



# Facilitating the development of preservice teachers' Pedagogical Content Knowledge of literacy *and* agentic identities: Examining a teacher Educator's intentional language choices during video-mediated reflection



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Three dialogic interaction patterns that developed PSTs PCK and agentic identities were noted.
- Language was used to create symmetrical power relationships.
- Language was used to provide opportunities for PSTs to notice and name important features literacy instruction.
- Language was used to provide PSTs the opportunity to imagine possibilities.

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined a possible way of facilitating the development of PSTs PCK and agentic identities through video-mediated, guided reflection on literacy field experiences. Particularly, this study examined the intentional language use of a teacher educator as she engaged in dyadic reflection conversations with 26 PSTs. The questions guiding this study were (1) What discursive practices open spaces for PSTs to rehearse/develop both PCK and agentic identities? (2) What particular phrases does a teacher educator use to open such spaces? Positive Discourse Analyses revealed three distinct dialogic patterns that opened spaces for the PSTs to rehearse/develop both PCK and agentic identities.

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Teacher quality and student learning are issues that have received unprecedented policy attention in the twenty-first century (Coffman, 2015). With the passing of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, NCLB (2002), teacher quality and student learning have been largely measured by high-stakes, end of year testing. The NCLB legislation's top down approach to school reform led to "a curriculum restructured around basic skills, pacing charts, and teacher-based recitations" (Calfée & Wilson, 2016, p. 18). Despite the intention of the NCLB legislation to improve schools, recent findings show that the embedded teaching effectiveness and evaluation policies did not change teachers' pedagogy or positively impact student learning (Donaldson, 2012).

To counter the narrowing of the curriculum that occurred as a result of NCLB, the Common Core State Standards, CCSS (2010) were intended to develop "the critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills students will need to be successful" (found in the What Parents Should Know section of [corestandards.org](http://corestandards.org)). However, as Calfée and Wilson (2016) note, curriculum packages claiming to address the CCSS are merely incorporating the same isolated objectives found in the NCLB legislation, thus, literacy instruction continues to be teacher-centered, strictly paced, and directed by basal scripts. Therefore, it appears that the most current top down approach to improving teaching and student learning is failing in much the same way that NCLB did.

Given that research has continually demonstrated that it is the quality of the teacher that has the greatest impact on student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2006), it is no wonder that the

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mentioned top down approaches to reform have not succeeded. Darling-Hammond links a teacher's ability to use adaptive strategies to positive student outcomes. In the area of literacy this means that teachers need to have deep and facile knowledge of:

- the content of literacy
- literacy assessments that determine what students know and what they are ready to learn
- research-based pedagogies that have been shown to develop students' literacy abilities
- when and how to engage in those pedagogies
- how to continually monitor to determine if literacy development is occurring

In addition to having the above Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK; [Magnusson, Krajcik, & Borko, 1999](#)), teachers need to use this knowledge to make instructional decisions that are in the best interests of students and then *act* on those decisions. Top down legislation continues to fail because standards and expectations cannot do the agentic work of teaching.

The capacity to act purposefully and reflectively on our world is known as agency ([Davies, 1990](#); [Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998](#); [Johnston, 2004](#)). If our aim as a society is to improve student learning, then we need to cultivate both the PCK and the agentic capacity of our nations' teachers. We need teachers who can act purposefully and reflectively when new standards and expectations are brought to their attention. Teachers without well developed PCK and agency may depart from what is in the best interest of children and adhere to curriculum maps focused on materials and pace of instruction ([Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006](#); [Eisenbach, 2012](#); [Gelfuso & Dennis, 2017a](#)). Agency, however, is a complex disposition. Agency is called for, cultivated, and displayed within complex, situated moments. As such, we do not yet have considerable knowledge about "the discursive contours of teacher agency, the contexts in which agency emerges, and the conditions necessary for supporting and extending teachers' agency" ([Rogers & Wetzel, 2013](#), p.63). In an effort to better understand the conditions necessary to cultivate preservice teachers' (PSTs) PCK and capacity for agency, this study examined the discursive practices of one teacher educator (author of this paper) and the PSTs (n = 26) with whom she worked. The questions that guided this study were:

- What discursive practices open spaces for PSTs to rehearse/develop PCK of literacy and agentic identities?
- What particular phrases does a teacher educator use to open such spaces?

## 1. Literature review

[Shulman \(1986\)](#) wrote that PCK is the capacity to integrate content knowledge with knowledge of teaching methods. Early literature documented that teachers develop their PCK through teacher education ([Zeichner, 1988](#)) and classroom experience ([Grossman, 1990](#)). Later, [Magnusson et al. \(1999\)](#) developed a broader view of PCK and wrote that it is the "transformation of several types of knowledge" (p.95). This broader view of PCK includes "teaching orientation, knowledge of curricula, knowledge of learner, knowledge of instructional strategies, and knowledge of assessment" ([Aydin, Demirdogen, Akin, Uzuntiryaki-Kondakci, & Tarkin, 2015](#)). [Aydin et al.](#), guided by the broader definition of PCK, found that when support is provided, PSTs can develop PCK in the area of science. It was additionally noted that clinical experiences alone were insufficient for developing the PCK of PSTs. Indeed, [Aydin and Boz \(2013\)](#) and [Padilla and van Driel \(2011\)](#) found that

reflection on clinical experiences is crucial in shaping the interactions between PCK components. However, despite the consensus that reflection is important for learning from experience, there is at the same time "no clarity on what reflection is" ([Clara, 2015](#), p. 261). Recent work has brought to light the challenges of facilitating reflection ([Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014](#)) and through the use of formative design experiment ([Reinking & Bradley, 2008](#)) has created a Framework for Facilitating Reflective Conversations ([Gelfuso, 2016](#)) that lead to the creation of "warranted assertabilities" ([Dewey, 1986](#), p. 15) about literacy teaching/learning. The current study adds to this thread by identifying the particular phrases a teacher educator uses within the Framework that open spaces for PSTs to develop PCK and agentic identities.

The literature on PST agency during teacher education and field experiences reports that a PST with a strong sense of agency develops better PCK than a PST with a weak sense of agency ([Cheng, Tang, & Cheng, 2014](#)). It is also known that when PSTs approximate practice during field experiences, experience dissonance during field placements, and engage in supported critical reflection their capacity for agency is developed ([Bieler, 2010](#); [Eby, 2000](#); [Galman, 2009](#); [Heineke, Ryan, & Tocci, 2015](#); [Larson & Phillips, 2005](#); [Lloyd, 2007](#); [Mosley, 2010](#); [Phelan, 2005](#); [Roberts & Graham, 2008](#); [Ticknor, 2012, 2015](#)). [Ticknor's \(2015\)](#) most recent study reported that PSTs (n = 2) rehearsed agency in language as they engaged in reflective discussion with peers and a course instructor. While it is clear that the participants in the study rehearsed and developed their agency through the use of professional language, it is less clear how exactly [Ticknor](#) created spaces for and supported PCK development and agentic language rehearsal.

This study extends [Ticknor's](#) work by examining the particular discursive practices and dialogic interactions that seem to develop PSTs PCK and agentic identities. The examination of particular dialogic interactions between university supervisors and PSTs is important because using a dialogic approach ([Bahktin, 1981](#)) supports teacher autonomy ([Andrews, Bartell, & Richmond, 2016](#)), however, the literature on supervision and mentoring describes the challenges of facilitating dialogic conversations with PSTs ([Bieler, 2010](#); [Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014](#); [Gelfuso & Dennis, 2017a](#); [Gelfuso, 2016](#); [Grossman, McDonald, Hammerness, & Ronfledt, 2008](#); [Price & Valli, 2005](#); [Slick, 1998](#); [Smagorinsky, Cook, Jackson, Moore, & Fry, 2004](#)). Indeed, supervisors often miss opportunities to use language during postconferences in such a way as to cultivate PSTs capacity for agency and adaptive teaching ([Soslau, 2012](#)). This study adds to the literature by providing insight into 'such a way' to simultaneously facilitate PSTs PCK development and agentic identities.

## 2. Theoretical frame

The theoretical notions of agency and socially constructed identities framed this study. Agency is the belief that if one acts and acts strategically then they can accomplish their goals ([Johnston, 2004](#)). Teachers who have a strong sense of agency believe that when confronted with a problem (e.g. being told to use curriculum materials that are not at the proper instructional level of her/his students) they can act (e.g. have a conversation with the authority that 'told' them to use the materials, subversively use different materials, etc.) in a way that will solve the problem. Developing a sense of agency is inextricably related to identity construction. Identities are socially constructed "through the mediation of powerful discourses and their artifacts" ([Holland et al., 1998](#), p. 26). This means that teachers' identities are continually shaped by the interactions, primarily language interactions, they have with people and related artifacts (curriculum materials, pacing guides, basals, student work, etc.). Thus, language interactions that include

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