



Early-Career Teachers Living on School Landscapes Shaped by Equity Policies and Practices: Helena's and Kristin's Stories

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Before moving beyond the beginning stages of becoming a teacher, one of every two teachers leaves the profession. Hence, for several decades, the recruitment, development, and retention of teachers has been a pernicious problem facing districts, schools, administrators, and school personnel. A productive line of narrative inquiry research has focused on teacher education and development. Additionally, narrative inquiries have focused on teacher retention and attrition. For example, several researchers have narratively inquired into the processes of transitioning out of the profession. In the present investigation, we asked an overarching question, what do beginning teachers need in order to tell stories of staying? And, relatedly, in schools working toward addressing questions of equity, what are the experiences of early-career teachers? And, what can be done to develop and sustain them in their professional commitments? Two novice teachers, Helena and Kristin, both of whom took initial positions in the same district, which had a commitment to promoting equity for children, were interviewed to gather perspectives on their early-career experiences. Both participants shared tension-filled stories from their beginning years as a teacher that created a sense of disequilibrium connected to their developing sense of self. The data analysis pointed to the value that the concept of the best-loved self may have in helping teachers construct their sense of identity. As in the case of Helena and Kristin, this sense of the best-loved self may develop early and can shift over time. For teacher educators, this aspect provides an opening for exploring philosophical commitments within preparations programs with teacher candidates. For teachers and administrators in schools who are intaking beginning teachers, understanding these nascent facets of best-loved teacher self may provide a window into these novice teachers' motivations. And, these practices may prompt the reconnection to philosophical commitments and aspirations in the day-to-day tug at the fabric of teacher identity.

Keywords: early-career teacher experiences, diversity, equity, best-loved self, narrative inquiry

INTRODUCTION

Vignettes, snippets of stories, told by two early-career teachers introduce the present study. Helena shared a story from her first year, during which she was teaching sixth-grade. Kristin recounts an experience in her second year as an educator. At the time, she was beginning the school year as a first-grade teacher. Kristin was new to this grade-level. These slices of stories highlight identity construction processes in which these early-career teachers are engaged.

STORIED STARTING POINTS: EARLY TEACHING EXPERIENCES THAT TUG AT THE FABRIC OF THE BEST-LOVED SELF

These two vignettes fit within Helena's and Kristin's narratives of experience (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988). The stories are nested in interview data collected during this study of early-career teacher retention. These snippets hint at the disequilibrium beginning teachers may feel between their experiences living and working on school landscapes (Clandinin and Connelly, 1996) and embracing their best-loved selves (Craig, 2013, 2017, 2020).

Grieving a Ruptured Relationship: A Teacher Story From Helena's First Weeks

And, before he could come back – before I could tell him, “I still love you. I'm going to have a hard time trusting you. You have to earn that back. But, you're still Joseph.” Before that could happen, he withdrew. I never even got to see him after – everything that happened. And, those are things that not every first-year teacher would have to deal with. I went to a school where that was a possibility. It was. . .it took a while. . .I was very upset after the whole thing. And, those are things that not every first-year teacher would have to deal with, but there are things that college cannot have prepared you for.

Helena (fieldnote recording)

Classroom Shambles and Self-Doubt: Kristin's Story of First-Grade Teaching

I left crying that day because he left my class in shambles. . .both my teammates called me. And, they were like, “Kristin, it's not you. Because I said that same thing. Like, I never thought that I would have the kid that I can't control.”

Kristin (fieldnote recording)

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Before moving beyond a beginner's stage, one of every two teachers leaves the profession (Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll and Kralik, 2004; Ingersoll and Merrill, 2010; Ingersoll and Perda, 2010a,b). The recruitment, development, and retention of teachers is a pernicious problem facing districts, schools, administrators, and school personnel. A productive line of narrative inquiry research focuses on this issue and explores

processes of transitioning out of the profession (Craig, 2013; Schaefer, 2013; Schaefer et al., 2014; Clandinin et al., 2015). In the present investigation, we asked an overarching question, what do beginning teachers need in order to tell stories of staying? Relatedly, in schools working toward addressing questions of equity, what are the experiences of early-career teachers? And, what can be done to develop and sustain them in their professional commitments? Two early-career teachers, Helena and Kristin were interviewed to gather perspectives on their early-career experiences.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE PROBLEM

In the fields of teacher preparation and education, oftentimes, teachers' first years' classroom experiences are portrayed as stories of survival (Lundeen, 2004; Street, 2004). For example, practical guides for first year teachers are known as survival guides (e.g., Thomson, J. *The first-year teacher's survival guide: Ready-to use strategies, tools, and activities for meeting the challenges of each school day, 4th edition*). Tales of beginning teachers are represented as exponentially more challenging when working in schools with greater levels of students with elevated levels of need (Isenberg et al., 2013). Those vulnerabilities may arise from language acquisition (Batt, 2008), cultural differences to those of a majority (Gay, 2002; Villegas and Lucas, 2007) – whether that majority is national or more localized – growing up in poverty (Simon and Johnson, 2015), and experiences of homelessness (Rafferty, 1997; Chow et al., 2015), transience, and/or hunger (Gehrke, 2005). Additionally, schools typically serving high needs populations are more likely to fit within categories of failing to meet student achievement goals (Bainbridge and Lasley, 2002). This failure may incur the imposition of structural, administrative, and financial penalties (“What happens when a school fails to make adequate yearly progress goals?” 2016). Challenges arising from these sets of circumstances fit under an umbrella of equity issues in education. Getting and keeping a cadre of talented teachers to meet the needs of children in schools addressing equity concerns drives recruitment in districts nationwide (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY OF EXPERIENCE AS A FOUNDATION

Experience of early-career teachers working in a context of equity policies and practices is at the core of the present investigation, and therefore, Dewey's (1938) philosophy was chosen as a framework (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988; Clandinin and Caine, 2013). Intertwining concepts of interaction, situation, and continuity in experience grounds the methodological decisions shaping this research focused on teachers' early-career experiences. Also, an interrelated set of terms and concepts allows for the experiences of Helena and Kristin to be juxtaposed into the narrative inquiry three-dimensional space (Clandinin and Connelly, 1992, 2002; Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007). Dewey's

criteria of experience map onto the narrative inquiry terms: temporality, sociality, and spatiality. These narrative inquiry concepts figure prominently in narrative understandings of identity. And, further, Craig's conceptualization of the best-loved self figures prominently in grounding this investigation into early-career teachers' classroom stories (Craig, 2013, 2017, 2020).

Intersecting Concepts: Dewey's Criteria of Experience and Narrative Inquiry

Because of its central focus, conceptually, narrative inquiry is structured on the criteria of experience as outlined, defined, and explained by Dewey (1938): continuity, situation, interaction. From these ideas come the narrative terms of temporality, personal and social dialectic (sociality), and place (spatiality). Temporality, from this perspective, refers to the individual history of person shaped over time, expressed in their present, and propelling them into a future. Sociality encompasses the complex interplay between an individual and the societal/cultural influences in which they are constructing meaning of their experiences over time. Place, in a narrative inquiry view, takes into account external conditions of experience, the situation, in which a person engages their existing set of constructed understandings – the “attitudes, habits, and dispositions” (Dewey, 1938) built from previous experiences – in the goings-on of new experiences.

Locating interconnections between Dewey's philosophy of experience and narrative inquiry highlights the role of experience in learning and the construction and reconstruction of knowledge through story. Further, linkages between experience, knowledge, and identity are discernable within stories composed, lived, and shared. Finally, attending to the shaping influence social context plays in the construction of knowledge and identity provides opportunity to explore policy agendas as lived experience. Common ground between the conceptual frameworks of Dewey's philosophy of experience and narrative inquiry provides the impetus for the study of story in the life and work of teachers.

Narrative Inquiry and Stories of Teachers as a Rationale for This Research

Story is understood as a human endeavor to make meaning and share understandings of experience (Bruner, 1990). Working with story has shaped narrative research methodologies for decades. Narrative inquiry approaches allow researchers to “listen closely to teachers and to the stories they live out in their classrooms” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1992, p. 393). In the present investigation, the stories that Helena and Kristin compose and share of their early years as teachers are explored. Both bring into their new contexts of practice, personal histories and unique sets of knowledge constructed from experience. These epistemological, ontological, and axiological elements of identity interact with the professional world in which they construct understandings of what it means to be a teacher.

Teacher's Best-Loved Self: Bridging Between Narrative Inquiry and Identity

The concept of a teacher's best-loved self, as developed by Craig (2013) builds on two lines. First, she grounds this concept in a broad reading and deep review of Schwab's writings, and particularly ties this concept to *Eros and Education* (Schwab, 1954/1978) and connecting with the teacher commonplace (Schwab, 1973). At the same time, Craig links this notion to Connelly and Clandinin's metaphor of teacher as curriculum-maker (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988; Craig and Ross, 2008). This approach involves axiological, epistemological, and ontological aspects of the self. The conceptualization of the best-loved self involves the individual in developing or coming to an understanding of a sense of themselves as teachers, their commitments and convictions that shape those identities, and how they desire to engage in the curriculum process, broadly speaking. Schwab argued that actualizing the best-loved self involves self-education and, perhaps, necessary push back on training, as manifested in the imposition of methods that may be inconsistent with teachers' visions of themselves and their curriculum commitments.

The best-loved self, as a conceptualization linked to teacher identity, has implications for teacher education (Craig, 2013). Likewise, applications for teacher professional development abound. In the present study, the concept of the best-loved self is used as a mechanism to understand curriculum and teaching situations, from the perspective of the teacher commonplace. In this examination of Helena's and Kristin's stories of experience, the metaphor of tugging at the fabric of the best-loved self intimates the fabric woven to create a teacher identity. That weave can change over time and through self-education become more developed, through multiple layers of situations, and in relation to individuals and contexts of practice.

Juxtapositions Between Teacher Identity Concepts and the Best-Loved Self

According to Van Lankveld et al. (2017), human beings are natural storytellers, and they do so in many forms (i.e., traditional folktales, works of literature, and daily conversations). People, naturally, develop and share stories about themselves constructed from details about their lives. In current psychology literature, composing accounts that interpret lived experience is known as narrative identity, and this concept allows for imagining the future while also reconstructing the autobiographical past (Van Lankveld et al., 2017). McAdams (1985) early proposed this concept and outlined a research agenda examining the content of life stories. From this perspective, narrative identity is a continually evolving story of self composed and shared in order to make meaning of life. As with Van Lankveld et al. (2017), McAdams's view presents story as an autobiographical account built on individual's past and a projection of a future self. In sharing their story, cultural norms and social context influence. Hence, teachers' identities may be understood as an ongoing process of re/construction wherein people internalize conditions shaping their communities of practice (Beijaard et al., 2004). A sense of disequilibrium may emerge when a fissure develops

between teachers' inner worlds and their external worlds that may contribute to conflicts or struggle between whom they desire to be (Darvin and Norton, 2015) and a designated identity ascribed by external bodies. Within this concept of the identity constructed in present and future desires and aspirations, are ideas that parallel with the best-loved self as described by Craig (2013). Sfard and Prusak contend that stories constructed and shared within a particular context may be either told or enacted (Tan et al., 2013). A distinction is made between stories as representations of identity rather than equating stories as identity or an expression of identity (Sfard and Prusak, 2005). They further delineate actual identity, representing stories composed in the present, from designated identity, which is more focused on a self to be assumed at a later point and is based on projections for the future.

Stories about identity are mainly told in a dialogical process, through interaction, or as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991), they represent people engaged in different social practices over different periods of time; therefore, these stories are representations of the self or "the set of meanings we hold for ourselves, our inferences about who we are, based on how others act toward us, our wishes and desires, and our evaluations of ourselves" (Stets and Burke, 2000, p. 130) in relation to a certain social context. As storied by Helena and Kristin, some teacher experiences may tug at that fabric of self; situations that snag threads of the fabric when slid over the commitments and convictions teachers may hold – elemental contributors to the best-loved self. A disequilibrium may develop between the vision of self and the lived experience in classroom life. Deep rifts between may be difficult to hold in tension and could nudge teachers out of the profession. Nevertheless, teachers, to some extent, exercise agency (Beijaard et al., 2004) when negotiating their relational positions (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) within a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Thus, navigating, pushing through, and/or embracing the disequilibrium of a vision of self and the lived experience in classroom life is the heart of this study.

Early-Career Teachers Experiences at the Intersection With Teacher Identity Concepts

The first years of practice for teachers may be challenging as they navigate new situations, a variety of difficulties, and work to develop instructional skills and strategies. Transitioning from teacher education programs to the profession can be a fraught time in the lives of early-career teachers. Beauchamp and Thomas (2011) note feelings of isolation were common amongst beginning teachers as they entered the profession. However, upon completion of the first year as teachers, these practitioners develop a new sense of belonging, as they are immersed in the teaching community. Furthermore, teachers find "a growing sense of agency" (p. 12), which the authors attribute to the contextual influence of the teaching community. Consequently, in order to assume new identities as teachers, individuals need to feel they are part of a community, and develop a sense of belonging through active engagement in their professional communities.

While integration within the teaching community represents a key factor in early-career teachers' identity development, many elements may be in play. Identity is not static, nor an end product, but a dynamic process (Akkerman and Meijer, 2011) in which the self is constantly negotiated (Linell, 2009). According to the Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans et al., 1992; Hermans and Kempen, 1993), the self consists of different I-positions that an individual uses to express themselves. Each I-position connects to experiences and relationships. In a study conducted with a beginning teacher, Stenberg and Maaranen (2021) found early in the school year, a teacher may struggle with conflicting I-positions (I as a person; I as a teacher). By the halfway point in the first semester, the new teacher may have harmonized the internal conflict within their I-positions. Stenberg and Maaranen (2021) highlight that in the development of early-career teachers, the focus should be brought to these interactions within and among the I-positions, and not exclusively on professional performance.

Early-Career Teachers' Beliefs About Equity Within Teacher Identity Literature

Studies focusing on the transition between students in teacher education programs and becoming an early-career professionals, find that individuals undergo a shift in identity as their beliefs transform (Huang et al., 2021). Beliefs are considered core to a teacher's identity (Pajares, 1992). There are underlying assumptions that beliefs guide practices, influence decision making and guide the manner of interactions with students (Davis and Andrzejewski, 2009). Beliefs impact a teacher's pedagogy, assessment, and may be an impediment to reaching equity goals. Beliefs are personal and represent intrinsic constructs and an ongoing, critical review and analysis may be useful in considering ways teacher beliefs intersect and shape student learning.

RATIONALE FOR USING NARRATIVE INQUIRY METHODOLOGY

Narrative Inquiry as a Methodology

In broad terms, narrative inquiry is described as both a phenomenon and a method (Clandinin and Huber, 2002); at once an individual's way of sharing an experience with others, and also, a way of studying and understanding human experience through stories. Human beings are meaning-making creatures, and story (Bruner, 1990; Clandinin and Connelly, 1992) is a fundamental tool used to interpret experience. In addition to being both a phenomenon and a method, narrative inquiry is a relational form of research, co-constructed by researcher and researched, and based in trust (Clandinin and Connelly, 2002; Craig and Huber, 2007; Boniface, 2020).

More specific to this study, stories the participants share are understood as first-level interpretations of experience, a telling of what meaning they make of becoming and being teachers in a district facing head-on equity issues. Their knowledge constructions are, thus and then, conveyed through story.

Subsequently, we study these stories by thinking narratively (Murphy et al., 2012) with and through Helena's and Kristin's stories. Arguably, because of the relational qualities of narrative research, what may come to be understood more deeply about experiences of early-career teachers may be linked intimately, inexorably, to interconnections between Helena, Kristin, and ourselves, as researchers.

Narrative inquiry methodology (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) is used in this fine-grained examination of experiences of two early-career teachers' experience in schools shaped by equity policies and practices. The introductory slivers of stories capture moments of internal and internalized disequilibrium in the construction of teacher identity. We conceptualize Helena's and Kristin's experiences as their individual vision of their best-loved self (Craig, 2013) in tension with the practices of becoming and being a teacher.

Study Context: External Conditions/Situational Factors/Equity Policies and Practices

The district and school contexts in which Helena and Kristin began their teaching careers, in Deweyian terms aspects of the situations of these two teachers' experiences, are shaped in part by equity policies and practices. Kristin began as a special education teacher in one school located within the district, while Helena's position was as a sixth-grade teacher in another of this district's elementary schools. Kristin shifted to a first-grade classroom at the beginning of her second year.

The district is one of many in a large metropolitan area in the Southwest. Ten thousand students attend the elementary schools with this district's catchment area. These students represent the construct of a minority-majority context. At the various school sites, the students are between 10 and 25% Spanish-speaking, and the schools themselves are culturally- and linguistically diverse. All schools in the district have Title 1 designation indicating a high-level of students receiving free or reduced lunch.

Historically, in the 1980s, to counter the emergence of the construct of at-risk youth, members of the community and a local Boys and Girls Club adopted the idea of Kids at Hope. The mission statement of this organization is "that every child is afforded the belief, guidance and encouragement that creates a sense of hope and optimism, supported by a course of action needed to experience success at life's four major destinations: Home & Family; Education & Career; Community & Service; and Hobbies & Recreation" (Maintenance mode, n.d.). This approach to meeting the diverse needs of students has inroads in 18 states. Specific to this study, the district Superintendent, decades earlier, committed to Kids at Hope. From the district office and personnel to school administration and teachers an ethos shaped by policy and practice addressed equity issues and challenges infused the two schools in which Helena and Kristin became first-year teachers.

The two participants first encountered the Kids at Hope philosophy during school-based practicum experiences. They, along with us (their teacher educators and practicum supervisors) were observers and participants in the equity practices shaped by

district-wide policies based on Kids at Hope philosophy. Early one morning, we arrived in time for the Kids at Hope pledge. During another visit, we attended a school assembly celebrating students' successes and being recognized by the caring adults in their lives. The positive, caring school environment built on meeting the diverse needs of learners is what drew Helena and Kristin to this district. For Helena and Kristin, this approach to embracing equity needs of schools was a potent recruitment tool for this district.

Participant Selection

Two young women, between 21 and 23 years of age, are the focus of this investigation. Helena and Kristin are both white, middle-class, females. They are native English speakers. In the several years of interactions, their gender identities were not a topic included in conversations. They both completed their teacher education in one of the nation's largest elementary education teacher preparation programs. Helena and Kristin fulfilled requirements for elementary and special education dual certifications as part of a cohort requiring more than one hundred hours of school-based field experiences for the three semesters, during which teacher candidates engage in methods courses with corresponding classroom practicum blocks, and, then, they have two semesters of student teaching. One placement qualifies teacher candidates for elementary school teaching positions, while the second placement prepares candidates for certification in special education in Grades K-12. Application for this program is competitive. Helena and Kristin graduated with high marks and equally effusive praise from their teacher educators within the program. These two students were members of a cohort we taught over the course of their three semesters. As mentioned above, we shared classroom experiences, programmatic challenges, and supervised practicums. Upon completion, these two beginning teachers were recruited by districts across the state and elsewhere, and they had their pick of teaching positions.

Both Helena and Kristin are from families in which teaching is a known profession. Helena's mother is a teacher, and Kristin's sister is a teacher. The work, challenges, and rewards of teaching were understood. Likewise, both benefited from familial support structures as they began their work in the classroom.

These two participants were chosen because they both accepted their first teaching positions in the same district upon completion of their teacher education program. They began teaching in different schools in the district. Helena took a sixth-grade position, and Kristin started as a special education teacher responsible for primary grades. Because of the longstanding commitments of the district to meeting the needs of children related to equity issues through policies and practices, these two participants were recruited, and they accepted the invitation to share their experiences.

Situating This Study of Two Early-Career Teachers Within a Broader and Longitudinal Investigation

This study, which focuses on Helena and Kristin, is enveloped within a study involving several other early-career teachers. That broader study provides a more longitudinal perspective of a cohort of teachers who were teacher candidates within

a program in which we, the researchers, were also teacher educators. As students, Helena and Kristin participated in a narrative inquiry examining their developing sense of self as teachers through their coursework and practicum work in schools (Ross and Prior, 2012).

EARLY-CAREER TEACHER STORIES FOLDED INTO LONGITUDINAL AND CONTEXTUAL DATA: ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION

The data set for the present study consists predominantly of transcribed interviews with two participants. While interviews collected Helena's and Kristin's replies to specific questions, their individual responses provided a plotline of experience stepping into the teaching profession. Once these stories were situated at the heart of this inquiry, the accounts were enveloped within the participants' continuities of experience (Dewey, 1938; Clandinin and Caine, 2013). In addition to these early-career teacher stories, data collected through writings from a previous narrative study (Ross and Prior, 2012) are used to situate the participants' recounting of experience with a wider and deeper view of identity development for Helena and Kristin. This contextualizing move makes possible tracing lines of identity construction. The construction and reconstruction processes track through past, present, and future elements of experience. Their narratives of experience (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988) can be understood as a construction of identity, both professional and personal. Additionally, situating these stories temporally, spatially, and socially allows for narratively thinking with and through their stories. Thinking narratively (Murphy et al., 2012) with their stories and about their conceptions of their best-loved selves (Craig, 2013, 2017, 2020) enabled the laying Helena's and Kristin's candidate stories alongside their early-career teachers' accounts. Narrative methods of analysis of burrowing and broadening (Keyes and Craig, 2012) digs deeply into participants' experiences and contextualizes those experiences in the field-at-large. Finally, by positioning Helena's and Kristin's stories within a field of relevant narrative inquiries and within the field of teacher preparation, retention and attrition, more broadly, these two teachers' stories of experience take on deeper meaning for these fields of study.

For the present investigation, the experiences of Helena and Kristin are forefronted because they both accepted their first teaching positions in the same district. The interviews were conducted individually, after school, at a local Mexican restaurant known to be frequented by teachers within the district that is featured in this research. Several questions were used to build and focus semi-structured interviews. The actual conversations were free-flowing and wide-ranging. The audio of these interviews was transcribed and data was organized in a MAXQDA system. The examination of these data was multi-perspectival. The stories forming the core of this research were selected for two reasons. First, these stories were shared early in the conversation in connection

to Helena's and Kristin's meaning-making efforts. In addition to the immediacy of the sharing, secondly, these stories were related with high emotional intensity. These factors, immediacy and intensity, were interpreted as indicating the import of these stories in the lives and work of these two early-career teachers.

In concluding this discussion of philosophical and methodological touchstones shaping the present study, Helena's vignette is pieced into the fuller story she shared over nachos one afternoon.

Helena: A Teaching Story From Her First-Year

A kid stole my phone. Took it off my desk. It's my third week of teaching, cop comes up to me and says, "Are you pressing charges?"

I'm looking at my principal. I'm like, . . .I had no idea that I would be asked this question at all, much less in the first few weeks. "What do you think?" She was trying to stay out of it.

It's funny because as the cop is talking, "Well, we won't be able to do anything. We won't be able to get restitution. . . .Well, you know, we can get him, maybe like, community service and like some therapy. I mean he wouldn't really have some punishment for it because he's too young."

My principal finally just says, "Press charges." I love her, my principal. But, oh my gosh, he's just making her more and more mad.

I got the letter a couple of weeks ago. He has to go to a probation hearing. If he agrees that he did it; he gets therapy and is having to do community service, which is obviously what he needs. And, it was really hard because he had a suspension after that. I didn't see him after. He was in the office that day, but I was like, I'm not gonna talk to him right now. I'm not going to talk to his parents and say, "Hey, I'm the woman pressing charges against your 11-year-old."

And, before he could come back – before I could tell him, "I still love you. I'm gonna have a hard time trusting you. You have to earn that back, but you're still Joseph." Before that could happen, he withdrew. I never even got to see him after – everything that happened. And, those are the things that not every first-year teacher would have to deal with. I went to a school where that was a possibility. It was. . . .It took a while. I was very upset after the whole thing. Especially with the withdrawing because, just with the out of school suspension and everything, I told people around me, I'm like, "You're gonna have to remind me, this is for his own good."

They're like, "Yes, it is."

I'm like, "If I ever look like I need a reminder, feel free to tell me."

I honestly haven't even thought about that for a long time. Teaching keeps moving forward. And, those are things that not every first-year teacher would have to deal with, but there are things that college cannot have prepared you for.

Before embarking upon process of meaning-making with Helena's story, Kristin's vignette is folded into the original story she shared over enchiladas.

Teaching First-Grade: Kristin's Story

Well, we were having a class birthday party. And, (in speech) then, once he was in the thinking chair, he was slamming against the wall and kicking and screaming so none of the other kids get any of their speech work done. . . . And, the speech teacher walked him back, and she had her hair all sorts of messed up. . . It happened in speech, and he didn't get his consequence until he got back to my classroom. And, I said, "I'm really sorry, but because of the choices that you made in speech, you will not be able to participate in our birthday party." And, so, I took a cupcake off his desk.

And, the, he threw his desk at me.

And, the, it was dismissal. I opened the door: all my kids went. They ran into my teammates' rooms. And, he just started throwing chairs all across the room. . . He went like this across my desk and put everything on the floor. Chairs everywhere.

And, I'm trying to call administration. Nobody's answering. And, he just having a field day in there. And, when I finally got hold of administration. . . this is the new vice-principal, and she came in and was like, "Whoa!" Like, it was the first time she had ever seen anything like this before too. Like, this was my first time seeing anything like this, but this should not be your first time seeing anything like this.

I left crying that day because he left my class in shambles. And, I had to go to swim practice. I didn't have a choice. So, I knew that meant an extra early morning for me the next day.

And, like, my vice-principal came in and was like, "Start cleaning this up. . ." and, like made him start putting things away. But, like, he's six. He's not going to clean it up. He's not going to do it the way I wanted it. So, I left crying that night. . . Both my teammates called me, and they were like, Kristin, it is not you. Because I aid that same thing. Like, I never thought that I would have the kid that I can't control.

Continuities in the Mix: Identities Under Construction

Because these two participants engaged in earlier research projects during their teacher candidacy, contextualizing the stories they shared during their early careers within a more temporal perspective coalescing around emerging visions of their best-loved teacher selves was possible. Nubs of a developing vision of themselves as the type of teacher each would most like to become are, then, laid alongside the dilemmas tugging at their teacher identity constructions of the present-day temporality. Tensions surface in the bumping between their respective sense of their best-loved selves and the exigencies of lived experience in classrooms and schools.

Helena's Emerging Best-Loved Teacher Self

During her teacher candidacy, Helena shared that she had always wanted to be a teacher.

My desire to be an educator has been present as far back as I can remember. I believe all began because of my older sister, whom I worshipped and adored. She wanted to be a teacher, so naturally, I did too! It helped that I loved school, as a student, and would often take the roll, as a teacher, with my stuffed animals.

When I went to college. I found myself as an underdeclared major with my course load all over the place – astronomy, art history, anthropology, French, and physics. I want to experience all before deciding. I also found myself right in the middle of a dormitory learning community for education communities. As I met and interacted with the girls on my hall, all fervent and excited education majors, I soon realized that, despite my wandering thoughts, education had always been at the back of my head for a reason. Shortly after I made this discovery, I quickly declared an elementary education (and subsequently a dual certification in special education), and I have never looked back.

Helena conceptualizes in this history, how she developed a sense of self as teacher. First, as an elementary school student taking on the play role of teacher and becoming more solidified as she prepared for her professional life. As is true of many teacher candidates, what it means to be a teacher is shaped by experiences of school as a student. These two participants' perspectives were influenced, also, by watching close family member/s engage in the work of teaching.

In sharing a sense of her best-loved self, Helena described how hers began to take more shape as she worked with students during her classroom practica.

I have spent three semesters of my college career in six different educational settings. There's one particular story that cemented why this is the profession for me.

In the behavior support room I was placed in, they took frequent field trips into the outdoors. . . One day, as we were hiking back from a leisurely trip to [a local geological site], a fourth-grade student of mine and I were having a conversation about the plants all around us. This student, a fourth-grader with mild cognitive intellectual disability disorder, was in love with the outdoors. After telling me that one plant "must be a species," he looked up at me. Ever so earnestly, he asked me, "Are you a boy or a girl?" Keep in mind I had just cut most of my hair short, and I had been in this classroom for three weeks already. When I answered that I was a girl, but that I understood that my hair was short like most boys. . . That simple answer was enough to satiate his curiosity.

The fact that in the three weeks I had spent so far in that room, I had managed to build a relationship with him where he was comfortable enough to ask me this question said it all. Putting on an engaging lesson and managing behaviors, is all well and good, but my favorite part of the job is the relationship I have the privilege to make with these students.

Helena's best-loved self as a teacher was taking shape around the idea that relationships with students are the most rewarding part of the job. She is arguing in this statement that the relationships teachers build and maintain are core to her best-loved self as a teacher.

Kristin's Emerging Best-Loved Teacher Self

Kristin told a story about a child who deeply impacted her. Gordon had Asperger's Syndrome, and he was in her swimming class.

All through high school and for most of my freshman year, I was convinced that I wanted to be a high school English teacher. I had a great English teacher my junior year of school who sparked

my interest in the subject. However, over summer break, I began giving private lessons to a seven-year-old named Gordon.

Ever since I was 15, I have been giving swim lessons over the summer to children ages two-12. Gordon was special though. The first day that I met Gordon he would not talk to me. He was scared to get in the water, swim, and trust me even in the slightest. I worked with him twice a week for the entire summer in half-hour increments, and slowly we began to make progress. By the end of the summer, I had Gordon swimming with confidence across the pool all by himself.

Gordon has Asperger's Syndrome, and because I worked so closely with him and was able to treat him like any other student who I would work with, I fell in love. Gordon is the reason I chose elementary and special education. I hope that I can make a difference in my students' lives and watch their eyes light up when they learn something new.

Gordon plays a role in the development of Kristin's best-loved self. Kristin talks about falling in love; an affair with her emerging teacher identity. An ability to excite students about learning and being a trustworthy adult in the lives of children are central to her best-loved self.

Kristin recollected another experience during her practica during which this desire to excite students' motivation to learn and this story reinforces this element of her best-loved self.

There was one lesson in particular that I taught that made me realize that primary teaching was exactly where I needed to be. It was the last week in my first-grade general education placement. . . and, I was teaching a lesson in math. I knew right away that I wanted to make it a hands-on lesson because my first graders did so well with getting up and moving around. Just watching their little faces light up when they were working collaboratively with each other and getting all the answers while learning kinesthetically was amazing. It was in that moment when I knew that I had the energy, the ability, and the drive to teach primary grades. It was in that moment that I knew I wanted to bring my energy to young grades and get those students as excited about learning as I was as a student.

These stories expose points of impact in the construction of a sense of a best-loved self. These particular interactions between particular preservice teachers with particular children (Ross and Chan, 2008) may provide the grist for examining philosophical and professional commitments as they are being incorporated into best-loved selves and carried forward into the first classrooms as early-career teachers.

Positioning Helena's and Kristin's Early Career Experiences Within Narrative Research Literature

Narrative research (e.g., Clandinin et al., 2013), for example, provides insights into the complex and nuanced ways that teachers make sense of their contexts of practice and the role autobiographical needs play in leaving the profession. In the narrative research literature regarding teacher retention and attrition, the process of leaving teaching may be perceived as a set of experiences that build on one another and hue a path upon which teachers to walk away. An awareness of

small details seeping from the stories portrayed in this research hint at a tugging at the fabric of teacher identity. In another narrative inquiry, Beaton (2014) focuses on dissonance teachers may feel as they encounter school milieus. In both Helena's and Kristin's experiences, dissonance is an element, but the tensions seem less located in taking professional risks. Rather, the rub emanates between the image constructed of their best-loved selves and the day-to-day lives of teachers. Perhaps, a more germane explanation can be found in the research with beginning teachers and their desire for compliance conducted by Flores and Day (2006). Elements of compliance may be extracted from Helena's and Kristin's early teaching stories. In Helena's case, the principal's response to just press charges, could be interpreted as a command to the early-career teacher who, then, complies. In Kristin's case, the pressure is more implicit. The speech therapist came to Kristin's classroom with a student who had been disruptive and, then, escalated through ineffective management strategies. This colleague's showing up is an unspoken demand that the classroom teacher, Kristin, take action with this child, to hold him accountable for behavior outside of the classroom. The act of compliance with others' expectations may be partially involved in the dissonance these two early-career teachers may have felt between lived experiences and their best-loved selves. One other burrowing into stories and broadening into the narrative inquiry research literature exposes the role that administrators have in the work of early-career teachers. In Helena's story, she expresses the feeling that she appreciates her principal with the words, "I just love her." Kristin's story is quite the opposite. She finds her vice-principal's response lack-luster. The two leave the experiences having felt quite different levels of support as they reconstruct their developing sense of who they are as teachers.

Experience Criteria as an Analytic Tool: An Inquiring Into Stories of Early-Career Teachers

Helena and Kristin, within their early-career contexts of practice, engage with and in challenges arising from work in schools shaped by equity issues. Helena's story, in which a bond with her student is broken, tugs at her best-loved self's commitment to relationship to her developing teacher identity. Through Kristin's cupcake incident, and the ensuing loss of control in her classroom, a different facet of equity is highlighted. In her storying of this experience, evidence of re/construction as she pieces together her teacher identity may be heard.

Helena: Becoming and Being a Teacher Amidst Equity Contexts

In recounting this story, Helena notes that she could have taken a job elsewhere: in a school where the challenges connected to high-level of student need and interconnected equity issues. She explains that teaching in this district was appealing to her. Helena had visited this school, had become familiar with its culture. A sense of strong alignment between the school's equity policies and practices and her own personal commitments prompted Helena to accept this position. A compelling interconnection

between temporal elements of continuity emerges in this explanation. Helena's attitudes, habits, and dispositions – her identity – prompt her to visit the school and recognize the connections between the personal and the social. In taking her first teaching job in this school, in accepting this position, she is, in fact, driving her story forward temporally – she is constructing a future.

Within the initial weeks of her first year, Helena found herself caught up in an unfolding experience in which she must choose whether or not to involve her sixth-grade student with the legal/justice system. Here, then, Helena is caught a situation – a collection of external factors with which she must interact. “Are you going to press charges?” This question is a complicated dilemma with no clear right answer. Helena's story portrays this experience as one fraught with emotion. Her best-loved self centers on the primacy of creating and maintaining relationships with students. A construction of knowledge and identity coming out of this experience likely sets up a disequilibrium. In instructing her colleagues to remind her, when troubled with memories of this experience, that this was for Joseph's own good. A sense of self-doubt tinges these words and lingers in what might be construed as a miseducative experience for all involved.

Within her first month, Helena met a challenge for which she felt unprepared. She intimated that not every first-year teacher would encounter such an experience. She stated that these are situations that college does not, cannot, prepare you to meet. In this moment, she relied on her school administrator for guidance and her school colleagues for support, highlighting the significance of relationship-building. Lower teacher turnover is associated with supportive school leadership, and leaders influence early career teachers' perceptions of school culture (Kraft et al., 2016; Burkhauser, 2017; Rothmann and Fouché, 2018; as cited in Van den Borre et al., 2021). As she grieves this relationship with Joseph, she re/constructs meaning from this experience and continues the work of weaving the fabric of her teacher identity.

Kristin: Becoming and Being a Teacher Amidst Equity Contexts

Kristin's story highlights issues of equity as they entwine amongst children with special needs. In the initial stages of this experiences in which the first-grader returns to his classroom from an intervention setting where he has had some challenges with his behavior. The consequences implemented by the speech teacher were ineffective. Both she and the student returned to Kristin's room escalated. Here, Kristin finds herself tangled in a situation not of her making. The interaction of her identity within the situation is within her control. However, her sense of herself as a teacher with exceptional management skills pushes her into an action that blows oxygen onto the fire. The distressed, angry, and emotional child lashes out at a consequence exacted in a context outside of the original misbehaviors.

In follow-up conversations with Kristin, her teammates reference the first-grader's disability as a factor in the child's response to the consequence delivered to the child upon his return for his disruptive behavior during speech. In their affirming message for Kristin, “that it was not her,” they attribute the outburst as part of his individual internal conditions.

Kristin, as a teacher candidate, completed course work and practicum experiences for a special education certification with her general education qualifications. She completed a year as a primary grades special education teacher before she moved to her first-grade elementary classroom. She brings a commitment to working with children with special needs and accepted a job in a district and school meeting Title 1 criteria. She works with a minority-majority student demographic. These are elements of her continuity, bits and pieces of past experiences, that are being cobbled together in a teacher identity, shaping her knowledge of herself, her students, and what it is to be a teacher.

This cupcake confrontation escalated and caught her up in self-doubt. Her words that she never thought she would be the teacher with an out-of-control child conveys the depth of disappointment, disequilibrium, and distrust she felt. The distrust lays at the doorstep of her administrative support. The disequilibrium bores into her self-doubt. And her disappointment is leveled at herself, evidenced in the assuaging of these emotional strains left to her teammates and her self-reflections. The re-constructions of self that impact interactions with individuals in forward looking stories.

Teaching is a profession of making moment-to-moment decisions, the results of which may not be predictable and not what was intended. Teachers' inner world and working environment are interwoven and construct an overabundance of factors associated with teacher retention (Zavelevsky and Lishchinsky, 2020). Teaching is a series of interconnected, complicated, complex, and nuanced interactions of continuities and shifting situations.

CONCLUSION

According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) “the severity of (teacher) turnover varies markedly” (p. v) across the United States. Statistically, for teachers working in contexts similar to Helena and Kristin, 16.7% of teachers leave the profession. For teachers working in Title 1 schools, the number increases to 70%. For those teaching in schools with a high percentage of students of color, similarly, 70% of teachers leave their positions. Our two participants, who are weathering their early-career years while remaining in teaching, seem to have prospects of staying in the field. We propose that their commitments to equity and teacher preparation that exposed them to contexts of positively addressing complex and challenging venues of practice may have provided them with resources to withstand the day-to-day tugging at their teacher identity. Certainly, within their school sites, they found teachers (in the case of Kristin and Helena) and administrators (in the case of Helena) who provided encouragement and guidance which may have enabled these two early-career teachers to compose stories in which they see themselves as staying in the profession.

We believe the concept of the best-loved self has value in helping teachers construct their sense of identity. Their vision of their best-loved self may strengthen them to stay in teaching long enough to develop professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions. The concept of the best-loved self may prompt the reconnection to philosophical commitments and

aspirations that brought them to teaching. The best-loved self may provide a counterbalance to the challenges a sense of teacher identity may encounter in the everyday tumble of lives lived in classrooms and schools.

As was the case for Helena and Kristin, this sense of the best-loved self may develop early and can shift over time. For teacher educators, this aspect of identity construction may provide openings for exploring philosophical commitments within preparations programs with teacher candidates. Teacher education programs that focus on the complexities of the demands on professional deliberations teachers face, may find the concept of the best-loved self an entry point into these discussions.

For teachers and administrators in schools who are intaking beginning teachers, understanding these nascent facets of best-loved teacher self may provide a window into these early-career teachers' motivations. Schools "characterized by mutual respect, collaborative cultures, and common educational objectives are more successful in retaining early career teachers" (Long et al., 2012, as cited in Van den Borre et al., 2021, p. 5). Perhaps, narrative inquiries with new teachers might open discussions with a focus on schools meeting challenges with high levels of need among their student populations.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because these data are not available to others than the approved researchers. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to VR, vicki.ross@nau.edu.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Northern Arizona University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

VR collected the data for this study. VR and TC analyzed the data and were involved in the initial writing of the manuscript. RM and YZ expertise were required to complete major portions of the requested revisions. All authors have been involved in the final augmentation, revisions, and editing of the manuscript.

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