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Examining the Relevance of Ethnographic Practices in Researching Teacher Identity in Preservice Teacher Education

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Abstract: This paper advocates the relevance of ethnography as a methodology for researching preservice teacher education. The research underpinning this paper demonstrates the importance and relevance of the ethnographic imagination for examining the formation and development of preservice teacher identity, offering a means of capturing the lived experience of learning to teach from the perspective of those entering the profession. The experience of learning to teach on three graduate-level teacher education pathways in the South of England is explored using ethnographic methods. The yearlong immersion in three different research sites and subsequent thematic analysis of the generated data gives insight into the formation of the teacher identity, foregrounding the importance of place in the experiential journey of the preservice teacher. The comprehensive data generated from this study give unique insight into how ethnographic practices can reveal the developmental process of teacher identity and have relevance for teacher educators and researchers internationally.

Keywords: ethnography, ethnographic, identity, preservice teacher education

1. Introduction

Ethnography is a powerful and empowering methodology. In recent times, its use within teacher education has become somewhat displaced by other qualitative methods such as focused interviews and narrative analysis. The "quick has replaced the slow" [1] in the search for cultural understanding of the "irreducibility of human experience" [2]. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the practice of ethnography was profound, presenting both practical and ethical challenges. Advice for social science researchers and anthropologists was quick to appear [3], with a call for creativity and improvization, although there remained deep concerns as to the effectiveness of alternatives to direct observation [4]. As we return to more social times, opportunities to "get the seat of your pants dirty in real research" [5] re-emerge, enabling the proximal observation of the lived experience of learning to teach.

This paper draws on ethnographic research conducted during 2017–19 into the experience of learning to teach on three contrasting graduate-level preservice teacher education pathways in England. Each course runs for an academic year and leads to the awarding of qualified teacher status, a prerequisite for teaching in English state schools. This paper addresses the effectiveness of ethnographic methods in capturing the lived experience of the participants from within their social world [6], enabling analysis of developing teacher identities. In contrast to previous work [7, 8], it was not the purpose of the study to make judgments about the provision offered on different teacher preparation programs. Instead, the choice of an ethnographic approach gave rise to the interrogation of the world of learning to teach from the perspective of those engaged in the "messy process" of becoming a teacher [9]. The comprehensive data generated from this study give unique insight into how ethnographic practices can reveal the developmental process of teacher identity and have relevance for teachers, teacher educators, and researchers internationally.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Ethnographic research in education

Ethnography has a complex and complicated history that has been well documented [6, 10–12] and there is an established tradition of ethnographic research in education. Mills and Morton [13] see ethnographic educational research in the UK as the "brainchild" of Max Gluckman, founder of The Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester in 1947, colloquially known as "the Manchester School". Gluckman viewed ethnography as a way of engaging teachers and under his management, the department saw funded doctoral research produces innovative ethnographic studies of Manchester schools. Nationally, a movement toward cultural studies marked by such publications as Willis's *Learning to Labour* in 1977 brought with it an analysis of cultural forms and the function of language and discourse.

Ethnographic research in education has since diversified exponentially. For example, a recent special issue of *Ethnography and Education* examined the nature of ethnography of education

for Social Justice, illustrating how the integration of social justice, education, and ethnographic research can illuminate possibilities of and for social transformation [14]. However, there remains a paucity of extended ethnographic study in the field of preservice teacher education.

2.2. Teacher identity

There are tensions in the complex and emotional transition from student to teacher [15] and accounts of preservice teacher identity development often inhabit the boundaries between the personal and the professional, with frequent reference to duality and balancing [16]. Capturing such identity developments is challenging but an ethnographic approach can provide the necessary immersion in the field to observe the transformations that take place in the development of teacher identities. Advocating the practice of ethnography, Willis [17] states, "The making of the self, the human meaning-making is the 'there-ness' that is there to be studied and is its own justification for study". This "there-ness" is central to this research as the developing teacher identities of preservice teachers are revealed through the lived experiences of the participants.

Identities are continually altered in response to new environments with different cultural norms [18, 19]. Development of an individual teacher identity takes place in the contrasting and sometimes conflicting social spaces of universities, staff rooms, classrooms, and schools, with newcomers to the profession tasked with reconciling the demands of each. As such, the teacher identity is "simultaneously individually constructed and socially negotiated" [20]. The performative and assessment-driven context of the preparation year can impede the development of an autonomous teacher identity [21].

Findings from a recent systematic review of a substantial body of literature concerning teacher identity conducted by Rushton et al. [22] highlighted the importance of identity research in illuminating the professional lives and practice of teachers, providing opportunities for teachers and teacher educators to understand the teacher identity scholarly landscape and, in turn, apply findings from the research to their own professional practice. The adoption of an ethnographic approach to teacher identity research has the potential to further such knowledge at a pivotal time for teacher education.

3. Theoretical Framework

Positioned from a broadly psycho-social perspective, the research detailed here is theoretically framed by an understanding of ethnography as "both a process and a product" [9]. The intensive yearlong immersion in three different preservice teacher education pathways illuminated the cultures of the differing providers, demonstrating differences between routes in terms of the structure and development of teacher learning while also highlighting the emotionality of teacher identity development [23]. In the changing landscape of teacher education, the "raising of the ethnographic antennae" [17] prioritizes the impact on individuals and gives voice to new experiences.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research design

The original research referenced in this paper was based on the exploration of the process of learning to teach and the development of teacher identity. A detailed account of the overall findings of the study can be found in Steadman [16]. This paper is concerned with the methodological decisions around the adoption of an ethnographic approach and its relevance in illuminating the development of teacher identity. It is not claimed that the research detailed offers a single anthropological ethnography as depicted in other educational studies such as Willis [24] and Lacey [25]. Rather than charting the world of a specific group in one location, it addresses three different teacher preparation environments, albeit linked by common goals of learning to teach.

The prolonged immersion in three different research sites afforded the opportunity to get inside the cultural world of the preservice teachers, with observations supplemented by the participants' personal reflections in interviews. With the emergence of a variety of alternative routes into teaching in England and internationally, it is essential that research provides the means to counter the generic discourses about teaching and teacher preparation with the actual experiences of those aiming to enter the profession.

Research was undertaken in three preservice graduate-level teacher education pathways in the South of England offering full-time programs:

1) Site 1: A school-centered teacher preparation program situated in a 11–19 mixed comprehensive Academy (a school which is funded by the government and sometimes also by a private individual or organization but is not controlled by the local authority);
2) Site 2: A university-led teacher preparation program situated in a high-ranking research-led university;
3) Site 3: A school-led teacher preparation blended program run by an alliance of 3 schools in association with an online provider and located in an 11–19 mixed comprehensive Academy.

In each case, preservice teachers spent time in the host institution and in placement schools, although the time given to provider-led training varied across the pathways. The researcher spent an extended amount of time in each of the sites, shadowing all three pathways for the duration of the academic year. Interviews with the participants took place at the start of Terms 1 and 2 and then at the end of the course. Ethical approval for the study was sought and obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the researcher's university and anonymity and confidentiality was assured for the participants and their schools.

4.2. Participants

The research focused on ten participants, selected by the course leaders to mitigate against any unconscious bias on the part of the researcher: three in Site 1 (with the pseudonyms of Amanda, Helen, Jane); three in Site 2 (Rachel, Zahra, Peter), and four in Site 3 (Emily, Laura, Tina, Lisa). The sample is not claimed to be representative of the full picture of preservice teacher education in England, rather the ethnographic approach facilitated the "process of exploration, discovery and creativity" [26], with analysis arising from the richness of the data.

4.3. Research methods

Research into preservice teacher education often features qualitative approaches. Livingston and Flores [27] found questionnaires and interviews to be the most commonly used methods in European research on teacher education. Questionnaires can be combined with quantitative analysis, as in van Katwijk et al. [28], where assessment scores are considered, or the use of a descriptive survey method [29]. However, in this research, the desire was to ensure that sufficient

descriptive data were collected to capture the "identity making process" [30] of learning to teach to inform subsequent analysis.

The adoption of an ethnographic approach enabled observations of training sessions and lessons to be combined with participant interviews. The self-conscious checking of data from different sources, settings, and participants became an integral part of the study, a "way of life" [31] with verification worked into the process of data collection as multiple instances of the same issues and themes were encountered across the three pathways.

4.3.1. Observation

Participant observation has a central position in ethnographic research and was the central research method in this study. The term is attributed to Bronislaw Malinowski, the founding father of ethnographic fieldwork and the practice of participant observation, whose ethnography of the Trobriand Islands culminated in the 1922 publication of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* [32]. The term "participant observation" is itself problematic [13]. O'Reilly [33] speaks of the difficulties in reconciling its oxymoronic nature, while Scott Jones and Watt [34] argue that ethnographers draw on a range of methods, of which participant observation is central but not exclusive. This thinking is relevant to this study, where participant observation is combined with semi-structured interviews to enable multidimensional reflections on the development of teacher identity.

Malinowski expounded the immersion of the anthropologist as deeply as possible into the foreign culture, participating in all everyday activities, while observing what was happening. In this research, it was often expedient for the researcher to be actively involved in training sessions. The preservice teachers would also often seek advice, knowing the researcher to be an experienced teacher. Such interactions assisted with the development of productive relationships with participants but also foregrounded the positionality of the researcher and the challenge of making such a familiar social space sufficiently strange to gain analytic purchase [26].

Alongside engaging in participant observation of training sessions, observations of lessons taught by the participants in the placement schools allowed for a view of their experiences away from the course settings where they enacted a different identity, that of teacher rather than student. Although it is impossible to mitigate entirely against the impact of an observer on a class, it is a feature of most English secondary schools that lessons are observed on a frequent basis and pupils seemed undeterred by the presence of another adult in the room. While in the field, a contemporaneous summary of the events in the room was recorded by hand, with verbatim utterances noted where possible. These notes were then written up electronically as soon after the event as possible (and never any later than the following day).

4.3.2. Interviews

The use of interviews within ethnographic research divides opinion. In his self-proclaimed manifesto for ethnography, Atkinson [26] dismisses interviews as "essentially a lazy way of undertaking social research", arguing that it is in intensely practical fieldwork that meaning can be found. However, many researchers regard interviewing as an integral part of the ethnographic research process, linked directly to the gathering of data.

For this study, it was considered pertinent to invite participants to talk about their experiences. This afforded opportunities for reflection on the ongoing development of their identity as teachers in a considered way, prompted by questions from the researcher. Additionally, photographs taken with permission during lessons were shown to the participants as a means of stimulating recall. The validity of the method was further enhanced by its use in conjunction with the contemporaneous lesson observation notes and copies of lesson plans provided by the participants. Thus, the response to the photographs served to "augment" the ethnographic data [35].

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants. These took place at the beginning, midpoint, and end of the program and each lasted for between 45 and 60 min. They were conducted in the university (Site 2) or at the provider's center (Sites 1 and 3). The interviews enabled the preservice teachers to return to their classroom and training experiences, prompting reflection on their intention and reasoning, and providing opportunities for evaluation and reconceptualization of their developing teacher identities. It is, however, acknowledged that the resulting narratives become a co-construction framed around the questions posed and the reaction to the responses [36].

4.4. Data analysis

Analysis of the copious qualitative data from this study utilized thematic coding [37, 38]. The use of in vivo codes served to "prioritize and honor the participants' voice" [31] while descriptive and process codes facilitated the recording of observable actions. The completion of thematic coding across all data sets revealed common themes across providers. Initial codes were grouped into five broader concepts that applied across settings, namely the training landscape; identity; navigating the course and people; struggle, and conceiving and reconceiving the future. A fuller exploration of the coding process can be found in Steadman [16]. In the analysis of the data, fieldnotes and vignettes were frequently returned to as a source of contextually rich renderings of the learning experience.

5. Discussion

5.1. Key findings

The proximity to the participants facilitated by the ethnographic approach enabled the chronicling of developments in their professional identity and perspectives on teaching. The sustained, intensive nature of the data collection period allowed for the observation of changes in the developing teacher identity of the participants over time. Data from fieldnotes and interviews highlighted their developmental journey, apparent in the change in Laura's tentative stance in her first discussion, "*I can slowly, each week, see myself becoming a bit more of a grown-up, real-life teacher*" to her very comfortable position in her third school placement "*I feel so at home here*".

Questions of identity permeate the teacher preparation year. References to "journey" and "progress" are common among the participants, but the development of their teacher identity is not without its conflicts. They are both students and teachers; learning to teach whilst teaching others how to learn. This juggling of multiple identities is evident in observations of Amanda in Site 1. As a parent, her decision to enter teaching had been deferred due to the commitments of family life. Following a lesson observation, she muses on whether she should have trained earlier, "*I think I'll make a better teacher now I have some life experience*". In subject sessions during the first term, her maternal identity is to the fore, with frequent references in group discussions to her children's education. As she accrues more school experience, her comments become more grounded in her classroom encounters. By midway through the year, thoughts on her role as a teacher have moved from performance to facilitation,

"*When you start off, you think it's about you, don't you? You think it's about you performing, and quite quickly you realise the focus is on them and what they're learning*".

Amanda's capacity for reflection is central to her development as a teacher. She demonstrates an ability to compartmentalize the various facets of her life, exemplified metaphorically in a blog post for the course webpage,

> *"Meticulously, I rake through all the memories of the day, trying to bring them into tidy piles, so that I can sleep. In one pile there are the things I should (or should not) have said. In another are the things I could have done differently. Next to them in a dark corner, the things I messed up".*

By the end of the year, she is looking forward to a time as a teacher where she will have perfected her classroom management skills but remains focused on her desire to "*make a difference".*

The data from Site 2 reveal both the pains and the internal debates experienced by the preservice teachers as they strove to find their place in the teaching world. At the start of the course, all three participants have clear ideas about the type of teacher that they want to be. For Rachel, it is personal. She wants to be the savior, positively impacting the lives of those in her care. Her idealism is still there by the end of the year but is couched in more considered terms, "*I want to be able to help them in other ways, like pastoral ways, not just academically but I have also learned that you have to be firm because they are children".* Zahra is more concerned about the way in which her lessons are delivered, with a preference for discussion and exploration. She is compliant in the strict authoritarian environments of her first placement school but never complicit, criticizing her own performance following a lesson observation, "*It was very sort of teacher, I stand at the front, you sit there, you listen to me. I knew as I was teaching . . . ".* By the end of the year, she has consolidated her thinking and is less concerned about being the isolated expert at the front of the class, "*It's very much we're learning together rather than I am teaching you".*

In Site 3, the developing teacher identity is closely aligned to a local view of teaching, situated in a specific school, as evident in Emily's reflection, "*I think a key part of it is actually finding a school that are – you can progress in".* Her views are echoed by Laura, "*I think it's absolutely crucial you find a school that fits with you*". The success of the training model is evident in the fact that all three participants gain employment in one of the schools that has hosted their training. However, there are potential questions as to whether the specificity of this experience leads to the development of a narrow version of practice, promoted by an uncritical interaction with the online material and adherence to the situated practices of individual schools.

5.2. Advantages

The adoption of an ethnographic approach for this research had distinct advantages over other methodological choices. The prolonged period spent in each of the research sites gave insight into the nuanced development of teacher identities over time and the combination of both observation and interview ensured that analysis stayed focused on the lived experience of the participants in varying contexts. However, the key advantage with the ethnographic approach was the foregrounding of the importance of place, in a way that would not have been apparent through more situated methods of data collection and analysis.

Researching the three teacher preparation routes involved following the participants into all locations, highlighting the sensory experience of the contrasting settings. It was in this context that data from observations became prominent. The impact of location on the learning environment is apparent in the following fieldnote completed during a subject session conducted in a partnership school,

> *"It is impossible to ignore the school setting. The route to the room wended its way past classrooms and the library with its colourful graffiti style mural. The door to the room is left open throughout the session and the noise from adjacent classrooms is a distraction. The noise passes, to return at intervals through the session. Although the group seem distracted, neither of the tutors (both classroom teachers) react at any point, seemingly oblivious".*

In the university-based provision, the preservice teachers seemed to identify with the teaching space, but no-one taking control over the layout of the room. Observations over multiple sessions showed how they always sat wherever the desks happened to be, although friendship groups were quick to emerge and remained relatively constant throughout the year. There was a disquiet when they returned to the room toward the end of the course to find it changed, as revealed in the fieldnote "*It has been redecorated and is clinically white – all traces of the displays removed. It looks very stark and prompts comments from everyone as they enter".*

Experiencing physical factors such as the weather and ambient noise contributed to an understanding of the learning environment and appreciation of the challenges faced by participants. It also often resulted in a sense of collusion between researcher and participant, the sharing of a knowing glance, or a raised eyebrow across a soporific training room as the presenter delivered their session. Additionally, progress between locations often afforded the opportunity for informal interactions, revealing emotive responses, as evident in the fieldnote below:

> *"I walk up to the room with the two trainees who bemoan the rather general nature of the morning session on reading skills, delivered by a local headteacher. Both felt that it needed to be more subject specific and had found it a bit patronising for English teachers".*

Personal social interactions impacted directly on the development of field relations, building rapport and contributing to the generation of rich data.

The significance of researching across three different research sites was quickly apparent, with noticeable differences in terms of the formation of teacher identities and the kinds of teachers the preservice teachers want to become. By way of example, it is helpful to consider the contrasting views Rachel in Site 2 and Helen in Site 1. Rachel enters the year wedded to an idea of teaching as aligned to notions of social justice and equity and is heartened by the inclusivity and emphasis on mixed ability teaching that she experiences in her university training. She positions herself as a savior, adhering to the cultural myth that everything depends on the teacher [39] and appears to embody this characterization while in the university. As she makes the transition into her first school placement, she encounters the academic rigor of a successful school in an affluent area and is forced to reconsider her positioning. She leaves behind her desire to work in "*very, very disadvantaged schools*" and accepts a permanent post in the school, grappling with feelings of guilt in the process but ultimately justifying her decision as developmental, "*the thing is I think I realised as well I need more time to grow*". For Rachel, the conscious reflection on the process of change allows her to both explain and accept her new direction, acknowledging both the multiplicity and variation in her developing teacher identity, "*I think it's just important for me to give them the best version of me*".

For Helen, her sense of self becomes more contextualized as the year progresses. She is an active participant in the life of her first school placement and measures other interactions and inputs by their relevance to this space. Unlike Rachel, she moves closer to her previous experiences, engaging less with the input from her training provider and distancing herself from the alternative approaches to delivery and discipline in her second placement. Notions of professional identity are cemented when Helen takes responsibility for a parents' evening in her mentor's absence. Her cyclic development is complete as she takes her position on the other side of the desk to where she sat as a pupil and the significance of her literally taking the place of her mentor is evident.

This research revealed that in all cases, the most powerful force in the development of the teacher identity for the preservice teachers is their experience in schools. Spending prolonged periods of time observing and interacting with the participants revealed how difficult it is for potential teachers not to become subsumed into a political environment that prioritizes recruitment and assimilation into local pedagogies over the development of the lifelong, autonomous professional [20]. The need to fit into the performative cultures of schools is so strong that preservice teachers can find themselves adopting local pedagogies and practices, even if they later deny them when back in the formal training environment. Such insights may not have been so forthcoming from more limited qualitative research methods.

5.3. Limitations

The adoption of the ethnographic approach is not without its limitations. It is time-consuming, demanding sufficient immersion in the field to both observe and interpret the social and cultural norms of the environment. Sample sizes also tend to be smaller than in quantitative studies and chosen participants may not be representative of a particular population. Qualitative research can never be "researcher proof" [40] and awareness of both your own presence and how you are perceived in the field is essential. This concept of reflexivity, the conscious connection of social engagement in the field and data gathering, pinpoints the interpretative and iterative nature of ethnography but also foregrounds issues of bias and preconceptions.

6. Conclusions

This paper has advocated the effectiveness of an ethnographic approach in analyzing the formation of the teacher identity. The prolonged engagement with preservice teacher participants across multiple sites enabled the development of a nuanced picture of teacher identity development, centering the lived experience of the individual while also allowing for analysis of points of commonality and difference. Despite recognized limitations, the proximal nature of the ethnographic stance allows for a richness of data and intimacy of knowledge that may not feature in other forms of social research. In this study, being a constant presence soon led to acceptance of the researcher as a non-judgmental observer in the space, as noted in this personal reflection, "*I have become part of the fabric of the course – they expect to see me*". This positionality frequently provoked spontaneous discussions in the times between sessions, often highlighting the emotionality of the process of learning to teach. The openness of the participants reflected a tacit understanding of the researcher's professional knowledge and highlighted the potential benefits for preservice teachers in having access to an informed listener at times during the teacher preparation process.

The strength of the research presented here lies in its detail, with the adoption of ethnographic practices generating data that reveal the challenges and changes that occur during the teacher preparation year, highlighting the emotionality of the personal–professional identity formation and furthering our knowledge of what it looks and feels like to develop as a teacher in the increasingly marketized landscape of teacher preparation in England.

7. Recommendations

In analyzing the developing teacher identities of preservice teachers, it is necessary to look beyond the immediate familiarity of schools and training rooms, entering their world in order to "reveal the cultural knowledge working in a particular place and time as it is lived through the subjectivities of its inhabitants" [9]. The adoption of an ethnographic approach enables such immersion, challenging the preconceptions of the researcher and facilitating a view of the complicated and often contested world that preservice teachers inhabit. Spending an academic year in all three research sites allowed for analytical and empathetic engagement with the participants and their developing teacher identities that may not have been elicited from other research approaches. The gathering of data through participant observation of training sessions, observations of lessons, and individual interviews over such a prolonged period of time resulted in a depth of insight into the complex and deeply personal process of becoming a teacher. As such, the adoption of ethnographic approaches to the analysis of teacher identity and other related fields is recommended.

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Ethical Statement

This study does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by the author.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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