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# “They Make Me Who I Am Today”: A Science Teacher’s Narrated Positioning, Agency, and Mediated Pedagogy with Multilingual Students

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## **“They Make Me Who I Am Today”: A Science Teacher’s Narrated Positioning, Agency, and Mediated Pedagogy with Multilingual Students**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

#### **About the Author:**

**Min Wang, PhD**, is an Assistant Professor of TESOL and Bilingual Education in the Department of Education Specialties at St. John’s University. She was awarded a PhD in TESOL in 2016 from the University of Alabama. Dr. Wang’s research interest includes critical applied linguistics, discourse analysis, positioning, and agency. Dr. Wang has published 10 articles in regionally, nationally, and internationally recognized journals. Her recent book entitled *Multimodalities and Chinese students’ L2 literacies: Positioning, agency, and communities* addresses the complicated interactions among multimodality, positioning, and agency in increasingly digitized, multilingual, and multicultural contexts in and through which Chinese international students practiced their L2 literacies.

#### **Acknowledgement:**

I appreciate my participant’s precious time and effort for participating in the research study.

# “They Make Me Who I Am Today”: A Science Teacher’s Narrated Positioning, Agency, and Mediated Pedagogy with Multilingual Students

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**Min Wang**

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Informed by theorizing positioning and agency, this article presents a case study by examining a science teacher’s positioning acts and her agency development in a middle school in New York City. An analysis of this teacher’s teaching narratives reveals that when she positioned her emergent multilingual students as “whole people,” who had social, cultural, emotional, and linguistic needs, she utilized their lived experiences as inspirations and resources to modify and inform instruction. The mediated pedagogy, developed by considering her students’ complicated and frustrating realities outside of the classroom, made them feel greater self-worth and valued, and encouraged them to persevere in school. Findings suggest that this teachers’ positive positioning acts inspired by her multilingual students’ lived experiences can trigger positive agency, which can become a direct driving force for pedagogical decisions and transformation. It also can contribute to emergent multilingual students’ positive self-positioning and stimulate and develop their agency for active and engaged classroom participation and interaction.

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**Keywords:** emergent multilinguals, narrative analysis, positioning, teacher agency, teaching and teacher education

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Having conversations with students is seen as a key into effective instruction and learning. Amy, the focus teacher of this case study who works with multilingual students, explains this practice in the following quote:

Middle school students do not like quiet. The best way to get a middle school student to speak to you is to sit with them and not speak. If you sit long enough and stay quite the student will begin to talk. Once the student begins to talk, they will begin to tell you every detail about their life. When a student speaks with you, it has been my experience, that they are open and honest. Many times, they just want their voices to be heard and for them to realize that they matter. When a student feels that they matter to you, it allows them to be successful in school. My goal in each of my classes is to make each student feel they matter to me...I strive to make each student feel that voice and what they have to say matter to me...When speak social with my students I always enjoy asking what their home

life is like. By gaining an understanding of how they interact with their family I am better able to understand my students. (Journal entry 1)

She considers conversing as an important venue for students to ensure that their voices are heard, underscoring in turn a connection between students' feeling of worth and school success. As a teacher, Amy takes the time to learn about her students' life stories valuing their linguistic, cultural, and social realities. She views the students' life stories as teaching resources, as well as an inspiration for teaching. Her positive positioning of her students and herself shapes her agency, the power for self-transformation, and informative decisions on pedagogical practices.

Contrasting Amy's perspectives on teaching linguistically diverse students, the scholarly literature suggests that the influx of these students in US schools has become a complicated dilemma that many teachers face, especially white monolingual English-speaking teachers (McVee et al., 2019; Samson & Lesaux, 2015). The agency that these teachers may have in the classroom is often used to blame these students for their limited English proficiency, interrupted schooling, and lack of family support. The term used to label these students at school serves to illustrate a teacher's agency that devalues students. Specifically, some labels suggest students as linguistically deficient, culturally worthless, and socially insignificant (Haneda & Sherman, 2018; Yoon, 2008). Researchers have argued that, labeling these students as English Language Learners (ELLs) may make teachers blind to the students' rich diverse linguistic and cultural experiences, and they are frequently treated as uninvited guests in their classrooms (Motha, 2014; Yoon, 2008). Sue Kasun and Cinthya Saavedra (2016) add that, "We only see [them] as language without bodies" (p. 687). This label consciously and unconsciously deprives the students of equal educational opportunities. Importantly, García (2009) suggested that,

Labeling students as either LEPs [Limited English Proficient Students] or ELLs omits an idea that is critical to the discussion of equality in the teaching of these children. When officials and educators ignore the bilingualism that these students can—and must—develop through schooling in the United States, they perpetuate inequalities in the education of these children. Putting bilingualism at the center in speaking of these students is important for (a) the children themselves; (b) teachers and teaching; (3) educational policy makers; (d) parents and communities; (e) the field of language education and TESOL; and (f) societies at large. (p. 322)

I utilize the term of emergent multilingual speakers to refer to ELLs hereafter, because these students speak more than two languages, which are valuable resources for their multilingual identities and academic achievement. It is a term that invites educators to take a stance of strength and possibility towards linguistically diverse students.

In this article I explore teacher agency in Amy's classroom, where students' linguistic diversity is uplifted and used to support their learning. I first frame the study by defining the construct of agency, exploring some of its theoretical underpinnings, including the construct of positioning, and discussing current relevant research that have explored teacher agency. Second, a description of the study's methodology

antecedes the discussion of findings. Finally, the conclusions and implications for further study are presented.

### **Teacher Agency and Positioning**

From a poststructuralist perspective, Davies (1990) defines agency as a form of discursive practice. She explains that individuals use discursive practices available to them to formulate their motivations and desires. Davies goes one step further to expound:

Embedded within those discursive practices is an understanding that each person is one who has an obligation to take themselves up as a knowable, recognizable identity, who 'speaks for themselves', who accepts responsibility for their actions, that is as one who is recognizably separate from any particular collective, and thus as one who can be said to have agency (p. 343).

Because of the nature of discursive constitution of self, agency is the authority to "recognize that constitution and to resist, subvert and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted" (Davies, 1991, p. 51). In this sense, agency is linguistically presented, shaped, and materialized (Ahearn, 2001).

Rooted in a sociocultural point of view, Ahearn (2001) argues that agency is "socioculturally constrained and enabled" (p. 127). She further points out that agency is not free will, a concentration which is aligned with Davies' observation that

Agency is never autonomy in the sense of being an individual standing outside structure and process. Autonomy becomes instead the recognition that power and force presume subcultural counter-power and counter-force and that such sub-cultures can create new life forms, which disrupt the hegemonic forms, even potentially replacing them (1991, p. 51).

Agency, then, interacts with and is influenced by social structure and discursive practices (Wang, 2020a).

From an ecological standpoint, agency is defined as something people *do*, instead of something people *have*. This understanding emphasizes how agency is "*achieved* in concrete settings and in and through particular ecological conditions and circumstances" (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 626. Emphasis is original). The achievement that Biesta and colleagues consider serves as an interplay between the social structure and one's past history, current practical evaluation, and future projection.

Based on foundational perspectives, Matthew Wallen and Roland Tormey (2019) defined teacher agency as "a product of professional identity" (p. 130), which echoes Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate's (2016) conceptualization of identity-agency. Maria Ruohotie-Lyhty and Josephine Moate argue that, "agency is the capacity to use experiences and participation in the development of professional identity" (p. 319). Teacher agency is inseparable from professional identity. As Lai, Li, and Gong (2016) emphasize, teacher agency is the fundamental drive for teachers to construct and reconstruct professional identity. In other words, professional identity cannot be developed without agentic actions.

Informed by a poststructuralist perspective and inspired by Davies' (1990) definition of agency, I define teacher agency as

the awareness, willingness, and authority to transform teaching practices based on the recognition of students' social-emotional well-being and academic needs through considering their life experiences and stories as pedagogical resources and inspirations in and through discursive practices, such as storytelling, reflection journals, or narratives of teaching practices. Students' life stories have the potential to evoke teachers' emotions, such as empathy, pleasure, excitement, and regret. Listening to students' life stories awakens teachers' sense that they are teaching professionals who are activists with expert knowledge and hold the responsibility to address various needs of students in the construction of emotional subjects (Wang, 2020b, p. 12).

A related construct to that of teacher agency is that of *positioning*. It refers to the act of locating oneself and others with rights and obligations in and through language, such as conversations, storytelling, or narratives (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1998). Positions are constituted by and negotiated through discursive practices as individuals emerge through the processes of social interactions, whereby the speakers and hearers construct and reconstruct how they interpret their life experiences (Davies & Harré, 1990). An individual can be variously positioned in a conversation. In this sense, positioning is interactive, relational, and multiple. Positioning is also fluid because

who one is, is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and others' lives (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 46).

The seminal research on this construct highlight two fundamental perspectives: (a) reflexive positioning, also called self-positioning, and (b) interactive positioning or other-positioning. Reflexive positioning guides people to think about their roles and assignments, such as taking responsibilities to act the roles because "[w]hen a person is engaged in a deliberate self-positioning process this often will imply that they try to achieve specific goals with their act of self-positioning. This requires one to assume that they have a goal in mind" (Harré & van Langenhove, 1998, p. 224).

In interactive positioning, people assign positions to others (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1998). Through discursive practices, the speaker and the listener take on various positions and constantly offer or deny people opportunities to say or do certain things (Kayi-Aydar, 2014). They may also refuse to take positions assigned by others and reposition themselves in a desired situation. In this sense, positioning requires agency, and agency produces positioning.

Teacher agency in classrooms with linguistically diverse students requires teachers to provide them with equal access to rich educational resources for their linguistic and academic development. The process of preparing teachers to meet this opportunity then needs to be considered carefully. For this purpose, Motha (2014) advocates:

Teacher education, both in TESOL and within other disciplines, should consistently and forcefully focus on teacher agency, applying a specific and deliberate emphasis on the role that teachers play in shaping the power relations, access to resources, and positionality of their linguistic-minority students. It is not enough for teachers to be familiar with second language acquisition theory and be able to name and identify a variety of ESL methods (p. 104).

Motha's advocacy of teachers' agency has echoed most research on pre-service and in-service teacher education (Kayi-Aydar, 2015a; Kayi-Aydar et al., 2019; Palmer & Martínez, 2013). Early research in this regard focused more on institutional and structural impact on teachers' agency development. For example, Lasky (2005) examined the relationship between curriculum reform and in-service teachers' agency. Sannino (2010) found that there was a positive association between resistance and agency and its potential for this connection to positively impact professional advancement and pedagogical growth. Ollerhead and Ollerhead (2010) explored the influence of policy-driven constraints and enablements on teaching practices and learning outcomes. Lipponen and Kumpulainen (2011) argued that collective inquiry and discussion can support pre-service teachers' agency work.

Recent research has looked at the interplay between teacher agency, identity, and power dynamics. Some researchers have explored the factor of identity in recent years. Through an examination of nine teachers' professional agency, Buchannan (2015) used teacher identity to examine the interplay of the social structure, including contexts of reform, discourses, and teachers' agency. This researcher argued that the interaction between teacher identity and school culture can both enable and constrain teachers' agency. Moreover, Feryok's (2013) analysis of the professional growth of an Armenian English teacher revealed that this English teacher oriented her actions through a specific image, which originated from her previous experiences as an elementary school student with her English teacher. This image mediated a sense of agency that guided her individual actions as a language-teaching student, English teacher, and teacher trainer. Feryok thus suggests that English teachers' professional development occurs over a lifetime and personal reflections can function as a professional call to action. In addition, based on a poststructuralist perspective on teacher identity and agency, Kayi-Aydar (2015b) reported how one teacher candidate switched from teaching Spanish to teaching English as a second language because of constant negotiations of her identities and agency across time and space. Kayi-Aydar concluded that race, ethnicity, and non-nativism interact with one another in complex ways.

Another factor to consider when exploring teacher agency is power dynamics. Research suggests that it can greatly influence teachers' agency in terms of their professional development (Haneda & Sherman, 2018; Kasun & Saavedra, 2016). Through a lens of indigenous knowledge, Kasun and Saavedra (2016) examined eight US teacher candidates' self-assessments, course work samples, class discussions, focus group sessions, and ethnographic field notes during a four-week abroad program in Mexico. They found that the teacher candidates began to understand the ways of knowing of others through decentering their knowledge paradigms, became

decolonized and empathetic with their emergent bilingual students, and became creators of caring (Noddings, 2003) classroom spaces.

To enrich the existing literature on pre- and in-service teacher agency, I examined how emergent multilingual speaking students' lived experiences impact teachers' agency, positioning, and pedagogy. To reach this goal, I explored two research questions:

1. How did a science teacher position her emergent multilingual students and how did she position herself based on her students' life stories?
2. How did her agency change according to self- and other-positioning acts and how did this changed agency inform her pedagogical decisions?

## **Methods**

### **The Participant and Data Collection**

The participant, Amy, in her middle twenties, who is a White science teacher, taught in a middle school in a metropolitan area of the United States for three years. Amy was a monolingual English speaker, but she was interested in multilingual and multicultural education. She was enrolled in the MATESOL program for her TESOL certification in a cohort group at a university in the northeastern United States. Amy was taking a linguistic class taught by me in the summer of 2017. There were about 27 students in my class, all of whom were asked to write journal reflections on their language learning or teaching experiences. The journal reflection was considered as part of students' homework. At the time, the students were not aware that their homework was going to be used as part of the research data. Students wrote one journal entry each week for the summer session course. They wrote four journal entries in total. After the course ended, I contacted all the students to participate in this research study. Seven of them showed interest in my study. Amy was one of them. Amy became my participant for this particular article because the focus of her teaching reflection was on bilingual/multilingual education. I used Amy's four journal entries as the data source for the narrative analysis discussed here.

### **Data Analysis**

The investigation of Amy's agency was conducted through an in-depth examination of her narrative positioning. When the teacher narrates, she produces herself and others situationally as "social beings" (Bamberg, 1997). Zembylas (2003) suggests that narrative research is "a powerful tool to document the way discursive environments provide the construction of teacher identity" (p. 215). I adapted Bamberg's (1997) framework of narrative positioning which asks:

1. How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within the reported events?...
2. How does the speaker position him- or herself to the audience?...
3. How do narrators position themselves to themselves? (p. 337).

Bamberg's framework questions emphasize the positioning acts of the characters in narratives, the narrator's positioning to the audience, and the narrator's self-positioning. Inspired by but slightly different from Bamberg's framework of



narrative positioning, I asked the following questions while analyzing Amy's journal entries: (1) What stories were told in the narrative? What events were highlighted? Why did Amy highlight a certain event? (2) How did Amy position her students and herself through narratives? For example, what lexical items and grammatical devices were used to construct a particular positioning? (3) How did Amy's agency change or develop through narrative positioning?

Here are the steps I took while analyzing the data. After I read Amy's journal entry line by line, I wrote down the topic of the narrative and summarized the event(s) she highlighted. When I read the entry several times, I figured out the possible reasons why Amy highlighted the event and jotted down the reasons. After reading the highlighted event again and again, I underlined certain lexical items, such as "ENL students," "whole people" and grammatical devices (e.g., "As a class we spoke about...As a class we researched..."). I made comments on the certain lexical items and grammatical devices as well as the themes of positioning and agency that emerged from the data analysis. Table 1 below illustrates an example of data analysis.

### **Findings**

Amy's journal entries covered her teaching experience for several years. Since she introduced her students in her first journal and narrated her teaching practices in later journals, I followed her narrative sequence. The section below reports her journal entries according to the original order of narratives she used.

**Table 1.***An Example of Data Analysis*

<b>Narrative 1: Problematizing the Label of ELLs</b>	<b>Self-Positioning</b>	<b>Other- Positioning</b>	<b>Agency</b>
<p>“If you only look at a student as an English language learner then you have taken away who they are as a person. Many of my students who are labeled as English as new language students are looked down upon because of the label. Many of the teachers in my building become upset when they are given the ESL class to teach. In my three years of teaching, I have had countless experiences that have taught me to see my students as whole people and not just ENL students.</p>	<p>Amy positioned herself as an advocate for considering multilingual speakers as human beings, not just English language learners. She pointed out the consequence of labeling. She distanced herself from her colleagues who were “upset” for being assigned to teach multilingual speakers.</p>	<p>Amy positioned herself students as “ENL students” as well as “whole people.” Here, Amy did not use the term ELL, but ENL. The term of “ENL” indicated that her students were able to speak other languages.</p>	<p>Amy believed that her experiences shaped her identity as a teacher. She claimed that labeling students as ELLs is problematic. She pointed out the consequence of labeling and indirectly criticized her colleagues who became “upset” for being assigned to teach multilingual speakers.</p>

**Narrative 1: Problematizing the Label of ELL**

Amy was asked to introduce herself in the first reflection journal. Interestingly, she briefly mentioned herself as a seventh-grade science teacher at a middle school where she taught two honors level classes, one co-taught students with disabilities class, one general education class, one advanced ENL (English as a New language) class, and one beginning ENL class. Amy mainly introduced her students through problematizing the label of ELLs. She reflected,

If you only look at a student as an English language learner, then you have taken away who they are as a person. Many of my students who are labeled as ELLs are looked down upon because of the label. Many of the teachers in my building become upset when they are given the ESL class to teach. In my three year of teaching, I have had countless experiences that have taught me to see my students as whole people and not just ENL students. (Journal entry 1)

Amy claimed that the label of ELL ignored the students as persons. This statement was aligned with Kasun and Saavedra’s (2016) previously mentioned argument that ELLs were considered as language without bodies. Amy also pointed out

that the label of ELL became one of the reasons for discrimination. She indirectly criticized her colleagues who were “upset” for being assigned to teach ELLs. Amy positioned herself as an advocate for regarding ELLs as “ENL” students as well as “whole people.” She chose to use the term “ENL students,” due to the term’s positive connotation, that is, students speak more than one language. The choice of terminology Amy used indicated her acknowledgement of the danger of the ELL label and favor toward the acknowledgement that the students already has a linguistic repertoire system. This suggested to me that this teacher may see her students as multilinguals, inferred from the journal entry where she introduced them:

Many of my students are not native speakers of English. In my honors class many of my students speak English in addition to a second language at home. In my general education class, most of my students are former English language learners. In my special education class, most students speak two languages but are stronger in English. Lastly in my two ESL class[es] almost all students speak English as a second or third language. I have 30 students who are currently receiving ESL services. Out of my 200 students that I teach 123 students have the self-identity as speaking a language other than English at home. Many of my students have tested out of ESL but still have extended time on exams. (Journal entry 1)

Amy’s framing of her students as multilinguals functioned as a salient discourse that students’ “primary language skills and their academic learning goals” (Palmer & Martínez, 2013, p. 271) should be recognized and valued. Her other positioning illustrated a belief that her students had cultural and linguistic value and talents because they were multilinguals. In the excerpt below, Amy directly described who her students were. She stated,

My students are an absolutely amazing group of people...The group of students in this class is truly special, the students speak a variety of language[s], and many times only have their limited English skills to communicate with each other. I am always impressed with how my students work each class to learn English as well as learn topic[s] in science. I am excited when they ask questions to expand their thought processes...I no longer think of Class 706 as my beginner ESL class but as a class of students who are all diverse and challenge me to be the best teacher, I can be each day. (Journal entry 1)

In the narrative above, Amy positioned her students as “absolutely amazing”, “truly special”, “all diverse”, and “challenging”. Her students spoke “a variety of language.” To present a whole image of her students, this teacher used a series of adverbs and positive adjectives, through which a group of talented and curious multilingual learners emerged. Amy also highlighted her emotions about teaching her students by using positive adjective phrases, such as “so excited,” “excited,” and “always impressed.” These emotions became the “glue of identity” (Zembylas, 2003) through which a passionate teacher who was committed to teaching was constructed. Amy’s view of students strikingly differed from her colleagues who were “upset” when assigned to teach multilingual speakers. The way in which Amy constructed her

students reflected how she viewed her profession and her professional identities. She described,

I believe that there are many experiences that have shaped me into the person I am today. I enjoy teaching more than anything in the world. I am always excited to go to work and help improve the knowledge of my students. I am also very hard on myself, working each year to get better at teaching and creating new lessons to promote student engagement. (Journal entry 1)

Amy believed that her teaching experiences shaped her professional identity. Her enjoyment of and excitement about teaching indicated her commitment to her profession, through which a self-disciplined and goal-oriented teacher identity was constructed. Again, Amy emphasized her emotions “enjoy” and “always excited” about teaching and helping her students. These emotions seemed to function as an indicator and a promoter for her agency (Benesch, 2018) to become better at teaching through promoting student engagement.

## **Narrative 2: Transforming Pedagogical Practices through Listening to Students’ Stories**

### ***Knowing Students by Listening to Their Life Stories***

In her second journal, Amy discussed the goal for each of her classes: to make students feel that they mattered to her. To do so, Amy invited her students to come to lunch with her or come after school for extra help. During this non-class time, she worked with small groups or one-on-one to learn about their life experiences. Amy believed that if students felt valued, they would be successful in school. She also claimed that gaining an understanding of how her students interacted with their families helped her better understand them in school. She positioned herself as “lucky” because students trusted her, and they were willing to share their life stories with her. She also positioned her students as “amazing people” who shaped her identity as a responsible and accommodated teacher. The following quote from the journal entry suggests this,

All my students regardless of their English levels have many things to say. The trick is to sit and listen to them. I feel so blessed to have students who trust me and let me into intimate details of their life. I am so inspired by the stories of my students. They make me who I am today, with each story that they tell, and I make my classes more targeted to them and their learning needs...For each class a unique lesson on all topic is created to meet the learning and behavioral needs of the class. (Journal entry 2)

Amy recognized the value of students’ life stories, which not only helped her better understand students but also inspired her teaching practices. The following section displays an example of how one of her students’ life stories became an inspiration for her pedagogical decisions and practice.

### ***Being Inspired by Students’ Life Stories***

When Amy guided her students to conduct medical team case studies in class, she realized that one of her Bengali students seemed sad and distressed, which surprised her because this student’s disposition was usually placid and mellow. The

student told Amy that he had to accompany his parents to the doctor when they were sick because he was able to translate their symptoms from Bengali to English and vice versa. Amy recollected the story as follows:

He told me that this was upsetting to him because when he left the doctor's office, he was very worried about the health of his family members. He felt like he had to be the adult and his mom and dad were in his care, like they were children. He also explained that one time his mom was sick and required a surgical procedure. The doctor had told him to let his mom know what was going on. My student explained that his mom looked so scared and different than he had ever seen before, so he could not tell his mom that she needed a surgical procedure. He said, "I knew it was wrong not to tell my mom, but I could not take the look she was giving me. It was like I had all the power in the world, and she could do nothing. It made me feel broken inside, so I told her it was time to go home. Her face got all happy, and my mom, the one I know, would be back". (Journal entry 2)

In the narrative of her student's story, Amy not only described what happened to the student and his family but also emphasized how he felt about the encounter in the doctor's office with such direct feelings as "upsetting", "worried about", and "broken inside" and indirect feelings as, "He felt like he had to be the adult and his mom and dad were in his care" and "I had all the power in the world". She foregrounded her student's reversed positioning as a powerful adult. This foregrounding indicated Amy's consideration of her student's self-positioning as significant. Therefore, she highlighted a capable, understanding, and mature translator through her narrative. The data displayed Amy's intention for and understanding of her student's social-emotional well-being, which stimulated her empathetic and caring emotions. The documentation of her student's story constructed Amy as an observant and loving teacher. The narrative below further confirmed her self-positioning. She described,

I can only imagine what this student had to go through as the translator for his mom. I know it is hard for most children to see their mom and dad upset or to hear about that a family member needs medical attention. I completely understand why the student wanted to see 'his' mom, the lady who took care of him and ran the household. I think about the fear that he must have had and how he must have felt. How hard it must have been to understand that his mom was powerless with no voice and how she needed a child to help her discover what made her sick. I can only begin to imagine how the mother must feel. She must feel powerless. (Journal entry 2)

This teacher's narrative concentrated on her emotions about the student's moral and psychological dilemma as a translator in the doctor's office. Amy's word choices, such as "I can only imagine," "go through," "must," and "I completely understand" demonstrated the difficulty and struggle her student had experienced and how she empathized with him. As a White educator for whom English is her home language, she did not have the same experience as the student did, so she could only imagine what happened to him; however, she understood his circumstance. Amy's self-positioning as an emotional subject emerged in and through her narrative, which confirmed Zembylas'

(2003) argument that, “agency is the constituted effect of emotion discourses (as well as other discourses)—bound up in practices—that inscribe the body” (p. 226). Her deep empathy toward this student became an indicator for agency to transform her pedagogical practice. In other words, Amy’s emotion generated power that empowered her to teach “Medical Translators” in this class immediately instead of solely following her teaching as originally planned. She continued to write,

As a teacher, it became so important for me to teach all of my students about Medical Translators...As a class we spoke about different experiences where language or translating for a family member was difficult when dealing with one’s health. As a class we researched the job of a Medical Translator and spoke about how they could help out a family. The students then began learning how to go about getting translation services in their native languages for their doctors’ appointments. Lastly, we went over different terms that students would hear in a doctor’s office and defined how we could use them. (Journal entry 2)

Amy iterated her mission as a teacher who realized the importance and responsibility of teaching “Medical Translators” to her students. She also constructed a community of practice by using the first plural pronoun “we” three times to include everyone in her class. She positioned herself as a responsible teacher and decision maker who cared about her students’ social-emotional, academic, and linguistic needs. She also positioned herself as a community member who bore the responsibility to co-construct knowledge to help her community members solve real-life problems. Amy considered her students’ life stories as a resource for meaningful teaching and learning because the stories told by her students not only allowed her to adapt the content but also allowed her students to solve real-world issues in their daily lives. She narrated,

I would have never thought of teaching this to my students until I listened to the story of the experience that my student had with his mom and translating for her. When I make time to speak to my students and learn about their life, it allows me, as a teacher, to adapt what has been taught in the classroom. This adaptation of content allows for the students to take real-world issues that they have and learn how to solve their problems. This in turn makes all students excited to learn as the material is based off what they feel they need to know for life. Many of my best lessons began with listening to the needs of my students and trying to find a way to help them to solve the problem they spoke with me about. (Journal entry 2)

Amy used a hypothetical clause “I would have never thought of teaching this to my students until I listened to the story of the experience that my student had with his mom and translating to her” to emphasize how important her student’s life story was to her teaching practices. This recognition encouraged her to make an effort to spend time with her students, listening to their life stories to be aware of their complicated and difficult life realities, which both resourced and benefited her teaching and students’ learning. A self-positioning as loving, flexible, and adaptive teacher and other-positioning of the students as real-life problem solvers emerged in the narrative above. Amy’s agency became salient through her pedagogical decision and transformation.

Amy also summarized that she created a community of practice, in and through which she and her students co-produced knowledge. She mentioned that her multilingual students were able to perform at grade level, which was attributed to their hard work and their feeling of value and self-worth.

By listening to my students and teaching them from the start that their needs held value in my classroom, I was able to create a community of students who wanted to learn and work together. This year my ENLs have been performing all lab tasks at grade level, they complete the same projects as their peers, and learn the same material. I feel that my students are part of the school community because they all are able to communicate with their peers. When the students feel that they are important, they work harder in the classroom. I am so lucky to work with my students each day. (Journal entry 2)

### **Narrative 3: Students Felt as Second Class**

Although Amy built a good relationship with her students, there are instances in which she wrote about her struggles to connect with the students and understand their needs during her first year of teaching. She recalled that she made a poster-size map of the world for each student for her lesson on topographic maps. She spent multiple hours of weekend time of drawing, coloring, cutting, gluing, and laminating each map. She was proud of herself because she had made something that she could use each year and it would allow her students to learn. When she taught her honors students topographic maps by using handmade maps, students were excited and she felt pleased with her work; however, when she taught ENL (multilingual) students the same topic by using the same material, students did not seem to take the class seriously. They used the handmade maps to hit each other. Seeing what was happening in the class, Amy felt frustrated and helpless. She explained,

The students were shaking the maps and whacking each other. I recall standing there in fear watching my maps that I had taken hours to make be destroyed. Watching the children break apart the maps and be aggressive to their peers, my world fell apart. It was that day I realized that I needed to learn how to teach my ENLs in a way that was targeted for them. (Journal entry 3)

Amy did not notice the difference between her honors students and ENL students, so, when the students did not understand what she had done for the class, her “world fell apart.” The feeling of failure made Amy realize that her class should be targeted for her students. Amy’s frustration did not discourage her; instead, it became a source for her agentic reflection and thinking. She reflected,

My ENLs did not care about the time I spent making the maps for them because they could not find the academic value in what was given to them. Many of my students found that I was giving the students homemade maps was a ‘baby’ activity. They felt that they had seen maps prior to this lesson. They thought that they were not allowed to use the ‘real’ maps and were being given lower level work than their peers. (Journal entry 3)

Her reflection emphasized two important aspects of teaching emergent multilinguals: one was “academic value”; the other was social value. The students did

not realize the academic value of the handmade maps because they thought that they were not given the real maps, so they felt that they were treated differently and not valued. After this incident, Amy recognized that communication was the “key” for effective teaching and learning. She stated,

As a teacher I had failed them. I had made my students feel that they were second class and they could not do grade level work... After reflecting on my experience that day, and thinking about the feelings of my ENLs, I began to realize that communication is key to any learning environment. That all students need clear expectations: What is required of them as well, is an explanation as to why. Thinking back on this experience, I am still upset with myself for not understanding the needs of my students, but more for not asking my students’ needs... (Journal entry 3)

She constructed a reflective and critical teacher image in her narrative, a teaching professional who had struggles but strove to find solutions to meet students’ needs. Again, Amy’s emotions, such as “regret” and “upset”, were centered in her narrative, which became a site of self-transformation (Zembylas, 2003). In the excerpt below, she used another hypothetical conditional statement to express her regret.

Had I spoken to my students first, explained what was going on, and allowed the students to address their concerns, I believe, the lesson would have gone differently. The students would have felt that their social emotional needs were met and that I, as their teacher, was on their team. As a teacher, this moment shaped my teaching practices for the years to come. I always begin teaching by listening to the needs of my students. Asking them what they need allows for the students to feel valued. (Journal entry 3)

Her reflection focused on students’ “social emotional needs”. She believed that communication was essential for making her class targeted to students’ needs. This is demonstrated by her use of the words “spoken”, “explained”, and “address their concerns” in her first statement in the excerpt above. She also considered herself as a team member with her students. Amy, again, iterated that her “failed” teaching experiences “shaped” her as a teacher who listened to her students’ life stories to not only make them feel valued but also transform her teaching practices.

#### **Narrative 4: Chaos and Multimodalities**

Amy also provided another example of how her teaching experience shaped her professional identity. She recalled that there was a lot of chaos in her beginner ENL class when she started teaching in her third year. She explained,

On the first day of school as I was speaking to the class, many of Chinese ENLs were yelling in Chinese over me. They were standing up and screaming! This made it very hard for me to teach. So, I began asking the students who stood up and scream, “why are you acting this way?” They all replied, “We are translating to our peers. They are new. They do not understand.” I began giving “translation” time to all of my students. This allowed the students who spoke Chinese to feel validated as well as feeling that they helped their peers. (Journal entry 4)



Based on her explanation, Amy constructed an understanding of a flexible teaching professional who embraced and valued multilingualism. Giving translation time to the students not only validated students' home language but also made students feel welcome in their community. Again, students' social, cultural, and linguistic value was recognized and legitimized. Amy not only gave "translation" time to her students but also allowed them to draw pictures to answer questions. She also created lessons that were completely non-verbal. She launched inquiry-based project learning activities so that students had a chance to show their knowledge and ability. Amy saw many benefits that the inquiry-based projects brought to the class. She described,

We built 3D cells, bookshelves, chairs, and tables during the first marking period. These projects allowed all students to work together regardless of language abilities. My advanced ENLs and my English native speakers were able to see the strengths that their peers had based on their projects. My students began to see each other for their strengths and not weaknesses. My native speakers began to listen more to the ENLs, and they learned that the ENLs had value to the class. It was amazing to watch my native speakers begin to respect my ENLs and my ENLs begin to succeed in science...I challenge myself to be the best teacher for my students. I am inspired by their needs and work very hard to give them the best lesson that I can... (Journal entry 4)

Through her language choices, such as the first plural pronoun "We", "all students", and "work together" in the community of practice became a salient feature of Amy's class. Also, an inclusive and welcomed classroom discourse became an additional feature. For example, Amy's advanced multilingual students and students for whom English is their home language began to see their peers' strengths "based on their projects", instead of fixating on their English skills; they realized that their multilingual peers had value for class contributions, and they should be respected and valued. This classroom discourse allowed Amy's multilingual students to excel in science. In this excerpt, she positioned her students as talented individuals and appreciative community members. Her identity, as an inclusive and innovative teacher was formed, which, was the result of Amy's agentic transformation.

## Discussion

The data suggest that when Amy positioned her emergent multilingual students in holistic terms—students who had social, cultural, emotional, and linguistic needs and were "amazing" individuals with cultural, social, and linguistic value—she utilized their lived experiences as inspirations and resources to modify and inform her teaching and instruction. The mediated pedagogy through Amy's consideration of emergent multilinguals' complicated and frustrating realities outside of the classroom made these students feel important and valued, which, therefore, encouraged them to persevere in school. The emergent multilinguals' linguistic repertoires were recognized, treasured, and enriched.

Further, the emergent multilingual students' lived experiences challenged the teacher to become a better teacher, one who was willing and able to take agentic actions to change students' participatory behaviors and further transform classroom dynamics. Findings reveal that teachers' positive self- and other-positioning inspired by

emergent multilinguals' lived experiences can trigger teachers' positive agency, which can become a direct driving force for pedagogical decisions and transformation. Also, teachers' positive positioning and enhanced agency can contribute to emergent multilinguals' positive self- and other-positioning and stimulate and develop their agency for active and engaged classroom participation and interaction.

Data also reveal that Amy's emotions became sites of her positional identities and pedagogical transformation. She chose to narrate beliefs about her students in the first journal because, as she saw them, her students, who were regarded as multilinguals, shaped her professional identity. She challenged the dominant discourse about labeling ELLs and distanced herself from her colleagues who considered teaching multilinguals as upsetting. Amy's other-positioning of her students as "absolutely amazing" and "truly special" because they "speak a variety of language" was quite different from that of other mainstream classroom teachers discussed in the research literature. For example, Yoon (2008) observed that multilingual students in her study were positioned as "problem", "shy", and "goofy" and seemed as uninvited guests in their classrooms. The teachers ignored their students' cultural and linguistic value so that the students became socially and linguistically invisible in classroom interactions. In addition, Pettit (2011) points out that mainstream classroom teachers blamed multilingual students for "a lack of academic achievement" (p. 130) and regarded them as linguistically deficient and therefore should not be mainstreamed. This negative other-positioning of multilinguals was solely based on their English language skills, and should be redressed because it has the danger to delimit opportunities for classroom participation. As García, Kleifgen, and Falchi (2008) suggest,

English language learners are in fact emergent bilinguals. That is, through school and through acquiring English, these children become bilingual, able to continue to function in their home language as well as in English... (p. 6).

The term "emergent bilinguals" features language learners' linguistic value instead of deficit. Students have unlimited potentials because "[a] child could be a competent speaker of another language, a strong mathematics and science student, a curious reader, a caring older sibling, a leader" (Palmer & Martínez, 2013, p. 271). Therefore, mainstream teachers should "pay more scrupulous attention to the students' acceptance and interactions by viewing the students as complex, cultural, social beings, more than simply language learners" (Yoon, 2008, p. 516).

Amy highlighted her excitement to learn more about her students so that the students' storytelling became an integral part of pedagogy. In Narrative 2, when Amy narrated her student's story, she constructed an emotional subject (Zembylas, 2003), who used her emotions as a departure point for her self- and pedagogical transformation as a teaching professional. She could have briefly mentioned what happened to the student and focused on what she did in her class. Instead, she foregrounded the story itself; she placed the student's feeling about his mother's reaction before and after his mother was told to go home and placed the student's moral dilemma for hiding the truth from his mother at the center of her narration. She also concentrated on how she herself felt about the student and his mother's situation. Amy's narration of this story can be understood as her intention to understand the

student's emotions by exposing her own. Through narrating her student's story, Amy was emotionally engaged in constructing her professional identity, which was informed and directed by her various emotions that emerged in both her students' and her own storytelling.

These emotions directly resonated with Amy's thoughts, judgments, and beliefs (Zembylas, 2003). Amy's emotional experiences that were synergized with her understanding of her students formed her positional identities, which resulted in and from agency. In this sense, emotions became the sites of agency. These emotional constituents of the positioning drove Amy to change her lesson plan to accommodate her student's needs. Based on Amy's case, emotions can be sources of professional identities and utilized to promote teacher agentic actions and activism in everyday classroom practices (Benesch, 2018).

### **Implications**

Amy's narratives show that students' life stories can be resources for teachers' professional identity development and agency. Emergent multilingual students' life stories have the potential to open up possibilities for teachers to not only better understand their students but also transform their pedagogy. Very often, emergent multilingual students come to the classroom with complicated and difficult realities, which teachers are unaware of. Research has shown that teachers of color tend to accommodate their multilingual students' various needs because they share similar experiences (Emdin, 2016); however, most teachers in mainstream classrooms are White monolingual English speakers, who are not often familiar with these students' lives. It is important for teachers to understand their students through listening to their stories in order to meet their needs. However, due to teaching load and professional obligations, teachers might not have the time to listen to their students' stories. School administrators need to consider including students' storytelling into curriculum and instruction.

Amy's narratives also show that some teachers were upset when assigned to teach emergent multilinguals. The possible reasons for the teachers' upsetting feelings can vary. For example, teachers might not be able to consider their emergent multilinguals as whole people as Amy did. They might have failed to see their students' linguistic and cultural values and other talents. Some teachers may not have enough knowledge and experience about teaching those students. They might lack appropriate support, such as teaching materials and professional development workshops from schools and districts. It is also very likely that some teachers may not have received relevant education because their programs did not require this learning. Therefore, a study on exploring teachers' attitudes toward emergent multilinguals can be a potential topic for future research.

### **Conclusion**

Listening to multilingual students' life stories is an effective way to trigger positive emotions, which can help teachers to develop agency, the very power for professional development and creative and transformative teaching. Agency is constituted and shaped by emotions. It is also the very power for positive self- and

other-positioning. When teachers engage in positive positioning actions, they make agentic and informative decisions on pedagogy and teaching practices. Teachers' positive positioning mediated and informed by agency promotes educational justice and equity.

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