

UC Berkeley

L2 Journal

Title

How Language Teacher Identities Conflict in Light of Bourdieu's Concepts of Habitus, Capital, and Field

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7cx0r7t5>

Journal

L2 Journal, 10(3)

Author

Alshareefy, Rajwan

Publication Date

2018

DOI

10.5070/L210335712

Copyright Information

Copyright 2018 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

How Language Teacher Identities Conflict in Light of Bourdieu's Concepts of *Habitus*, *Capital*, and *Field*

RAJWAN ALSHAREEFY

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

E-mail: rajwanalshareefy@gmail.com

Adopting Bourdieu's (1986, 1977) concepts of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital* as a framework, I reflect on my multiple fluid identities as I study, teach, and live within two socially, culturally, and politically distinct places (Iraq and the United States). I examine my privileged and/or marginalized self throughout my journey and the way this privilege/marginalization influences my language teaching and learning experiences. The narratives used in this paper include poems I wrote, my literacy autobiography, and a few Facebook posts. Through my reflection, I provide an example of identity construction of a scholar and a teacher as he inhabits multiple space and places.

In this paper, I look at my privileged and marginalized self as a teacher, a multilingual scholar, and a graduate student across multiple contexts. By being self-reflexive on the different and sometimes conflicting roles and identities I hold and by identifying the underlying social, political, and cultural influences that have shaped them, I become better informed about both my teaching practices in different contexts and my ever-changing and dynamic language teacher identity. As Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005) pointed out:

In order to understand language teaching and learning we need to understand teachers; and in order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are: the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them. (p. 22)

I take on a wide variety of identities within my everyday life, which include: a high school teacher and a university lecturer in my home country, a masters and, currently, a PhD student, a father of two children, and a husband (just to name a few roles). I have struggled to strike an unreachable balance—a struggle that is mentally and physically exhausting.

My reflection and investigation into my teacher identity is grounded in Bourdieu's (1986, 1977) concepts of *capital*, *habitus*, and *field*, which I have used as a theoretical framework. Based on these concepts, I examine my conflicting identities and roles in the multiple educational and professional settings that I inhabit, and I situate my identity on the *privilege* and *marginalization* continuum (Park, 2015; Park, Kinke, & Mawhinney, 2016). In the following section, I present Bourdieu's major concepts as well as studies related to privilege and marginalization in language teacher identity construction.

GROUNDING MY IDENTITY IN THEORY

My paper adopts Pierre Bourdieu's major concepts (*capital*, *habitus*, and *field*) as the theoretical lens through which I analyze and discuss my stories, which are composed of reflections, a

number of poems, and Facebook posts during my educational journey across multiple settings. Additionally, I draw on the concepts of *privilege* and *marginalization*. These two concepts are utilized to explain and capture the conflicts, struggles, and triumphs that I experienced throughout my journey. In this section, I briefly define these terms and discuss the relevant literature.

Bourdieu (1986) stated that capital, which “is accumulated labor” (p. 241), comes in three forms: “economic capital,” “cultural capital,” and “social capital.” Economic capital is money or any property that can be turned into a financial resource and is the essence of all other sorts of capital, though not identical to them. Cultural capital refers to accumulated know-how. In other words, it refers to the knowledge and skills someone has, which can give him/her certain privilege and power over others in certain contexts or communities. An example of this is someone’s academic qualifications that give him/her a privilege and, hence, better opportunities in the job market. Social capital refers to the network of social relations and connections someone has that can serve him/her in gaining certain benefits in various ways. An example of this type of capital is being a member of an influential group or being related to someone in power or a high social position. Bourdieu (1986) stated that:

The structure of the field, i.e., the unequal distribution of capital, is the source of the specific effects of capital, i.e., the appropriation of profits and the power to impose the laws of functioning of the field most favourable to the capital and its reproduction. (p. 246)

This shows that the way certain “fields” or contexts are structured gives capital its effect and makes it a source of power and privilege for its holders.

Another central concept to Bourdieu’s theory of practice is “habitus” which is a “system of schemes of thought, perception, appreciation and action” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 40). It is the “product of internalization of the principles of a cultural arbitrary capable of perpetuating itself after a PA [Pedagogic Action] has ceased and thereby of perpetuating in practice the principles of the internalized arbitrary” (p. 31). This means that, as human beings and members of a certain social group (e.g., school, family, firm), we internalize practices and behaviors from our surroundings and, (un)consciously, we come to consider these as the norm. Habitus, as Bourdieu (1990) stated, comprises systems of “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (p. 53). This refers to the mutual constitutive relationship between a scheme in a field/context and its members. The members are subject to a structure/scheme that dictates their practices and at the same time, the members contribute to maintaining and reproducing this structure. Habitus is also “an infinite capacity for generating products—thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions—whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production” (p. 55). Individuals carry this capacity in the different *fields* or social contexts in which they live. For instance, in the educational field (e.g., school), individuals (teachers, students, etc.) act within a set of (institutional) norms, and the positions they occupy in that field are based on the *capital* they have accumulated (Kramsch, 2008).

Privilege and *marginalization* are two concepts/practices that go hand in hand and coexist in both education and social life. These two concepts are highly connected to Bourdieu’s notions of *habitus*, *capital*, and *field*. Park (2015) drew on Kumashiro’s (2000) concepts of privilege and marginalization, together with Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of habitus, capital, and field to analyze nonnative English speaking teachers’ and learners’ stories of their professional and educational journeys across multiple settings. Park focused on the ways in which

marginalization and privilege intersect and how different forms of capital play themselves out where this intersection takes place. Kumashiro (2000) pointed out that it is crucial to study not only how certain groups or identities are disenfranchised, marginalized, and excluded, but also how other groups are (simultaneously) “favored, normalized, [and] privileged,” and “how this dual process is legitimized and maintained by social structures and competing ideologies” (pp. 35–36). Based on Kumashiro’s ideas, my investigation into my own professional and educational journey presents instances of marginalization and privileging in relation to accumulated capital and ways of being (i.e., habitus) in different contexts. In the following section, I present the purpose of my discussion, the source of my stories, and a reflection on my experiences with reference to the concepts introduced above.

WHAT TO REFLECT ON

In my reflective narrative on my educational and language teaching and learning experiences, I specifically focus on narratives that I wrote for different purposes on different occasions. These texts highlighted social, political, cultural, professional, educational, and emotional aspects of my perceived identity and sense of self. They comprise personal reflective writing on my educational experiences, my literacy autobiography (Alshareefy, 2017), and a few poems I wrote which depicted social and emotional moments. In addition to this, I refer to a few Facebook posts, which documented certain moments of my life in which I felt politically and socially challenged. These texts are discussed in relation to research and theory on language teacher identity. I present my discussion in a way similar to that of Park (2013). That is to say, I organize my narrative and reflections to present aspects of my *past* and *current* experiences as well as my *imagined future*, three time frames that are interconnected and mutually influential. Incidents and experiences within these periods of my social and professional life have (re)shaped (and continue to shape) my overall identity and my teaching beliefs. Hence, in the following section, I present and discuss these stories.

IDENTITIES IN THE PAST, PRESENT, AND IMAGINED FUTURE

Past Experiences Studying in the United States and Teaching in my Home Country

Four years of college education. Two months prior to receiving my high school diploma in 2001, as I was waiting for the bus to go home, I had a five-minute conversation with a person I hadn’t met before. The highlight of that conversation was his suggestion for my college education. He said to me, “Why don’t you apply for the department of English at the University of Babylon for your college education? They have a pretty nice teacher education program.” At the time, my interest in learning English made me pay more attention to the word “English” than to “teacher education program.” That very moment marked the beginning of my journey as an English language learner (in the first place) and, later on, as a teacher and a teacher educator.

As an eighteen-year old student with limited financial and social resources, as well as an unexceptional high school GPA, I was surprised to be accepted into such a competitive program. At that time, I did not know how concepts of power relations and capital worked. During my four years of study, I came to realize that those who possessed financial resources were privileged over others because those financial resources were accompanied by further

sources of privilege (e.g., large social networks and elevated social status). Bourdieu (1986) stated that economic capital is the root of all other types of capital. Because of my lack of economic capital, a lingering feeling of marginalization accompanied me throughout my undergraduate college education. Nevertheless, I worked hard enough to accumulate knowledge in my major—knowledge that I capitalized on during my studies and after my graduation.

My four-year program was oriented toward the production of teachers. That is to say, it focused more on the product than on the process of students *becoming* teachers. The way I understood teacher identity at that time was as a product that was static, fixed, and could be achieved and sustained after gaining certain skills and knowledge through study. Mayer (1999) explained the difference between *being* and *becoming* a teacher as follows:

Learning to teach can be learning the skills and knowledge to perform the functions of a teacher or it can be developing a sense of self as teacher. In the former, one is ‘being the teacher’, whereas in the latter, one is ‘becoming a teacher’. (Implications for perspective, paragraph 1)

Socializing with my teachers and some classmates in the department, I gradually started to acquire, understand, and enact certain practices and viewpoints that were appreciated and promoted at the department of English.

First teaching experience. As a high school teacher, I was endowed with the power and privilege a teacher can have over students. I had the privilege of being a young male English language teacher (a language and a school subject that has always been extremely difficult for the majority of students in Iraq). However, being a new teacher required me to invest more time and effort in learning the regulations and expectations of my institution in my new social environment in order to develop a habitus that enabled me to succeed in my career. My relatively good command of English was my highly valued capital. Despite these locally perceived privileges that I had, being a K-12 teacher is not a profession that is high in the hierarchy of professions (the top professions being medicine, engineering, and pharmacy). Realizing that, my goal was to elevate my social and professional status by means of gaining further professional development or a higher degree. In Bourdieu’s terms, it seems that I was trying to accumulate a certain kind of capital, which may bring with it economic and social resources as well as a sort of distinction, which is “any enhancement of one’s symbolic position within a field” (Kramsch, 2008, p. 41). This mindset led me to the next phase of my professional identity development.

Studying in the United States and teaching in Iraq. In 2011, landing in Philadelphia International Airport at night, I tried to communicate with people by asking about the address of my hotel and how to get there. My attempts weren’t successful. At the time, people “seemed to be in a hurry and unwilling to negotiate their accents or dialects to fit my ears. I did not want to ask for clarification or use the question, ‘What’s that?’ so as not to reveal my foreign identity” (Alshareefy, 2017, p. 18). It was in that moment that I started thinking of my identity and how I was perceived by the people around me. My English, which I had studied and taught for over eight years, had failed me at that particular point.

During my two-year master’s program in the US, for the first time in my life, I started asking myself questions such as *How do I look? How does my English sound? Do I have an accent that tells something about me? How do people (mostly white Americans) see me? Do my brown hair and brown*

eyes, my foreign English accent and proficiency level connote certain meanings? The fact that I come from a war-torn country (whose war was with the US)—a country that was devastated by sectarian violence, corruption, and terrorism—made my situation rather challenging. It was hard for me to say, “I am proud of my country”—a cliché that all my classmates could use when talking about their home countries. I was reluctant to share my teaching experiences and my former students’ social and educational conditions because I did not want Iraqi educators or students to be perceived as patients who need treatment by the application of foreign pedagogical or social theories. At that time, and in that academic and social “field,” I had a feeling of marginalization. I did not have any form of capital or privilege to rely on. In Bourdieu’s terms, the habitus I acquired in the educational setting in Iraq seemed to have no bearing whatsoever in the new environment. Much of what I knew and valued about teaching and learning had to be replaced now with a different set of rules/values.

As an international MA student, I needed to strive to accumulate a cultural and social capital (which according to Bourdieu (1986) requires a lot of time and concentrated effort to achieve) because what I brought with me was not enough for me to survive in a totally new and different social and educational environment. During my time in that program, I did not have confidence in my speaking ability. Due to my lack of confidence, I couldn’t ask questions or express all of what I knew about the subject being discussed.

For people in my educational and professional network in Iraq, studying in the US for a graduate degree was an extreme privilege to attain. Thus, by studying and living in the US and while having moments and incidents of marginalization, I was simultaneously being perceived as privileged by people in my home country. I was accumulating symbolic capital. Going back to Iraq, I resumed my previous job with a better salary and a promotion. Throughout my study in the United States, I was exposed to and learned to appreciate new cultural, educational, and social values and practices which comprise a habitus. Bearing this habitus in mind, while teaching in many schools in Iraq, I had to negotiate my teaching philosophy and how I approached language teaching with my students, supervisors, and school principals. I struggled to adapt what I learned during my MA study to my educational contexts. At times, I had to leave it all out and go back to what I used to do in terms of teaching methods (e.g., teacher centered classroom, teach for the test, etc.)

During the three years following my graduation with a master’s degree, I taught in many private language teaching institutions, I managed to teach in two teacher education programs in two colleges, and I was admired by colleagues and students. My story was known by people I did not know because I had the (perceived) privilege of having studied in the US and was a grantee of the prestigious and highly competitive Fulbright Foreign Students Scholarship. This was due to the fact that I worked within a field, an educational environment (in Iraq) in which the scheme of thought was set to privilege teachers who had been educated in English-speaking countries (e.g., the United States, Canada, etc.).

A PhD Candidate: A Bright but Worrying Future

A PhD student in the United States. The deteriorating political, social, humanitarian, and educational situation in Iraq had contributed to my decision to apply to a PhD program abroad. In 2016, I commenced my PhD studies in Composition and Applied Linguistics in the United States. Having received my master’s degree from the same university, I now had the privilege of being an alumnus of that same department and university. I was familiar with the city facilities, library website and services, university policies, and, most importantly, what

it means to study in an American university. In Bourdieu's words, I had acquired cultural capital, the know-how that gave me a privilege over my classmates. Additionally, my social network was larger than that of any of my classmates. Knowing some professors, senior doctoral students, and friends counted as social capital that I relied on to some extent.

One of the most serious challenges I had was when I found out that there were extra fees that I needed to pay every semester that my graduate assistantship would not cover. Having quit my job in Iraq, lacking financial support, and having no permission to work off campus, I was in a deeply problematic situation. I lost my passion and hope to continue my studies and succeed. This crisis negatively influenced my performance as a student. It directly impacted my plans and created another burden for me to bear—a burden represented by securing my school and living expenses.

During my first year in the PhD program, in January of 2017, the president of the United States, Donald Trump, had issued his executive order banning Muslims from entering the US, specifically from seven countries, one of them being Iraq. Although these orders were rejected by many Americans and were overturned by the courts, I could not stop thinking of myself and my family as marginalized and threatened. During that week, I became convinced that I might not be able to continue living in the US. My public reaction to these presidential orders was represented by two Facebook posts (*Figures 1 and 2* below). In *Figure 1*, I was being sarcastic as a way to show how those new orders had directly influenced my study and my status as a student, as if they were tailored for me and my Iraqi Muslim family.



Figure 1. Reaction to Trump's executive order to ban Muslims

In *Figure 2*, my reaction shows an aspect of the historical and political conflict between the two fields/contexts (Iraq and the United States) where my educational and professional identities were constructed.

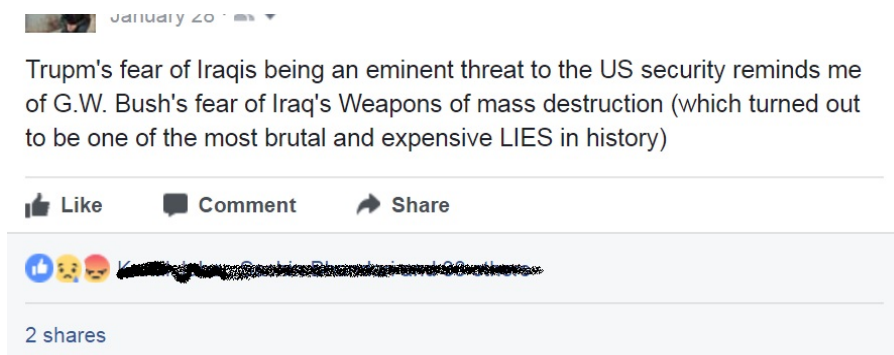


Figure 2. Reaction to Trump's orders with relation to previous US foreign policies

Currently immersed in my PhD study, having already spent over two years in the United

States doing my master's in TESOL, speaking two languages, and being supported by a loving family, I certainly have multiple sources of privilege that I treasure. However, in many situations, both within and outside academia, I feel unsafe, threatened, and underprivileged. Living in the US now (more than ever before), I have started paying more attention to who I am and how I am perceived by teachers, colleagues, and people around me. My visible identity, my foreign English accent and proficiency level, my wife's scarf, and what connotations and associations this all might bring constructs my *unprivileged* identity.

At times, I find myself defending, justifying, or criticizing what Americans think, do, and believe in. At other times, I find myself doing that to my home country and my people. I sometimes feel puzzled as to which side I should take or whether I should even pick a side. I sometimes end up considering myself a global person that is tolerant, open-minded, and multicultural. But suddenly a deafening sound from deep inside my heart calls on me and says *what about your national, religious, cultural, and social identity?* That same sound sometimes whispers in my ears, *you cannot be two or multi-. You are Muslim, Arab, from Iraq.* This conflict of powers inside me, this paradox manifests itself in every aspect of my everyday life and every role I play. I sometimes ask myself, *Am I a good father and husband to a loving wife if I spend all my time in the library or at work as a graduate student? Am I Iraqi or American? What if I like being both? Where does this national identity end to allow the other to begin? Can these be separated?* A series of questions to which I have no definitive answers. Commenting on identity and group affiliation, Tabouret-Keller (1997) stated that "identity is rather a network of identities, reflecting the many commitments, allegiances, loyalties, passions, and hatreds everyone tries to handle in ever-varying compromise strategies" (p. 321). I sometimes feel that I truly am trapped in this complex network of allegiances, loyalties, and hatreds. Additionally, I feel obliged to compromise and make decisions to identify with or distance myself from certain social groups.

My name is "Rajwan." It carries with it all my complexities, stories, experiences, and memories. My first sense of identity came from learning my name as a little child. As a child, I used my name to tell the world who I was. It's the aspect of my identity that I have been holding on tightly to. It is that aspect that I should never have a doubt about. Nonetheless, living in the US, I have had to negotiate over those six letters that made up my name, "Rajwan." I didn't like it when I was first called "Raj"; however, I accepted it as part of my tolerance of the new culture, even though this name is a popular Indian name. Yet, that's not the end of the story, because my name has become *AJ* in the restaurant next to my college campus. This restaurant has the habit of taking customers' names so as to call on them when their orders are ready. So, every time I pronounce and spell my name to the cashier, they fail to recognize the R at the beginning of my already abbreviated name, "Raj." Hence, my name has become *AJ*. When reflecting on this experience, I ask myself, *Is this me being multicultural, tolerant, marginalized, misunderstood, or does this announce the loss of an individual's identity in the age of a globalized world?* My full name resided with me for over 30 years and it is never the same as the abbreviated one.

My Identity in the Imagined Future

*Behind these doors is who I am
 Behind these doors is obscure
 The doors are locked with fear, doubt, and the unsecure
 I will cross but I may fall
 Home is far.. the doors are many.. the goal is even farther now.*

*I can't forget.. I can't be changed.. I will go on
I will cross but I may fall
Crossing, falling, rising, searching, finding, losing, gaining
Building, thinking, caring, loving is how I construct myself*

These lines depict part of my ongoing struggle to make hard decisions. The *doors* have a physical and metaphoric reference. I wrote these lines after the Muslim ban order was issued. The physical reference for the word *doors* is the American border. Behind these doors is where my home, family, friends, and my first 30 years of life occurred. If I cross through the door, I may fall. This fall is a reference to the possibility of being denied access to the US again; the fall is also a reference to going back to an unstable, war-torn country where our lives are unsafe and insecure. The emotional part of myself was telling me to take the risk and go back; the rational part of me was urging me to stay and forget my 30 years, my memories, my father, and my mother. The last two lines show the process of my identity construction with all these actions and more. Eventually, the emotional *me* won the conflict. I decided to go back to see my father, who supported me and did all he could to get me out of a doomed land. I couldn't fulfill my promise to him when he said, "Don't come back." In my first semester in the PhD program, I wrote to him:

*He said leave.. He loved me
He didn't have doubt.
Away from war he pushed me
He made me promise
to succeed.. to not come back..
I miss my father, my teacher, my idol.*

Today, I stand at a crossroads; each road is marked with a vague sign denoting an uncertain destination. No matter what path I take, they will all have areas of privilege and marginalization—two aspects of our lives that are situated, unpredictable, and tightly connected to power relations. My conflict now, at this crossroads, is whether to stay in the US and be discriminated against and marginalized because of my visible identity and religion, or to go back to my home country where the aftermath of war is brutally ending lives and dreams.

With the obligation of gaining experience in teaching in the US, I applied for a temporary faculty position in my college. I will be teaching a Composition 1 class starting in fall 2018. My social, racial, and professional identity conflict will increase as I stand in front of my classroom and teach native speakers of English how to write, while being a nonnative English-speaking teacher myself. During my course work, I was immersed in the "best practices" for teaching writing. I observed English composition 1 classes and took writing pedagogy courses. I have consciously and intentionally accumulated a habitus on which I intend to rely when teaching my class. Many of the ideas I included in my teaching philosophy and my syllabus have come from what is appreciated and considered good teaching in the US educational context.

FINAL THOUGHTS

What I know now is that I will continue to go back and forth between 'being' and 'becoming' and 'assigned' and 'claimed' identities as I physically move from one context to another and

progress in my professional and social life. As Deckert and Vickers (2011) pointed out, identity is constructed through “ongoing interactions” (p. 11) and is highly influenced by the contexts of that interactions. This is because “identity is performed, or constructed if you will, in particular language interactions. This means that identity is not a static characteristic of an individual” (p. 10). The conflicts I have within myself will continue to grow as I move between contexts and communities knowing that each community and context will compel me to accumulate certain forms of capital to rely on. However, I realize that I cannot possibly continue to strive to gain new capital because this is as challenging a goal as understanding the varied and complex nature of human beings. Being aware of the existence of different forms of capital, habitus, and fields, and knowing their interplay and their interconnectedness with my identity construction as a teacher, is what I have gained from my current investigation and reflection on my own (teacher) identity. Being aware of all these complexities will inform my teaching practices and the way I approach students within the various educational and social institutions I will encounter in the future.

REFERENCES

- Alshareefy, R. (2017). My literacy autobiography: My insight into literacy, context, and identity. *Currere Exchange Journal*, 1(2), 17–24.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). New York, NY: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. Translated by R. Nice. London, England: Sage.
- Deckert, S. K., & Vickers, C. H. (2011). *An introduction to sociolinguistics: Society and identity*. London, England: Continuum.
- Kramsch, C. (2008). Pierre Bourdieu: A biographical memoir. In J. Albright & A. Luke (Eds.), *Pierre Bourdieu and literacy education* (pp. 33–49). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kumashiro, K. K. (2000). Toward a theory of anti-oppressive education. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(1), 25–53.
- Mayer, D. (1999, November 29). *Building teaching identities: Implications for preservice teacher education*. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education and New Zealand Association for Research in Education Conference, Melbourne, Australia.
- Park, G. (2013). My autobiographical poetic rendition: An inquiry into humanizing our teacher-scholarship. *L2 Journal Special Themed Issue: L2 Writing and Personal History*, 5(1), 6–18.
- Park, G. (2015). Situating the discourses of privilege and marginalization in the lives of two East Asian women teachers of English. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 18(1), 108–133.
- Park, G., Kinke, C., & Mawhinney, L. (2016). Exploring the interplay of cultural capital, habitus, and field in the life histories of two West African teacher candidates. *Teacher Development*, 20(5), 648–666.
- Tabouret-Keller, A. (1997). Language and identity. In F. Coulmas (Ed.), *The handbook of sociolinguistics* (pp. 315–326). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Varghese, M., Morgan, B., Johnston, B., & Johnson, K. (2005). Theorizing language teacher identity: Three perspectives and beyond. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 4(1), 21–44.