and transactions with their teacher educators. Additionally, the student-teachers envisioned themselves based on their role model teacher educators that they admire and affiliate with. As the process of identity construction is dynamic, student-teachers move from role model affiliation to their own construction of informed visions and perceptions of education. The latter is aimed at transforming the dynamics of the classroom, which was displayed through the student-teachers' concern about innovation in teaching and learning practices. They are also reflective practitioners of education when they asserted that contextualized teaching practices are needed in order to establish a reciprocal relationship between what happens in the surrounding contexts and the classroom. Our research study also revealed that student-teachers consider bringing an in-depth humanistic perspective into the classroom by providing students with opportunities to be heard and grow as human beings. Student-teachers are inspiring storytellers in the field of education and agents of change involved in a learning process to tackle future challenges, tensions, and inquiries in different educational contexts.

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