

# Identity Theft on the Way to an Administrative Role

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This paper explores changes in identity experienced by three teacher educators on their journey into an administrative role in our institutions. After 14-19 years as teacher educators, we see an administrative role, including managerial and leadership aspects, as a way to support our field more broadly. Yet as we consider and reflect on our career changes, we feel that we are in danger of losing connection with our teacher educator identities. At times these feelings are so profound that we wonder if we have become victims of identity theft. This collective S-STEP examines our identity shifts in the transition into administrative roles.

S-STEP research is guided by a 'desire to be more, to improve, to better understand' (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014, p.7). Yet at times the 'desire to be more' can have unintended consequences for our core values and identities. Therefore, any 'desire to be more' must also be balanced by the 'desire to better understand'. This collective S-STEP provided us with the opportunity to better understand these consequences by quilting together insights from across organisations and cultures to take a more purposeful approach to managing identity change during a transition to administration.

Chris, from a University in New Zealand, has 14 years' experience in teacher education with a specialisation in outdoor and environmental education. Three years of his work was in a teacher education college

prior to merging with a University. Chris was shoulder-tapped to become Deputy Head of School. While enjoying (mostly) the challenges of the new role, Chris's motivation for joining this collaboration was a sense of isolation and feeling of career drift. He found his relationships with teacher education colleagues was changing in ways that did not feel comfortable and he also did not feel at home in the new administrative contexts.

Kevin has 15 years' experience in physical education teacher education in two universities in western United States. For the last three years, he has served as Department Chair of Kinesiology, which houses programs in both exercise science and teacher education. Kevin viewed a leadership role as an opportunity for professional learning as well as an opportunity to serve his department. Assuming the chair role took Kevin largely out of a teaching role. As a result, he slowly began to feel disconnected from students, teacher education, and scholarship. Kevin views this new role as largely gratifying, but also personally and academically unsettling. For Kevin, the collaboration described in this paper represented opportunities to remain connected with and intentional about his own identity.

Maura has 19 years' experience as a teacher educator in primary physical education teacher education in Ireland. She spent 16 years in a teacher education college prior to the college incorporating with a university to become a Faculty of Education, where she has spent the last three years. While employed in the teacher education college, teaching was Maura's primary role with little to no opportunity for promotion or movement from this role. Following incorporation many opportunities to move into administrative roles and for promotion were presented to her. Maura collaborated with Chris and Kevin to establish how she might best navigate these opportunities and maintain her personal and professional identity by learning from, and challenging, their experiences. Over the course of this research, and influenced by the collaboration, Maura applied for and was appointed Associate Dean for Research (a three-year appointment). Maura sees

this position of responsibility not as a weight to be carried (weighed down with responsibility) but rather to view the word differently and look at being 'able to respond' while you are in that position.

We each identified strongly as teacher educators. We were all at a position in our careers where we were trying to evaluate the new expectations of our administrative positions or in Maura's case, the administrative position she aspired to and ultimately secured. We were keen to retain some semblance of our identities as teacher educators while maintaining a research agenda and establishing ourselves as administrators. We had similar characteristics as teacher educators in that we each expressed how we felt a duty of care to our students and this duty of care was manifesting itself in our administrative roles with each of us wanting to support our colleagues and programmes within our new roles. All three of us were active knowledge-seekers and avid learners. Therefore, when we discovered that there was no manual, no training or guidelines to follow in our respective roles, we 'found each other' through a mutual colleague and decided to collaborate towards better understanding ourselves in these new and changing contexts.

Our study is informed by two areas: teacher educators taking on administrative roles; and identity. There is a growing interest within self-study in teacher educators moving into administration. Within this body of work, studies have examined: issues concerning power, social justice, and reform (e.g. Manke, 2004); the experiences of women (e.g. Clift, 2015; Collins, 2016; Crowe, Collins & Harper, 2018); enactment of democratic practice, transparency, and collaboration (Allison & Ramirez, 2016; Kitchen, 2016); and the influence of a teacher educator identity in shaping administrative practices (Loughran, 2015). Similar to notions of tensions in teacher education (Berry, 2007), in the roles of administrators we found ourselves with a new set of tensions, described by Gosling and Mintzberg (2003), as living in a paradox and cognitive dissonance, being 'told to be global and local, collaborate and compete, change perpetually but maintain

order, make the numbers and nurture people' (p.1). This study builds on this body of work specifically in the area of identity shifts during the transition from teacher educator to administrator.

## **Identity As a Framework**

According to Gee (2001), our life project in this post-modern era is to forge an identity. Gee argues that 'all people have multiple identities connected not to their "internal states" but to their performances in society' (p.99) and therefore 'identity' provides a useful analytic tool for researching issues of theory and practice. According to Gee, there are both micro and macro influences on identity. Macro-level identity is constructed and sustained by institutions and groups of people through discourses that create titles, job descriptions, and larger-scale expectations of a 'certain type of person' (p.111). By contrast, micro-level identity is negotiated through moment-by-moment interactions that may shore-up or undermine particular identities. Recognition of identity is a social and political process. At the heart of this research into identity within administrative roles are these macro and micro-processes. On a macro-level, we three collaborators hold institutionally named positions (Deputy Head, Chair, Associate Dean) which come with role descriptions and institutional expectations, and on a micro-level, through our interactions in particular settings, we may support or contest these expectations. Gee sees identity as not fixed but fluid and negotiated. Our identities cannot be all-embracing because 'at root, human beings must see each other in certain ways and not others if there are to be identities of any sort' (p.109). Therefore, through macro and micro processes identities can be shaped, developed, and perhaps even lost.

## **Purpose**

From this year-long study, we offer our collective insights into the ways in which our changing roles influenced our identities. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how we as teacher educators, after assuming new administrative roles, come to understand our experiences, and process of shifting identities.

## **Methodology**

S-STEP research is improvement-aimed, interactive, and includes multiple, mainly qualitative methods (LaBoskey, 2004). This research was: improvement-aimed because we sought to better understand the changes in our identities; interactive through our collective and critical process (avoiding the concern that S-STEP can become an exercise in justifying our positions (Hamilton, 2002); and used multiple qualitative data sources (Skype conversations, reflections and critical friend responses). We demonstrated trustworthiness by collectively and critically examining our identities, relating back to the literature, and making our analysis transparent (Mena & Russell, 2017). Collective S-STEP emphasises: the importance of openness and critical honesty within the group (Butler et al., 2014); a collective commitment of the participants to their learning and growth (Berry, et al., 2018; Davey et al., 2010); and contributes to the criteria for rigour in S-STEP research.

## ***Data Sources***

Skype conversations were recorded and reflections generated over 12-months at intervals of three to six weeks. All three collaborators published an online reflection and responded as a critical friend to the reflections of the other two. These were completed a week prior to the Skype conversation and involved responding to an agreed upon topic, issue and/or associated reading. The reflections and responses framed

the conversations. On occasion there was a need for the authors to correspond by email to seek clarification on a task or comment made by their critical friend and these are included in the analysis. All data are included as follows:

<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Reflections	MR1	<b>Maura's</b> first <b>Reflection</b>
Transcripts of Skype meetings	MC2	<b>Maura's</b> second skype <b>Conversation</b>
Critical Friend Comments on reflections	KR3 - CCF	<b>Chris's</b> feedback as <b>Critical Friend</b> on <b>Kevin's</b> third <b>Reflection</b>
Email correspondence	KE	<b>Kevin's</b> comments made in an <b>Email</b>

## ***Data Analysis***

The authors inductively coded the data using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Initial codes were independently generated by identifying recurring ideas emerging from the dataset. These codes were compared across the three authors to produce themes to represent the concepts. Themes of identity change and becoming purposeful were presented by Chris as a process through which we became conscious of identity change which was validated by Kevin and Maura. Using multiple data sources and perspectives ensured triangulation and increased the validity of the analysis.

## ***Representation***

Findings are represented through a narrative that describes a process that was initiated by a sense of dissonance. Through our collective S-STEP, we identified this dissonance as being rooted in competing discourses which have the potential to 'rob' us of our identities as teacher educators. This in turn led us to ask how stable or malleable are our identities? Through this process, we came to an understanding that while our identities are malleable, we can become conscious about the different identities we hold, and this opens

opportunities to be more purposeful about how we allow our identities to transform.

## **Findings**

### ***Identity Theft***

As teacher educators, we identified a strong nurturing aspect to our identities which had been developed over years of working with our students to support and challenge them in their learning. As administrators, we drew on the same nurturing identities which allowed us to support our staff but also to deal sensitively with challenging situations. These particular teacher educator identities were not always helpful. For example, we found that administrative meetings required a different identity and associated discourse, shifting conversations from effective teaching to finances:

*we're speaking a completely different language than administrators and staff, and it's just trying to get that language, as you say, to be able to have a conversation with them and explain what you want, not in pedagogy but in pounds, shillings and pence ... language. (MC7)*

As we explored this further, we felt that these discourses also had particular logics and ideologies behind them which promoted efficiencies over powerful learning experiences for our students. Financial discussions are important for organisational functioning, and when finances became the sole focus of the meetings and, more importantly, the only arguments which held sway, it became essential that we learn to speak this language. We noticed how we began to adapt our identities so that we could gain access to these financial discourses more fluently and argue for our causes more compellingly.

This identity shift proved a significant concern for us:

*by doing that [engaging in discussions about financial models] at some point or what point do you become, or do I become complicit? And this erosion of this profession that's torn apart because there's no coherence anymore, it's just a course that has more students in it and fewer staff teaching into it is actually the ideal course. It's perfect! [sarcastic tone] (CC7)*

From our years as teacher educators, we held certain beliefs about quality teaching, yet as administrators, these new discourses were shifting our language and raised concerns for us about how we were changing and the direction of these changes. Particularly the worry that we had become complicit in devaluing student learning:

*I see that my career progression had impacted my core value of teaching. It seemed to have been co-opted by other agendas and marginalised. What can I do to hold on to those key motivators? Can I let them go without feeling like I have sold out to the system? Where will this progression lead to? (CR1)*

Kevin echoed these concerns, describing tensions created by tending to both roles (teacher education and administration):

*I have really felt a tension, as if being pulled in two directions. Finding time to interact with students, conduct research, and write has become difficult. Instead of a singular focus on pedagogical quality, now I also have to be concerned with 'cheeks in seats'. My courses*

*and academic identity used to guide my day, my work is now directed by the immediate and pressing concerns of the day, like classes having adequate enrolment. This shift has challenged my identity as a teacher educator and researcher. In many respects, this new role is stealing time from my old familiar one. (KE)*

Here we see the idea of theft entering our data. The demands of the administrative role seem to force us into particular ways of being which over time were pushing our identities into new shapes and new directions. But it was not just in the administrative discussions that these shifts were occurring. When back together with our teacher education colleagues we felt the change because of our new administration role and confidentiality:

*That feels like I am becoming a different person. I have to think about who I am talking to and what they already know and what they are allowed to know. It is a level of complexity that doesn't come naturally to me because I value openness and transparency. (MR1-CCF)*

Taking on the title of administrator was a macro-level identity change. We can see here how these macro-level shifts impacted on the micro-level conversations resulting in discomfort. At times we felt alienated in both teacher education and administrative contexts. We seemed to have lost access to familiar teacher educator discourses because of our new titles and responsibilities, yet the language of administration did not sit well with us.

Others taking on administrative roles have shared our concerns as Collins (2016) explains: 'I felt that my path had veered from its intended course... and I found myself saying that it "blackened my soul."' (p.189). We could feel how the discourses which constructed

our identities were shifting from being immersed in particular social contexts where administrative logics and financial arguments dominated. It was not a comfortable feeling.

### ***Becoming Purposeful***

Our research uncovered numerous situations which showed the potential for ‘identity theft’ in our transitions to administrative roles. Through our participation in this collective S-STEP we became more conscious of these identity changes and this in turn presented possibilities of a more mindful approach:

*This discussion of identity includes that of a teacher educator and researcher and my still-forming identity as an administrator/leader. Reflecting on our conversation allowed me to begin to really think about who I am professionally and who I want to become. (KR1)*

In this extract, Kevin showed the shift in our thinking from falling victim to identity theft, to something which we had some control over. This occurred at various points in our collaboration:

*I find I have a number of identities -some overlapping, some intersecting, and sometimes trying to be all of them at once and yet not ‘being’ any of them... in some ways I am resisting the change and in others embracing it... (MR2)*

Here we see the intersection of the micro- and the macro-level, particularly where Maura is discussing how she can resist the change in some ways. She recognises the messiness of identity work and wishing to embrace some of the changes but pushing back against

others.

Our collective S-STEP was influenced strongly by our work as teacher educators where we value reflection on practice which is informed by literature and research. For example, in this S-STEP, our reflections, critical friend comments and skype meetings were augmented by assigning ourselves readings prior to each meeting. Readings provided insights from diverse contexts and linked our experiences to theoretical constructs. In the following reflection, Chris quotes Swennen, Jones and Volman (2010) (one of the readings on identity):

*If I am not stable, but plastic and malleable in different settings, then being aware of how my identity is shaped in these different contexts is important to understand my influence on others. AND importantly, understanding my identity at different times does require an 'ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experience' which is why the discipline of this collaboration is SO helpful. It pushes me to reflect and consider which is rare in my work and also my wider life. (CR7) (original emphasis)*

Swennen, Jones and Volman's (2010) article was instrumental in shifting and expanding our understandings of our identities and how they can change. In this instance, the idea that identity change is continuous and requires active engagement with our experiences to unpack who we are becoming, was powerful for us. The combination of deadlines for reflections, readings and critical friend comments, followed up by a skype meeting placed pressure on us and underscored the importance of the collaboration in providing a space and indeed an impetus for this project.

Our initial discussions revealed concerns about identity theft and also feelings of being powerless to avoid this theft. Indeed, this was the

key concern that started our collaboration. However, there emerges a strong sense of a shared project through the collective SSTEP which enabled us to come to understand that we were not helpless victims but could take a purposeful approach to understanding and in fact influence how our identities shift.

## **Discussion**

All three collaborators were committed to quality teacher education and these administrative roles offered a different means to pursue this commitment. What probably should have been apparent from the outset were the significant changes that these roles would bring to our work and our professional identities. As these changes took effect, we could feel our old selves and identities morphing into new forms. The discomfort with these new forms and feelings of being dis-located from our familiar roles prompted our collaboration and this research project.

If as Gee (2001) argues, the key project of our lives is to forge an identity, then it is critical to be aware of the micro- and macro-level influences to 'better understand' our changing identities. We believe that 'forging' is an apt metaphor for the creation of identity. Forging implies an agentic and vigorous process through heat and hammering such as in the creation of tools on a blacksmith's anvil. Certainly some of our experiences of administration were heated and robust. Without an understanding of how our identities are being forged, we may be unaware of changes to the shape of our identities and our own ability to take some control.

On a macro-level, institutional roles are designed to create clarity of structure and efficient organisational processes. Receiving an administrative title also comes with responsibility for management and leadership decisions which will affect programmes and colleagues on a different scale to our roles as teacher educators. These administrative roles mean we are privy to information that is sensitive

and cannot be widely shared. On a micro- level, such exclusive knowledge can alter conversations with colleagues and make them inhibited or awkward.

Simultaneously, our institutional roles require that we hold conversations with finance managers who understand different discourses to those of teacher educators. We must then learn to bridge different discourse communities and speak different languages. It is not appropriate to bring a purely teacher educator identity to a finance discussion, nor to bring the unmodified discourses of finance to teacher educator discussions.

Underneath each of these discourses lies an identity which is shored up (or undermined) by both micro- and macro-level processes. 'In the end, we are talking about recognition as a social and political process, though, of course, one rooted in the workings of people's (fully historicized and socialized) minds' (Gee, 2001, p.111). Because identity exists in our minds and is constructed socially and politically, the shape of our identities is malleable. Without time or encouragement to consciously examine and reflect on our identities, we believe there is considerable potential for unconscious and potentially undesirable shifts, perhaps even identity theft, to occur.

## **Implications**

It is important to note that while this chapter focuses on dissonance and discomfort with our administrative roles, all three of us find our new roles challenging and often rewarding. We do feel that as administrators we are able to support teacher education on a different scale to when we were solely teacher educators. The identities which are important to us as teacher educators also bring a number of strengths to administrative roles such as building relationships with a range of different people (Kitchen, 2016). However, the discourses of administration also require the development of different identities.

Administrators need to draw on discourses from disparate ideologies including accounting and organisational systems. Immersing ourselves in these discourses allows us to better (more effectively) articulate the importance (financial viability) of teacher education in meetings with teacher educators and also senior leadership. Our findings suggest that teacher educators moving into administrative roles risk subtle, and not so subtle identity changes which could be described crudely as identity theft.

This research strongly supports the benefits of a collective S-STEP in taking a purposeful approach to transitions to administrative roles because the desire to 'be more' must be augmented with the desire to 'better understand'. The forging of a professional

identity is therefore not only an answer to the question, "Who am I now?", but also to the question, "Who do I want to be in the future?" (Beijaard et. al; 2004). Collective S-STEP allows us to recognise how shifts in our identities align (or conflict) with our goals and better understand the implications for ourselves personally and professionally.

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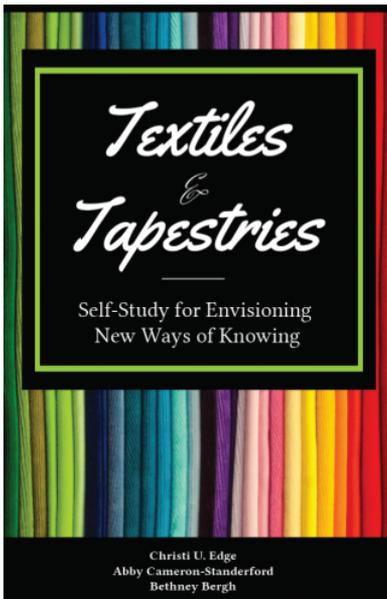
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