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Review Article

IMPACT OF AN ELT PROGRAM: CRITICAL REVIEW OF A LONGITUDINAL STUDY ON STUDENT-TEACHERS’ BELIEFS

Zelege Teshome Lucha

*Institute of Language Studies and Journalism, Department of Language Studies and Literature
Wollega University, Post Box No: 395, Nekemte, Ethiopia*

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Email: info@jusres.com

ABSTRACT

This paper provides review of an article that report on longitudinal study that deals with the impact of ELT program on Students -teachers’ belief. The aim of the review is to provide a critical summary of the contents of the article. Accordingly, each section of the article was summarized and critically analyzed. The implication of the study for the reviewers own context was then coined. The abstract of the article introduced the objective of the study well. It addressed that the study attempted to track possible changes in the student-teachers beliefs about language teaching and learning and analyze the impact of an ELT pre-service program. It also provided the methodology asserting that interview was conducted with 49 student teachers and the data were processed through a mixed-method design. However, details of the sampling technique, tools, procedures as well as the analysis techniques that lead to the findings were not provided in a way that sets a synopsis of the study. The results that various changes on the students-teachers believe development occurred due to the different program and that the practicum seems to have a higher impact was also provided. Yet the expression used to show various change is very generic and exaggerated. On the other hand, the researcher provided what he has already achieved as a major finding with hedge, “practicum seems to have a higher impact on the development of the beliefs about language learning and teaching.” Similarly, the expression of the contribution of the study is expressed with hedge,” this may be interpreted as a less significant study”.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction section starts with the impact of teachers’ belief on practice. However, the impact of the beliefs of student teachers who are the real subject of the study on practice which is a central focus and which can serve as evidence of the problem is rejected from this beginning section. In this section, the researcher addresses citing several scholars that ST carry with them strong ideas and beliefs about education which impacts the way they process information and that the earlier impact remains unchanged. The researcher then affirmed the implication of that the mechanics of STs Beliefs’ change should be studied empirically in different countries and contexts, and that the findings of those studies must be utilized to reshape the current content and structure of teacher education programs. He then provided a somewhat contrary view citing Nettle (1998) that there is change and stability in student teachers belief. He later stated that there are two kinds of studies concerning the issue; those which emphasize changes in the beliefs of STs (Winitzky & Kaucak, 1997) and those which do not (Tillema & Knoll, 1997).

However, he did not provide his position .Afterwards the researcher emphasized the existence of gap of information about the program of study and content of English language teaching (ELT) programs in which belief studies were conducted; particularly the nature and quality of teacher education programs are not taken into consideration as an influential variable in studies about STs’ beliefs citing (Mattheoudakis, 2007; Bramald, Hardman, and Leat 1995). The researcher asserted that his study unlike most studies regards the programs as dynamic variable. Then he provided the purpose of the paper which is to presents a longitudinal study on STs’ beliefs about language learning and teaching and the details of the influence of ELT program. Toward the end, he provided the contribution of the study for the development of STs’ beliefs by pointing to the correlation between belief changes and the phases of the ELT program at Gazi University.

The introduction section also tries to set a background of the study and address the problem. However, the problem is not stated well. Instead of focusing on the problem by showing the magnitude of the problem for readers, evidences and justifications and deficiencies (literature and practical deficiency), the researcher raised several view points in a way that may confuse readers. He didn’t bring contradicting views to resolution by stating his stance and converging to his main target. For example it may appear that the main problem of this particular study is either *change in belief across different contexts and countries or the role of*

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the change in shaping ELT program which actually are not the main target of the study .The research objectives were not over shadowed.

THE LITERATURE

The researcher provided literature review in two sections. The first section deals with student-teachers belief. In this section, the research addressed that STs’ beliefs can be traced back to early experiences from primary level. He also provided citing scholars that beliefs of university teachers may exert a notable impact on the educational experiences of students in tertiary contexts, the areas of impacts of educational program, the two categories of teachers belief: (1) traditional view where teaching is perceived as a process of knowledge transmission and the teacher is considered as the source of knowledge and the authority, and (2) constructivist views where learning is viewed as a process of knowledge construction and the teacher serves as a facilitator of students’ effort of constructing knowledge by making sense of their experiences. He mentioned that most studies showed that students adopt an eclectic approach of the two views.

Most of the cited literatures are relevant but the writer would have made live by explicitly associating the view points with his problem. However, issue about the noticeable impact of university teachers on the tertiary level students’ educational experiences is irrelevant as the study does not deal with it. Discussion of a more detailed philosophy of the view points with recent literature particularly of international ones would have given the section a more scholastic concern. His study did not show that the STs take an eclectic approach in contrary to the scholars view both at the beginning and end of the program. Hence, he could have included this interesting finding since this is the final report of the literature.

The second section of the literature review deals with Second language teacher education (SLTE) and STs’ beliefs. The researcher provided here that ELT programs have both theoretical and practical course natures which usually appear in the last year though their ratio varies based on factors such as nature and cultural values of the programs. He also provided his inference of scholars (Freeman and Johnson 1998; Crandall 2000) advocacy of constructivist view of teaching in SLTE and the changing trend toward this view. Citing (Wright 2010) the researcher offered the research gap (research non-existence as he stated) concerning the interactions of STs’ prior knowledge and beliefs about language learning and teaching and SLTE programs goals, course content, pedagogy and so on. He asserted the transmissive and behaviorist pedagogies have been replaced by experiential (Dewey, 1938), constructivist and social constructivist views of learning (Lantolf, 2000) and in turn caused

extensive execution of reflective practice in SLTE pedagogy (Schön, 1983, 1987; Wallace, 1991). The researcher then provided major issues of his interest; his problem in a more technical term. He stated that the fact that the SLTE does not adequately benefit from the studies that address the role of STs’ beliefs leads to focus on the discussion of teaching theoretical courses like second language acquisition (SLA). The SLA courses which normally must have a vital role in shaping the STs’ beliefs, are claimed to remain too theoretical and abstract (Markee, 1997) and thus most of the STs fail to associate these courses with the practical methodology courses and the teaching practicum. Citing Brown (1985), the researcher notes that SLA studies can actually convince STs to adopt communicative approaches to ELT and help understand why communicative approaches are more effective than behaviorist or purely cognitive methods.

However, the extent to which such theoretical courses contribute to a change in STs’ beliefs depends on the nature of teaching, the syllabus, and the curriculum of the program. Then, he provided the aim of the study in context stating, within this theoretical frame of STs’ beliefs and SLTE pedagogy, the present study analyzes the impact of the phases of a typical ELT pre-service program and aims to explore the influences of each phase on STs’ beliefs about language learning and teaching. The structure and content of the program in which the study was conducted in four years were also taken into account so that the program itself as a dynamic variable could be included in the data analysis process. The findings may illuminate our thinking about what aspects of a SLTE program should be modified to support STs’ belief change.”

In this section also, the researcher provided literature that can serve him as a justification of the problem. He has also provided a brief structure of the ELT program which is used as a dynamic variable. However, in most cases, his critical stance is not provided. For example, the fact that constructivism is replacing traditional view is not enough to justify constructivism is better on its own. He is supposed to argue well in support of his frame of reference. The researcher classified the program in to three phases (phase 1: Years1&2, phase 2: year 3and phase 3: year 4) in this section. However, he did not provide adequate justification for his classification.

THE STUDY CONTEXT

The writer provided the context in this section. He addressed that the study deals with the impact of the ELT pre-service education program at Gazi University, Gazi Faculty of

Education in Ankara Turkey. The nature of the ELT program at Gazi i.e. it adopts a constructivist view of education and reflective approach in pre-service teacher education and reasons for adapting such program such as the general trend in teacher education, impact of national academicians, and the influence of European Union language teaching policy were provided in the section citing (Çakır & Balçıklan, 2012). He also made explicit that STs at Gazi University ELT program undertakes a one-year teaching practicum at state primary or secondary schools in the 4th year being assigned to a particular classroom using the curriculum prescribed by the Ministry of Education. The practicum was based on observation during the first semester while STs starts teaching every week for one course hour (40 or 45 minutes) and the methodology trainer observes ST twice during the semester in the second semester. The STs are to write reflections and submit them weekly to their trainer, and they also plan their own lessons, prepare original materials and submit them weekly. The one-day practicum is supported with a ST and trainer interaction (called "feedback sessions").

The research mentioned STs’ prior language learning experience which is mostly based on a grammar-based and exam-oriented practice particularly by “Foreign Language Examination” (FLE) offered by Student Selection and Placement Center nationwide school system as a requirement to be accepted to an ELT program and over crowdedness as the two limitations of the ELT program at Gazi University. The FLE includes 80 multiple-choice test items assessing grammar, academic vocabulary knowledge with some sub-skills of reading. The examination has been proven to exert a negative wash back effect on students (Yıldırım, 2010).

The researcher provided the target of the study which was to analyze the content of a typical ELT program in terms of certain phases that were identified by the author. Three (3) phases were utilized to observe how the program influenced belief development. Phase 1 covers the first two (2) years of the program during which STs are introduced to academic English courses, some educational sciences courses and applied linguistics courses. In Phase 1, the only practical course is “*Special Teaching Methods I*” (4 hours per week) offered in the Spring semester of the second year. Phase 2 represents the third year of the program in which the courses are completely practical and based on the performance of the STs in teaching attempts. Phase 3 includes the practicum as well as some methodology and linguistics courses. In this section, the researcher did not justify his choice of the context. He also provided two limitations but he did not elaborate how they limit the study.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The researcher indicated he had invited 60STs as participants from a population of 243 students enrolled in 2007 through an e-mail but only 49 STs wanted to take part and hence were followed throughout the four years. Age of the participants ranged between 18 and 21 and where 89.8% of them were females. The researcher also mentioned that attempts were made to ensure homogeneity among the participants by controlling variables such as educational background, socio-economic demography, the participants aim to attend an ELT program and by providing the 16 credits core methodology courses and the complete practicum from the same trainer. He provided as limitations that the sample of 49 STs may not represent the whole population and the idiosyncratic differences among participants cannot be controlled in any way and indicated that taking these limitations into account, the results should be interpreted with caution.

Here also, the researcher did not justify about his participants; who are the 60 STs invited; on what base are they invited; what sampling technique was used and why; how about the mode of communication employed (email); why is it employed, what is the culture of the participants in using e-mails, is the impact positive or negative etc. The researcher only mentioned that he has attempted to ensure homogeneity and didn’t tell us how he has done and how successful he was. For example, whether he was able to get students of similar educational background, socio-economic demography, the participants aim to attend an ELT were not elaboratively mentioned. His justification of using 49 participant size because of the nature of qualitative is not sound because the study is mainly quantitative in nature. Besides, 49 is a large size sample for qualitative investigations. Moreover, mentioning the limitation and indicating that precautions should be taken in interpretation is not enough on its own. The researcher is supposed to show precautions he took for the analysis in this section.

THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The researcher provided in this section the specific objectives of the study that include *identifying the current status of the STs’ beliefs about language learning and teaching, tracking the changes in their beliefs, exploring the impact of each ELT program on STs’ beliefs and examining of the ELT curriculum* . However, as long as the study traces the change in the three phases of the program, objective three (3) can inherently be expressed in objective two (2). Furthermore, it would have been better if the researcher had given the general objective of the study which would have served as an umbrella and also showed the link between the specific objectives and the basic research questions of the study. Moreover,

the objectives were only dimly foreshadowed by the previous section (*Introduction* and *Literature Review*).

DATA COLLECTION

The researcher provided that he had used a mixed-method design, two semi-structured interviews with their aims, two pilot interviews and a questionnaire for demographic data. However, he did not show how his study is mixed; which objective or variable called for quantitative aspect and which one for qualitative one. Besides, justifications of issues which play a great role at convincing the reader like *why this participants*, *why mixed*, *why semi-structure interview*, *why interview in English* and even *why longitudinal study* were unexplained. He mentioned the pilot but did not elaborate the results from the pilot study except stating that changes were made based on the pilot. In this kind of longitudinal study (panel study), the two threats to validity namely attrition and panel conditioning are expected, but the researcher did not provide any report of these issues. These could have raised the validation of his work. All the data concerning the demography of the participants could have well been addressed by the interview. Thus, instead of the questionnaire used, it could have been better if the researcher had assessed the students plan and also attended their reflection sessions to triangulate his data since practice reflects perception. Thus document analysis and observation are preferable to questionnaire for this particular study based on the very nature and objectives of the case at hand.

DATA ANALYSIS

The researcher claimed that he has used the software Nvivo for organizing the data from the interview. However, details of what this software is about should have been given for readers’ convenience. He provided that the data were given under three major educational views: traditional, constructivist, and the mixed views, and that “other” was added to code safely the data that fall under neither of them. However, the researcher did not provide how he treated the “other” data. He provided that three scholars cross-checked the coding of the transcriptions, and refined the categorized data through cyclical reading to insure validity. The demographic data gathered through a questionnaire were analyzed using computer software and descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage for the utilization of the analysis. The demographic findings were referred to ensure the homogeneity and identification of the characteristics of the sample group; they are not exploited to categorize or compare the findings. Thus, the researcher is supposed to provide the use of demographic data under the data section not under the analysis section.

RESULTS

Demography

The researcher provided under the result, the demographic finding aiming to maintain the homogeneity among participants and asserted that participants were quite a homogeneous in their educational and socio-demographic background, and their motivation in being enrolled in an ELT program. However, this should have been discussed as part of the methodology not as the result, since it is not among the objective of the study. In addition, though the expression quite homogeneous implies that there is a deviation, the researcher did not discuss the deviation and this has an impact on credibility of his finding at least the discussion. The research should still express the possibility of interferences of other variables that might have impacted the result. For example, students from private school and public school, those from educated family and others, those whose family members are teachers in English as a foreign language and others may significantly differ. Though it is difficult to control all the variables their possibility of interference should be pointed out.

Findings

The researcher discussed the finding under shorter versions of the research objectives entitled *identifying the current status, tracking the changes in STs’ beliefs, exploring the impact of the program, and examining the ELT curriculum*. Though the writer mentioned that he discusses the qualitative data under this heading, in actuality it is the quantitative data that he mainly focused on under each headings.

Research Question 1: Identifying the Current Status

The researcher mentioned that the finding concerning the STs’ belief when they joined the program was based on the first interview held in 2007. He provided percentage of STs’ belief about language teaching, learning and teacher/learner as traditional/transmissive, constructivist, mixed view and others in a tabular form. The result revealed that most of STs held a transmissive /traditional view of language teaching and learning. Accordingly, they mostly perceived foreign language learning as a set of some cognitive operations such as memorizing vocabulary items and practicing grammar so as to construct an infrastructure to develop the communicative skills. As of teaching L2, the STs believed that an English teacher was the source of the knowledge and had the complete authority in managing the classroom and deciding on what and how to learn. They referred to the traditional teacher roles in defining a typical English teacher (83.6%) and also viewed the language student as a passive learner who rarely practices language in a constructivist way.

Though the finding is well discussed in this section, it should be noted that the writer is supposed to give room for the remaining few; the other responses and the difference regarding the various variables in the course of his discussion. What is more that he needs to provide the standard he used for labeling at this stage to convince the reader. The demographic data

Research Question 2: Tracking the Development

In this section, the researcher provided that all the respondents mentioned their L2 learning experiences specially the influence of the secondary school during which they had studied for FLE as a source of their belief when they joined the program. To track their belief, he provided in tabular form the areas: belief about language teaching, language learning, teacher and learner across the core relevant narratives (Key content summarized), emergent themes (Initial themes arising within quotation) and sum of constructivist mixed Views. At the beginning of the ELT Program in 2007, sum of the constructivist mixed Views of the students’ belief about language teaching, language learning, teacher and learner was a maximum of 10.5% 2. During the first phase of the program (2008-2009) where the STs used to take many academic English courses, such as “Speaking I and II and Reading and Writing I and II” with only 8 credits practical methodology courses and 6 more theoretical aspects of ELT methods and approaches, STs did not display a significant change in their beliefs. At the end of the program, the change in STs beliefs approximated to an academic perspective. At this stage, a minimum of 81% sum of the constructivist mixed view was reported concerning the STs belief of the four areas. The impact of the reflective writing and feedback sessions throughout the practicum seemed to help STs associate their teaching experience with the ELT literature and make sense of their actions in front of real students.

Research Question 3: Exploring the Impact of the Program

In this section, the researcher provided that the finding is parallel to RQ2 and asserted that the most influential phase of the program was Phase 3. Nineteen participants (38.7%) agreed that Phase 2 followed Phase 3 in terms of its effect on their beliefs’ change. The STs unanimously agreed that the practicum was influential, and the interaction with the trainer and the peers supported the experiential learning process. As for the second year (as the part of Phase 1), 17 of the STs (34.6%) believed that the year had some impact, mostly reminded them of the methodology course they took in the second semester. However, the first year of the Phase 1 had little or no impact (F=3, 6.1%). Still, the STs unanimously agreed that the practicum was influential, and the interaction with the trainer and the peers supported the experiential learning process. Although the responses of the STs have led us to infer that the Phase 3 is

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the most influential one, we should underline that the program is complementary in nature. In other words, the first year, which was found to have the lowest impact on the belief development, is actually critical in developing the L2 communicative competences of the STs. However, the study doesn’t justify this. Moreover, the theoretical courses that were repeatedly reported to be boring and irrelevant were found effective in the feedback sessions during practicum. Did he identify this? Therefore, an inference that the Phase 1 and 2 were weak and limited may not be accurate.

Research Question 4: Examining the ELT Curriculum

The researcher asserted that this section offers the phase and the content of ELT program that should be modified based on STs Perspective. The STs agreed and suggested that educational science courses be taught in English by the lecturers with a background in ELT or be excluded from the program; they believed that language skills courses in the first year might be replaced with some field courses though some of them suggested that a content-based approach be applied to these courses and they also regarded the intensity of the third year as a weakness and repeatedly.

DISCUSSION

The discussion section has attempted to provide a detailed discussion of the findings. However, it happens to be a mere repletion of the finding which again was almost repeated in the conclusion section. The researcher addressed that the STs at of Gazi University, ELT program had various common beliefs and ideas about language learning and teaching at the begging. But can we say every traditional belief is common? In addition, the researcher over emphasized with great certainty that STs beliefs were constructed during their previous education particularly as a result of a grammar-based and a traditional test to be accepted to the program. Though tests have wash back effects, the present study didn’t aim and investigated the rationale for the ST belief and hence should not discussed here as major finding or else should have had it as one specific objective and addressed. Similarly, it was mentioned that the courses specifically that they took in the third and fourth year of the program enabled them to change their beliefs about how language learning should be facilitated and what kind of teacher identity they should develop to become an effective EFL teacher. Reflective writing and post-feedback sessions during the practicum were reported to help them build attitudes and actions on a well-established theoretical ground; that is, the practicum actually enabled them to make sense of the theoretical courses such as linguistics, SLA and other applied linguistic courses. But was the kind of teacher identity the ST should develop to become an effective EFL teacher a major focus. Moreover did the study

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investigate the impact of reflective writing and post-feedback sessions on building attitudes and actions? was it about how the practicum actually enabled STs to make sense of the theoretical courses such as linguistics, SLA and other applied linguistic courses or was it about the impact the practicum as one phase of the ELT program or? Here again the research emphasized issues that were not the main aspects of his investigation.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion provides that the aim of the study was investigate STs’ beliefs about language learning and teaching in an ELT program by identifying their status when they first entered the program, tracking the changes in those beliefs during four years, and by exploring their ideas about the impact of the program on their belief development. It also asserts that one of the aims was to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the program from the STs’ perspectives.

However, this view can be embedded in the first sentence. In the conclusion, the researcher did not provide the methodology he employed to achieve the finding. This may raise the quest of how the finding is achieved. There is a great paradox in this study as we have stated earlier this study is more of a quantitative oriented as the main finding are discussed through generalization based on statically data. However, the researcher claims for example that finding about the strength and weakness from the students perspective i.e. subjectivity which is the ontological stance of the qualitative orientation. In the conclusion, the researcher reported the finding that a teacher education program based on a constructivist view of education might have a significant impact on the belief development of the pre-service STs.

However, the researcher is supposed to elaborate that the target program is constructivist program in the introduction, or methodology section so as to set a frame of reference instead of bring it at last. He also provided that the first two years were not found significantly influential, in contrary to the following years that display a significant and radical change in the beliefs. He asserted when the theoretical courses are associated with the teaching experiences of the STs in the practicum, they may be influential and convincing in adopting an academic approach to developing effective teacher behavior.

The researcher argued citing (Richardson, 1996) that STs beliefs or any other ones, do not change overnight and hence tried to provided the reason for employing longitudinal study. However this is an issue that should be raised earlier under methodological choice. He provided the significance of his study i.e as a complementary to the literature that deals with the vital role of reflective practice in belief development in SLTE; an area with a wide research gap (Wright, 2010).At last he emphasized and called for further research that track

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the STs in their professional careers and measure whether an effective ELT program contributes to their real teaching contexts of these novices as a context influence the approaches of teachers adopt by citing studies by Prosser and Trigwell (1999). Understanding the real influence of the belief change or development in initial teacher education requires an observation of teachers from their pre-service education to their professional teaching contexts. These and similar findings may also enlighten the studies of the in-service trainers and decision-makers, who possess inadequate information about this issue. He provided in the statement of the problem section that the study is initiate.

APPENDIX

FIRST INTERVIEW

1. About learning:

a. Please explain how you study English. What strategies, study skills do you use to practice four skills, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation?

b. How do you define learning a foreign language?

2. About teaching:

a. How should a teacher teach English? Please describe the principles, techniques, some ways and views. Can you give specific examples of activities, exercises, tasks, assignments?

b. What are the effective teaching strategies, skills and techniques you prefer as a student? What

do you expect from an English teacher to help you improve your English?

3. About learner:

a. Who is a good language learner? What are her characteristics?

b. What are the specific strategies that a good learner employs?

4. About teacher:

a. Who is a good language teacher? What are her characteristics?

b. What specific attitudes does an effective language teacher display? For example, how does s/he approach to the students? What kind of activities and exercises does s/he use to teach English?

b. What are the effective teaching strategies, skills and techniques you prefer as a student?

What do you expect from an English teacher to help you improve your English?

The first interview attempted to extract data concerning the STs belief about language learning, teaching, learner and teacher when they joined the program.

SECOND INTERVIEW

1. Influence of the ELT program:

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a. What aspects, years or courses of your program have had the most influential impact on your

beliefs about language learning and teaching?

b. How did the influential aspects of the program affect your thinking? For example, what were

the content of the specific course(s) that made you reconsider your ideas about language learning and teaching?

2. *Strengths and weaknesses of the ELT program:*

a. What are the strengths of the program in terms of your beliefs about language teaching?

b. What are the weaknesses of the program in terms of your beliefs about language teaching?

3. *Necessary modifications on the ELT program:*

a. Do you believe that some courses of the program should be modified to help you become a more effective teacher?

b. Which courses should be modified?

c. Do you think that there are some courses in the program that were inadequate in terms of their

impact in your belief development?

The second interviewed aimed at eliciting data about the influence of the ELT program, strengths and weaknesses of the ELT program, necessary modifications on the ELT program. However most of the questions have retrospective nature and forces the participant to remember about the past. Thus the data might be adjusted by the student to meet their current stand. Some of the question likes Do you believe---, Do you think might also be leading.

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AUTHOR NOTES

Dr. Kemal Sinan Özmen Gazi University, Gazi Egitim Fakultesi, C-Blok, C122, 06500 Besevler-

Ankara, Turkey sozmen@gazi.edu.tr

“Impact of an ELT program: Critical review of a longitudinal study on student-teachers’ beliefs”

Dr. Özmen works at Gazi University, English language teaching program in Turkey, and teaches TESOL methodology, second language acquisition and creative drama. He has completed his BA, MA and Ph.D. degrees in English language teaching at Gazi University. He also studied at University of Rochester in New York as a Fulbright doctoral researcher. His research interests include ‘teaching as a performing art,’ ‘teacher identity and belief development’ and pre-service English teacher education.
