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## Emerging Critical Literacy in Teachers as Novice Researchers

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*Abstract: This paper explores the experiences of three teachers as novice researchers as they taught full-time in a university English language school in Turkey. Viewing the participants' experiences as researchers through a narrative understanding of teacher knowledge and a critical literacy lens enhanced their critical cognisance of their positioning as women instructors in a higher education setting. Their research experiences were shaped not only by their classroom concerns but also by expectations and larger social narratives that lived beyond their classroom doors. This study focuses specifically upon English language teachers and acknowledges the intersection of gender roles and contextual constraints as complicating, and possibly constraining, the professional learning of teachers as they engage in research.*

### **I Learned this Year**

*I would start keeping field notes.*

*You'd ask—I'd promise.*

*Then the next week would come—nothing.*

*I was so focused on other MA assignments.*

*I should have managed my time better.*

**BUT**

*I was*

*taking other MA classes,*

*teaching 25 hours, and I was a [teacher leader],*

*plus I was teaching exit level students.*

*I wouldn't have kept the [teacher leader] job to begin with!*

*It put a lot of pressure,*

*and the school is changing,*

*and people are not ready to do that.*

*I learned this year: I can't defend things that I don't believe in.*

*(Found poem of recorded conversations with 'Damla')*

### **Introduction**

In this paper I focus on the experiences of three teachers as novice researchers involved in graduate study as they taught full-time in a university English language school in Turkey over the course of the 2009-2010 academic year.

The opening poem is an example of the insights to be shared, an instance in which one of the participants, 'Damla' (the names of participants and the institution are pseudonyms), named some of the ways she learned during the process of conducting a first time research study in her

final year of a masters degree program. While a newcomer to research, Damla was not new to teaching having taught over 10 years in K-12 private education systems in different national contexts as well as in this particular university language school.

Damla's emphasis upon 'I can't defend things that I don't believe in' is an example of how she began to see the everyday through a new lens; that is, events happening in the school context, which she began to question with newfound critical awareness as she conducted research in this setting.

As a way of making participants' emerging critical literacy explicit, I draw upon Munn's (1990) notion of listening posts and identify instances in which participants employed their developing knowledge as researchers to question and interpret their own and others' actions.

In Munn's (1990,1) exploration of cultural practices within a community on Gawa Island, New Guinea, she wrote of the ways in which 'spatiotemporally distanced events bec[a]me meaning horizons of an actor's immediate situation or present'. Munn (1990, 2) defined such events as 'listening posts', culturally relevant moments for individuals that were indicative of 'a wider social milieu beyond that of the "moment", that is [of] particular ways in which the subject's present forms a "network, branching out...to somewhere else"'.

What is apparent in Munn's description is the influence of the broader context upon the daily meaning making of individuals and their actions within localised settings. Looking at this notion through a critical literacy lens on how texts of self and place are considered socially, culturally, and politically (Lewison, Seely Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) with particular emphasis upon power and its presence in the world (Wolk, 2003), I bring forward moments in which participants showed critical cognisance of themselves in personal and professional contexts using aspects like age, culture, gender, formal education, and socioeconomic status as well as personal and professional experiences to interpret their positioning as women and university English language instructors in the midst of conducting first time research studies.

The decision to represent participants' learning as found poetry was in response to what surfaced in the analysis of data; it demanded a form that could represent their growing critical awareness vividly. Throughout the 2009-2010 academic year participants' learning about research was documented over several recorded conversations, multiple blog contributions (the participants and I regularly contributed to a private blog over the 2009-2010 academic year), field notes, and participant-generated photographs and artefacts.

Found poetry allowed me to use the words of participants and represent their learning in a way that traditional portrayals could not (Butler-Kisber, 2002). Butler-Kisber (2002, 230) suggests that,

*The rationale for including arts-based representations in qualitative research is that form mediates understanding. Different forms can qualitatively change how we understand phenomena.*

I see these poems as not so much about representing participants' learning as complete and seamless but more about showing pockets of their profound learning (Heydon, 2010) and the ways their professional expectations of themselves conflicted with the expectations of significant others. Representing participants' insights as poems is to encourage new ways of thinking about the research process for beginning teacher researchers, a process that was reportedly multi-faceted for participants as they moved between the practical and intellectual in conducting a research study, while also growing more aware of and inquisitive about of taken-for-granted texts of self and place.

In what follows I establish the theoretical framework and literature in which the work is grounded and provide an overview of the study context. I then show through a series of found poems participants' emerging critical literacy in response to the process of conducting research. I

argue that engaging in research encouraged participants to question the belief and value messages shaping themselves and their professional and personal contexts (Lewison et al., 2002). I also propose that while it is essential to acknowledge teacher research as part of the paradigm of teacher professional development (O'Connell Rust, 2009), it is also essential to recognise gender roles and contextual constraints as complicating the research process for teachers. While this study focuses specifically upon the exploration of English language teachers' engagement in research (Borg, 2007, 2010; Tavakoli & Howad, 2012) in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) setting, it may also resonate with teacher educators and scholars involved and interested in the professional learning experiences of in-service teachers.

### **Teacher Research: Benefits, Challenges, and Unknowns**

Teacher research has been described as beneficial for teachers by creating opportunities for continued growth of teacher knowledge (Babkie & Provost, 2004; Ballenger & Roseberry, 2003; Borg, 2007; Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 2004; Massey, Allred, Baber, Lowe, Ormond, & Weatherly, 2009) about the ways in which teachers begin to see the familiar as unfamiliar (Power & Hubbard, 1999), full of possibilities for change in their teaching practices and understanding of themselves (Esposito & Smith, 2006; McGlinn Manfra, 2009; Massey et al., 2009, Zeichner, 2003), with the potential as a learning endeavour to encourage capacity and confidence (Castle, 2006, Kraft, 2002) and a continued desire for further collaboration (Mitton Kukner & Akyuz, 2012).

That being said, scholars also note the challenges research creates for teachers, with time being an ever-pressing constraint upon the process (Borg, 2007; Massey et al., 2009; Sowa, 2009; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012) as teachers attempt to balance the needs of their classrooms and their research (Li, 2006) and try to shape their learning into suitable representations for the academic community (Smiles & Short, 2006).

In the opening poem, in addition to her claims of increased awareness as part of conducting her own study, Damla also echoes other scholars in the challenges she experienced. In particular, Damla's emphasis upon a lack of time and attempting to balance multiple responsibilities speaks to what is well known in this field: that while teacher research is a valuable learning endeavour (Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Ellis & Castle, 2010; Zeichner, 2003), it is challenging for teachers to sustain as a part of everyday practices (Chandler, 1999; Massey et al., 2009; Sowa, 2009; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012).

Adding to the complexity of determining the nature of teacher research are the examples showcased in many studies in that they are, typically, quite inspiring, demonstrating how teachers conducting research can lead to transformative learning (Chandler, 1999; Zeichner, 2003) and increased autonomy (Castle, 2006). Many such examples exemplify teachers in K-12 school contexts (Fecho, Graham & Hudson-Ross, 2005; Ballenger & Roseberry, 2003; Esposito & Smith, 2006) as well as focus upon that audience (Babkie & Provost, 2004; Capobianco & Joyal, 2008). But what about university language instructors in the midst of conducting first time research studies in highly competitive, higher education contexts? How do they experience research as novice researchers? What does their learning look like as they conduct first time research studies?

Zeichner (2003, 320) proposes that while there is an abundance of literature about teacher research and its profound positive effects, the field 'need[s] to learn more about the process of how [teachers] were inducted into the role of researcher from a methodological perspective'. A recent study by Magos (2012) describes teacher-participants as resistant to the idea of research,

citing a fear of the process, time as a constraint, demands from parents, and negative reactions from colleagues as being obstacles to engaging in inquiry. These two extremes, as suggested by Zeichner and Magos, are supported in current literature: at one end of the continuum there is documented support for the benefits of teacher research as a learning enterprise (Coggins, 2005; Sowa, 2009; Hagevik, Aydeniz & Glennon Rowell, 2012; O'Connell Rust, 2009), while at the other are studies that portray traditional models of teacher research as challenging for teachers to sustain and less relevant for them in their daily teaching (McBee, 2004; Olivero, John, & Sutherland, 2004; Reis-Jorge, 2007). What is lacking is a better understanding of what teachers experience as they conduct research as part of their ongoing life space (Xu & Connelly, 2009).

In the area of English language teaching, while scholars have noted a gap, there is little research that examines, in particular, English language teachers' views of research (Borg, 2007, 2010; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012) or that addresses the experiences of English language teachers as novice researchers. What was found, confirms much of what has already been established in the field, particularly about the benefits and challenges that research engagement poses for teachers.

For example, Cummings, Shi, and So (1997) inquired into the learning process of six experienced language teachers as they worked as research assistants as part of three year research project and found that participants benefitted from the experience in that they learned specific research skills in addition to new understandings about teaching practices, theory and concepts, teamwork, and their future careers as university professors and researchers. Sowa (2009) explored how action research projects conducted by teachers of English language learners (ELLs) enabled them to become more reflective and confident about teaching in general as well as teaching ELLs specifically. Sowa also notes that in addition to the positive aspects of conducting research, participants noted that time constraints and the presence of state mandated testing would potentially prevent them from further action research. Adding another layer of insight to English language teachers as researchers is the recent work of Tavakoli and Howard (2012), who examined the beliefs of 60 teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) teachers and found that while the majority viewed research as valuable and positive, they also found that participants had mixed views about the usefulness and significance of research in language teaching. Tavakoli and Howard (2012, 240) suggest that: *teachers' interpretations of what constitute research are sometimes radically different from the more established or traditional notions of research.*

Situating this phenomenon in the educational context of Turkey, the broader setting in which the study was conducted, inquiries focused upon teachers and research, as producers or consumers, are limited.

Studies situated in K-12 school contexts depict teachers as growing more aware of the importance of drawing upon research to inform their teaching (Beycioglu, Ozer & Teyyar Ugurlu, 2010; Ekiz, 2006) or, conversely, teachers as not being aware of research as potentially important for their practice (Cepni & Kucuk, 2003).

In an English for Academic Purposes (EAP), higher education setting in Turkey, Borg (2007) found that English language instructors did not necessarily see themselves as researchers, defining research as an endeavour well suited to university academics and their undertakings of large-scale survey studies, statistical analysis and dissemination of results in peer reviewed journals. Borg concluded that establishing a research culture within an institution was a complex process, with time for research being a particularly significant factor in teachers' perceptions of research:

*The results here suggest that even where the institution is generally seen to be supportive of teachers' research engagement, time may be a factor which carries more weight than others in*

*influencing the extent to which such engagement actually takes place. This suggests that different conditions for research engagement carry different weights and that time may be one of those that is particularly influential. (2007, 745)*

In the case of the three experienced teachers I worked with, they were well educated, knowledgeable and were able to identify and justify what they felt was sound research. Yet all agreed that they did not know much about the active process of conducting research or what it might mean to their learning and professional identities prior to their studies. At the outset of this inquiry, it is fair to describe the participants as having traditional understandings of educational research (Borg, 2007) in that they saw studies as being conducted and published by expert others.

At that time, research for participants was more about the consumption and, possibly, practical application of research findings to their teaching, as opposed to the production and the active inquiry of their own teaching practices and its relationship to student learning (Wilhelm, 2009) and their professional identities.

My intention in this paper is to show how being engaged in research brought not only benefits and challenges for this group of university language instructors, but also highlighted their emerging critical literacy and awareness of teaching as a gendered profession (Smulyan, 2004).

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework informing this study draws upon a narrative view of teacher knowledge; that is, knowledge as composed of teachers' understanding of their experiences in personal and professional settings influencing the explicit and tacit formation (Johnson, 1989) of their identities and learning (Xu & Connelly 2009). There is an abundance of narrative research that portrays the intricate connections between teacher knowledge and teachers' experiences in a range of educational situations and contexts (Barak, Gidron, & Turniansky, 2010; Carillo & Baguley, 2011; Chan, 2006; Chang & Rosiek 2003; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Craig, 2006, 2007; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2004; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2010; Mitton Kukner & Akyuz, 2012; Murray Orr & Olson 2007; Olson & Craig 2001; Shields, 2005; Vloet & van Swet 2010).

By inquiring into teachers' lives, what they know, experience, and understand about who they are in schooling and higher education, the numerous ways teachers learn and develop has been documented as multiple and contextually dependent. An excellent example of how narrative research provides insights into the development of teacher knowledge in particular settings is the work of Craig (2003, 2004, 2006, 2010) and her ongoing narrative inquiry into teacher development in the midst of wide scale curriculum reforms. Drawing upon this body of work, I see teacher knowledge as composed of teachers' identities that change over time (Carr, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Murray & Olson, 2007) in response to experiences (Dewey, 1938) situated in school settings as teachers interact and participate in the learning of others and themselves.

As I explored the participants' experiences of conducting first-time research studies, I viewed their experiences as happening within an "ongoing life space" (Xu & Connelly, 2009, 223) composed of the temporal (past-present-future), a personal-social continuum, and places (Connelly & Clandinin, 2005) located in personal and professional settings. Thinking narratively (Xu & Connelly, 2009) had significant implications for this study in that, while I was intent upon exploring the research experiences of teachers as novice researchers, I was also mindful that their experiences happened over time, with multiple others and in multiple places.

Based upon my literature review of teachers as researchers I had established what was known about this phenomenon, particularly the benefits and challenges of teacher research; however, not as well documented are what teachers experience in the process of carrying out a research study. In response to the gap I noted in the literature and thinking narratively about this phenomenon, I purposefully invited (Merriam, 2009) three participants to take part in this study knowing that what I was undertaking demanded an intense collaborative exploration of participants' experiences over a sustained period of time (Xu, Connelly, He & Phillion, 2007).

Approaching this phenomenon narratively enabled me to better understand what could be known about teachers as novice researchers in ways that arguably other methodologies could not (Clandinin, Pushor, & Murray Orr, 2007; Merriam, 2009). For example, while this study affirmed much of what is known about teachers as researchers, particularly how participants felt they benefitted from the research process (Sowa, 2009; Hagevik et al., 2012) and how they named time and the demands of full-time teaching as limiting their research efforts (Borg, 2007; Li, 2006; Massey et al., 2009; Sowa, 2009; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012), this study also shows how the participants became more critically cognisant of their positioning as women instructors in a higher education setting.

As part of my framework I include, Lewison, Seely-Flint, and Van Sluys's (2002) critical literacy framework. In their review of research and professional literature that spanned 30 years, Lewison et al. focused upon definitions of critical literacy and synthesised the literature into four dimensions: (1), disrupting the commonplace; (2), interrogating multiple viewpoints; (3), focusing on socio-political issues; and (4), taking action and promoting social justice. Lewison et al.'s framework enabled me to pinpoint reoccurring instances of participants' emerging critical literacy in the stories they told by selecting words and phrases (Butler-Kisber, 2002) in which they spoke about their learning and growing attentiveness to themselves and the world around them.

The work of Lewison et al. informed my analysis of participants' experiences and drew my attention to how participants' learning occurred at pivotal moments over the course of conducting research studies, moments at which articulated tensions and turning points provided participants with windows of inquiry into self and place, particularly when their understanding of themselves and their careers bumped into the gendered expectations of others (Smulyan, 2004; Sari, 2012; Cin & Walker, in press).

## **The Context of the Study: An English Medium University in Turkey**

Before beginning their graduate studies and teaching careers (Damla, Ece, and Eda were language instructors at the Knowledge University's English Language School and were also graduate students in the same university's Faculty of Education). at the Knowledge University's English language school, 'Damla', 'Ece', and 'Eda', the three teachers who are the focus of this study, arrived at this institution with varying years of teaching experience and educational qualifications.

As an instructor at this university, I worked closely with the participants over the course of the 2009-2010 academic year. This was then followed by further conversations with participants in 2010-2011. Particular emphasis was placed upon 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) in the process by which I obtained formal permission for the study and negotiated with participants in terms of their involvement regarding recorded conversations, artefact generation, and transcript reviews as well as writing that emerged from my analysis.

At the time of the study, each of the participants was an experienced teacher, a novice researcher and a graduate student in their final year of a three-year graduate program. The period of time in which the participants conducted their studies was conducive to inquiry in that the English language school where they taught encouraged teacher-conducted research.

In Turkey, English is widely recognised as a form of international communication and is acknowledged at both the higher education and K-12 levels of schooling (Dogancay-Aktuna & Kiziltepe 2005; Kirkgoz 2007; Yayli, 2010). Scholars suggest that the presence of the English language in Turkey is partly due to globalisation (Hismanoglu, 2012) and the nation's desire to become globally integrated in business, science and technology (Dogancay-Aktuna 1998; Incecay, 2011; Kirkgoz, 2007, 2009) as demonstrated in its recent candidacy for membership of the European Union (Hismanoglu, 2012; Incecay, 2011; Saricoban, 2012).

The Council of Higher Education (CoHE) oversees all matters related to higher education in Turkey and requires institutions that offer instruction in a foreign language to establish foreign language preparatory schools in the target language and provide rigorous instruction for students found to be lacking proficiency through entrance language examinations (CoHE 2008, 2010; for a comprehensive overview, see Kirkgoz 2009).

Although a large number of private and public schools in the K-12 system offer English as part of required curriculum (Hismanoglu, 2012), the quality of English language education differs across types of schools and educational levels (Dogancay-Aktuna, 1998; Dogancay-Aktuna & Kiziltepe 2005), and the CoHE does not stipulate the foreign language to be taught at higher education levels of schooling (CoHE, 2010).

At the same time, due to the global influence of the English language and its prominence in public and private sectors of the country, with graduates from such institutions being regularly hired in private and public labour sectors (Mizikaci 2006), universities are inclined to offer instruction in English alongside Turkish (Dogancay-Aktuna & Kiziltepe 2005; Incecay, 2011) with language preparatory schools teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

The CoHE classifies instructors teaching in university foreign language preparatory schools as non-tenure track teaching staff members, and they are distinguished from academic staff with PhDs (CoHE 2010; Mizikaci 2006). University foreign language preparatory schools are categorised as institutions in higher education contexts providing language instruction at a pre-baccalaureate level (CoHE 2010).

My purpose in emphasising the broader policies shaping the university landscape in which the study was situated was threefold: (1), to introduce the presence of English medium

instruction in this higher education setting; (2), to highlight the nature of the population working in this university language school, where teachers of different years of experience, education, and cultural backgrounds work alongside one another; (3), to emphasise the distinct difference between instructors teaching in university foreign language preparatory schools and university faculties of study in terms of educational qualifications and professional status.

Also emerging as being of particular importance in this study is the linking of gender and teaching for women in Turkey. Turkey is a growing nation (General Directorate on the Status of Women, 2008) and while the majority of the population has attended or attends school, there are differences among literacy levels between genders, age groups and regions in Turkey, in particular, literacy levels are lower in older age groups, in rural populations, and in Eastern regions of the nation with women experiencing lower levels of literacy among these groups (General Directorate on the Status of Women, 2008; Kadinin Statusu Genel Mudurlugu/Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanligi, 2012). The participants of this study, as previously described, were three well-educated women who lived in a large, urban western context.

Sari (2012, 818) suggests that teaching in Turkey is socially seen 'as an appropriate profession to the traditional gender roles and they [female teachers] prefer teaching because it leaves suitable spaces to meet the expectations as mothers, spouses and housewives'. This social circumstance became particularly telling in the unfolding of the study, as participants became more critically aware of how their commitment to learning as they taught full time situated in the midst of a first time research study conflicted with others who were important in their lives.

### **Methodological Considerations**

I first met Damla, Eda and Ece in August 2009 when I began teaching at Knowledge University as an instructor of an introductory research course. As part of my teaching responsibilities within this institution, I was also responsible for advising students as they conducted research studies towards the completion of a master degree in education. Knowing that I was to work closely with experienced teachers as an advisor on their research projects, narratively exploring teachers' experiences as novice researchers over the course of an academic year was intentional from the beginning, as I felt it was important to have a better understanding of the context in which I was situated as way to inform my teaching practices, course development and advisory practices. As I learned about each of the students in the course, the details of their backgrounds and teaching experiences in relation to the goals they had for their research studies, Damla, Eda and Ece became apparent as individuals who were passionate about teaching and their own professional development.

Approaching this study narratively, I learned about Damla, Eda, and Ece's stories over the course of the 2009-2010 academic year, using a wide selection of data sources: field notes, individual and group recorded conversations, participant-generated photographs and artefacts, a research journal and entries from a blog to which we all contributed. These multiple data sources were used to explore the interconnected nature of Damla, Eda, and Ece's research experiences to their lives in and outside of the institution in relation to others (supervisors, colleagues, friends, and family) and events in different places (classrooms, staff rooms, and home). I observed and interacted with the three participants in the classroom, in my office at the university and in their homes.

Four group conversations took place in September, October and December 2010 and June 2011. I also individually interviewed each participant on two occasions in 2011; one participant was interviewed in January and the other two were interviewed in March, with the three

remaining individual conversations occurring in June. The group interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and the individual interviews between 45 and 70 minutes. I conducted individual interviews to provide an opportunity for each participant to speak about matters personally relevant for them and to also acknowledge that each of the participants progressed at a different pace during their studies. Once the interviews were transcribed, I shared the transcripts with the participants and asked for their clarification. Damla, Eda and Ece provided me with further understanding of the interviews by writing comments boxes throughout the transcripts as a way to clarify meaning, ask questions and suggest possibilities for further conversation in subsequent interviews.

The decision to interview participants individually proved to be particularly important during the more challenging stages of their research, specifically when participants were engaged in data analysis during the winter months of January, February and March and later when they began to write the findings and implications chapters of their research projects in April and May. Because they were expected to complete all course work and their research projects by late May in order to graduate in mid-June, their final semester as graduate students while also being full-time teachers was busy and, at times, tension-filled. The individual interviews seemed to provide participants with a quiet space to reflect on their learning, discuss the challenges they were experiencing and to ask questions.

Following each phase of data collection of narrative field notes, interview transcripts and blog contributions (participant-generated photographs and artefacts were used as points of discussion during the interviews), I analysed data inductively to pinpoint recurring themes. As I attended to the participants' verbal and written descriptions of their experiences, I focused upon expressed insights into their learning and noticed how their perceived tensions with the research process provided openings into pivotal learning moments, moments in which their questions, concerns and disagreements offered listening posts (Munn, 1990) into how they inquired into their own positioning in different social, personal, and professional settings.

This is not suggest such moments were grand or dramatic; rather, they were about the participants' everyday experiences as they attempted to balance full-time teaching and completion of final MA course requirements in relation to the ongoing task of a qualitative research study. It is in the 'mundane and ordinary aspects of daily life that critical literacies are negotiated' (Comber, 2001, p. 173) and in which I saw reoccurring instances of participants' growing critical awareness of themselves and others.

For example, codes that emerged as I analysed data and which were based upon the frequency with which they were mentioned by all three participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) and which were found present in the field notes, interview transcripts, and blog contributions (Denzin, 1978) were: (1), tensions experienced during the research process; (2), metaphors of life as a full time teacher and graduate student; (3), research as a process of self-learning; (4) passion for the teaching profession. Ongoing analysis continued to show the presence of these codes as defining aspects of participants' experiences and helped me later in the process to develop themes. As a way to make this explicit, the code that I identified as 'tensions experienced during the research process', included participants' perceived tensions in response to conducting research. For example, a lack of time, the presence of family responsibilities, perceptions of colleagues, course instructors, and family members, high expectations of selves as researchers and teachers as well as ongoing health issues were reported by all three participants to be aspects constraining the quality of their potential research and were documented in different data sources (interviews, field notes, and blog contributions).

Analyzing inductively enabled me to plan data collection phases over the course of the study in terms of how I documented what I was learning in my research journal, how I asked

follow up questions in interviews, particularly in the latter half of the study, and how I was able to explore relevant literature in the midst of conducting the study (Merriam, 2009). The stories and poems that were composed about the participants' experiences were situated in the context of the study and preliminary drafts of the poems were shared with participants as a way to better capture their perspectives. To ensure that my representation of participants' stories rang true for someone familiar with university English language schools and the higher education context of Turkey, the preliminary drafts of the poems and findings of the study were reviewed and found plausible by a colleague knowledgeable about the particularities of this educational setting.

Adding to the complexity to this inquiry was my relationship with participants not only was I their research project advisor, advising them as they made their way throughout their studies, I was also the researcher learning about their learning through ongoing conversations situated in a context that was different than my Canadian upbringing.

Helping me to make sense of this relationship in which the role of knowledgeable expert shifted back and forth amongst us, was the work of Patrick, Elliot, Hulme and McPhee (2010) and their study into new teachers being inducted into the profession of teaching. Commenting upon the learning that occurred among new and experienced teachers, they found'

*A collegiate approach as essential in this process, with reciprocal professional learning regarded as leading to a revitalization of the professional culture in [participants'] schools. This revitalization was not solely generated by the new entrants, although their enthusiasm played a part. It was also generated by experienced teachers who shared their pedagogic knowledge and skills, and who were open to learning from recently qualified colleagues. (Patrick et al., 2010, 287)*

Particularly significant within this explanation is Patrick et al.'s emphasis upon the mutual sharing of knowledge between new and experienced teachers. In my dual role as advisor and researcher in this inquiry, I am aware, and emphasise, the reciprocal learning nature of our conversations. While I attempted to provide guidance about the particularities of conducting research, they provided me with new ways of understanding the social, cultural, historical, and political aspects of the context in which the study took place.

### **Listening Posts: Damla, Ece, and Eda's Emerging Critical Literacy**

Creating the found poems that emerged from my analysis of the data was not a linear process (Butler-Kisber, 2002). It required numerous readings of the transcripts and multiple listenings of the recorded conversations to see if my representation of Damla, Ece, and Eda's learning conveyed the differences shaping their experiences while also capturing the distinctions of who they were.

Like Butsler-Kisber, I read and listened, choosing nuggets of words and phrases that vividly portrayed participants' understanding of their experiences in conducting research and of their newfound awareness of themselves, others and particular events in different places. I then played with sentence order and images and was guided by breath points and the rhythm of participants' speech (Ward, 2011) in my attempts to depict the substance of their insights over the course of the academic year. Addonizio and Laux (1997, 115) suggest that when we listen to someone speak 'we hear a particular music unlike any other. The stamp of someone's voice is as individual as a fingerprint; if we know someone well, we instantly recognize the one, pitch, resonance of that voice whenever we encounter it'.

To embody participants' voices and capture their distinctiveness, sharing draft poems with participants enabled changes, as did reading the work aloud (Butler-Kisber, 2002). Lewison

et al.'s (2002) critical literacy framework contributed further meaning to this process and enabled me to see participants' learning as grounded within particular dimensions of this framework. Subsequent analysis of the 'completed' poems combined with Lewison et al.'s critical literacy framework and established literature on teacher research, disclosed three well-defined themes of emerging critical literacy of these novice teacher researchers: (1), defining professional identity within competing perspectives; (2), identifying positioning on uncertain ground; (3), acknowledging empowerment in the midst of ambiguity.

As a way of making my interpretations explicit, I aligned each theme's title to one of the four dimensions proposed by Lewison et al. (2002). In what follows, participants' found poems are clustered together according to theme and represent a sample of the recurring patterns found across the stories they told of conducting and learning from research. The poems are to provide insights into participants' learning during the research process and to demonstrate similarities in how they experienced research, particularly in the ways they became more critically cognisant of themselves and of the places in which they lived and worked.

### **Theme 1: Defining Professional Identity Within Competing Perspectives**

Infused throughout participants' stories of conducting research were moments in which they looked beyond the parameters of their research studies to their own lives and the relational circumstances influencing their actions and identities. Their understanding of their roles as women in relation to others, particularly their families, was a steady backdrop and bumping point underlying their experiences as teacher researchers and graduate students. They all acknowledged that their careers compounded by the workload of an MA program conflicted, at times, with their families and others' expectations of them. On the critical literacy framework (Lewison et al. 2002), the dimension 'interrogation of multiple viewpoints' was most evident as Damla, Eda, and Ece puzzled frequently over the viewpoints of others, particularly family, friends, and colleagues, and the contradictory messages such viewpoints had upon their understanding of their identities as women with careers.

In the following poems, Damla and Eda depict complex moments in which personal goals conflict with family expectations of settling down and marriage. In both instances, they wonder aloud about the significance of their own goals and life accomplishments in the light of their families' responses. Ece's poem is different from those of Damla and Eda and represents her unique perspective in that during our conversations she frequently looked across multiple moments to portray the challenges she experienced during her graduate studies in attempting to balance career and family. Implied but not expressed in all three poems are larger social narratives at work that suggest women of their age should be more focused upon the goal of marriage and child care as opposed to career trajectory and professional development (Cin & Walker, in press; Sari, 2012). Throughout the study all three participants inquired into the mixed messages they received and grappled with the importance of their own careers and professional development in light of their families and others' expectations.

#### **Damla**

*The other day  
you know I'm trying to lose weight  
so I said to my father 'In March*

*I'll be slim, my Masters will be over  
There's nothing I can't accomplish in my life'.*

*My father said 'No, you haven't done the most important thing.'  
He said, 'Come on I am waiting for a son-in-law.'*

*So this is the expectation.  
You don't have to lose weight,  
You don't have to do a Masters  
...it's nothing for him.*

*My father is one of the most modern Turkish men,  
But still he has this expectation.  
Come on, get married so you can have a baby.  
Tick-Tock-Tick-Tock...*

### **Eda**

*How do you feel about the fact that you're the only one here who doesn't have  
somebody?  
And that is a reoccurring theme.*

*Now it's gotten to the point where it's  
'When are you coming home so you can get married?'  
'When are you coming home so you can settle down?'  
'When are you coming home so you can get yourself a husband?'  
'When are you coming home so you can get yourself a life?'*

*And I'm like 'I have a life.'  
It's important to have someone in your life but  
Do you want to have it for the sake of having it?  
It's like the MA.  
Are you going to have it for the sake of having an MA degree?  
Or are you going to have it because it adds something to you?  
I have the pressure of 'When are you coming home?'  
I do have a life here.*

### **Ece**

*Thinking about all of the years of this program,  
everyone has their own journey.  
It's easy to say.  
It's not easy to live out.*

*I didn't have the luxury to go back and search,  
for articles on different topics.  
I wish I had had more time;  
to take delight in the researcher process.*

*But because of many things:  
My role in the school.  
Visits from my family.*

*You don't have a lot of time for luxury.*

### ***Unpacking Theme 1***

Situating the research experiences of Damla, Eda and Ece within the complexities of their lives outside the formal boundaries of their research and graduate studies, it is apparent that their experiences as researchers did not occur in a vacuum.

All three recognised that what they envisioned for themselves was not necessarily what others envisioned for them. Their acknowledgement of this situation recurs throughout the study and sheds light upon another possible challenge that female teachers experience as they attempt to conduct research or sustain professional learning in light of significant others' differing views.

Research on teacher researchers generally focuses upon the benefits that inquiry brings and the challenges that limit its possibilities as a learning endeavour for teachers. For example, numerous studies depict teacher research as contributing to the development of teacher knowledge (Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Ellis & Castle, 2010; Power & Hubbard, 1999), understanding of classroom instruction (McGlenn Manfra, 2009; Massey et al., 2009), and the growth of teacher-initiated professional development (Castle, 2006). Teacher research is also depicted as challenging for teachers to sustain due to time constraints (Li, 2006; Tavakoli & Howard 2012), multiple teaching responsibilities (Li, 2006; Massey et al., 2009), and difficulty in finding forums in which to share their findings (Smiles & Short, 2006). Also important to acknowledge as part of its challenges are the criticisms made about teacher research and its methodological rigour (Borg, 2010).

While this body of work is valuable in that it establishes teacher research as a presence in educational research, at the same time it tends to reduce the research experiences of teachers to a series of positive possible outcomes or set of limiting circumstances. Important to note in Damla, Eda, and Ece's experiences are the presence of others' gendered notions of teaching and professionalism (Smulyan, 2004) conflicting with their understanding of what it meant to their careers. As a way to contextualise this, I draw upon Sari (2012) and her exploration of the effects of gender roles upon Turkish women's teachers teaching practices;

*One of the most important problems related to [the] teaching profession is that women consider teaching as an appropriate profession to the traditional gender roles and they prefer teaching because it leaves suitable spaces to meet the expectations as mothers, spouses and housewives. (2012, 818)*

Situating Damla, Eda, and Ece's experiences of conducting research within the broader social context depicted by Sari provides a window into the complexity of being a female teacher researcher in this setting. It is possible some of the tensions experienced by Damla, Ede and Ece were in response to the gendered expectations of others being at odds with the effort needed to professionally succeed. Complicating this is the very real possibility that participants' own gendered expectations of themselves also created conflict as they attempted to balance full-time teaching, part time graduate studies, and an ongoing research project in the midst of family responsibilities. As Smulyan (2004, 516) notes in her work upon the gendered construction of teachers and teaching as women make career decisions;

*acting in ways which challenge these traditional roles may lead to conflict or stress for women who aspire to non-traditional careers. It may also limit the numbers of those who pursue such careers, even if they aspire to them.*

## **Theme 2: Identifying Positioning on Uncertain Ground**

Teacher research often emerges from recognition that something about one's practice is wrong and needs to be improved (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Castle, 2006; Robinson & Lai, 2006).

Of the research studies that Damla, Eda, and Ece conducted (to increase participant confidentiality and anonymity (Merriam, 2009) the research topics of participants are not named), all three had questions about situations related to their teaching practices and professional identities. Attending to what they felt was wrong or missing in their understanding of themselves and their teaching led them to not only a literature search about the phenomenon in that they were interested initially, but also seemed to create a 'state of alertness' (Castle, 2006, p. 1097) in the ways they attended to events, conditions, and interactions informing their experiences as teacher researchers throughout the duration of their efforts.

Working with transcripts of recorded conversations as well as blog entries, I took particular notice of moments in which the participants named uncertainty and tension about their roles as university instructors in relation to other aspects (relationships and places) shaping their professional lives. On the critical literacy framework (Lewison et al., 2002), the dimension 'focusing on socio-political issues' was most evident in participants' expressed tensions about how they felt positioned and pulled between different personal and professional locations. In the following poems participants question the power structures shaping their status as university language instructors and acknowledge the impact this has had upon the quality of their professional lives.

**Damla**

*I'm teaching 25 hours.  
I'm working in the testing department.  
I have a life.  
I'm trying to have a life!  
I have my friends.  
And then I have [Instructor A]'s class,  
I have [Instructor B]'s class,  
I have my class,*

*You know it's...  
it's not taking the book and going to class.  
Every night I go home,  
and plan for the next day.  
Each student has their own weaknesses and strengths.  
It's really energy consuming.  
I have other responsibilities in my unit,  
I have my family.*

*Next Monday I have a VEEERY big assignment.  
It's not fair.  
The masters—I wasn't interested in doing the masters.  
But it was in my contract...*

**Eda**

*This is the Charles River in Boston.  
On the top the river is frozen,  
but underneath the river is still moving.*

*Outwardly you could be presenting something,  
but on the inside it's not the same...  
underneath it's not that stable.  
That's me.*

*The outward portrayal of maintaining balance  
has—in some ways—been detrimental.*

**Ece**

*Our school has some very nice opportunities  
but we, the teachers,  
are in between being academics and teachers.  
we do these secretary-ish things  
plus something academy like.  
Cruising in between these two things is not comfortable most of the time.  
Where do we belong?*

*People in the university don't see us in the academic sense.  
Maybe we need to have more connection with them?  
Can we have some quality time for us?  
Some real academic time?  
For our students?  
For ourselves?  
It's just like we're waiting for it [the masters] to be over...*

### **Unpacking Theme 2**

Throughout the duration of this study, Damla, Eda and Ece questioned their positioning in different contexts, particularly in professional and personal settings.

In the first set of group-recorded interviews conducted in October and December 2009, the women described the challenges they experienced as a response to complex institutional and national policies at work within a social context that saw teaching as a suitable profession for women (Sari, 2012).

The intricacy of this set of circumstances shaping their personal and professional lives was not lost upon the women and was a recurring topic that emerged over the course of the study in group and individual conversations. Their understanding of this situation became more developed over the year, reportedly in response to situating their own research findings in the established literature and having the opportunity to reflect upon their conversations with me as their advisor and as a researcher inquiring in to their experiences.

As emphasised by Damla, fulfilling the degree was part of a contractual obligation and that while important to their professional status in the institution, it lessened the amount of time they had for their teaching, their families and for themselves. Adding to the complexity of their professional lives was their sense of who they were as instructors in a higher education setting. Ece depicts the space in which she and her colleagues reside as 'not comfortable most of the time' due to her feeling that they were not acknowledged by other academic staff, particularly faculty members, as belonging to the academic community.

This situation, at times, cast doubt upon the importance of the studies in which they were engaged; for example, acquiring the degree would not change their non-tenure track status according to the Council of Higher Education nor would it, arguably, change the ways they were perceived as vocational instructors by faculty members of the university in which they taught.

The women in this study described their experiences as teacher researchers and graduate students as complicated in that the degree was a time consuming expectation not widely recognized by those situated in the higher education community, yet, worthwhile in terms of the learning they experienced, particularly as first time researchers.

Eda best depicts the emotional intricacy of these circumstances in that 'outwardly you could be presenting something, but on the inside it's not the same...underneath it's not that stable'. In the literature, teacher research is often depicted as challenging for teachers to continue in ongoing ways. As part of this, time as a constraint is a well-documented factor limiting the sustainability of teacher-conducted research (Borg, 2007; Massey et al., 2009; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012). This study also affirms the findings of earlier work.

At the same time also important to acknowledge in the experiences of Damla, Eda, and Ece are the intersection of gender and teaching with their positioning as non-tenure track instructors in a higher education setting.

While the women had the opportunity to improve their educational qualifications, upon the completion of their degrees their opportunities in terms of further career possibilities in this particular university language school were limited, a situation they critically recognised and what Smulyan (2004) describes as:

*The concept of a profession, like the concept of career, has been created by and applies to jobs and career paths that were, from their inception, male dominated. Attempts to professionalize teaching may stumble on the lack of acknowledgment of the role of women in shaping and carrying out their work in schools. (2004, 539)*

### **Theme 3: Acknowledging Empowerment in the Midst of Ambiguity**

At the outset of the research process, Damla, Eda, and Ece were all hopeful that their studies would benefit the institution, but were also concerned about how their colleagues would perceive the final results of their work.

The ambiguity surrounding their research—that is, whether others would perceive it as a valuable and worthwhile effort—seemed to fuel their concerns, a set of circumstances that only began to dissipate at the end of the process when their studies were completed and all course work had been submitted. This particular concern served as a backdrop for most of the process and was more pronounced at later phases of their research, especially when they transitioned from one stage of the study to the next.

For example, all three participants found the data analysis phase to be a challenging endeavour and their concerns about how others would receive their work was a regular part of our conversations between January and March. Castle acknowledges that teacher conducted research is a risky endeavour and suggests that:

*Teachers have to feel comfortable enough to try something new in their teaching even though the results are uncertain. They also have to be prepared to face the consequences of their risky actions. Risk taking can be scary because of the element of the unknown. (2006, 1099)*

In the situation of the three participants, the comfort level that Castle speaks of was not an ever-present condition of their experience. Rather, their successful completion of research projects was a part of the requirements needed to fulfil their postgraduate degrees, a degree that was also needed to satisfy contractual obligations to the institution. Adding to this situation was the highly competitive nature of the context, one in which their successes and failures would have been known in the community, particularly as they held the dual role of university language instructor and graduate student.

Despite this set of contextual circumstances, as their graduate studies drew to a close, participants began to describe themselves as authors of newly constructed knowledge.

Castle (2006, 1099) suggests that this is ‘the results of teacher inquiry’ in that ‘it helps teachers understand what they have done, what it means, and what actions needs to occur next’. Power and Hubbard (1999, 38) refer to shifts in teacher thinking about research as ‘the most difficult moments to document, because the shifts in thinking are so subtle’. On the critical literacy framework (Lewison et al. 2002), the dimension ‘disrupting the commonplace’ was most distinct. They describe this dimension (2002, 383) ‘as seeing the “everyday” through new lenses’ in how ‘we use language and other sign systems to recognize implicit modes of perception and to consider new frames from which to understand experience’. In what follows the participants specify the importance of using an inquirer’s lens to see the particularities of context and others’ perceptions as important to their newfound understanding of themselves.

**Damla**

*This life has taught me  
only I can assess my performance.  
Professionals come and observe my class  
—course I'm not an expert in that—  
the tutor can assess the border of an activity  
—you shouldn't have done this or that—  
But still...  
I can only justify certain things  
Why I asked THAT student THAT question, for example.  
The outsider won't know  
Because he or she is not a part of THAT classroom.*

*I don't know what people will say,  
when they read my research.  
Most probably "How dare she let the students assess themselves"?  
But this would change a lot in the school  
—how the students see themselves—  
Yeah, autonomy.  
Give them the responsibility.*

*This year was the first time for many things  
A research project  
An MA  
Learning how to drive  
How to be patient  
A very fruitful year...*

**Eda**

*It's been good,  
my research,  
it's been good.*

*My research was brave.  
People are like 'Wow, how did you do that?'  
Yeah.  
It's made me more aware.  
To keep a journal  
and know that it's there.  
It's going to keep me awake.*

*I learned a lot about myself.  
Things I like and don't like.  
Me as a person,  
me as a teacher,  
me and my family,*

*me as—you know—  
just being here.*

*Things I don't like.*

*I do things to please others—*

*others' expectations—*

*others' perceived needs.*

*if I don't, then I freak out*

*to meet those perceived needs.*

*Wasn't until I sat down and thought, 'Wow'.*

*I'm living proof.*

**Ece**

*The [MA] sessions [were] very much related to my daily life,  
to my work.*

*I can see the theoretical side of things*

*and then I see the justification,*

*the rationale.*

*BUT it's challenging*

*Of course, challenging*

*Because of time—energy—workload.*

*Everything was new to me*

*and I was trying to learn many things at one time*

*but it was a fruitful journey for me*

*—maybe because of its intensive fashion—*

*although sometimes I questioned.*

*I developed this research notion*

*—about looking at things with a different eye—*

*with my researcher's eye.*

*I didn't have this thinking beforehand.*

### ***Unpacking Theme 3***

Reportedly for Damla, Eda, and Ece the experience of conducting a research study and completing a postgraduate degree was empowering and enabled them to see themselves, their learning and their future actions in new ways. All three acknowledge a different way of seeing things, what Ece calls her 'researcher's eye', allowing them to see the familiar of their teaching practices and school context (Damla), family, colleagues and administration (Eda), and graduate studies (Ece) in new ways.

As previously described, the context in which the study took place was highly competitive, as implied by Damla in her comment that 'professionals come and observe my class' and by Eda in her admission that she did 'things to please others, others' expectations, others' perceived needs' yet each of the participants positively identified the importance of this experience in how they viewed and questioned others and themselves in particular places and situations.

Massey et al. (2009), in their inquiry into the benefits and challenges of teacher research, found evidence that teacher research not only benefitted teachers' understanding of research, learning about students and improving classroom instruction, it also offered additional valuable outcomes: reflecting more about teaching practices, seeing problems and events as possible research questions, developing better methods of collecting and analysing data, and choosing to read research and doing it more efficiently.

Adding to what Massey et al. propose as additional benefits of teacher research is the importance of Damla, Eda and Ece's recognition of seeing the familiar of their teaching lives as an examples of their teacher knowledge in action as well as providing opportunities for further inquiry in which they could develop and rely upon their own professional judgment (Moutafidou, Melliou, & Georgopoulou, 2012).

## Conclusion

Viewing participants' experiences as researchers through a narrative understanding of teacher knowledge (Carr, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Murray & Olson, 2007; Xu & Connelly, 2009) and critical literacy lens (Lewison et al., 2002) enabled me to see the ways participants became more critically cognisant of their positioning as women instructors in a higher education setting.

Damla, Eda, and Ece described their research experiences as creating tension-filled instances in which they bumped into others' gendered expectations and saw themselves as located in uncertainty among personal and professional contexts.

Despite the views of others, particularly family, friends, colleagues, and their own understanding of career and family obligations, they chose to define their research experiences as learning opportunities, ones in which they saw themselves as constructors of knowledge, as aware of others' expectations possibly influencing their actions, and as empowered by their newfound critical awareness.

They described their learning as largely shaped by the process of the experience; that is, in how they conducted an actual study pertinent to their interests and teaching and in the ways they were able to unpack these experiences with me as their advisor and as a researcher asking questions about what they had lived.

Situating participants' experiences in the field of teacher research affirms the findings of prior studies in how participants became more knowledgeable about research (Cummings et al., 1997; Massey et al, 2009), better aware of how to improve their teaching practices (Esposito & Smith, 2006; McGlenn Manfra, 2009; Zeichner, 2003), and more confident about how to direct their own learning in connection to their teaching (Castle, 2006).

The same may be said of the challenges that Damla, Eda, and Ece experienced as teacher researchers; in particular, time was a constraint (Borg, 2007; Sowa, 2009; Tavakoli & Howard, 2012) as were their attempts to balance their teaching and research responsibilities (Li, 2006; McBee, 2004; Olivero, John, & Sutherland, 2004; Reis-Jorge, 2007).

Like researchers before me, I argue that engaging in research is an important professional learning endeavour for teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; O'Connell Rust, 2009; Rust & Myers, 2006), providing teachers with the opportunity for self-directed learning that is relevant to what they experience as part of their busy lives in classrooms (Castle, 2006). Rust and Myers suggest that research is:

*the essential activity of a reflective teacher, as a viable means for teachers to question the impact of their practice on student achievement and as a way of bringing teachers' voices into the*

*discourse around education policy. (2006, 73)*

This viewpoint still informs and guides my practices as a teacher educator; however, in response to this study I am also mindful that the research experience for teachers is more than a series of benefits and challenges (Borg, 2010) as an educative enterprise.

Based upon what I learned from Damla, Eda and Ece it is essential to acknowledge the intersection of gender roles and contextual constraints as complicating and possibly constraining the professional learning of teachers as they engage in research. My review of the literature suggests that the impact of gender roles upon female teachers' understanding of their experiences as researchers is not acknowledged. Tavakoli and Howard (2012) suggest that in order to better understand the ways in which teachers view research, researchers and teacher educators should consider the epistemological and ontological views of teachers underlying their understanding of research as a way of establishing more congruent views of research as a bridge between theory and practice.

I agree with their proposal and would add that also of great significance is consideration of teachers' (and particularly female teachers) understanding of gender roles and the ways these influence the investment they believe they are able to make in the undertaking of a research study, which arguably has an impact upon the quality of their learning and development.

In response to engaging in the research process, these participants demonstrated not only a revised understanding of research but also a critical understanding of what they were living in and outside the parameters of their efforts as researchers in how they questioned their own and others' assumptions about themselves and the places in which they lived and worked. This study addresses some of what McGlenn Manfra (2009, 41) suggests is absent between practical and critical action research: 'a sense of the nuance of teacher practice – the reality of classroom life that is mutually steeped in practical and critical concerns'.

Damla, Eda and Ece's insights into their experiences begins to provide a new way of portraying a teacher researcher, one that confronts and challenges traditional notions of the research process as a learning experience, particularly in the ways they questioned and lived within tension-filled spaces that were infused by not only their classroom concerns but also by expectations and larger social narratives that lived beyond their classroom doors.

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