

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Narrative Inquiry on the Teaching Development of Adjunct Faculty in Counselor Education

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ABSTRACT

Adjunct faculty in counselor education (AFCE) can experience barriers in their teaching development, such as role confusion, isolation, low self-efficacy, and limited mentorship. Yet, limited research exists about how AFCE navigate these barriers to make meaning of their teaching and grow over time. In this narrative inquiry study, we used interviews and photo elicitation with 13 AFCE to elicit their stories of teaching development. We used thematic analysis to analyze the data, and the resulting themes were *teaching identity definition and evolution*, *student relationships motivate growth*, and *program and institutional support*. These findings highlight AFCE's agency in seeking meaning in relationships with students and in preparing students as future counselors, as well as in how AFCE sought support for their teaching development with other faculty in the face of unsupportive institutional systems. Implications for counseling programs and institutions include development of flexible, accessible, and continuous mentoring programs for AFCE and engagement of AFCE in programmatic and institutional decision-making to promote a greater sense of belonging. Implications for AFCE include reflecting on motivation for teaching and areas of meaning in their teaching through reflective journaling.

1 | Introduction

Adjunct faculty (AF), who teach courses part-time often without service or research responsibilities, made up nearly half (44%) of college faculty in the United States in 2022 (NCES 2024). AF can provide lived experiences of the current realities of the workplace (Pearlman 2013). Since AF are often compensated far less per course than full-time faculty, higher education institutions utilize AF to help manage budgets without decreasing student enrollment (Danaei 2019; Pearlman 2013).

The CACREP (2023) standards require that counseling programs limit overutilization of AF and core full-time faculty must teach the majority of combined course credit hours every year (1.U). This requirement allows AF to teach up to 49% of a program's

credit hours each year. Additionally, there is demand for AF positions in counselor education since over half of graduates from counselor education doctoral programs do not become full-time counselor educators and two-thirds of counselor education doctoral students in one study rated teaching part-time as important in their decision to pursue a doctoral degree (Hatchett 2025). Despite their prevalence and importance, adjunct faculty in counselor education (AFCE) have reported experiencing barriers in teaching, including role confusion, a lack of adequate onboarding, isolation, low self-efficacy, a lack of mentorship, and a sense of powerlessness (DeJonge et al. 2025; Wadsworth 2021). Even as AFCE find meaning in influencing the next generation of counselors and giving back to the profession (Degeneffe and Offutt 2008; DeJonge et al. 2025), these barriers may impede the development of their identities as teachers (Wadsworth 2021).

and their sense of belonging at their institutions (Burroughs 2019; Danaei 2019; Rich 2016). Yet, limited research examines AFCE's experiences navigating these barriers and their meaning-making in teaching (Bolitzer 2019). Therefore, in the current narrative inquiry, we sought to uncover the contextualized stories of AFCE's development in teaching, guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological model.

2 | Teaching Development of AF

AF vary in their goals for part-time teaching, including as a springboard to a full-time faculty appointment, working career professionals who want to offer practical expertise to students, and retirees who want to stay active in the field (Levin and Montero Hernandez 2014). AF are more likely to be new to teaching compared to full-time faculty (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE] 2014) and, therefore, are at a critical point in their development as educators. AF are rarely provided with support and resources to enhance the quality of their instruction (Danaei 2019). AF have reported fewer opportunities for professional development, teaching orientations, and mentorship despite feeling a need for it (CCCSE 2014; Danaei 2019; DeJonge et al. 2025). AF often have little advanced notice about the courses they are teaching, leaving them little time to prepare (Pearlman 2013). Although researchers have documented the lack of support for AF, there is limited research on how AF develop their teaching despite these barriers (Bolitzer 2019).

AF perceive that coworkers and administrators do not value them as colleagues (Batiste et al. 2023; Rich 2016), and AF believe they have little job security (DeJonge et al. 2025; Pearlman 2013). AF may also feel a sense of disenfranchisement in their exclusion from determining the direction of their institutions (Burroughs 2019; Levin and Montero Hernandez 2014). When AF are provided with opportunities to offer input to the program or institution, they feel a greater sense of control over their work and ownership over the long-term success of the institution (Burroughs 2019). Alternatively, some AF recognize the freedom and autonomy that opting out of participating in institutional decision-making affords them (CCCSE 2014).

2.1 | Meaning for AF

The positive impact AF have on students motivates them and causes them to view their teaching as a source of self-value and self-efficacy (Degeneffe and Offutt 2008; DeJonge et al. 2025; Levin and Montero Hernandez 2014; Smith 2019). Similarly, meaningful interactions and authentic relationships with students can help AF feel they are fulfilling their calling in their careers (Smith 2019). Additionally, AF cited flexibility, autonomy, and freedom as benefits allowing them to find meaning in other areas of their lives (e.g., family; Bolitzer 2019; Levin and Montero Hernandez 2014; Rich 2016). Yet, researchers have not looked at the contextual factors influencing meaning-making and how it may enhance AF's development (Bolitzer 2019).

3 | Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological model of human development guided this study to enhance understanding of the impact of systems on AFCE's teaching development. In this model, an individual's development exists within a series of nested systems that are interconnected and contained within each other. Beginning with the innermost system and expanding outward, the microsystem involves the settings in which individuals engage regularly (e.g., an AF interacting with students in class). Next, the mesosystem involves the interaction of two or more microsystems of the individual's immediate environment (e.g., responsibilities at another job reduce an AF's capacity to prepare their teaching). Then, the exosystem entails interactions between two or more settings that the individual is not directly involved in, but which still impact the individual (e.g., institutional policies on AF compensation that impact their living conditions). The macrosystem includes expansive cultural values that influence individuals, but that do not directly influence them (e.g., economic trends). Finally, the chronosystem highlights how each system evolves over time (e.g., increases in AF hiring over time as a cost-saving measure). This model enhanced our study by helping us recognize AFCE's agency in interacting within their cultural contexts (Levin and Montero Hernandez 2014).

4 | Teaching Development of AFCE

The work of AFCE is multifaceted, including evaluating overall student performance, gatekeeping, advising, planning curriculum changes, infusing social justice into curriculum, and attending advisory board meetings (Degeneffe and Offutt 2008; DeJonge et al. 2025; Wadsworth 2021). Yet, most research on teaching in counselor education has focused on full-time faculty, offering little empirical guidance for how to support teaching development for AFCE. Given differences in work responsibilities and lack of job security (DeJonge et al. 2025), AFCE may experience growth in teaching and teaching identity development differently than full-time faculty (Gibson et al. 2015).

Connection, mentorship, and inclusion with colleagues can ease AFCE's feelings of uncertainty and imposter syndrome, lead to more positive experiences with gatekeeping (DeJonge et al. 2025; Wadsworth 2021), and support self-reflection and self-efficacy (Gibson et al. 2015; Waalkes et al. 2021). Yet, AFCE reported feeling isolated and alone, wanting more connection with counseling colleagues and programs, and not receiving mentorship (DeJonge et al. 2025; Wadsworth 2021). Additionally, AFCE can feel role confusion in gatekeeping, which can negatively impact their self-efficacy (Wadsworth 2021). AFCE can feel hesitant to report gatekeeping concerns because they fear losing their position, being labeled as difficult, or being dismissed by the program (DeJonge et al. 2025; Wadsworth 2021).

Researchers have often presented AF as having limited agency, as passive participants impacted by institutional problems in higher education (Levin and Montero Hernandez 2014). Yet, AFCE pursue teaching as a meaningful and important career goal in their lives starting in their doctoral programs (Hatchett 2025).

In-depth interviews may uncover complexities (Bolitzer 2019) in how AFCE build and evolve their identities based on the specific contexts of their institutions (Levin and Montero Hernandez 2014). However, there is limited research on what AFCE do to develop their teaching and how AFCE's motivation for teaching drives their growth (Bolitzer 2019). The present narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) study offered AFCE the opportunity to share their stories of teaching development in ways that might diverge from deficit-driven narratives. Understanding AFCE's stories and contextualized meaning-making processes can help counselor education programs and administrators design more intentional supports that target common developmental struggles and leverage common areas of strength (Smith 2019; Waalkes et al. 2022). We asked the following research question to guide this study: What stories do AFCE share about their teaching development, considering the context of their institutions?

5 | Methodology

We utilized narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) to investigate the stories AFCE told about their teaching development. The focus on a sequential and causal recollection of events and people in context in narrative inquiry fit well with our goal of exploring AFCE's development in teaching over time. Understanding and analyzing participants' experiences as contextualized narratives also helped us examine the impact of institutional systems on AFCE's teaching development (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Narration of a person's process of change and emphasis on the person's action and meaning-making in this narrative inquiry process (Clandinin and Connelly 2000) guided participants to tell their stories in ways that offered more empowerment and nuance than the focus on AF being victims of institutional barriers in the current research literature (Levin and Montero Hernandez 2014).

5.1 | Research Team

The coding team consisted of the first four authors, all of whom identify as men. We also used an external auditor who identifies as a woman, has 3 years' experience as an AFCE, and has audited multiple qualitative studies. Three members of the research team were counselor educators, and two members were counselor education doctoral students. Four members of the team have experience teaching as an AF.

To promote reflexivity and identify how our beliefs, values, and perceptions impact how we analyzed the data (Lincoln and Guba 1985), each team member wrote an ongoing reflexivity journal. In these statements, we considered our relevant experiences developing our teaching and working as an AFCE and our biases. We continued to engage in reflexive discussion after writing our journals, including pointing out for ourselves and for other team members times when our positionality and biases might impact our perceptions of the data.

The first author considered his experiences with imposter syndrome teaching as an AF and feeling reluctant to seek support because of an unspoken perception of needing to work

autonomously. He acknowledged biases about AFCE feeling disenfranchised within their institutions. The second author discussed working as an AFCE in online programs and his beliefs that AFCE are underpaid, overutilized, and not provided adequate support and orientation. The third author reflected on his nearly 15 years of experience working as an AFCE and how he created his own teaching style based on his experiences as a student in the absence of training and support. He imagined his familiarity with higher education might cause him to inaccurately understand the stories of newer AFCE. The fourth author talked about his positive experiences of AFCE being connected, available, and passionate as a student and how he might have a bias toward seeing positive experiences in the data.

5.2 | Participants

To be eligible to participate in this study, AFCE were required to have experience teaching as an AF in at least one course taken by students in a counseling program within the last 5 years. Of the 13 participants, 12 (92.31%) identified as women and one (7.69%) identified as a man. Ten (76.92%) participants identified as White, one (7.69%) participant identified as Black or African American, one (7.69%) participant identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, and one (7.69%) participant identified as multiracial or biracial. Participants' ages ranged from 28 to 76 ($M = 50$; $Mdn = 43$; $SD = 16.85$). Eight (61.54%) participants attained the highest degree of PhD, four (30.77%) attained a Master's, one (7.69%) attained an EdS, and one (7.69%) attained an EdD. Nine (69.23%) participants had not worked as full-time counselor educators and four (30.77%) had. For those who had worked as full-time counselor educators, their years of experience in this role ranged from 2 to 25 years ($M = 9.38$; $Mdn = 5.25$; $SD = 10.55$). The number of semesters taught as an AFCE ranged from two to 45 ($M = 11.46$; $Mdn = 5$; $SD = 13.16$). Participants engaged in a range of professional activities other than adjunct teaching, including running a private practice, consulting, working as a school counselor, and serving on doctoral dissertation committees. Participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with their current or most recent position(s) as an AFCE on a scale of 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 5 (*very satisfied*). Their responses to this item ranged from 2 to 5 ($M = 4.31$; $Mdn = 5$; $SD = 0.95$).

5.3 | Sampling and Recruitment

We used purposive sampling to recruit participants who could provide us with rich information about their development as AFCE (Patton 2015). Since limited research exists on the development of AFCE, we also used maximum variation sampling to provide a broad overview of the variety in stories of AFCE in terms of experience and highest degree attained (Patton 2015). Maximum variation sampling also helped us to avoid bias by highlighting the diversity in AFCE's stories and the central patterns across the diverse stories (Patton 2015). Since the CACREP (2023) standards allow affiliate faculty to hold degrees in varied fields related to the program's mission, participants were not required to have a degree in counseling or counselor education. Participants were also eligible if they had held previous full-time counselor education positions, if they were currently doctoral students in

counselor education programs, or if they taught in counseling programs that were not CACREP accredited.

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we recruited participants by emailing program coordinators and counselor education contacts ($n = 7$), asking for a list of AFCE names and email addresses. These contacts were selected based on their access to this information due to their leadership roles in their programs. They provided us with names and email addresses for AF at their seven institutions from four different states in the Midwest, South, and Northeast regions of the United States located in rural, urban, and suburban settings. Using this information, we emailed 66 AFCE, and 11 agreed to participate for a response rate of 16.67%. We also recruited two participants through a posting on the Counselor Education and Supervision Network Listserv. We determined that we had reached meaning saturation after enlisting 13 participants by noting that no new dimensions emerged for the 13th participant after going through each participant's data one at a time (Hennink et al. 2017).

5.4 | Data Collection

Participants completed a demographic data survey, an individual, semistructured interview, and a photo-elicitation prompt (Harper 2002). We maintained participant anonymity by deidentifying all data sources through the removal of identifiable information (e.g., places, names), using participant numbers instead of their real names, and storing data in a password-protected folder. Only the members of the research team involved in data collection had access to a spreadsheet linking participant numbers with their real names and contact information.

On the demographic data survey, we asked questions to provide us with rich context to inform our data analysis process (e.g., satisfaction with the most recent AFCE position, highest degree). For race, ethnicity, and gender identity questions, participants were provided with checkboxes representing varied identities and a fill-in-the-blank option.

The interview protocol consisted of seven primary scripted prompts, as well as scripted and unscripted follow-up probes to elicit more depth in participants' responses. The main prompts were open-ended, allowing participants the flexibility to share their unique stories (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), while probes helped guide participants to address different systems of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological model. The interview protocol was designed to help participants provide in-depth stories of their development of teaching as AFCE over time and the impact of varied contextual factors on their development. We developed the interview protocol based on the focus on story elements (e.g., person, place, action, change over time) in narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), a review of journal articles on AFCE, and the experiences of research team members working as AF. Examples of our main interview prompts included: "Tell me a story that characterizes who you were as an educator when you first started teaching as an adjunct," and "Tell me a story about how relationships have impacted your teaching development." The first, second, third, and fifth researchers conducted interviews through Zoom. The interviews were recorded and

transcribed. Interviews lasted between 49 and 71 min ($M = 57.08$; $SD = 5.81$).

In narrative inquiry, photographs help trigger memories of important times in participants' recollections of their stories and help participants and researchers engage in "an archaeology of memory and meaning" (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 114). We used photo elicitation in this study to promote depth in our data since photos can evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than words alone and are especially powerful in exploring participants' social identities and the impact of context (Harper 2002). Within 1 week after their interviews, participants took one photo that represented their teaching development as an AFCE. They submitted it via email with answers to two questions to explain its meaning (Harper 2002). Eleven of the 13 participants sent us their photos and answers to the questions.

5.5 | Data Analysis

We utilized thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to conduct an iterative, team-based data analysis process rooted in narrative theory (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Narrative inquiry allowed us to tell a grand narrative, the shared story across all our participants, in a way where AFCE have agency and are the central characters in their stories (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Levin and Montero Hernandez 2014). To supplement the theoretical focus of narrative inquiry, thematic analysis provided us with a flexible, step-by-step structure to identify themes in our iterative six-step data analysis process (Braun and Clarke 2006). For each step of the data analysis process, we analyzed all parts of our data (i.e., demographic data surveys, interview transcripts, photos, and photo descriptions).

In Step 1, we each familiarized ourselves with our data by reviewing every interview transcript, survey, and photo multiple times. In Step 2, we started by coding the first participant's data together as a group to align our approach to the coding process. Each team member individually reviewed all data for the first participant again and generated initial codes, short phrases representing interesting features of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Each member of the coding team subsequently reviewed one another's codes. In Step 3, we met as a group over a series of meetings to develop themes and subthemes from these initial codes through a consensus-based process. In Step 4, we individually reviewed all the data again and met to discuss how well our consensus list of themes and subthemes fit our data and reflected our participants' stories in three-dimensional space (with a focus on place, change over time, and relationships; Clandinin and Connelly 2000). In this process, we removed, added, combined, and divided our existing thematic structure to better represent our data and make sure that each theme clearly made sense on its own (Braun and Clarke 2006). In Step 5, we defined each theme and subtheme by writing a short description that captured its essence and scope in a concise and understandable way (Braun and Clarke 2006). Finally, in Step 6, our external auditor reviewed our themes, subthemes, and their definitions and offered feedback (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The coding team met to discuss her feedback and changed our thematic structure to enhance clarity and specificity.

5.6 | Trustworthiness

We promoted trustworthiness through triangulation of investigators, an external auditor, triangulation of data methods, and reflexivity (Lincoln and Guba 1985). First, we triangulated investigators during the data analysis process with the use of a coding team of four members with diverse experiences in counselor education and as AF. Throughout our data analysis process, we utilized an iterative consensus-based process to avoid bias and systematically incorporate input from all research team members. Second, we utilized an external auditor to provide feedback on the themes (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Third, we utilized triangulation of data methods by collecting semistructured interview data, photos and their descriptions, and demographic data that provided context. Finally, we used individual reflexive journals and discussions to help us consider the impact of our positionality, biases, and experiences on our data analysis (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

6 | Findings

Our data analysis process resulted in the following themes described in the sections below: (a) *teaching identity definition and evolution*, (b) *student relationships motivate growth*, and (c) *program and institutional support*.

6.1 | Teaching Identity Definition and Evolution

The theme of *teaching identity definition and evolution* underscores AFCE's process of professional identity development that evolved over time as they gained experience and shifted their life priorities and career goals. Participants often described a journey of growth over time, including a reduction of imposter syndrome and self-doubt, and a crystallization of their identities through experience and positive student feedback. This theme is broken down into four subthemes: (1) *imposter syndrome fades*, (2) *impact of identities*, (3) *career goals*, and (4) *balancing adjunct teaching and life*.

6.1.1 | Imposter Syndrome Fades

In the *imposter syndrome fades* subtheme, participants described experiencing doubt and imposter syndrome when they first started as an AFCE, especially if they received little support from their department. In teaching her first few classes as an AFCE, Participant 3 described how her imposter syndrome pushed her to work long hours:

[I felt] very unprepared [and] a lot of imposter syndrome. Literally feeling like showing up and I was an actress just kind of pretending. I did not receive any help with preparing for the classes that I was teaching ... [I was] lost. An actress faking it until I make it type of deal ... scrambling to pull together as much as I could to prepare a class that I could at least feel somewhat

confident in doing. I would spend many, I mean, many hours preparing for my classes.

Participants also highlighted the ways that their imposter syndrome faded as they gained experience and recognized their success. Participant 6 described feelings of imposter syndrome early on due to the lack of support, while also recognizing that these feelings pushed her to grow:

It's just kind of, "Go in there and figure out ... Just do it." ... just that imposter syndrome, "Okay, now they're going to find out that this isn't going to work for me." Or, "Now they're going to find out that I'm not up to this." ... It pushed me to grow ... Because I was like, "Is there a syllabus? 'No.'" Like, "Okay. I've never done one, but I guess I will." I think in the beginning, I was just a little protective of that core self ... maybe that was the best thing that could have happened.

Lastly, Participant 2 described how she learned to admit her mistakes to students:

A couple times in one of my classes, I totally blew it as a adjunct, because I was not at all prepared for the technology that was in place for this university ... I would have to then apologize to the students and own my weaknesses and my failures. I feel like we're human, and we need to identify first and foremost as human, so we're going to make mistakes. How do we look at that and then try to go forward doing better? ... Here, I'm just always saying, "Hey, guys, we're humans. We're going to make mistakes. All we can do is own those and not make things worse by trying to make it about something else. This is not the last time I'm going to fall on my face here, so I'm sorry. I will try to do better. I understand if you're upset, angry, frustrated with me, I get it." ... I feel freer to now admit that I fail regularly.

6.1.2 | Impact of Identities

In the *impact of identities* subtheme, participants described how their characteristics influenced their teaching development. Participants described how their identities, combined with their status as an AF, would cause them to be challenged by their students or to perceive their students as judging them. For example, Participant 3 described how students' perceptions of her age impacted her early development as an AFCE:

At this point in my life, things are very refined. I feel like I'm a well-oiled machine ... around teaching. In the beginning, I think my uncertainty probably got projected onto [students] ... I believe that students somewhat took advantage of that in some ways and would argue about grades. "Well, your expectations weren't clear, so I should get a 96 instead of a 94."

“Okay.” Just doubt ... When I started, I was really young. I already look really young anyway, and I imagine they sat there and were like, “How old are you, really?”

Participant 5 described how her intersectional identities and her marginalized position within the department and the field created barriers for her:

I was the only Asian individual in the classroom for these two semesters ... students only see my face, students only hear my accent ... in my imperfect English ... and I know people call me I have baby face, so I feel younger than my age, and I’m from a different country and I’m Asian and female. All of the things that I know I present myself in class and I have to bring it into class, and I just felt like I need to overcome these old barriers in order to connect with students.

Participant 8, who identified as Black, described how her first experience teaching as an adjunct was a class of only White students and how the conversation in the class impacted her development as a teacher:

I was thinking about, “One, how are they going to look at me as an adjunct and as a woman of color? And then, two, how are these conversations going to be when I have all White students, and won’t have other students to engage in that conversation?” It’d be mostly me feeling like I had to talk at them about the cultural aspect or about different pieces of it included in the skills class ... And the students were open. I mean, they asked lots of questions, they did want to know more ... that definitely gave me a little bit of relief ... And [in future classes as an adjunct] I also took more risks. I felt a little more comfortable and was able to be myself more in a way that I definitely wasn’t the first time I did an adjunct class.

6.1.3 | Career Goals

Participants discussed how adjunct teaching fit into their lives and impacted their vocational journeys in the *career goals* subtheme. Participants viewed their identity and purpose as an AFCE differently depending on their aspirations, life priorities, and experience in the field. Some participants viewed adjunct teaching as an ongoing part of their long-term career plan. For example, Participant 2 viewed adjunct teaching as a perfect fit for her because “you get to be in the passion of education, not the business.” Participant 11 described how adjunct teaching helped her focus on teaching as compared to her previous role as a tenure-track faculty member:

I can be a little more present now because I don’t have my research project over here, my administrative project over here, the faculty conflict that’s going on

here. I don’t have all those things to worry about anymore, and so I’m able to just be a teacher, and it enables me to focus a little more ... I don’t have the distractions I used to have.

Other participants viewed adjunct teaching as a way to develop their teaching to help them attain a full-time counselor education position. Participant 8, who planned to seek positions as a full-time counselor educator, believed that the low-stakes nature of adjunct teaching had a positive influence on her growth as an educator:

One of the things that I’m nervous about is my identity as a Black woman and the horror stories that I’ve heard regarding Black women and their [student teaching] evaluations, and the whole tenure thing, and just so many issues of how students treat some of their Black professors ... [Adjuncting as a doctoral student] took off the pressure. You’re an adjunct, you’re still a student, so you’re still learning, and this is your time to take risks and kind of see how students respond to it before you are actually a professor and thinking about, “Am I going to lose my job?”

Participant 4 discussed how adjunct teaching made him realize he wanted opportunities to impact students’ development more consistently with a full-time teaching position:

Adjuncting is not for me because I have a deeper passion for the academia piece ... going back to the substitute teacher analogy, I know some substitute teachers that enjoy it, but they like the fact that there’s no commitment on them. They relish that, and that’s not me. So, for me, the context of being an adjunct highlighted and solidified for me, I’m deeper into this than just dancing around and playing around here and there. So, I applied for the full-time position.

6.1.4 | Balancing Adjunct Teaching and Life

In the *balancing adjunct teaching and life* subtheme, participants described their process of meaning-making in considering how adjunct teaching fit into their lives. Changes in participants’ personal lives caused them to step back from putting long hours into their teaching preparation. For example, Participant 12 described how a health issue caused her to reprioritize what is important in her life:

I have these major surgeries to pay attention to ... I was pretty scared ... so I feel it’s pretty important for me to not be married to teaching. I’ve done many classes from a hospital bed or from a recovery bed here at home ... And what I have ahead of me is pretty big and [I’m] just not going to do that anymore. I have more important things to do and I’m not going to be married to teaching.

Participants also described how program and institutional factors impacted their workload as an AFCE. For example, Participant 3 described how she wished she would have advocated for more support and mentorship as a new AFCE:

I would get up at 6:00 a.m. and prep all the way until 9:00 when I had to teach, and I did that twice a week for like ever. [If I had it to do over again,] I probably just would have asked for a lot more people for help ... You don't know what you don't know. I had the textbook, I had textbook PowerPoints, but the rest of it was me sifting through what I wanted to teach and how I wanted to do it, and I just didn't know how. I would've loved a bit of mentorship. Even if I could have met with a person once a month, "Hey, this is my plan moving forward, what do you think about this?"

Other participants discussed how the freedom of adjunct teaching allowed them to spend more time with family. For example, Participant 11 described the benefits of retiring from a 25-year career as a full-time faculty member to become an AFCE:

I've taken on a much bigger role as a family person now that I am not working full time. I'm a much more attentive auntie and a much more attentive sister and a daughter-in-law ... I have had to reprioritize the importance of certain activities in my life ... and so I get to hold onto ... that calling of mine [as a counselor educator], but at the same time, I get to attend other aspects of my life that I felt like I had neglected for so many years.

6.2 | Student Relationships Motivate Growth

The theme of *student relationships motivate growth* highlights how participants viewed building relationships with students and supporting their growth as a motivating factor in their desire to improve their teaching. Participants described moments that helped them adopt a more relational focus. For example, Participant 7 described how expressing relational vulnerability in owning mistakes strengthened her relational teaching orientation:

I had to apologize not once, but twice, this semester to students ... I just felt like I had misspoke or I had said something that offended them in class ... it wasn't my intent, but I saw the look on their face as we were talking about it. I felt like I grew in that moment because I try to be very introspective with who I am as a person, and I feel that that situation in class really allowed me to grow just in regards to, "I am up here delivering this information, but you are still a person and I never would want to make you feel less than that." ... Just having a very vulnerable moment with

two of my students and just apologizing for the way a conversation took place in class ... now ... I am just growing into who I am, and who I am is very real and very personable ... what matters is who you are as a person sitting in the room right now with me.

Some participants discussed their current process of figuring out how to navigate their relationships with students. Participant 8 discussed how she received positive feedback from students based on her relational approach while also questioning whether she was too caring:

I had a student who said basically there was a lot going on, they were overwhelmed, and I had given them a day off with an alternative assignment, but they didn't have to come to the live session. And they just were so grateful ... they were like, "We've never really had a professor who's really thought about our mental health like this and really recognized how much we were struggling." And I struggle because I worry that I am too emotionally involved, or too caring ... So it's like, "Am I doing them any favors, or am I really being helpful and supportive?"

Participants also framed building relationships with students to facilitate students' growth and positively impact the counseling field. Participant 2 focused on the love of the counseling field and student growth in discussing why she came back to teaching after resigning from a 4.5-year career as a full-time counselor educator:

I was a frustrated assistant professor and ... left teaching because of that for a few years. Then I really missed the energy of the students, and my joy of seeing new counselors get going, and their hope, and their tenacity to want to change the world ... I had finally come back to my love for the field itself.

Similarly, Participant 3 described her relationship with students as characterized by co-constructed mutual respect:

My students blow me away all the time, all the time. I consider myself to have very, very good relationships with them. That keeps me excited as well. I genuinely enjoy seeing them. I genuinely enjoy talking with them ... I am floored a lot of the times by whatever environment we co-construct lends itself to them just really opening up in these really awesome ways ... I really appreciate the level of ownership and maturity that a lot of them have, because then I trust that they can do this, because of how they show up in my classroom ... There's a lot of mutual respect. There's a lot of love, if I'm being honest.

6.3 | Program and Institutional Support

In the *program and institutional support* theme, participants discussed a spectrum of support they received and the impact the level of support had on their teaching development. Some participants felt supported and valued in relationships with other faculty. Participant 10 described how the support of her department chair helped her feel a sense of belonging and competence as an AFCE:

It's just the support of the colleagues and realizing that you're not really alone ... our chair really tries to implement that ... and realizing that just because you may not be full-time faculty, that I as an educator still matter ... that really just made me say, "I fit here." It allowed me to see that I was in the right profession of being an adjunct teacher. It allowed me to see that I do have a voice. It allowed me to, "Yes, I am competent to be an adjunct teacher," that I am heard. I'm not just somebody signing off on grades, and that I'm going to run my courses with that. I'm going to make sure that my students are at a certain standard of level.

Similarly, Participant 7 had a positive relationship with a full-time program faculty mentor who helped her grow more confident:

[My assigned mentor] took time out of her busy schedule to meet with me and really help answer any questions that I had, not once, but twice, just to go over things, go over the material. That really made an impact on me. I didn't feel like I was just thrown to the wolves. That initial relationship I think just made me feel a little more confident and comfortable teaching.

Since full-time faculty were too busy to be helpful, Participant 1 found another AFCE to be valuable in understanding program expectations and resources:

It was actually another adjunct who had worked there before who spent a lot of time with me saying, "okay, this is how you do Blackboard. This is what student expectations are. This is what the program will expect from you." She was a lifesaver ... So she was invaluable.

In contrast, some participants discussed how their program's lack of support and lack of recognition of their value as AFCE had a negative impact on their teaching development. For example, Participant 4 described how he felt limited in his role and confused in his teaching development based on the lack of trust the full-time counseling faculty placed in his abilities:

It's confusing ... the funny thing is not even being told what my power is. It's the ambiguity. I'm cool with ambiguity except I don't like it when it's almost like you are purposefully doing it for the sake of keeping me immobilized from actually functioning ... That's the way I think about adjuncting: [it] is substitute teaching.

You come in, you have all the responsibilities, but you don't have any authority to really do anything of corrective nature ... So, you got to have a certain level of degree and a certain level of experience, and then they say, "No, we don't trust you enough to take corrective measures. Just give them what we tell you to give them and then grade these papers ... and be quiet."

Participant 13 discussed how the lack of communication and support from her program caused her to be unaware of important teaching requirements:

It was a bit of a junk show ... I was hired to teach the course a week and a half before it started. So, they were really scrambling. They have an interim director; all their adjunct faculty support was on leave ... and the same thing is happening again this next semester ... And it's maybe more of a pattern than they have realized where their adjunct support person is overtaxed ... You just have to go with it For example, my final needed to be uploaded into this entirely different system for [institution], and I had no idea. And apparently my rubric needed to be in there ... I didn't do that. The term is over, what else can I do?

Participants defined the lack of support they received as symptoms of systemic problems. For example, as shown in Figure 1, Participant 9 took a photo of a vibrant, blooming cactus thriving within a dormant, dried-up environment. This juxtaposition showed the way she found meaning in adjunct teaching while also feeling unsupported by her institution. Similarly, Participant 11 described feeling hurt by being commodified by the larger system of higher education while still loving the institution where she taught:

I do feel like a commodity. I feel commoditized ... it feels like they can take you or they can leave you. They'll call you when they need you, and that's a bit of a shock to the system, but it's part of the role ... I don't blame anyone. I still love [institution]. I still love the [institution] students ... But there has been a little bit of hurt, in part, because the communication is not what it could be, and I think in some ways that's because everyone's so strapped ... I don't think that that's anyone in particular's fault. I think that's part of the systemic financial thing.

Participant 4 wondered if institutions were strategically using AF's replaceability as a way of limiting AF's voice in naming inequities or improprieties:

I wonder if it's kind of also strategic on the part of institutions because there is no shortage of people that want to be adjuncts because they want to get their foot in the door. So, will I be willing to die on that cross rallying or railing against what I see as inequities



FIGURE 1 | Participant 9's photo and description excerpt. The area around the blooming cactus is dried and dormant. Yet, the cactus is full of life and beauty. This juxtaposition is an excellent representation of being an adjunct professor because the cactus and its flowers represent the best parts of working with students, furthering my profession, and continuing to learn in my own professional journey. The surrounding lifeless brush is my connection to the larger university community, while still there, it is dormant and less relevant than the beauty of what is in bloom.

or improprieties or whatever, when they could easily replace me as an adjunct?

7 | Discussion

This study explored AFCE's narratives of their teaching development in context. The themes of this study represent aspects of teaching development within participants' narratives: (a) *teaching identity definition and evolution*, (b) *student relationships motivate growth*, and (c) *program and institutional support*. Participants' multifaceted narratives and motivations illuminate the agency that AFCE have in overcoming barriers to their growth in teaching (Levin and Montero Hernandez 2014).

In the *student relationships motivate growth* theme, participants perceived meaningful relationships with students as motivators to developing their teaching in similar ways to research on teach-

ing development of full-time counselor educators (Waalkes et al. 2022). This finding reveals an interplay between the microsystem of the classroom environment and the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979), as participants' relationships with students and motivation deepened as they received positive student feedback and recognized student growth. This finding addresses the gap in the research literature about how AF's motivation shapes their teaching development (Bolitzer 2019). Additionally, this finding adds nuance to existing literature on AF's teaching development by highlighting positive sources of meaning for AF, in contrast to the emphasis on the lack of support and institutional barriers they face (Batiste et al. 2023; DeJonge et al. 2025; Rich 2016). In terms of the exosystem, participants found meaning in strengthening the counseling profession by training future clinicians, which aligns with findings of previous research studies on AF (DeJonge et al. 2025; Smith 2019) and full-time counselor educators (Waalkes et al. 2022). Counseling programs and administrators should consider the importance of student relationships and their impact on the counseling field when recruiting and supporting AFCE.

In the *program and institutional support* theme, participants received varied levels of support from their programs and institutions, which had substantial impacts on their teaching development. These findings add complexity to previous research on experiences of AFCE (e.g., DeJonge et al. 2025; Wadsworth 2021) and in academia broadly (Batiste et al. 2023; Rich 2016), which focused largely on the lack of support received by AF. The present study illuminates the positive impact of meaningful one-on-one mentoring on the teaching development of AFCE, especially as it relates to confidence. This finding aligns with previous research on teaching mentorship of full-time counselor educators who reported increased self-efficacy and validation in positive mentoring relationships (Waalkes et al. 2021). AFCE also pointed to similar negative impacts of lacking support on their teaching development as full-time counselor educators (e.g., confusion, isolation; Waalkes et al. 2021). Yet, AFCE discussed the systemic factors that influenced this lack of support more than full-time faculty members reported.

Some AFCE who did not receive helpful support did not blame full-time counseling program faculty for these shortcomings, instead recognizing the insufficient support as resulting from full-time faculty being overwhelmed. In other words, participants framed this lack of support within the exosystem and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979) as symptoms of the transactional culture of higher education systems that prioritize productivity over relational support (Danaei 2019; Pearlman 2013). This finding illuminates the potential for full-time counseling faculty and AFCE to form connections between their siloed mesosystems to serve as allies in advocacy for changes in the exosystem of higher education that would support teaching development and capacity for all faculty.

Although our findings align with prior research on how AF do not often receive adequate support from their programs or institutions (Batiste et al. 2023; DeJonge et al. 2025; Rich 2016), participants' stories of their agency in the face of this lack of support represent a unique contribution to the literature (Levin and Montero Hernandez 2014). For example, participants sought support from other AF and found that the autonomy in adjunct teaching helped them become more self-sufficient and resourceful in growing as a teacher. In providing support and mentorship, counseling programs and administrators should consider the agency AFCE have in teaching development and help AFCE identify existing strategies and skills.

In the *imposter syndrome fades* subtheme, participants described how they lacked confidence when they started teaching as AFCE and how these feelings subsided as they gained experience and recognized their successes in facilitating student learning. This finding aligns with previous research on how full-time counselor educators grow in confidence and resiliency in their teaching over time (Waalkes et al. 2022). A lack of support hindered participants' confidence in teaching as they did not feel valued by their programs, which also aligns with experiences of full-time counselor educators (Waalkes et al. 2021). Yet, participants also illuminated exosystem (e.g., a lack of institutional resources) and macrosystem (e.g., capitalism) factors that fueled their imposter syndrome. These systemic influences that devalue and deflate AFCE point to the urgency of providing intentional and relational support.

Finally, participants identified important ways that their teaching development was influenced by their identities in the *impact of identities* subtheme. Researchers (e.g., Thacker and Barrio Minton 2021) have explored minoritized counselor educators' experiences of teaching broadly. Yet, this finding represents one of the first studies that illuminates the impact of identities and systems of oppression on AFCE's teaching development, although in a partial way, as some identities (e.g., age) were discussed more than others (e.g., race and ethnicity). This finding highlights how macrosystem factors (Bronfenbrenner 1979) impacted AFCE's teaching development and how AFCE navigated the impact of these factors within the microsystem of their classrooms. AFCE have less power and status within the hierarchy of higher education (Batiste et al. 2023; Rich 2016), which can interact with their minoritized identities in terms of tokenization, microaggressions from students, and other forms of discrimination. Our findings also begin to show ways AFCE show agency in processing and navigating their identities in their teaching. Counseling programs and administrators should consider culture, power, and systemic injustice to advocate for dismantling oppressive systems and building equitable support and mentorship for AFCE.

7.1 | Limitations

We identified several limitations of this study. First, participants may have chosen to take part in our study based on their significant positive or negative experiences as AFCE. Specifically, most participants indicated similar levels of high satisfaction with their current or most recent position as AFCE, reporting a median score of 5 (*highly satisfied*) on this item on the demographic data survey. Yet, one participant rated their satisfaction level as 2 (*dissatisfied*), representing a significantly negative experience. Therefore, these polarized levels of satisfaction with their recent AFCE positions may have restricted the diversity of narratives represented by our participants. This underscores the need for further exploration of a wider range of AFCE experiences. Second, although our participants represented diversity in terms of age and years of experience that we sought with maximum variation sampling (Patton 2015), our sample was mostly homogeneous in terms of race (77% White) and gender (92% women). Thus, our findings may not transfer to AFCE with diverse identities. This also limits the depth of our *impact of identities* subtheme, as much of the data in this subtheme explored age. Third, we did not collect information regarding the broader context of the universities or programs where AFCE taught, such as Carnegie Classification or the remote or in-person nature of their program and institution. Obtaining this additional contextual information could have offered a more holistic picture of AFCE's experiences and how these systemic factors may have impacted their narratives. Fourth, four participants in our study had previously worked as full-time counselor educators before becoming AFCE, and they had different development journeys compared to the other nine participants. Therefore, our findings may have lacked depth in fully illuminating the patterns in stories of teaching development for either of these groups. Finally, since the data analysis team identified as men and most participants identified as women, we may have missed important elements of participants' stories in the data analysis.

7.2 | Directions for Future Research

There are several avenues for future research that build on our findings. First, researchers could examine a more diverse sample of AFCE across race, ethnicity, and gender, since scholars have identified specific challenges faced by minoritized individuals in counselor education (Thacker and Barrio Minton 2021). While our findings began to illuminate the influence of identities on AFCE's teaching development, it would be beneficial to expand on these findings by examining the experiences of a sample of AFCE with diverse intersectional identities. Similarly, it would be valuable to gather additional perspectives of AFCE beyond those with extreme positive or negative experiences to gain a more holistic understanding of AFCE's narratives. Second, as our study sought to provide a broad overview of the diversity of stories of AFCE (Patton 2015), researchers might use homogeneous sampling methods to examine the teaching development journeys of specific subsets of AFCE (e.g., AFCE who previously worked as full-time counselor educators). Third, given the complex nature of the interconnected systems (Bronfenbrenner 1979) impacting AFCE's teaching development, future researchers could use other data sources and participants. For example, researchers could include data collected about AFCE from program directors, students who take classes from AFCE, and full-time faculty who work closely with AFCE to gain a more comprehensive understanding of AFCE's teaching development. Fourth, quantitative studies could expand on this qualitative study. Since institutions increasingly rely on AF (NCES 2024), cross-sectional survey data focused on the utilization, experiences, and supports and challenges faced by AFCE can provide a broader and more generalized perspective of AFCE teaching.

7.3 | Implications

We suggest several implications of our findings for AFCE, counselor education programs, and higher education institutions. As participants in our study shared the positive impacts of mentorship on their confidence and teaching development, institutions should establish structured mentorship initiatives to enhance the identity development of AFCE (Batiste et al. 2023; CACREP 2023; Wadsworth 2021). The implementation of continuous support systems, such as mentorship initiatives and designated AFCE coordinators, can enhance communication, increase self-efficacy, provide necessary resources, and address faculty concerns (Degeneffe and Offutt 2008; DeJonge et al. 2025; Wadsworth 2021). Furthermore, institutions should create professional development programs that are both flexible and accessible, considering the varied schedules and responsibilities of AFCE.

Participants felt underappreciated in their work as AFCE and lacked confidence as new AFCE. Creating avenues for AFCE to engage in programmatic and institutional decision-making can provide a greater sense of belonging, build support systems, and increase self-efficacy (Degeneffe and Offutt 2008). Similarly, institutions should gather feedback from AF on a scheduled basis to guide program enhancements and ensure that support initiatives are effective (Degeneffe and Offutt 2008).

To help AFCE feel valued, institutions should offer fair compensation and incentives to acknowledge and reward the contributions of AFCE (Danaei 2019; DeJonge et al. 2025). AFCE's sense of belonging and recognition can also be enhanced by providing cost-neutral benefits that help them feel part of the community and reward their efforts, like free event tickets, travel funds, and gym access (Danaei 2019). Incentives, such as awards for teaching or programs centered around recognition, can attract and retain high-quality AFCE.

Since participants in this study identified building relationships with students and impacting the counseling field as factors that motivated their teaching development, AFCE might reflect on their motivation for teaching and their meaning-making processes (Degeneffe and Offutt 2008; DeJonge et al. 2025). AFCE can schedule intentional time to clarify areas of meaning in their work through reflective journaling or discussions with other AFCE. Additionally, AFCE might create a portfolio where they compile positive student feedback and descriptions of meaningful teaching moments to remind them of the impact of their teaching. These reflections could help enhance AFCE's perseverance and professional growth, despite challenges.

8 | Conclusion

AFCE play a critical role in training future counselors and counselor educators. Understanding their narratives is critical to creating more offer intentionally supports for their teaching development (Bolitzer 2019). The field of counseling and counselor education is strengthened when AFCE are supported with the resources and mentorship they need to enhance student learning.

Author Contributions

Authors contributed to this manuscript based on the authorship order. All authors were involved in the conceptualization and design of the study. The first three authors were involved in data collection. The first four authors were involved in data analysis. The fifth author served as an auditor in the data analysis process. All authors were involved in the writing of the article, but the first author led the writing process.

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Ethics Statement

The first three authors of this article received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from their institutions before recruiting participants.

Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in this study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data have not been made publicly available.

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