

BEYOND WORDS: METAPHORICAL INSIGHTS INTO EFL STUDENT-TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE TEACHING PRACTICE EXPERIENCES

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Abstract: This study explores senior EFL student-teachers' perceptions of their teaching practice experiences through metaphors. Conducted with 50 final-year student-teachers in Türkiye, the research employed a qualitative case study design. Following their three-week observation stage, participants generated metaphors to describe their practicum experiences after their first teaching practice experiences, which were thematically categorized into positive and negative domains. Positive metaphors—comprising 76% of responses—centred on emotional resonance, professional growth, identity transformation, and relational dynamics, often framing teaching as a journey or role that fosters development and fulfilment. In contrast, 24% of the metaphors expressed negative experiences, reflecting feelings of futility, role conflict, disorientation, and lack of agency. The findings portray metaphors as powerful cognitive and emotional tools that illuminate how student-teachers negotiate their emerging professional identities. Drawing on Gee's (2000) identity framework, the study underscores the importance of integrating metaphor elicitation into reflective practice and teacher education curricula to support emotional resilience and identity formation. Revealing the dynamic interaction between metaphor and identity negotiation in the high-stakes context of the EFL teaching practicum, this research helps fill gaps in metaphor-based studies. By capturing nuanced, practice-based perceptions, it goes beyond broad impressions to show how student-teachers make use of metaphors to explain classroom realities, providing distinctive insights into the cognitive and emotional challenges that characterize the transition from student-teachers to in-service teachers, along with offering actionable visions for educators, mentors, and curriculum designers. Furthermore, the research offers a unique view into the often-hidden internal processes of professional growth by delving into subtle perceptions in teacher identity during practicum, and gaining insights into student-teachers' perceptions via metaphors.

Keywords: EFL student-teachers, metaphors, reflective practice, teacher identity, teaching practice/practicum

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For many early career teachers, the reality of classroom life can diverge starkly from their initial expectations. Melnick and Meister (2008) note that this discord becomes especially pronounced after the first year, when novice teachers begin to recognize the nuanced and often overwhelming complexity of the teaching profession. Feiman-Nemser (2001, p. 1026) asserts that formative years are “an intense and formative time in learning to teach, influencing not only whether people remain in teaching but what kind of teacher they become.”

Despite this, early career language teachers in English Foreign Language (EFL) context, have been underrepresented in research on teacher education and development (Farrell, 2023). In response to this gap, the current study explores how senior EFL student-teachers nearing graduation perceive their practicum experiences through metaphors. Metaphor, as Dickmeyer (1989) explains, is “the characterization of a phenomenon in familiar terms” (p. 151), allowing individuals to articulate and structure their experiences in accessible and often emotionally resonant ways. Metaphors are not merely stylistic devices; as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue, they are fundamental to human cognition and essential for self-understanding. In teacher education, they serve as a means of interpreting teaching experiences, forming professional beliefs, and expressing personal practical knowledge.

Recent empirical studies have further illuminated the multifaceted nature of teaching practicum experiences across diverse contexts. To illustrate a few, Tannehill and MacPhail (2014) demonstrated that examining teaching metaphors helps pre-service teachers recognize and challenge their pre-existing beliefs about teaching and learning. Similarly, Zhu et al. (2022) found that Chinese EFL student-teachers’ metaphors shifted significantly from pre- to post-practicum, revealing transformations in their professional identity construction highlighted by placement-school contexts.

Furthermore, cross-cultural studies have identified both universal and context-specific challenges in teaching practicum. Nguyen (2023) compared two practicum models in Vietnam and found that while student-teachers across models gained confidence in pedagogical skills, such as lesson planning and classroom management, they faced distinct challenges related to mentor teachers, host schools, and institutional support structures. In Turkish contexts specifically, Çelik and Zehir Topkaya (2024) uncovered a significant perception gap between faculty advisors and cooperating teachers regarding pre-service teachers’ preparedness. This gap suggests a lack of common understanding about standards for high-quality teacher preparation. Recent studies have also documented persistent challenges including limited adaptability in instructional approaches (Sohrabi & Soodmand Afshar, 2025), tensions between theoretical knowledge and classroom realities (Maharani & Fithriani, 2023), insufficient supervision (Karim & Abbas, 2024), and inadequate pedagogical knowledge affecting teaching practices (Al-Jaro, 2023).

Metaphors have been used in TESOL and teacher education research as reflective tools and data sources to investigate teacher beliefs, identities, and emotional states (Farrel, 2023; Brandão, 2021; Block, 1996). Therefore, metaphor analysis has proven valuable for understanding teacher agency and cognition during practicum. Valdez et al. (2024) identified eleven distinct conceptual categories in Filipino teachers’ metaphors about lesson planning, revealing how teachers assume different roles based on subject matter, work contexts, and beliefs about teaching and learning. Tran et al. (2023) found that Vietnamese pre-service teachers gained competencies aligned with national frameworks during practicum, particularly in appreciating teaching values and responsibilities, though certain competency indicators remained less clearly obtained. Ibrahim (2021) reported that Saudi EFL student-teachers’ positive perceptions include constructive feedback from supervisors and cooperating teachers which significantly impact their teaching performance.

Against this theoretical and empirical backdrop, our study examines the metaphors generated by 50 senior EFL student-teachers in Türkiye, who were undergoing their final teaching practicum. Drawing on Gee's (2000) identity framework, which conceptualizes identity as constructed across institutional, discourse, nature, and affinity dimensions, this study seeks to unpack the multiple, and sometimes conflicting, roles student-teachers assume during the practicum phase by answering the following research questions:

1. What metaphors do senior EFL student-teachers use to conceptualize their teaching practice experiences?
2. How do these metaphors reflect their emotional, cognitive, and professional perceptions of teaching?
3. What insights do these metaphors provide into the construction and negotiation of pre-service teacher identity during the practicum period?

Metaphors as Cognitive and Linguistic Tools

Metaphors function as powerful cognitive and linguistic instruments that enable individuals to articulate complex personal experiences through relatable symbolism (Oxford et al., 1998). In educational contexts, where roles and responsibilities frequently represent dynamic concepts, metaphors help categorize and make sense of experiences. MacCormac (1990) captures this function by stating that “to describe the unknown, we must resort to concepts that we know and understand, and that is the essence of a metaphor -an unusual juxtaposition of the familiar with the unfamiliar” (p. 9). This is particularly relevant in teacher education contexts where student-teachers must navigate unfamiliar professional territories. Recent research demonstrates how metaphors elucidate the varying roles teachers play in educational processes (e.g., Valdez et al., 2024; Farrell, 2023; Shaw & Andrei, 2019), providing conceptual frameworks through which student-teachers can understand their multifaceted responsibilities.

Categories of Metaphors in Teaching Practice

Metaphors in teaching practice can be categorized into various types based on their underlying themes and connotations. One common category draws on positive and negative categories. Positive metaphors include vehicle metaphors highlighting mechanisms and navigation (Oxford et al., 1998); professional metaphors comparing teaching to specific occupations; journey metaphors depicting ongoing growth processes (Clarcken, 1997); connection metaphors presenting teaching as links between theory and practice; perspective metaphors emphasizing multiple viewpoints (Saban, 2006); role metaphors defining experiences as stepping stones; developmental metaphors comparing teaching to early growth stages; transformation metaphors highlighting character changes; emotional metaphors portraying affective states; balance metaphors emphasizing equilibrium management (Zembylas, 2003); and persistence metaphors highlighting resilience (Cameron, 2008).

As for negative metaphors, they reveal challenging aspects of student-teaching experiences through several categories (Pitcher, 2013). These include futility metaphors portraying efforts as unproductive; pressure metaphors highlighting overwhelming responsibilities (Reeves, 2018);

conflict metaphors revealing internal or external struggles; disorientation metaphors expressing adaptation difficulties (Rodgers & Scott, 2008); uncertainty metaphors reflecting doubts about the teaching process; challenge metaphors focusing on professional struggles; and submissive role metaphors indicating situations where student-teachers lack control or autonomy (Guilherme & Souza de Freitas, 2018). These metaphorical categories provide valuable insights into how student-teachers perceive and construct meaning from their practicum experiences.

Metaphors and Teacher Identity

Metaphors often emerge unconsciously and they reveal perceptions, feelings, and thoughts that might otherwise remain unexpressed (Pitcher, 2013). They help navigate between conceptual domains by relating different concepts (Guilherme & Souza de Freitas, 2018) and making abstract ideas more vivid and comprehensible (Clarcken, 1997). Scholars have long used metaphors to understand educational practices, teacher roles, and student-teacher relationships (Guilherme & Souza de Freitas, 2018; Clarcken, 1997). These metaphors provide insight into personal thoughts, beliefs, and feelings within educational settings (Saban, 2006). Recent research further emphasizes how metaphor analysis can illuminate teacher agency and cognition. For instance, Norscini and Daniela (2024) demonstrate metaphors' capacity to scaffold learning when engaging with complex content, while Ulusoy (2022) highlights how metaphors facilitate teacher reflection on practice. As Valdez et al., (2024) note, metaphors are valuable for examining "teacher agency and varying roles as manifestations of teachers' cognitions" (p. 354), which reveals how student-teachers perceive their developing identities and suggesting pathways for targeted professional development. As teacher agency is multifaceted, metaphor analysis provides a unique window into how pre-service teachers conceptualize their "multiple spaces of engagement" (Valdez et al., 2024, p. 354) during teaching practicum.

Metaphor Studies in the Turkish Teacher Education Context

In Turkish educational contexts there are some valuable contributions, despite their shortcomings in metaphor-based practicum research (see Table 1).

Table 1. Contributions of Recent Metaphor Studies in Turkish Educational Contexts

Author(s)	Contributions
Ulusoy (2022)	His longitudinal research tracked pre-service primary school teachers' conceptualizations from university entry through early in-service years, revealing a predominance of behaviorist and teacher-centred metaphors.
Köroğlu and Ekici (2016)	They investigated freshman ELT students' metaphorical perceptions, categorizing findings into four main categories with "culture related image", but overlooked negative perceptions and detailed frequency distributions.
Aydın & Pehlivan (2010)	They found prevalent perceptions of teachers as knowledge providers or authority figures.

Author(s)	Contributions
Seferoğlu et al. (2009)	They examined metaphorical shifts from program entry to completion, revealing that while some participants develop more constructivist or student-centred metaphors over time, many maintain stable, transmission-based beliefs.
Saban (2004)	He identified growth-related metaphors among beginning pre-service teachers.

We argue that our research extends this body of work in four significant ways. First, our study uniquely captures metaphorical perceptions midway through the practicum when student-teachers have completed at least one active teaching session, while remaining immersed in the learning-to-teach process. This timing allows us to capture identity negotiation in real-time rather than retrospectively. This addresses Valdez et al.'s (2024) call for research on “metaphors on specific teaching-learning processes” (p. 354) that remain underexplored.

Second, unlike previous Turkish studies that have overlooked negative perceptions (Köroğlu & Ekici, 2016) or focused primarily on hierarchical relationship patterns (Ulusoy, 2022; Saban, 2004), our study provides systematic analysis of both positive (76%) and negative (24%) metaphorical perceptions with detailed frequency distributions. This balanced approach acknowledges that the practicum experience, while generally positive (Ibrahim, 2021), inevitably involves tensions and struggles that shape professional identity formation.

Third, we apply metaphor analysis specifically to the EFL teaching domain in Türkiye by addressing a subject-specific gap identified by Valdez et al. (2024). While recent studies have examined EFL practicum experiences through various lenses, few have employed metaphor analysis to understand how EFL student-teachers in Turkish contexts conceptualize their emerging professional identities during the practicum phase.

Finally, our study's theoretical grounding in Gee's (2000) identity framework enables systematic examination of how metaphors reflect the negotiation of multiple identity dimensions (institutional, discourse, nature, and affinity) during practicum. This addresses the “perception gap” identified by Çelik and Zehir Topkaya (2024) between stakeholders by centering student-teachers' own voices and conceptualizations, while also connecting to broader concerns about the theory-practice divide (Sohrabi & Soodmand Afshar, 2025; Nguyen, 2023) and insufficient institutional support structures (Karim & Abbas, 2024) that shape practicum experiences internationally.

Theoretical Framework of Teacher Identity

Before adopting Gee's (2000) framework, we examined several competing approaches to determine the most suitable for understanding EFL student-teachers' practicum experiences through metaphorical expressions (see Table 2).

Table 2. Teacher Identity Frameworks' Descriptors

Name of Theoretical Frameworks	Usage Area & Functions	Drawbacks
Communities of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998)	Emphasizes social learning through domain, community, and shared practice, and has been widely employed in teacher identity research (Riyanti, 2017; Fajardo-Castañeda, 2014).	May not yield adequate accounts for identity negotiations in classroom practices institutionally sanctioned (Lee & Shaari, 2012), such as the practicum in the Turkish context.
Positioning Theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999)	Addresses power dynamics more directly through discursive positioning.	Its focus on specific interactional moments rather than multiple identity dimensions makes it too narrow for understanding emotional or institutional metaphorical expressions.
Activity Theory (Engeström, 2001)	Analyses goal-oriented activities through six interconnected constructs, i.e. subject, object, community, tools, rules, and division of labour.	Its emphasis on collective goal orientation may overshadow the personal, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of metaphors.
The Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI) (Kaplan et al., 2015)	Provides an integrative approach with four components, i.e. beliefs, goals, self-perceptions, and perceived action possibilities.	Its complexity and emphasis on longitudinal change make it more suitable for extended studies tracking transformation over time.
Dialogical Self-Theory (DST) (Hermans & Meijers, 2018)	Conceptualizes the self as containing multiple I-positions engaging in internal dialogue, offers valuable insights into conflicting perspectives.	May not adequately address the institutional and nature-based dimensions that emerged in our data due to its primary focus on internal dialogical processes.

In contrast to frameworks above, Gee's (2000) identity framework offers several distinct advantages that make it particularly suitable for this study. Thus, we illustrated the identity types, key theoretical advantages, and how they are related to our study in-depth below (see Figure 1).

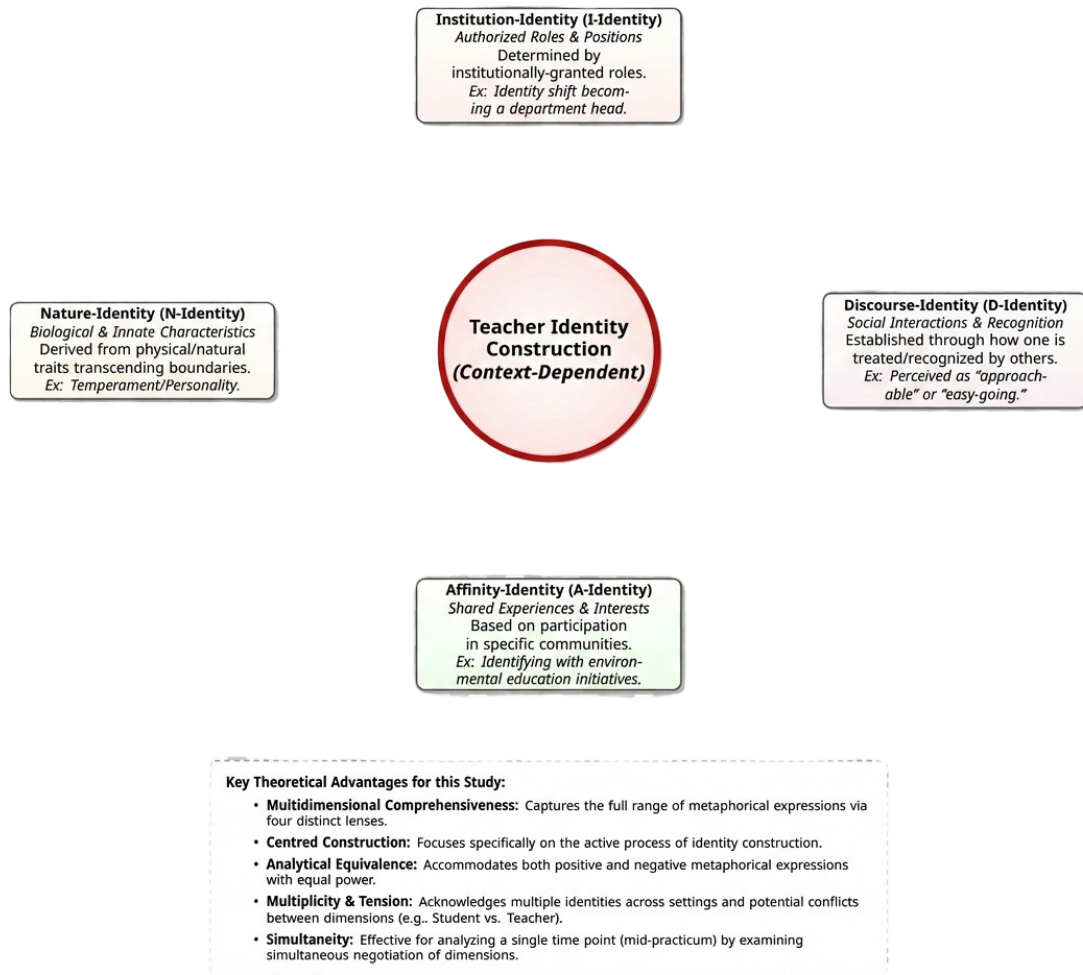


Figure 1. Gee's (2000) Identity Framework

Gee's (2000) framework conceptualizes teacher identity as context-dependent by incorporating four dimensions: *Institution-identity* is determined by institutionally-granted roles and positions, such as the identity shift when becoming a department head. *Nature-identity* is derived from biological, physical, or innate characteristics, such as temperament that transcends classroom boundaries. *Discourse-identity* is established through social interactions and how others recognize and treat the individual, such as being perceived as "easy-going" or "approachable." *Affinity-identity* is based on shared experiences and interests within communities, such as identifying with environmental education initiatives.

Our study positions itself at a critical transitional moment during teaching practice when student-teachers are actively bridging theory and practice. This positioning allows for more nuanced understanding of how near-graduation student-teachers conceptualize their professional

identity through metaphors at the threshold of entering the profession. By examining student-teachers' metaphor use in conceptualizing their practicum, we gain insight into the cognitive frameworks they employ and the emotional and social dimensions of their developing professional identities.

METHOD

This study examined the metaphors used by EFL student-teachers to describe their experiences as student-teachers, including their rationales for these metaphorical choices. Interest in metaphor analysis within cognitive linguistics gained momentum following Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) seminal work "Metaphors We Live By." Metaphor analysis involves the systematic examination of the metaphorical expressions individuals use to convey their thoughts and feelings (Pitcher, 2013). In language education specifically, researchers have employed metaphor analysis to understand how participants conceptualize their own practices or those of others, particularly in relation to professional development (e.g., Cameron & Low, 1999). For this research, we adopted a qualitative case study methodology, which aims to provide comprehensive descriptions of phenomena within specific populations and settings (Mackey & Gass, 2021). Our focus was on the metaphors senior pre-service EFL teachers used to characterize their practicum experiences.

Participants

The participants were 50 senior-year student-teachers from a public university in southwest Türkiye, who were enrolled in the teaching practice course in teacher training program. These students attended practice schools for six class hours weekly. Since the researchers were based at the same university, convenience sampling was employed to gather insights into participants' perspectives on the student-teaching experience. As Mackey and Gass (2021) explain, "[c]onvenience sampling is the selection of individuals who happen to be available for study" (p. 228). The study also incorporated purposive sampling by specifically excluding students not enrolled in the teaching practice course, as they would likely be unable to provide reliable responses. According to Mackey and Gass (2021), "[i]n a purposive sample, researchers knowingly select individuals based on their knowledge of the population and in order to elicit data they are interested in" (p. 229).

Data Collection

The metaphor elicitation took place midway through the fall semester of the 2024-2025 academic year. This timing was intentional, allowing students to complete at least one active teaching session in their practicum before participating in the study. Since the teaching practice course began with several weeks of mentor teacher observation, it was not until midterm that student-teachers began transitioning from student to teacher roles. As researchers, we reasoned that participants' responses would likely differ significantly before and after their first independent teaching experience with actual students. Participants received an online Google Docs form containing the exact prompt in English: "Being a student-teacher is like _____"

because ____.” They were then instructed to provide a metaphor in the first blank (e.g., “being a student-teacher is like climbing a mountain”) and their rationale in the second blank (e.g., “because it is challenging, but the view from the top is rewarding”) in English. To maintain anonymity, no personal information was collected throughout the study, and responses were simply coded from ST1 (Student-Teacher1) to ST50 (Student-Teacher50), and all the metaphors and rationales that were obtained from student-teachers’ responses were quoted verbatim.

Data Analysis

The data analysis followed a systematic, multi-stage process grounded in established metaphor analysis procedures (e.g., Pitcher, 2013; Cameron & Low, 1999). All 50 responses were anonymized (coded ST1-ST50) and analysed manually by the research team through constant comparison methods.

Following Steen et al.’s (2010) *Metaphor Identification Procedure*, we verified that each expression involved understanding one conceptual domain (being a student-teacher) in terms of another (e.g., journey, profession). All responses contained identifiable metaphors with rationales. Metaphors were then classified as positive or negative based on two criteria: (1) *affective valence* in participants’ rationales -whether they expressed satisfaction, growth, and optimism (positive) versus frustration, inadequacy, and distress (negative); and (2) *semantic associations* of the metaphorical vehicle in Turkish cultural contexts (e.g., “flying like a bird” versus “slave”).

Two researchers independently coded all 50 metaphors as positive or negative, achieving 94% initial agreement (47/50). Three discrepancies were resolved through discussion with the third researcher. For example, “walking a tightrope” was debated between emphasizing precariousness (negative) versus skill development (positive). After examining the complete rationale stressing “focus and adaptability,” team consensus classified it as positive (Balance category).

For thematic categorization, we engaged in open coding to identify thematic categories within each valence group, informed by existing teaching metaphor typologies (Pitcher, 2013; Oxford et al., 1998; Clarken, 1997) while remaining open to emergent themes. Through constant comparison, metaphors sharing underlying themes were grouped together. For instance, “journey,” “pathway,” “adventure,” and “first grade of university” all emphasized progression and continuous development, forming the “Journey” category. Similarly, “actor,” “journalist,” “artist,” and “acrobat” all framed the experience through occupational roles, creating the “Profession” category.

Initial coding produced 15 tentative categories, which were refined through iterative team discussion into 11 final categories (positive) and 7 (negative). Two researchers then independently categorized all metaphors into established themes, yielding Cohen’s Kappa $\kappa = 0.89$, indicating strong agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Three discrepancies were resolved through consensus. For example, “being an actor” was debated between “Profession” (occupational comparison) and “Transformation” (identity change). Referencing the participant’s rationale emphasizing role-playing requirements, the team agreed on “Profession.”

To illustrate our process more precisely, consider ST40's metaphor: "*Being a student teacher is like planting seeds on a desert because it takes effort but it is in vain.*"

- **Initial coding:** Negative valence ("in vain" signals futility); metaphorical vehicle = planting in desert; emphasizes wasted effort
- **Category consideration:** Could fit "Futility" (explicit statement of vanity) or "Challenge" (requires effort)
- **Final categorization:** Futility -the emphasis is on pointlessness rather than difficulty; "in vain" explicitly signals unproductive effort
- **Sub-theme:** "Planting seeds on a desert"

We also employed multiple validation strategies: (1) *investigator triangulation* with all three researchers participating in coding and interpretation through regular team meetings; (2) *peer debriefing* with a panel of five colleagues from the same cohort (not in the study sample) who discussed and verified the coding scheme's consistency by looking at a sample of the gathered metaphors and the rationales that accompanied them until a consensus was reached; (3) *audit trail* documenting coding decisions and category refinements; and (4) *inter-coder reliability* testing as described above. These procedures ensured analytical rigor and transparency.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Metaphors were classified as positive or negative based on affective valence in participants' rationales and semantic associations of metaphorical vehicles (see Method). This binary classification preceded thematic categorization, ensuring distinct emotional and cognitive dimensions were analyzed separately. The distribution revealed 76% (n=38) positive metaphors and 24% (n=12) negative metaphors, indicating that while most student-teachers viewed their practicum favorably, a significant minority encountered meaningful challenges.

The following sections address our three research questions systematically. RQ1 (*What metaphors do senior EFL student-teachers use?*) is answered through the identification and categorization of 11 positive metaphor types (Table 4) and 7 negative metaphor types (Table 6), with detailed exemplars illustrating each category. RQ2 (*How do these metaphors reflect emotional, cognitive, and professional perceptions?*) is addressed through the thematic analysis showing emotional dimensions, cognitive aspects (reflected in perspective and transformation categories), and professional perceptions (evident in profession, role, and development categories). RQ3 (*What insights do metaphors provide into identity construction?*) is explored through connections to Gee's (2000) framework in the Discussion section, where we demonstrate how metaphorical expressions illuminate the negotiation of institutional, discourse, nature, and affinity identities during practicum.

Metaphors with Positive Attributes

The positive metaphor distribution was analysed descriptively via percentages and frequency counts as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Positive Metaphors Cited

Positive Metaphors	%	Frequency
Vehicle	2%	1
Persistence	4%	2
Transformation	4%	2
Balance	4%	2
Perspective	4%	2
Connection	6%	3
Journey	10%	5
Role	10%	5
Development	10%	5
Profession	10%	5
Emotion	12%	6
Total	76%	38

Table 3 shows that the participants citing positive metaphors to describe their experiences as student-teachers, referred to “Emotion” as being the most common category (12%, n=6). This suggests that emotional aspects were particularly meaningful to them. Four categories tied for second place at 10% (n=5) each: “Profession,” “Development,” “Role,” and “Journey,” indicating that participants frequently conceptualized their student-teaching experience regarding professional identity formation, personal/professional growth, and progressive journeys. Then, the “Connection” category followed at 6% (n=3), reflecting the value some participants placed on relational aspects of teaching. The remaining four categories each represented 4% (n=2) of responses: “Perspective,” “Balance,” “Transformation,” and “Persistence”. These results highlight less frequent but notable aspects related to changing viewpoints. However, the least common category was “Vehicle” at only 2% (n=1), showing that transportation or movement metaphors were rarely used in a positive context.

The positive metaphors were categorized into thematic groups based on their underlying conceptual frameworks. Table 4 presents a classification of these positive metaphors, organizing participants’ specific metaphorical expressions as sub-themes.

Table 4. Classifications of Positive Metaphors based on Sub-Themes

Positive Metaphors	
Vehicle	Car
Profession	Actor; Journalist; Artist; Acrobat; Tourist Guide

Positive Metaphors	
Journey	Valuable pathway; A long way; An adventure; First grade of university; A journey of growth
Connection	Bridge
Perspective	Two sides of the coin; Going down a mountain
Role	Host; Young mother; Friend; Mediator; Mentor
Development	Toddler baby; Planting seeds; Driving a plane; Planting a garden; Riding a bike
Transformation	Creating different version of yourself; Beginning a new life
Emotion	Wonderful feeling; Flying in the sky like a bird; Being sad; An extraordinary experience; Getting motivated; Having your dreams come true
Balance	Juggling while riding a bike; Walking a tightrope
Persistence	Learning how to swim; Joining a marathon

To demonstrate our analytical process, consider how ST7's metaphor was categorized: *"Being a student teacher is like walking on a valuable pathway because you are learning and experiencing valuable things in classroom and it also changes your perspectives."* This was coded as positive valence (valuable, learning, transformation) with "pathway" as the metaphorical vehicle. We considered both "Journey" (pathway suggests progression) and "Transformation" (changes perspectives) categories. Since the primary emphasis was on the ongoing process of moving along a path -with transformation as a consequence rather than central focus -we classified it under "Journey" with "valuable pathway" as the sub-theme. Similar analytical reasoning was applied to all 50 metaphors.

Vehicle

*"Being a student teacher is like being a **car** because you need to run every time."* — (ST1)

This description further pinpoints the ongoing effort and fast-paced nature of the flow of teaching profession by referring to an uninterrupted circulation of a work of a mechanism.

Profession

*"Being a student teacher is like being **an actor** because you have to have two or more personas: a student in university and a student-teacher in practice schools."* — (ST2)

This metaphor highlights the necessity for adaptability and smooth role transitions between academic and practical teaching environments.

*"Being a student teacher is like being **a journalist and waiting in line** at the same time because we observe and write our report regarding and wait for our turn to come."* — (ST3)

On the other hand, this metaphor emphasizes the reflective nature of teaching, which involves careful observation, documentation, and patience while waiting for teaching opportunities.

*“Being a student teacher is like being **an artist** because your imagination can bring great pictures to the students mind.” — (ST4)*

This comparison shows that they frame teaching as a creative endeavour where student-teachers employ innovative approaches to inspire learning and engage students' imaginations.

*“Being a student teacher is like being **an acrobat on a tightrope** because you're trying to learn and teach at the same time and constantly trying to balance everything.” — (ST5)*

This description vividly portrays the precarious challenge of simultaneously fulfilling learning and teaching responsibilities in the professions.

*“Being a student teacher is like being **a tourist guide** that constantly tries to hold a group together because children are just like that.” — (ST6)*

This metaphor highlights the classroom management dimension of teaching, where student-teachers must develop leadership skills to organize and effectively manage diverse groups of learners.

Journey

*“Being a student teacher is like **walking on a valuable pathway** because you are learning and experiencing valuable things in classroom and it also changes your perspectives.” — (ST7)*

This metaphor emphasizes the meaningful, transformative nature of classroom experience by highlighting how real-time teaching practice reshapes one's professional outlook.

*“Being a student teacher is like **walking in a long way** because it never ends.” — (ST8)*

This comparison conveys the perception of teaching as an endless process, thereby suggesting both the lifelong nature of professional development and perhaps the felt experience of time slowing during intensive learning periods.

*“Being a student teacher is like **an adventure** because it has both challenges and lots of love.” — (ST9)*

This metaphor frames the experience as exhilarating despite obstacles, with an emphasis on the emotional rewards of student affection that balance the inherent difficulties. Additionally, the recursive nature of professional knowledge was detected.

*“Being a student teacher is like **being in the first grade of university all over again** because I have to go over all the things I learned in the past years to prepare activities for my students and think*

about the various ways my university teachers taught me their lessons to get inspiration from them.”
— (ST10)

This detailed comparison emphasizes the cognitive challenge of synthesizing accumulated knowledge to design appropriate materials while considering pedagogical models, student needs, and material requirements.

*“Being a student teacher is like **a journey of growth** because you get to learn from your students just as much as they learn from you.”* — (ST11)

This metaphor directly addresses the gradual, progressive nature of professional development as a bidirectional process involving mutual learning.

Connection

*“Being a student teacher is like **a bridge between learning and teaching** because you are constantly moving between gaining knowledge and applying it to help others learn.”* — (ST12)

This metaphor illustrates the intertwined relationship between learning and teaching practices as inseparable aspects of the profession. It emphasizes the ongoing dynamic process of acquiring and implementing professional knowledge.

“Being a student teacher is like a bridge between learning and teaching because you are constantly moving between gaining knowledge and applying it to help others learn.” — (ST13)

This metaphor demonstrates the dynamic interaction between teaching practice and proceeding professional development.

*“Being a student teacher is like **a bridge** because I learn as a student and to teach as a teacher.”* — (ST14)

This metaphor clearly portrays the fundamental link between receiving education and providing education as interconnected transformative processes.

Perspective

*“Being a student teacher is like **two sides of the coin** because you can see from both teachers’ and students’ perspectives.”* — (ST15)

This metaphor captures the dual nature of student teaching, that is understanding circumstances from multiple viewpoints and implementing appropriate pedagogical approaches simultaneously.

*“Being a student teacher is like **going down a mountain** because it is fast but the view from the bottom is rewarding.”* — (ST16)

It is clear from this response that the participant views teaching practice as a collection of achievements that, while passing quickly, provides a valuable and gratifying perspective upon completion.

Role(s)

*"Being a student teacher is like **you are the host** because you will be when the time comes."* — (ST17)

This metaphor pictures school as a home where teachers are hosts who guide and facilitate students, highlighting inherent hospitality requirements in teaching

*"Being a student teacher is like **being a young mother** because you want to grow your child but you are an inadequate mother."* — (ST18)

The nurturing aspect of teaching emerged in this metaphor, emphasizing both the deep connection and sense of insufficient experience or knowledge that characterizes the beginning teaching experience.

*"Being a student teacher is like **being a friend to students** because our age gap is not that much and everyone feels safe in the class."* — (ST19)

From this description, it is evident that the participant stresses how the relatively small age difference enables student-teachers to establish healthy and effective connections with pupils.

*"Being a student teacher is like **being a mediator** because you are both friends with teachers and students."* — (ST20)

This understanding implies the unique role of student-teachers in connecting experienced teachers with students through collaborative communication.

*"Being a student teacher is like **being a mentor** because you guide and touch their life and hearts."* — (ST21)

The mentorship dimension was also emphasized in this metaphor by pointing to the profound influence teachers can have on students' personal and professional development through empathetic engagement.

Development

*"Being a student teacher is like **being a toddler baby**, because we are making progress but we are at very beginning of the adventure."* — (ST22)

This description points to the early developmental stage in a teaching career that is viewed as an extended journey.

*“Being a student teacher is like **planting seeds** because you both grow together.” — (ST23)*

The theme of mutual growth appeared in this metaphor by underscoring the parallel progression of both student and teacher occurring simultaneously.

*“Being a student teacher is like **driving a plane** because at first it’s really hard to drive, but when you finally understand all of the controls it’s easier to use.” — (ST24)*

This description illustrates how teaching initially presents significant challenges but gradually becomes more natural as students’ competencies develop.

*“Being a student teacher is like **planting a garden** because we prepare young minds while they grow and learn.” — (ST25)*

Similarly, nurturing aspects of teaching were emphasized in this metaphor by depicting teachers as cultivators who prepare fertile ground for students to thrive and create opportunities for future growth.

*“Being a student teacher is like **riding a bike** because we learn by making mistakes” — (ST26).*

This clearly emphasizes the fact that professional growth stems from recognizing and learning from errors.

Transformation

*“Being a student teacher is like **creating a different version of yourself** because you have to pretend like a formal person.” — (ST27)*

This points to the transformation and adaptability required in the student-teacher role as one transitions from one character to another with more professional manner.

*“Being a student teacher is like **beginning a new life in somewhere you are not familiar with** because every day you experience something different but fun.” — (ST28)*

This metaphor stresses the novelty, excitement, and challenges inherent in the teaching experience while emphasizing the significant role transformation that occurs when entering the teaching profession.

Emotions

*“Being a student teacher is like **a wonderful feeling** because you can observe the class, the student-teacher interaction from a different perspective and you can change it and apply to your class as a teaching method in the future.” — (ST29)*

This metaphor indicates the positive emotional response to having opportunities to observe, adapt, and implement various teaching methods in future classroom environments. The sense of liberation was captured in the metaphors, too.

*"Being a student teacher is like **flying in the sky like a bird** because I feel free and happy with the real students."* — (ST30)

Obviously, this metaphor description connects the experience with a bird's freedom of independent movement through the sky.

*"Being a student teacher is like **being sad** because my education years are nearly finishing."* — (ST31)

Conversely, this metaphor expressed the melancholy associated with the conclusion of their university experience from an emotional perspective.

*"Being a student teacher is like **an extraordinary experience** because I love them and they love me too."* — (ST32)

This metaphor focuses on the uniqueness of the practicum through a reciprocal sense of profound adoration.

*"Being a student teacher is like **getting motivated** because it motivates me to be a teacher in the future."* — (ST33)

Future-oriented motivation also emerged in this metaphor, indicating how the practicum experience creates positive stimulation regarding the transition to full-time teaching.

*"Being a student teacher is like **having your dreams come true** because becoming a teacher was my dream."* — (ST34)

Some participants connecting the student-teaching experience with the realization of a long-cherished goal also highlighted the fulfilment of personal aspirations as in this metaphor.

Balance

*"Being a student teacher is like **juggling while riding a bike** because you're balancing your own learning while managing the needs of your students."* — (ST35)

By using this complex physical metaphor, the participant attracts attention to the multitasking required in simultaneously developing one's own professional knowledge while attending to student needs.

*"Being a student teacher is like **walking a tightrope** because you have to balance your own learning while guiding others, which requires a lot of focus and adaptability."* — (ST36)

Similarly, this metaphor demonstrates the precarious nature of maintaining equilibrium between personal educational development and the responsibility of guiding students.

Persistence

*“Being a student teacher is like **learning how to swim** because it takes time and effort.” — (ST37)*

Here, this metaphor emphasizes how the journey of learning to teach requires both sufficient time and determination to progress successfully.

*“Being a student teacher is like **joining a marathon** because there are so many exams and competitors to overcome.” — (ST38)*

Obviously, this metaphor alludes to the demanding nature of the teaching profession, which requires absolute determination and sustained effort over an extended period.

Metaphors with Negative Attributes

Student-teachers’ negative metaphor responses showcase a significant minority (24%, n=12) employed negative metaphors to describe their practicum. As shown in Table 5, these negative metaphors were classified into seven distinct categories: Challenge (6%, n=3), Futility (4%, n=2), Conflict (4%, n=2), Submissive Role (4%, n=2), Pressure (2%, n=1), Disorientation (2%, n=1), and Uncertainty (2%, n=1).

Table 5. Negative Metaphors Cited

Negative Metaphors	%	Frequency
Pressure	2%	1
Disorientation	2%	1
Uncertainty	2%	1
Futility	4%	2
Conflict	4%	2
Submissive Role	4%	2
Challenge	6%	3
Total	24%	12

The following sections explore each category in detail together with sub-categories (see Table 6), providing insights into the specific challenges faced by student-teachers as they navigate the complex transition from student to professional educator.

Table 6. Classification of Negative Metaphors based on Sub-Themes

Negative Metaphors	
Futility	Wasting time; Planting seeds on a desert
Pressure	An old head on young shoulders
Conflict	A child acting an adult teacher; Being stuck in the middle
Disorientation	Being in a strange place
Uncertainty	Walking in a foggy place
Challenge	A roller coaster running in the pathway which is covered with rocks; Surviving
Submissive Role	Slave

Futility

*“Being a student teacher is like **wasting time** because it is useless.” — (ST39)*

Evidently, this metaphor draws attention to what they perceived as unnecessary activities in the teaching practice process that ultimately served no valuable purpose.

*“Being a student teacher is like **planting seeds on a desert** because it takes effort but it is in vain.” — (ST40)*

This metaphor shows the futility of their efforts through the metaphor of attempting cultivation in an environment where growth is impossible.

Pressure

*“Being a student teacher is like **an old head on young shoulders** because students see you as a grown-man (but you are not yet) and act, speak, take action according to what you do there as a job, they do not see you as big brother.” — (ST41)*

Vividly, this metaphor illuminates the disconnect between the student-teacher’s internal sense of development and external expectations by suggesting the strain of needing to project a mature and professional persona.

Conflict

*“Being a student teacher is like **a child acting like an adult teacher** because when I go to school everything suddenly gets serious but I am not in the serious condition of life as a student.” — (ST42)*

The contradictory role of a student-teacher having to adopt professional responsibilities as a student is evident in this metaphor.

*“Being a student teacher is like **being stuck in the middle** because you have the power to control students until your internship teacher stops you.” — (ST43)*

This conceptualization demonstrates the restricted authority and external conflicts that arise when mentor teachers intervene in the student-teachers' classroom management, creating a situation of conditionally granted authority.

Disorientation

*"Being a student teacher is like **being in a strange place** because you are a teacher but not an actual teacher."* — (ST44)

This metaphor captures the disorienting experience of occupying a liminal professional space and having teaching responsibilities without official recognition as an in-service teacher.

Uncertainty

*"Being a student teacher is like **walking in a foggy place** because once you get out everything will be clear."* — (ST45)

This metaphor illustrates the student-teachers' current inability to perceive their surroundings clearly, suggesting limited visibility regarding appropriate actions or decisions.

Challenge

*"Being a student teacher is like **a roller coaster**, because it's full of ups and downs and it never slows down."* — (ST46)

This metaphor shows the continuous fluctuation between positive and negative experiences in an ongoing, relentless process.

*"Being a student teacher is like **running in the pathway which is covered with rocks** because when you run with barefoot it feels like there are some stones that can cut your foot even if you keep running."* — (ST47)

In this metaphor, the necessity for caution is stressed as missteps that could lead to failure despite continued effort.

*"Being a student teacher is like **surviving** because you're always on your own."* — (ST48)

This metaphor accentuates the futility of effort and solitary reality of the practicum.

Submissive Role

"Being a student teacher is like being a slave because you don't get paid." — (ST49)

The financial precariousness of student teachers who carry out unpaid labor is underscored by this metaphor.

“Being a student teacher is like a slave because you are not paid even one Turkish lira but you are staying in school for 8 hours and give lessons to every class.” — (ST50)

Besides, this metaphor draws attention to the lack of financial compensation despite substantial teaching responsibilities, a situation beyond the student-teachers' control that seems to diminish their professional status and agency.

Discussion

This study provides valuable insights into senior year student-teachers' perceptions of teaching practicum experiences through metaphorical expressions. The metaphors functioned as cognitive and linguistic instruments that revealed perceptions, feelings, and thoughts that might otherwise remain unexpressed (Pitcher, 2013) through relatable symbolism (Oxford et al., 1998). When categorizing the metaphors according to established frameworks, several distinct patterns emerged. Among positive expressions, journey metaphors were particularly prevalent. Many student-teachers perceived being a student-teacher as a developmental journey, aligning with findings from Vietnamese contexts where practicum enabled appreciation of teaching values and responsibilities (Tran et al., 2023). Additionally, professional metaphors emerged strongly, with participants drawing parallels between student-teaching and roles requiring versatility such as actors, artists, journalists, acrobats, and tourist guides. These metaphors reflect aspects of processes similarly documented in Filipino teachers' lesson planning metaphors (Valdez et al., 2024).

While our findings show some continuity with the broader Turkish research tradition that has identified hierarchical relationships in metaphorical conceptualizations (Saban, 2004), our findings reflect a more complex negotiation of professional identity specific to the EFL teaching practicum experience. Unlike previous Turkish studies where teachers are frequently conceptualized primarily as knowledge providers or authority figures (Aydm & Pehlivan, 2010), our participants' metaphors of actors, artists, and guides emphasize adaptability and multifaceted skill sets rather than just hierarchical authority.

Regarding negative metaphors, several categories identified by Pitcher (2013) were evident in our findings. Some student-teachers utilized pressure metaphors and conflict metaphors, characterizing themselves as “unpaid, over-occupied workers on an uncertain, obstructed path full of ups and downs who are struggling to survive.” These characterizations resonate with Indonesian student-teachers' experiences of tensions between vision and reality and inadequate supervision (Maharani & Fithriani, 2023), as well as Algerian trainees' reports of theory-practice gaps (Zeghmar & Djouima, 2025).

The presence of these negative metaphors emphasizes the critical nature of the teaching practicum in teacher identity development. The disorientation and pressure metaphors identified here suggest that the practicum experience represents a particularly intense period of identity negotiation that may reinforce or challenge pre-existing beliefs about teaching. This emotional dimension proved central to Chinese EFL student-teachers' identity transformations during practicum (Zhu et al., 2022). Following Gee's (2000) framework, these metaphors suggest tensions between student-teachers' emerging nature-identity and the institution-identity imposed by schools and teacher education programs.

Furthermore, the bidirectional relationship between individuals and institutions described by Clarken (1997) is evident in our findings. Student-teachers are actively negotiating their professional identities within institutional constraints, revealing potential discrepancies between their beliefs, perspectives, teacher identity, and classroom practice realities. This negotiation process has been documented internationally, with studies showing how cooperating teachers' limited support (Nguyen, 2023), mismatches between university-taught methods and school practices (Sohrabi & Soodmand Afshar, 2025), and perception gaps between faculty advisors and cooperating teachers regarding preparedness standards (Çelik & Zehir Topkaya, 2024) all shape student-teachers' identity construction. Unlike earlier studies, such as Koroğlu and Ekici (2016), that overlooked negative perceptions, our research captured both positive and negative metaphorical perceptions at a critical transitional moment when students are actively bridging theory and practice.

Thus, this research extends the existing body of metaphor studies in the Turkish educational context in two significant ways. First, it applies metaphor analysis specifically to the EFL teaching domain, addressing a gap in subject-specific metaphorical conceptualizations. Second, our study examines a critical juncture for identity negotiation during practicum that remains underrepresented in the literature. The bidirectional relationship between individual identity formation and institutional constraints provides important insights into how EFL student-teachers navigate the transition from theory to practice, complementing recent findings on how placement-school contexts significantly influence identity formation (Zhu et al., 2022).

We also argue that the findings contribute to international discourse on teacher identity development and reflective practice in several ways. First, the predominance of positive metaphors (76%) aligns with Ibrahim's (2021) findings in Saudi Arabia and Tran et al.'s (2023) research in Vietnam, suggesting cross-cultural consistency in generally favourable practicum perceptions when adequate support structures exist. However, the 24% negative metaphor rate resonates with challenges documented internationally: insufficient supervision (Karim & Abbas, 2024), theory-practice gaps (Sohrabi & Soodmand Afshar, 2025), limited agency (Al-Jaro, 2023), and tensions between vision and reality (Maharani & Fithriani, 2023). This suggests universal tensions in practicum structures that transcend national contexts.

Second, the prevalence of journey and transformation metaphors across cultures (Zhu et al., 2022; Tannehill & MacPhail, 2014;) indicates shared developmental narratives in teacher education, while context-specific negative metaphors reflect local institutional realities from inadequate teaching materials and facilities documented in Vietnamese contexts (Nguyen, 2023) to lack of collaboration between educational institutions and universities in Iranian settings (Sohrabi & Soodmand Afshar, 2025).

Third, our findings support calls for metaphor elicitation as a reflective practice tool in teacher education globally. As Tannehill and MacPhail (2014) demonstrated, examining metaphors helps pre-service teachers recognize and challenge held beliefs, with several participants in their study moving from teacher-centered to student-centered conceptualizations through powerful practicum experiences. Our evidence that metaphors illuminate identity tensions across Gee's (2000) four dimensions implies that structured metaphor reflection could be integrated into practicum seminars internationally to: (a) surface unconscious beliefs about teaching, (b) identify sources of identity conflict, (c) facilitate peer dialogue about shared

challenges, and (d) support agency development by naming and reframing negative experiences. Such practices could enhance emotional resilience and professional identity formation worldwide, particularly in contexts where student-teachers report feeling voiceless or constrained (Zeghmar & Djouima, 2025; Çelik & Zehir Topkaya, 2024).

Metaphors and Gee's Identity Dimensions: Mapping the Findings

Our findings demonstrate how metaphorical expressions map onto Gee's (2000) four identity dimensions (see Figure 2 below). *Nature-identity* emerged in developmental metaphors (toddler baby, planting seeds) and emotional metaphors (flying like a bird, wonderful feeling), reflecting innate characteristics and temperamental responses to teaching. *Institution-identity* appeared in professional metaphors (actor, journalist, tourist guide) and *submissive role* metaphors (slave), revealing how institutionally-granted positions and hierarchical structures shape identity perceptions -concerns paralleled in Iranian findings about limited adaptability in cooperating teachers' instructional approaches and insufficient university advisor supervision (Sohrabi & Soodmand Afshar, 2025). *Discourse-identity* was evident in role metaphors (young mother, friend, mediator) and conflict metaphors (stuck in the middle, child acting like adult), showing how social interactions and others' recognition influence self-perception -a dynamic similarly observed in how Saudi student-teachers valued cooperating teachers' and university supervisors' positive roles in guiding their development (Ibrahim, 2021). *Affinity-identity* surfaced in journey metaphors (adventure, pathway, journey of growth) and connection metaphors (bridge), indicating identification with teaching communities and shared professional experiences.

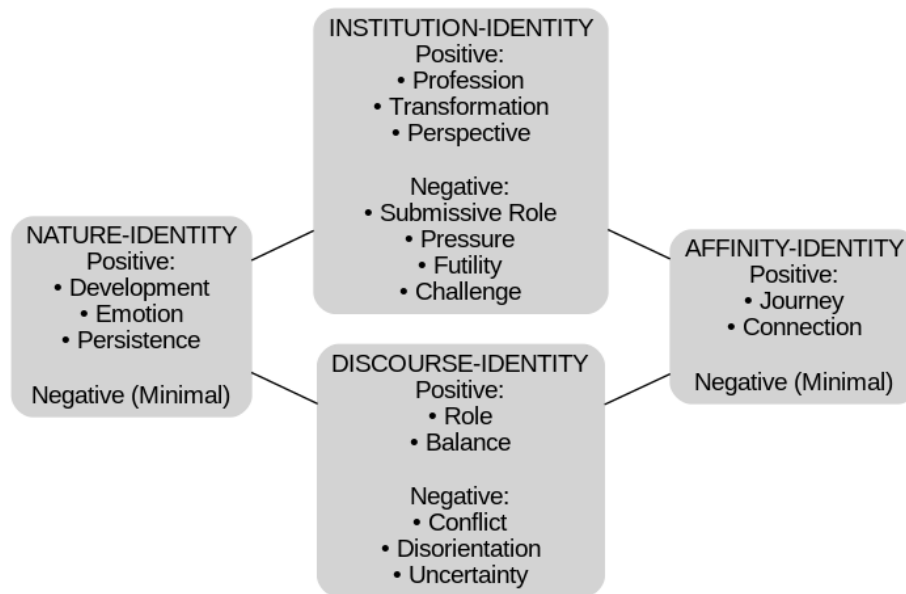


Figure 2. Mapping Metaphor Categories to Gee's (2000) Identity Dimensions

Notably, negative metaphors primarily reflected tensions in institutional and discourse dimensions, while positive metaphors distributed more evenly across all four dimensions. This suggests that identity conflicts during practicum stem largely from institutional constraints and social positioning rather than personal characteristics or community affiliation -a pattern consistent with international findings on host school-related challenges and mentor teacher-related difficulties (e.g., Maharani & Fithriani, 2023; Nguyen, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how senior-year student-teachers conceptualized their teaching practice experiences through metaphors, revealing predominant positive perceptions categorized into themes of profession, journey, connection, vehicle, perspective, role, developmental, transformational, emotion, balance, and persistence. Negative metaphors, expressed by a minority of participants, encompassed futility, pressure, conflict, disorientation, uncertainty, challenge, and submissive roles. The prevalence of positive metaphors, particularly emotion-related expressions, alongside the dominance of challenge-related metaphors in the negative category, provided valuable insights into teacher identity construction at the threshold of entering the profession.

The study was limited to one public university in Türkiye, necessitating similar research across diverse institutional and international contexts for more comprehensive understanding. Future studies could valuably compare metaphors before and after professional entry to track identity transformation over time. As Low (2008) noted, metaphoric expressions do not necessarily indicate active guidance of thinking or action, and as Clarken (1997) suggested, may represent aspirational rather than actual practices. Consequently, classroom observations could help validate alignment between expressed metaphors and teaching practices. Additional research dimensions could thus explore economic, social, affective, and country-specific factors influencing metaphor choices, potentially revealing deeper connections between sociocultural contexts and teacher identity formation. Such multidimensional analysis would strengthen understanding of how pre-service teachers conceptualize their professional identities and how these conceptualizations might evolve through practical experience.

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