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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"I Remind Myself I'm Operating in a Broken System and Push Forward": Exploring New Second-Career ESL Teachers' Identities through Sociocultural Theory

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Abstract

English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers who are career changers enter the profession often due to their motivation to advocate for emergent multilingual students. Research indicates that second career teachers' professional needs differ from their first-career counterparts. However, limited research has explored these teachers' professional identity, particularly from the perspective of Sociocultural Theory (Deters, 2011). In this qualitative study, we focused on the voices of four new second-career ESL teachers who were teaching in different school districts in the U.S. Data were triangulated by using a three-step interview approach (Seidman, 1998) over the course of one year. We aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of the participants' interpretation of their experience and how they constructed teacher identities. We explored challenges the participants deemed to be impacting their work as ESL educators and how they overcame them as they developed their teacher identities. Through the lens of sociocultural theory, we explained how their emotions and private speech mediated the challenges and facilitated the construction of new professional identities. Based on the findings, we suggest ways for teacher educators and school leaders to effectively support new second-career ESL teachers' continued professional development as these teachers equitable education for emergent multilingual students.

Keywords

emotions; new ESL teachers; private speech; second-career teachers; sociocultural theory; teacher professional identity

INTRODUCTION

According to the National Centre for Education Statistics (2021), there are over five million emergent multilingual (EMLs) students enrolled in pre-K through 12th grades in the U.S., and the number is increasing rapidly. However, the country is facing a serious shortage of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2021) since 50% of these teachers leave the profession within the first five years due to numerous challenges (Farrell, 2012). To compensate for a teacher shortage, schools and ESL teacher preparation programs have expanded their recruiting efforts to attract individuals from other professions (Marinell & Johnson, 2014; Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021; Shin, 2016; Troesch & Bauer, 2020).

Researchers have reported that second-career[1] teachers often have high intrinsic values and that their passion for teaching is driven by their altruistic motivation or their desire to support underserved student populations (Varadharajan & Buchanan, 2020; Whitaker & Valtierra, 2018). Despite their motivation and passion for teaching, their initial years are described as the most difficult period due to challenges from new professional responsibilities (Troesch & Bauer, 2020).

According to Vygotsky's (1978;1986) sociocultural theory (SCT), the construction of teacher identities is based on their external experience and interactions within the social environment, which teachers will use as tools to internalize their thinking. In this regard, Johnson and Golombek (2016) described this process by stating, "[T]his transformation, from external to internal, is not direct, but mediated" (p. 4). To date, limited research has explored new ESL teacher identity from the perspective of SCT (Deters, 2011); far fewer studies have focused on those who are career changers. Thus, the current study aimed to explore new second-career ESL teachers' challenges and how they overcame them as they developed their teacher identities.

We examined our data through the lens of SCT to provide concrete suggestions for school leaders to provide appropriate support for these teachers' continued professional development. To define who new ESL teachers are, we used Farrell's (2012) definition and refer to those who have begun teaching within three years of completing their teacher preparation program. The analysis of our data is informed by SCT, in particular, the interrelatedness of emotion and cognition, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and private speech. The following question guided our study: What were the challenges the four new second-career ESL teachers encountered and how did they overcome them as they developed their new professional identities?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Teacher Identity

Teacher identity is a central component of teaching knowledge and practice (Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Kim & Kim, 2016; Varghese et al., 2005). It is a broad concept that includes an aspect of constant change and the influence of community. The formation of teacher identity is both an individual and a social practice that includes self-image, views of peers, supportive

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[1] In this article, we use the term "second-career teachers" to refer to all teachers who have undergone career changes.

leadership, and the social processes within the communities where teachers work (Kocabas-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021; Menard-Warwick et al., 2019; Varghese et al., 2005). A teacher's professional identity is directly linked to their job satisfaction, relationships with school personnel, a positive sense of their role as teachers, occupational commitment, and motivation within their work lives (Gayton, 2016; Kelchtermans, 2009). Within these elements, relationships with various stakeholders and recognition from the school community are also significant in developing teacher identity (Gayton, 2016; Kocabas-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021). Based on the psychological factors affecting teacher identity, a sense of appreciation, connectedness, competence, and commitment and imagining a future career trajectory are deemed to strengthen teacher identities (Lankveld et al., 2017).

Research on language teacher identity is extensive (e.g., Farrell, 2016; Fogle & Moser, 2017; Gan, 2018; Wong, 2022; Wong & Fitzgerald, 2022; Wong & Turkan, 2022; Wong et al., 2022). For example, Wong and Turkan (2022) found that ESL teachers felt isolated, unprepared, and disrespected by colleagues, and these challenges distressed them as they constructed their professional identities. Unfortunately, this seems to be a common phenomenon among ESL teachers, which causes many of them to leave the profession early in their careers (Farrell, 2016; Gan, 2018). To increase the retention rate of ESL teachers, Farrell (2016) suggested that understanding new ESL teacher identity is critical to education as a whole.

Second-Career Teacher Identity

More individuals are undergoing career changes to become teachers for increased job satisfaction and to solve the teacher shortage problem (Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021; Shin, 2016; Troesch & Bauer, 2020). Second-career teachers' needs and those of first-career teachers differ in that the former enter the teaching field with more real-life experiences and professional employment skills (Williams & Forgasz, 2009). As such, their learning needs, teaching beliefs, and values are different (Leshem, 2019; Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021; Shwartz & Dori, 2020; Williams & Forgasz, 2009). Shwartz and Dori (2020) stress that understanding and cultivating these teachers' needs can foster their professional identities and, in turn, increase job satisfaction. Three factors that influence the construction of second-career teachers' identities include previous career experience, knowledge developed during teacher training, and the social context in which they teach. Williams (2010) calls these new teachers 'expert novices' (p. 642) since they refer to the expertise developed in their former

careers but also realize they are new to the teaching field. Similar to first-career teachers, if second-career teachers' professional experiences and identity are greatly challenged, it will also cause them to leave the profession. The main factors that influence second-career teachers' retention are support from leadership, development opportunities, collegial relationships, and recognition of their skills and professional needs (Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021; Williams, 2010).

It is important to examine second-career teachers' experiences in the field of ESL because, as Shin (2016) stated, people rarely consider being an ESL teacher growing up. Rather, many ESL teachers discover the profession through other life experiences, such as volunteering or meeting multilingual speakers. However, very few studies have focused on second-career ESL teachers. Among these studies, Shin (2016) interviewed 30 career changers in an ESL teacher training program in the U.S. and reported how their prior career and life experiences shaped their learning as educators. Shin described how her participants were driven by a sense of purpose and motivation to make a lasting effect on their students' lives. In another research study by Trent (2018), the author reported on the struggles of six second-career ESL teachers in Hong Kong as they developed their new professional identities. Trent found that their struggles were mainly due to the tensions between how they and the experienced teachers perceived their new roles as teachers. Similarly, the new second-career English teachers in Leshem's (2019) study expressed their concern about needing to learn new skills and establish new relationships in a school setting.

Sociocultural Theory and Teacher Identity

SCT views human cognition as social, emerging from participation in external social interactions that can become internalized tools for thinking (Vygotsky, 1978; 1986). The transformation from external to internal is not direct but is mediated (Wertsch, 2007). The process of mediation happens over sustained participation in social activities, dependent on the individual's agency as well as the positives and challenges within the environment (Johnson & Kuerten Dellagnelo, 2013). Based on SCT, teacher identity evolves constantly as teachers participate and make sense of their experience in their schools' social practices (Kelly, 2006; Wenger, 1998). The construction of teacher identities is influenced by how teachers view themselves in the profession and their reactions to how others view their expertise (Johnson, 2006). Unfortunately, when teachers' perceptions of their identities

conflict with how others perceive them, they may reject those identities or even leave the profession (Kelly, 2006).

Interrelatedness of Emotions and Cognition

One of the important concepts within SCT is the interrelatedness of emotion and cognition. Vygotsky (1978; 1986) explained that emotions are developed in response to the social environment and can mediate one's thinking, goals, and actions. The interrelatedness of emotion and cognition is linked to one's identity, which means that teachers' emotions greatly impact their thinking and practices (Swain, et al., 2016). As Johnson and Golombek (2016) describe, 'Identity…is a by-product of emotion' (p. 12), meaning emotions are fundamental to the understanding of teacher identity. Thus, without understanding teachers' emotions with respect to the social environment, we cannot completely understand the whole picture of their experience and professional development (Deter, 2011; Roth, 2007). It is important to mention that negative emotion does not always shut down learning; rather, it can affect one's participation in positive ways (Swain et al., 2016).

Zone of Proximal Development

Another concept within SCT is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). It is described as the distance between what an individual can achieve on their own and their potential development with an experienced mentor (Vygotsky, 1986). In fact, ZPD emphasizes attending to the interrelatedness of feelings and learning and that the support provided within one's ZPD is a way of attending to their emotions (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002). In a school environment, ZPD is also considered a collective effort (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002; Moran & John-Steiner, 2003). If teachers feel supported by the community in which they work rather than feeling isolated, it has a positive influence on their professional identities; such an environment will also foster their students' emotional needs (Deter, 2011). As Moran and John-Steiner (2003) explain, "how a person, emotionally, not just cognitively, perceives his or her place within the social environment has a tremendous impact on the ability to flexibly, and perhaps creatively, respond to possibilities in that environment" (p. 33).

Private Speech

A third concept related to SCT is private speech or self-directed speech, which is a way of communication that mediates and organizes one's own thinking processes (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Swain et al., 2016). Individuals brainstorm solutions to problems through private

speech and self-regulate their logical thinking and action (Swain et al., 2016). In sum, teacher behaviors reflect their professional identities (Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Kim & Kim, 2016; Varghese et al., 2005), and their emotions and motivation are core components of identity development (Johnson & Golombek, 2016; Roth, 2007). As such, examining teachers' inner perspectives of how they develop new professional identities is vital because their initial years in the field have long-term effects regarding job satisfaction and career longevity, which pave the foundation for the rest of their careers (Gan, 2018; Shin, 2016; Verity, 2000).

METHODS

This case study took place in an East Coast region of the U.S. A case study approach was applied to explore the challenges faced by a group of new second-career ESL teachers and how they overcame them as they constructed their teacher identities. We adopted a constructivist paradigm to understand the participants' world and how they developed meanings associated with their experience through interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The reflective process in the three interviews revealed the participants' experiences and how they formed their teacher identities.

Context

To provide context for our study, it is important to understand the landscape of ESL programs in the state where the participants were teaching. There was a serious shortage of well-prepared teachers to teach EMLs. Despite this need, the state did not require teachers to obtain ESL teaching credentials to teach these students; instead, the decision was left to individual districts to determine if an ESL credential was necessary. In the study, all the participants took the initiative to obtain an ESL endorsement, despite it not being a state requirement, in addition to obtaining their standard teaching license prior to becoming full-time teachers. They were teaching in four different districts in the region at the time of the study.

Their EMLs consisted of students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds who required additional support to achieve proficiency in English. These teachers faced significant challenges due to the lack of support and resources in their schools, which reflects broader systemic issues within ESL education in the United States. This experience shaped their identity as outsiders within the teaching community, fostering resilience and determination to advocate more fiercely for their students.

Participants

We had previously recruited a group of new ESL teachers in the area for a larger study on teacher identities. To achieve trustworthiness in this study's findings, we used a criterion sampling strategy to select our teachers among the participant pool (Tracy, 2020). The criteria included those who: 1) experienced a career change and 2) were in their second year of teaching. We focused on career changers because we were interested in learning how their previous careers helped them overcome challenges and shape their teacher identities. We also decided on second-year teachers because we believed they would be able to provide richer and greater details of their experience after completing a full year of teaching. Four participants fulfilled the criteria from the participant pool: Amy, Augusto, Helen, and Sami (pseudonyms). Table 1 illustrates the participants' demographic information and teaching assignments.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information and Teaching Assignment

Participant	Teaching Assignment	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Languages	Previous Career and Duration	Current ESL Model(s) Follow in School	Approximate % of EMLs in School
Amy	5th Grade ESL	Female	Black	Native Speaker of English	Admission Counselor of 10 Years	Push-in and Pull-out	23%
Augusto	5th Grade Social Studies and Science	Male	Hispanic	Native Speaker of Spanish; Proficient in English	Sales Representative of 5 Years	Pull-out	27%
Helen	9th-12th Grade ESL	Female	White	Native Speaker of English	Project Manager of 5.5 Years	Self-contained	40%
Sami	5th Grade ESL	Female	White	Native Speaker of English; Beginner Level in French	Technology Consultant of 5 Years	Push-in	10%

Data

Our main goal was to pay attention to the participants' voices and interpretations of their experiences. Thus, to achieve credibility, we triangulated the data by using a three-step interview approach (Seidman, 1998) to obtain an in-depth understanding of the participants'

experience and how they constructed teacher identities. We conducted three in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with each participant over the course of their second year of teaching. Hence, the data consisted of a total of 12 interview transcripts of approximately 22 hours of interviews. Each interview was transcribed verbatim. The first interview (about 90 minutes each, conducted in September) was to understand the participants' background, why they wished to become ESL teachers, and their views on supporting EMLs. The second interview (about 120 minutes each, conducted in December) focused on their teaching practices, while the third interview (about 120 minutes each, conducted in June) focused on their relationships with different stakeholders in the school.

In addition, following Seidman's approach, we asked the participants to describe their experiences being interviewed during the last step. The purpose of this was for them to reflect on their overall experience as new ESL teachers. Although each interview had its focus, it is important to note that the participants circled back to the same issues throughout the three interviews, hence the triangulation of data. We viewed that the amount of interview data collected was sufficient for the purpose of the study as we reached data saturation, meaning there were no new codes identified from the data (Forero et al., 2018; Tracy, 2020).

Data Analysis

We conducted a content analysis in this study. We strived to ensure rigor throughout the research process by attaining confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Table 2 summarizes the verification strategies we applied to achieve rigor. To ensure confirmability, we applied the strategy of concurrent data collection and analysis in the process of data collection (Quintanilha, 2021); i.e., we analyzed the transcript of each interview before conducting the next one to ensure that we obtained a detailed story from the participants.

Upon completing the data collection process, we conducted the inductive analysis (Charmaz, 2014) in two rounds. First, using a holistic coding method (Dey, 1993), we read and summarized the interview transcripts independently to obtain a "grand tour overview" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 73) of the participants' experiences. We also used the in vivo coding strategy (Saldaña, 2016) to emphasize the actual words of the participants. We also recorded our thoughts and interpretations through memo writing (Saldaña, 2016), which we utilized during our weekly meetings to discuss our reflective processes and to compare our codes to ensure our thought processes agreed. This reflexivity strategy helped us assert that the

findings reflect the participants' perspectives and experiences, which increased dependability (Forero et al., 2018).

Examples of identified codes were: isolated, advocate, unwelcomed, unprepared, and stressed. During the second round of the analysis, we returned to the codes and employed axial coding to determine which codes were salient and linked the related codes together to create categories (Saldaña, 2016). We also referred to the concepts of SCT to make sense of the data and determine how SCT affected the participants as they developed their new professional identities. Specifically, we used SCT to analyze how the participants' interactions within their social and cultural contexts, including their use of private speech, mediated their cognitive processes and emotional responses as they navigated challenges and constructed their professional identities as new ESL teachers. Examples of categories included: supporting EMLs, lack of training, and lack of mentorship. Next, the first author generated the categories into themes based on the research question.

To achieve transferability, we used criterion sampling and thick and rich descriptions (e.g., powerful quotes) that allowed us to illustrate the participants' experience in our writing (Stake, 2010). Finally, to ensure credibility, we triangulated the three sets of interview data and adopted a peer review strategy through which our research assistant read through the data and our analysis to ensure the report of our findings represents the participants' experience.

Table 2. Verification Strategies Applied in the Study to Achieve Rigor

Rigor Criteria	Verification Strategies Applied
Credibility	Triangulation of Data Thick and Rich Descriptions Peer Review
Confirmability	Researcher Reflexivity Triangulation of Data Concurrent Data Collection and Analysis
Transferability	Thick and Rich Description Criterion Sampling Data Saturation
Dependability	Research Reflexivity Memo Writing

FINDINGS

In this section, we report on the participants' challenges and how they overcame them through two themes. The first theme related to their commitment to advocate for EMLs due to their first-hand experiences of marginalization. Two sub-categories were developed within this theme: (1) the marginalized status of ESL teachers and (2) an inequitable education for EMLs. The second theme captured participants' beliefs in self-initiative for continuous development despite the absence of appropriate mentorship. Finally, we address how the participants constructed new professional identities as ESL teachers amidst the challenges from the SCT perspective.

Commitment to Advocate for EMLs Due to Marginalization

Marginalized Status of ESL Teachers

One of the major challenges faced by all of the participants was related to feeling their expertise was undervalued by colleagues and the school administration. The participants expressed that the main reason for their career change to teaching ESL was their hope to make a difference in EMLs' learning. For example, Helen recalled "I saw that there was a political tide that I didn't agree with and I want to help the immigrant children" (Interview 1). Amy said, "I was also always the only Black kid in my grade. There's one ESL kid in my class and he always got made fun of for not speaking English…it was a shared experience" (Interview 1). Although they had realized that they had to advocate for EMLs before entering the teaching field, they could not believe that they would have to stand up for their positions as ESL educators. Sami said, "I never imagined I'd have to advocate this hard not only for my students but also for myself and my position" (Interview 1).

The participants described their experience of encountering colleagues who did not respect their expertise as ESL educators. For example, Augusto recalled his colleagues commenting on EMLs passing a class because ESL teachers lowered the standards for them. He expressed, "ESL teachers are looked down upon because we have a different type of population. They feel like we're watering down the content for the students" (Interview 3). We also heard the participants' frustration about their general education colleagues constantly telling them how they should teach. Amy's experience painted this picture clearly, "The classroom teachers would try to sneak into our Google Classrooms as students to see what we're doing. We feel like we're being spied on. When I pushed into their classrooms, they stand over me, micromanaging what I'm teaching" (Interview 2). Another example came

from Sami's experience of a teacher complaining to the principal about Sami's instructional approach and how she was supplanting her lessons. Sami further explained, "Some teachers refused to add me to their classrooms. Collaboration was something I had to fight for, especially being a new teacher" (Interview 3).

In addition to the participants' teaching expertise being described as devalued, they were also made to feel unwelcome when pushing into other teachers' classrooms. The situations led to participants feeling isolated. Amy revealed, "They don't want me to be in their classrooms. I had a teacher say to me when I walked into her classroom, it ruined her day. There is such a lack of respect for ESL teachers" (Interview 2). This unwelcoming phenomenon also happened in other settings, such as Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Three of the participants mentioned that they were not included in any of the PLC meetings. For instance, Sami stated, "I don't even know when they have PLCs. That would be amazing if ESL teachers actually went in and worked with each PLC and offered support" (Interview 2). In the same vein, Helen described her negative feelings toward attending PLCs:

> PLC is the hardest part of my day. I leave feeling stressed. It's not a collaborative environment. They make decisions based on what's best for the general education population and not necessarily what's best for [EMLs]. Sometimes they told me I don't need to be there. I cry a lot on Mondays (Interview 2).

Similarly, according to Helen, her district worked with various organizations to provide training for teachers. The school leaders would select a teacher to represent each department and grade level. Helen recalled volunteering to attend those trainings because she wanted someone to represent ESL. However, she was rejected repeatedly. With frustration in her voice, Helen said "That doesn't make sense to me because there are representatives for Math and there's an ELA representative. And there's a Special education representative, and there are grade level representations. So, why is there not an ESL representative?" (Interview 2). The negative emotions associated with these situations made the participants feel marginalized as ESL teachers.

Inequitable Education for EMLs

All of the participants inferred that ESL teachers were not respected mainly because of the marginalized status of EMLs. From their experience and observations, they did not believe EMLs were provided an equitable education. For example, Sami described storage as more important than instructional space for EMLs in her district, which she thought was

inequitable for her students. In her words, "I'm currently teaching in a cafeteria where I have to clean the tables. My classroom is currently being used to store air conditioning units for the district…storage is a higher priority than our students" (Interview 3). Augusto was also disappointed that his EMLs did not receive accommodations from his colleagues. He told us, frustratedly, how his EMLs failed a physical education class: "How could you fail the class when you're only supposed to run? Guess what? The instructions were never explained to them properly and now they have a bad reputation that they don't want to learn" (Interview 3). He further described how a colleague said during a department meeting that they would not slow down for the EMLs because "this is the American way" (Interview 3).

Not only did the EMLs not receive appropriate support for their learning needs, but the participants also revealed a physical segregation for EMLs. Helen expressed that her EMLs were separated physically in the building and furthermore, did not receive all the resources other students did. She said:

> My students don't have all the information or the availability of resources; we're also physically segregated...we're kind of seen as second-class citizens. They have been labeled as [EMLs] and kept in the program for such a long time that they missed out on basic literacy development (Interview 1).

Helen's description of being "second class citizens" did not only come from her feelings. She recounted an incident where she went to collect workbooks for her class and was told by other colleagues that after distributing the materials to other fifth grade classrooms, they would give her class the remainder. She felt resentful that her EMLs were not treated equitably. She said:

> A student with a learning disability can be in the general education setting, then there's no reason that someone who is learning another language can't be in the general education setting. Because of the way that they were segregated by the time they got to fifth grade, some of my kids just thought they were not smart anymore. And they thought they were not capable (Interview 3).

Sami echoed the segregation phenomenon for EMLs and said, "I have students who were born in New York City, but they have been in ESL since kindergarten. They're in sixth grade now. You can imagine that stigma, and separation, and lack of inclusiveness" (Interview 2).

Facing these challenges created many negative emotions for the participants. However, they stated that their experience and emotions coming from inequity made them want to fight harder for their EMLs. The participants described in the third interview how they had to remind themselves why they wanted to teach, especially when feeling discouraged. For example, Helen kept telling herself, "I'm doing this for my students." Amy also constantly

reminded herself: "The influence I have in their lives and how much not only that they mean to me but that I mean to them. I just have to stay focused on why I'm there and know that even if I'm made to feel unimportant, I'm important to the students." Similarly, Sami gave herself a pep-talk consistently:

> Every day I remind myself why I'm there for my students. I try to think about what their day would be like if they had to go through their day without a moment where somebody didn't understand their needs. I remind myself that I'm operating in a broken system and push forward.

Because there was a lack of culturally and linguistically diverse teachers to represent the diverse populations of EMLs, Augusto also needed to rely on self-talk when facing challenges. In his words, "I need to bite my tongue and remind myself that I'm the only Hispanic male in the whole high school. I'm gonna make sure I keep my job because my students need me."

Self-Initiatives for Continuous Development Due to the Absence of Appropriate Guidance

In accordance with state law, the four participants were assigned a mentor during their first year. However, none of them found their mentors helpful because they lacked experience with EMLs. The participants explained that because there was only one ESL supervisor in their respective districts, new ESL teachers were often assigned a mentor from another department. In Amy's previous career, there was a great deal of advanced planning and collaboration. Being in a completely new career with many impromptu changes, Amy wished she could have a supportive mentor who could guide her. Instead, she "ended up getting a mentor who was the school's guidance counselor who wasn't teaching and was too busy to help" (Interview 3). Unlike the other three participants, Augusto had more opportunities to interact with his mentor who was an experienced ELA teacher in the district for 17 years. However, he was disappointed in the mentor's emphasis on the ELA standards and how he discounted Augusto's previous experience and efforts in supporting EMLs. He exclaimed, "I wish more teachers understood EMLs' needs. There's a constant battle between the ESL department and everybody else in the school. When my students go to their elective classes, they often don't receive accommodations other than a dictionary" (Interview 3).

All of the participants felt frustrated that they were unable to reach their potential due to the absence of appropriate mentorship. From their observations, ESL teachers often seemed to be neglected. Having worked in two districts, Sami realized, "Teaching ESL is one of the

hardest areas to teach and I don't think administration, coaches, and curriculum personnel know exactly how to provide support. Most districts treat ESL teachers and their students as an afterthought" (Interview 2). Thus, the participants implemented workplace skills acquired from their previous careers to support themselves in their new professional roles. For example, Sami recalled, "I'm used to troubleshooting various problems by myself in my former company. So, I've actually independently gone out and looked at other districts to see their guidelines and their curricula. I'm looking at probably about a dozen districts" (Interview 2). Similarly, Augusto said, "My experience working in a business setting taught me to always research and find solutions independently; complaining won't take me anywhere" (Interview 1). Likewise, Helen used the skills acquired from her previous role as a project manager to organize her classroom. She said, "Teaching is overwhelming; there's no end to teaching and being a self-contained teacher is bizarre. Having project management experience helps me understand how to unpack the whole curriculum from start to finish" (Interview 3).

DISCUSSION

Our findings indicate that the participants faced numerous challenges as new second-career ESL teachers, resulting in many negative emotions. Their challenges agree with the existing literature that reports obstacles many first-career ESL teachers face (e.g., Gan, 2018; Wong & Fitzgerald, 2022; Wong & Turkan, 2022; Wong et al., 2022). However, as reported in the findings, it appears that our career changer participants' emotions served as affordances for them to overcome their challenges and that these emotions were essential to our understanding of their identity development. This supports the notion of SCT in that the participants' emotions elicited from the social context served as a mediational tool in their new professional identities (Johnson & Golombek, 2016). During the process, they responded to their negative emotions by adjusting their thinking and behaviors and using private speech to cope. Below, we discuss how the participants' negative emotions served as a mediational tool as they constructed their new professional identities as ESL teachers amidst the challenges.

Negative Emotions Mediated the Construction of New Professional Identities

One notable layer of second-career ESL teacher identity that emerged was the feeling of being a second-class citizen. This sense of marginalization, such as not receiving the same opportunities as other teachers, appeared to be a major challenge for all of the participants.

Although the existing literature has repeatedly pinpointed such a phenomenon (DelliCarpini, 2009; Liggett, 2010; Wong, 2022; Wong & Fitzgerald, 2022; Wong & Turkan, 2022; Wong et al., 2022), the issue still exists across different schools, as indicated in the study. This experience shaped the participants' identity as an outsider within the teaching community, fostering resilience and determination to advocate more fiercely for their students.

In addition, their experience with unsupportive colleagues further reinforced their commitment to advocating for their EMLs. According to SCT, teachers' emotions are socially constructed through communication, allowing them to mediate their thoughts, decisions, and actions (Imai, 2010; Swain et al., 2016). The extent to which the participants internalized the knowledge of how to support EMLs is the extent to which the environment and emotion mediated change in their cognitive processes. The participants left their previous careers due to their desire to make a difference in EMLs' education, however, it was their interaction with this population of students and unsupportive colleagues that fueled their determination to fight even harder for EMLs. The outcome of this change became a greater understanding of their students' needs, which mediated their realization of being a stronger advocate for their students (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Varadharajan & Buchanan, 2020).

Many participants developed a strong sense of advocacy for their EMLs, driven by their own experiences of marginalization. This identity was characterized by a commitment to fighting for equitable treatment and resources for their students, often in the face of institutional resistance. The participants' negative experiences and emotions, such as feelings of isolation and lack of support, cultivated a sense of resilience. They learned to navigate these challenges independently, drawing on skills and knowledge from their previous careers. This identity emphasizes perseverance and adaptability. They also developed an identity as cultural mediators, bridging the gap between their students' diverse backgrounds and the mainstream educational system. This involved leveraging their own multicultural experiences and empathetic understanding to support their students more effectively. Given the lack of adequate mentoring and resources, many second-career ESL teachers became innovative practitioners, creating teaching materials and strategies. This identity reflects a proactive approach to problem-solving and a commitment to continuous professional growth.

Hence, our findings support the belief that negative emotion does not always shut down learning or hinder one's development (Swain et al., 2016). Rather, the participants' negative emotions propelled the construction of their identity as ESL teachers. While we should always do our best to avoid teachers and students receiving any unjust treatment, in this

study, we discovered that participants' negative emotions served as a major mediational tool that may have helped advance the construction of their new professional identities.

Connecting Previous Expert Knowledge

The process of changing participants' previous professional roles into becoming ESL teachers requires the guidance of mentors and colleagues (Buldur, 2017; Williams, 2010). Despite the participants being assigned a mentor during their first year, none of them found their respective mentors helpful, mainly because of their limited experience working with EMLs. Having mentors who understand new teachers' content areas is of utmost importance since they play a vital role in new teachers' development (Schwan et al., 2020). For new teachers to reach their 'level of potential development' (Esteve et al., 2018, p. 85), their learning should be guided by someone with experience in a similar context (Esteve et al., 2018; Johnson & Golombek, 2016; Swain et al., 2016).

Due to a lack of appropriate mentors, our career-changer participants took the initiative to seek help. They were shocked by the absence of an ESL curriculum and were assigned to teach subjects for which they were not trained. Without guidance and an ESL curriculum, the participants applied their knowledge acquired from previous careers (e.g., Helen applied her skills as a project manager as she juggled her responsibilities in her self-contained class; Augusto implemented his work ethic skills to research instead of waiting for help) and looked for external professional development opportunities. Rather than giving up, their real-life and workplace skills became a mediational tool in constructing their identities as new ESL teachers (Shin, 2016; Williams & Forgasz, 2009).

The Power of Private Speech

Striving to survive is typical for anyone who enters a new career. Without a sense of appreciation and connectedness with the professional community, the participants' teacher identities seemed to be affected (Lankveld et al., 2017). In addition, their negative emotions stemming from an unsupportive environment forced them to rely on their private speech. Private speech appeared to be a powerful tool for the participants to mediate their thinking and combat challenges as they constructed their new professional identities.

The participants frequently used private speech to cope with feeling discouraged, disrespected and undervalued. For instance, Helen described how she constantly reminded herself of her purpose: "I'm doing this for my students." This form of self-talk helped her

stay focused on her mission despite feeling marginalized. Similarly, Amy noted, “I just have to stay focused on why I’m there and know that even if I’m made to feel unimportant, I’m important to the students.” This type of intrapersonal dialogue and constant self-reflection reinforced the participants’ commitment to their students and to continue advocating for their students, even when the system seemed stacked against them. Private speech also helped the participants regulate their emotions and actions by reminding them of EMLs’ struggles. Augusto, for example, often told himself, “I need to bite my tongue and remind myself that I’m the only Hispanic male in the whole high school. I’m gonna make sure I keep my job because my students need me.” This self-directed speech helped him stay resilient and focus on the larger goal of supporting his students.

The findings reflect a “broken system” in multiple ways. The lack of respect for ESL teachers and their expertise, as evidenced by their exclusion from PLCs and other professional development opportunities, illustrates systemic neglect. This segregation and lack of inclusiveness perpetuated the marginalization of EMLs within the educational system. However, through the participants’ use of private speech, they were able to navigate these challenges and maintain their commitment to their students. This intrapersonal communication served as a powerful tool that mediated the construction of their professional identities as new ESL teachers, enabling them to push forward despite operating in a broken system.

IMPLICATIONS

As discussed above, the participants’ negative emotions stemmed from their feelings of marginalization. Because school leaders set the tone and culture for their schools (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2015; Sánchez & Menken, 2020), they must ensure that ESL teachers, including those who are second-career teachers, are fully integrated into daily school life. Thus, we recommend that school leaders give ample opportunities for these teachers to participate in decision-making and collaborate with colleagues since recognizing second-career teachers’ prior experience as experts impacts their new professional identities (Varadharajan & Buchanan, 2020; Williams, 2010, 2013; Williams & Forgasz, 2009). Through these opportunities, they can draw on “the histories and interpretations of others in their sense-making and are not riskily isolated” (Edwards & D’Arcy, 2004, p. 150).

Possessing a positive sense of their professional roles and recognition from their leaders has a positive effect on a teacher’s professional identity, which will likely increase job

satisfaction (Gayton, 2016; Kelchtermans, 2009; Kocabas-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021). If a collaborative effort within the school community is currently not occurring, as our participants reported, training administrators on distributed and collaborative leadership with ESL teachers must occur (Sánchez & Menken, 2020; Wong, 2022; Wong & Turkan, 2022). Through such a leadership model, school personnel can see EMLs' cultural and linguistic diversity as an asset rather than a deficiency (Ascenzi-Moreno et al., 2015).

Since teachers' emotions and private speech play a crucial role in their identities, as confirmed in the present study, we suggest school leaders provide listening sessions catered for second-career teachers that highlight the career backgrounds and skills that they bring into teaching. These sessions create opportunities for new teachers to see how their prior experiences contribute to their practices and identity as educators (Williams, 2010). We also recommend ESL leaders/mentors provide adequate time for new teachers to periodically reflect on their goals and develop action plans. These affordances help new teachers transform social dialogues into private speech that mediates their development (Swain et al., 2016). One way to address and mediate their emotions is to encourage new teachers to develop reflective practices, such as recording their experiences and thoughts through journal writing (Golombek & Doran, 2014). Engaging in deep reflection during their initial years as professionals allows teachers to minimize burnout and to be more mindful of their decisions (Farrell, 2016). Based on their goals, school leaders should encourage teachers to select professional development opportunities that meet their needs.

Despite being marginalized, the resilience and determination demonstrated by the participants highlight their extensive agency. To build such agency in second-career ESL teachers, teacher education programs should emphasize the development of self-advocacy skills, reflective practices, and resilience. Incorporating training that encourages private speech and self-reflection can help teachers navigate challenging environments. Additionally, providing robust mentorship programs tailored to the unique needs of second-career teachers, along with opportunities for professional development focused on advocacy and cultural competency, can support these educators in becoming strong advocates for their students. By developing a supportive community and emphasizing the importance of agency, teacher education programs can better prepare second-career ESL teachers to thrive in their roles.

Mentors contribute to new teachers' professional development as their interaction with each other is a powerful mediated activity that helps teachers gain insights into their social context and environment (Deter, 2011; Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004). However, as indicated in

our findings, merely having a mentor is not sufficient; they need to match new teachers' areas of expertise for them to reach their ZPD (Whitaker et al., 2019). Otherwise, an inappropriate mentorship is not only a waste of resources, but it can cause new teachers to have negative emotions.

Therefore, we recommend that new ESL teachers be paired with appropriate ESL mentors or other experienced ESL teachers (i.e., trained in ESL instruction and experienced with EMLs). These mentor/mentee pairs must be provided time to observe each other and to meet and debrief after the observations. Such observations, followed by conversations with the teachers about their actions, are necessary for new teachers' development. Establishing a healthy relationship with an appropriate mentor cultivates new teachers' identity development within their ZPD. Knowing they are supported creates a strong sense of job satisfaction for teachers and, in turn, increases their retention (Wong, 2022; Wong & Turkan, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The present study illustrated the experiences of four new ESL teachers who had gone through a career change due to their desire to support EMLs. We explored the challenges these teachers face and how they coped with their challenges in the process of constructing teacher identities through the lens of SCT. Based on our findings, we provided suggestions for school leaders to support ESL teachers. We hope that learning how second-career teachers respond to their challenges offers school leaders insights into how to support these teachers' continued professional development and nurture their identities as professionals.

While it is impossible to foresee and address all sorts of challenges new teachers may face, we hope that more attention will be paid to developing second-career ESL teachers. This way, they can receive appropriate support and resources that guide them to develop as professionals, which may increase their job satisfaction and, in turn, may increase the quality of EMLs' educational experience. One limitation of the study was its reliance on self-reported data. Therefore, future studies should include observations to better understand the day-to-day challenges faced by these new second-career teachers in a broader sense.

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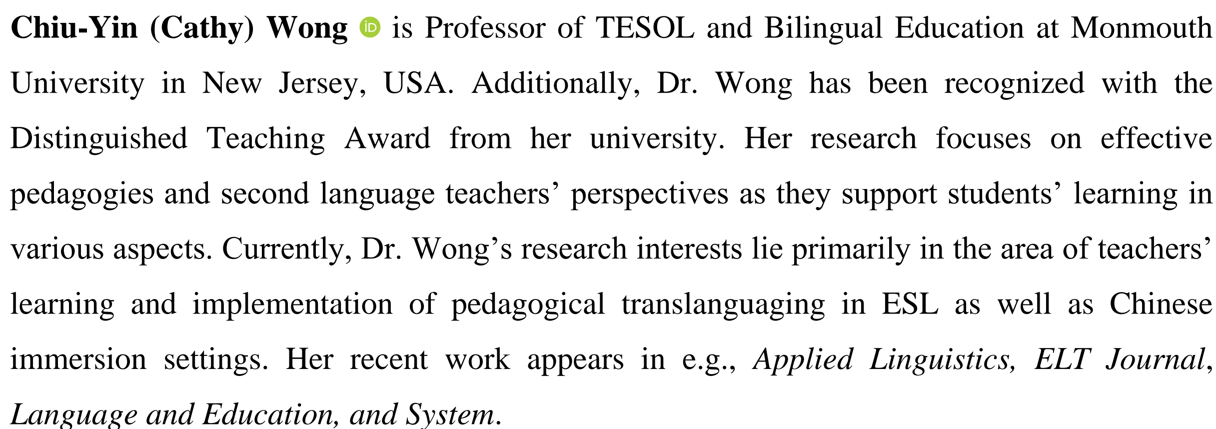

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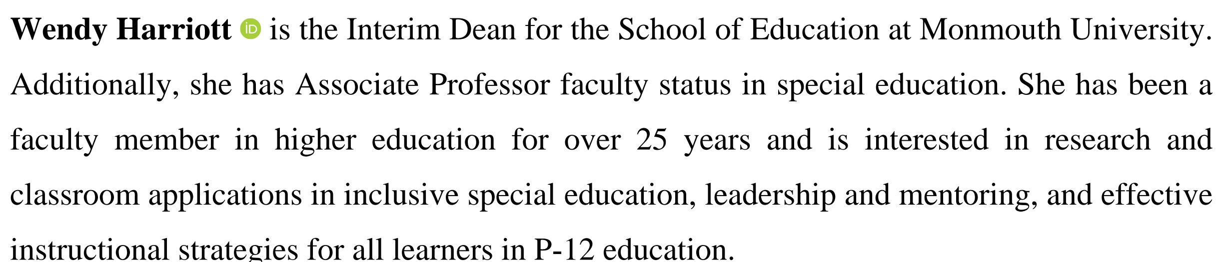

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