Inspired Teachers: A Narrative Perspective on Preservice English Teachers' Career Choices

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Research on why people choose to pursue teaching careers has focused on a variety of factors related to recruitment and retention. For language teacher trainers, however, a potentially more insightful approach involves examining the discourse that preservice teachers (PSTs) use to discuss career decisions. This paper presents an analysis of narratives that Japanese PSTs used to explain why they wanted to become public school teachers. Data are drawn from a larger study of narrative inquiry as a tool for reflection in a language teaching methodology course and include texts written during the course and interviews conducted afterward. Using a framework that connects specific narrative elements (people, places, times) to wider contexts, the study reveals how PSTs relate career decisions to a dynamic and evolving sense of identity. This has implications for teacher trainers and programs, suggesting in particular the value of engaging PSTs in critical reflection on career plans.

教職キャリアの選択についての先行研究は、採用や定着に関連する様々な要因に焦点を当ててきた。しかし、語学の教員養成者にとって、教育実習生(PST)がキャリアの決定について話し合う際に使用する談話を調べることがより洞察的なアプローチであろう。本研究の目的は、教員養成課程の学生が公立の学校の教師を目指す理由を説明するためのナラティブを分析することである。データは、英語教育法を受講した学生の振り返りのツールとして、大規模なナラティブ研究から抽出されたもので、授業のために書いた課題やその後のインタビューが含まれている。本研究では、ナラティブの要素（人物、場所、時間）を社会的背景に結びつける分析法を用いて、教育実習生が教職の選択を動的で進化する個々のアイデンティティの感覚にどのように関連付けているのかを探求する。結果は、特に教員を目指す学生が自身のキャリア選択について批判的に考えることの価値を示唆しており、教員養成者と課程にとって意義を与えるものである。

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"Why do you want to be a teacher?" Many of the preservice teachers (PSTs) that I work with answer this question by referring to experiences and people from their past. They describe, for example, that particular teacher that they found inspirational or that memorable class that opened a door for them and eventually led to a love of teaching and learning and a desire to make a career out of it. This type of response reflects the fact that the teaching profession in Japan can be characterized as having what Lortie (1975), writing about teachers in the US, called a "wide decision range":

> People can decide to become teachers at any number of points. Since the occupation is ubiquitous and highly visible in the lives of children, it can easily figure in their fantasies about adult occupational activity; even young children can make persisting decisions to enter teaching. At the other end of the continuum, it is possible to decide on teaching late and still implement the decision. (p. 38)

Similarly, while the path to becoming a teacher in Japan is circumscribed by gate-keeping mechanisms such as licensing, hiring exams, and periods of apprenticeship (Howe, 2005; Numano, 2011), these are loosely spread over a time extending from the trainee's university coursework through the first years of in-service teaching, making it relatively easy to change course along the way. Thus, it seems natural that people explain their decisions to pursue a teaching career by drawing heavily on personal outlooks and dispositions. Becoming a teacher, in other words, is a story that they tell about themselves.

The purpose of this article is to explore these observations by looking at the ways in which undergraduate PSTs in Japan frame their career choices through personal stories. Specifically, it focuses on narratives written for a methods course for university students acquiring an English teacher's license.

Background

Research into the factors influencing the choice of a teaching career has traditionally taken a top-down approach, with large-scale studies at the national and cross-national level (Alexander et al., 1994; An et al., 2021; Kim & Kim, 2022; Uztosun & Topkaya, 2017; Watt et al., 2012) using survey instruments such as the one developed by Watt and Richardson (2007). These studies have suggested that there are similarities across contexts in people's motivations to pursue a teaching career, although sociocultural factors are associated with specific differences in attitudes and outcomes. The bird's-eye view taken by this research has implications for

educational policy, as it provides insight into issues that affect the overall health of the teaching profession, including recruitment and retention.

A more recent line of inquiry has focused on individual factors underlying teacher career decisions, often employing qualitative methods and adopting a dynamic view of teacher motivation (Harfitt, 2015; Low et al., 2017; Olan & Belló, 2016a, 2016b). These studies have complemented large-scale surveys by yielding insight into the ways in which individual teachers understand their careers as an unfolding process of self-realization. This work also reflects calls to make teacher training programs more supportive of novice teachers' identity development (Clarke, 2008; Fairley, 2020; Trent, 2010). The analysis reported here fits within this second line as it examines PSTs' reflections on learning and teaching experiences, particularly the ways in which they construe those experiences as part of their motivation to become a teacher.

Context

The data for this investigation are drawn from a larger study of the use of narrative inquiry in a course on English language teaching methods. The course is the last of a series for undergraduates obtaining a teaching license with a qualification in English, and enrollment typically consists of around 40 students in the 3rd and 4th year, approximately half of whom are in the education faculty's English education department, with the rest from other departments in the faculty. Entry surveys indicate that students take the course for varying reasons, including the fulfillment of graduation requirements, the prospect of adding English to their teaching qualifications, and preparation for a career as an English teacher.

Whether students are planning to become teachers or not, the course is designed to provide opportunities for them to think about teaching as a career and their own possible futures as teachers. This design includes a series of three written assignments modeled on Barkhuizen's (2008) contextualized narrative approach. For the first two assignments, students are told to first write a story about a significant learning experience and then one about a significant teaching experience. Prior to each activity, students are given few specific directions other than that their stories should be as vivid and detailed as they can make them. The third assignment is to analyze one or both of these stories using narrative techniques that they practice in class (see Clements, 2021, for details). Prior to a recent iteration of the course, university approval was obtained to collect data for an analysis of these assignments, including the assignments themselves and interviews with students. After the course ended and grades had been submitted, students were informed about the project and participation was solicited. Fourteen (out of 43) agreed to let their writing be used, and six of those (three male, three female) consented to a semi-structured interview, conducted in either Japanese or English, depending on participant preference. The low participation rate likely reflects the fact that students were not contacted until after the term had ended and spring break had begun. One participant was interviewed online just after the course ended because he was about to graduate, and the remaining five were interviewed in an on-campus office during the following term. Interviews were conducted individually and lasted between 23 and 34 minutes.

Analysis

The study as a whole involved a content analysis of 42 written assignments and six interview transcripts using Barkhuizen's (2016) short story analysis. This approach takes Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three dimensions of narrative space—*who* (the people and their relative roles in the story), *where* (the settings and shifts from place to place), and *when* (the unfolding of action in the past, present or future)—and applies them to three scales of context, or levels. The first level (*story*) focuses on the immediate here and now of the narrative, particularly the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the participants. The second level (*Story*) looks at the communities and institutions that are implicated as well as longer time scales extending before and after the narrative proper. The third level (*STORY*) considers the macro scale of sociopolitical context, including government policy and national culture as well as time scales encompassing life histories and career trajectories. Short story analysis is thus a method of closely reading texts and connecting their specific narrative elements (people, places, times) to broader contexts.

It is important to note that this kind of analysis is interpretive and constructive. The interpretations are based on close engagement with the data, but they remain the interpretations of one researcher. The aim is not to suggest that these are more correct than someone else's interpretations, but to acknowledge that they add a layer of meaning to participants' stories, to which readers add their own understandings as part of an open-ended process of "narrative knowledging" (Barkhuizen, 2011). A range of issues emerged from the study as a whole such as PSTs' perspectives on the value of the teacher

training program that they were enrolled in and the future working conditions that they were anticipating. However, this study focuses specifically on those points where participants talked about their decision to pursue a teaching career and how they relate to the three levels of context (*story*, *Story*, and *STORY*).

The discussion that follows focuses first on interview responses followed by written narratives. Although the written narratives were completed first, they tended to yield richer narrative data than interviews, which were largely confirmatory. As a result, interview data provide an introduction to themes explored in greater detail in written narratives. All names are pseudonyms, which do not necessarily reflect ethnicity or nationality, as participants were asked to choose their own pseudonyms. Also, all extracts are presented without editing for grammar. Commas indicate pauses and false starts while brackets indicate material removed for space considerations. The question guiding this discussion is "How did participants narrate their decision to become a teacher?"

Interview Responses

Five of the six interview participants were in their 3rd year of university during the course and were interviewed at the beginning of their 4th year. The sixth (Kotaro) was in his 4th year during the course and was interviewed online just prior to graduation. Four of these students were still planning to become teachers when they were interviewed, and all four located their initial motivation in experiences in elementary and middle school. For example, Kotaro recalled an elementary school calligraphy exercise in which he had been asked to write what he wanted to be when he grew up and had chosen the Chinese characters for "teacher" (教師). Participants also referred to people they had encountered during their schooling, particularly teachers, as in this brief story from the interview with Nica:

> When I was elementary school student, grade one to three, I don't like studying but when I was fourth grade the teacher, my teacher is very wonderful person [...] and I want to study, I wanted to study so [...] I respect her so I want to be teacher.

Nica implies that the teacher influenced her attitude toward learning and that this made her want to be like the teacher by becoming a teacher herself. Statements like Kotaro's and Nica's present the decision to become a teacher as something that begins in school communities (*Story*) and which is triggered by specific incidents and encounters with people in those communities (*story*). They also suggest that the decision has been maintained over the years from childhood to the present. In other words, deciding to be a teacher is talked about as part of one's life history (*STORY*).

Written Narratives

As noted earlier, the narrative assignments that students completed during the course were somewhat open ended, the primary direction being to write as vividly as possible about significant learning and teaching experiences. In contrast to interviews, participants were not directly asked about career plans, although six of them brought up this topic, once again pointing to specific experiences in school settings, as in the following:

> I started aspiring to be a teacher when I was in junior high school. It was time to meet the teachers I admire [...] For me, who was an elementary school student until a while ago, the rules of junior high school, where teachers change for each subject, may have been fresh [...] Three teachers left an impression on me.

This extract, taken from the beginning of the narrative, introduces the main section—the portraits of three teachers who "left an impression"—as part of the student's career aspirations (*STORY*). The writer also suggests that the newness of middle school influenced her feelings about her teachers (*story*), thus placing the already distant context within the transition from elementary to middle school (*Story*).

Participants did not draw solely on positive experiences in explaining their career plans. They also recalled aspects of schooling that they disliked or felt needed changing, as in the following:

> When I was in high school, most English classes were "translation and reading" that called "yakudoku." Those classes were very boring, and I wondered if there was not useful to improve my English skills. Then, in my third year of high school, I went to a cram school and met a teacher who taught me "how to read English" and the core-meaning of vocabulary. These instructions made me easy to read English and helped me to pass my examinations. However, at the same time, I believed that these instructions should be received. I decided to become a teacher who could provide such instructions at school.

The writer describes an inspiring encounter with a teacher (*story*), but this is presented in relation to features of English education (*Story*, *STORY*): "boring" classes using outmoded teaching techniques and the presence of private educational institutions

(cram schools). The last two sentences imply that the writer sees a difference between public and cram school environments (*Story*), the latter being more innovative and responsive to student needs, and suggest that he wants to use that understanding to inform his future work as a public school teacher "who could provide such instructions at school" (*STORY*).

Aside from experiences as students, participants also related career decisions to more recent teaching experiences, drawing especially on practicum sessions and part-time cram school work. The following example is from the conclusion to a narrative about the writer's teaching practicum at a middle school affiliated with the university:

> I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the teachers of [university name] and [...] [middle school name]. Thanks to them, I was able to fill [*sic*] real pleasure of teacher, and my desire to become a teacher became even stronger.

As Clements (2019) noted, university students' practicum narratives tend to portray the practicum as a positive learning experience, in which initial nervousness and anxiety are gradually overcome through challenging yet pleasurable interactions with children, leading to feelings of accomplishment and appreciation. In the example above, the sense of gratitude is connected to long-term career plans (*STORY*) through the idea that the practicum has strengthened the writer's decision.

Many of these teaching narratives discuss specific encounters with children and how those encounters led to realizations about teaching as a profession. An example of this can be seen in a narrative about working at a cram school in which the writer, Sammy, describes tutoring a student who needed a considerable amount of remedial instruction (in Sammy's terms, "basic knowledge"). Sammy characterizes this situation as a process of helping the student gain confidence and shoring up her motivation: "As she became able to solve a lot of questions, she became confident. This is the turning point of her English studying. After that, she studied harder than ever, and her score was getting better and better." The student's test scores eventually improved to the point where she left the cram school, but she later returned to give Sammy a letter of appreciation, which he reflects on as follows:

> I was not sure, until getting this letter, whether I had given her appropriate support mentally and on studies and of course I know she was able to pass the test because I had spent tremendous amount of time in studies, but I felt like rewarded and I realized what a nice job a teacher is. The job of teachers is not only teaching, but also support students for the sake of students' future. What is more, they can feel the growth of students. By reflecting this experience, I feel it was I that was encouraged and given energy. I am proud of having taught her English, and this experience will be remained in my mind forever.

At the immediate level (*story*), this extract, particularly the mixture of subordinate and coordinate clauses in the first sentence using "whether…and… but," seems to mirror Sammy's uncertainty over the results of his teaching efforts. He then connects the experience to more general observations about teaching (*STORY*): that it involves both immediate and long-term results ("teaching" versus "growth") and that the relationship between students and teachers is reciprocal ("I feel that it was I that was encouraged and given energy").

Whether connected to career plans or not, this focus on encounters with individuals, particularly student-teacher interactions that are usually positive, is common in the narratives that have been analyzed in this project and in previous work (Clements, 2019), and it reflects the ways in which everyday incidents are used to express identity. Sammy reflected further on his outlook as a teacher in the third assignment of the course by connecting his cram school teaching experience with unpleasant memories of when he was a student at a private English conversation school. The third sentence of the following extract ("… as the teacher at the English conversation school did to me") refers to an incident from his childhood that he had written about in the first narrative assignment of the course, where he failed a standardized interview test and stopped taking conversation classes as a result.

> I feel happy when I can teach something, and the hearer understand what he or she did not understand. These experiences and events have made who I am, made me to decide to take a job to teach English. I am thinking of how to cheer students up who do not have confidence like who I was as the teacher at the English conversation school did to me. What is more, I want to figuring out, as an identity of me, other ways to encourage students to study English more, such as how to give a fascinating lessons to students, how to lead to students learning English on their own, and motivate students to learn not only to pass examinations, but also for the future.

Once again Sammy contrasts short-term results (passing exams) with long-term ones (learning "for the future") and places that contrast in the arc of his evolving identity as a teacher (*STORY*). His use

of past- and present-tense *be* verbs ("who I am" versus "who I was") suggests that developing specific teaching skills and approaches, such as the ability to give "fascinating lessons" and encourage students to learn English "on their own," is part of a process of self-realization.

Implications

Researchers have recognized that an important component of teacher cognition is teachers' beliefs and how those beliefs influence their openness to new theories and instructional techniques (see, e.g., Takagi, 2022). Preservice and in-service training, therefore, need to encourage reflection on beliefs so that teachers can learn to make informed decisions about practice. The narratives that have been analyzed for this paper suggest that this examination of beliefs could well be extended to include an explicit focus on teacher identity, as others (e.g., Clarke, 2008; Fairley, 2020; Trent, 2010) have called for. That is, trainers can ask teachers to talk about their sense of themselves as teachers and then explore the broader implications of that talk. Although there are many ways to promote reflection (see, e.g., Maijala, 2023), narrative inquiry provides a toolkit of techniques and activities that are both practical and meaningful. Moreover, these kinds of activities are potentially valuable not only for the trainees themselves, who engage in critical reflection that can ultimately be empowering, but also for teacher trainers, who gain insight into students' outlook and developing sense of self.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that PSTs' narratives are dynamic and evolving, a fact that is consonant with the wide decision range of the teaching profession in Japan. For example, when Sammy was interviewed the following term, after the course had ended, he reaffirmed many of the points noted above about his orientation to teaching, particularly the importance of being responsive to and supportive of students with varying needs. However, he also revealed that he had decided not to work as a teacher after graduation but instead go to graduate school with the aim of becoming an academic. The question that this article begins with—"Why do you want to be a teacher?"—is not something that students can answer definitively, and answers will shift depending on a variety of factors. Rather, questions like this afford opportunities for PSTs to examine their career decisions and discover how they make those decisions meaningful through discourse.

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