

Looking Back, Looking Forward

A Self-Study into Sustaining a Teacher Identity

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Identity

Self-Study

Narrative

Teacher Identity

Like many young scholars in the current higher education climate within the US, I completed my Ph.D. but struggled to find the academic employment I had imagined I would get after I graduated. As I talked with other young scholars, I discovered I was not alone. Many of them spent several years seeking permanent positions with a Higher Education institution. At the Castle Conference in 2018, Torrez and Hanniford (2018) presented about the ways in which they sought to sustain themselves as scholars within a difficult institutional and political climate. After the session, a group of self-study of practice scholars who had attended the session discussed the challenges they faced. As part of that discussion and based on my conversation with other recent graduates, I determined to explore the ways in which I have sustained myself outside the academy as I attempted to move from graduate student to academic faculty.

Other Self-Study of Practice (S-STEP) scholars have studied shifts in their teacher identity-making as they move from teacher to grad student (Dinkelman, Cuenca, Butler, Elfer, Ritter, Powell, & Hawley, 2012) from grad student to faculty positions (Williams, Ritter, & Bullock, 2012) but the voices of those who are struggling to find positions at higher education institutions after their graduate degrees are silent with regards to the challenge of identity-making with which they are involved. My struggle to forge a life as an academic, has felt unique and lonely, but as I have talked to other recent graduates, I have found the experience to be more common than I thought. Putnam (2005) argues that in examining the particular we are able to uncover understandings that others can use in solving similar problems. Thus, I set out to explore how I am sustaining my teacher educator, researcher and academic identity when not officially a teacher educator at a higher education institution. In this narrative self-study, I recognize the situatedness of my experience but as Slife (2004) states: "Suddenly, the engaged and situated character of our lives becomes clear. We are no longer primarily rational beings, with our minds and ideas as our only or even our primary resources" (p. 176). Through an ongoing process of positioning and being positioned within inquiries, our identity and understanding is formed and revealed (Harre & van Langehove, 1999). This study is representative of another way in which teacher educators seek to sustain themselves as they live out varying narratives as teacher educators.

The purpose of this study is to examine my narratives of sustaining my identity in facing the challenge of experiencing the living contradiction of being and not being a teacher educator scholar in order to develop understandings of what is sustaining and what makes me resilient as a teacher educator scholar within the academy but outside the academic institutional landscape.

Methodology

Self-Study or Self-Study of Practice or S-STEP is described by Pinnegar and Hamilton (1998) as a methodology where “one’s self, one’s actions, one’s ideas, as well as the “not self” (p. 236) is considered. “It is autobiographical, historical, cultural, and political... it draws on one’s life, but it is more than that” (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 1998, p. 236). This study of my experience of this living contradiction follows the tenets of LaBoskey’s (2004) five characteristics of S-STEP. I took up the study focused on my experience in seeking to be resilient as a teacher educator outside the academy. It is interactive and improvement aimed because I have engaged myself as a critical friend and engaged in dialogue with others about my situation. I seek to use what I find to be more resilient. I use qualitative methods and in attending to trustworthiness in my analysis, I seek exemplar validation.

Because “the work of self-study falls *in the midst...*, *between*, and *alongside*” (Hamilton, 2004) the lived life being studied, just as Narrative Inquiry which Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe as always being in the midst of a life unfolding over time, this work is ongoing as new experiences shape my understandings and interpretations, and therefore my future experiences and understandings.

Data Sources and Analysis

To uncover what sustains me, I explored previously written narrative accounts, engaged in memory work, utilized Facebook and blog posts, as well as journal records across the years since my graduation. The narrative accounts came from the narrative beginnings that I constructed for my M.A. and Ph.D. projects. I have commented on my experiences and feelings in Facebook and blog posts and in personal journal records and I pull forward data from these sources that are relevant to my exploration of how I sustain myself in the academy outside an institution.

Using Dewey’s notion of experience (1938), I engage with my data by thinking narratively with it, organizing it into stories of similar themes (commitment, relationships, identity, training, etc.), looking within each to identify the critical events, and taking into account Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three commonplaces (temporality, sociality and place). While I did not engage with a specific critical friend (because of the intense vulnerability I felt), I reviewed the data acting as my own critical friend in determining which events from the various data were relevant in my exploration of my sources of support and experiences of resilience. Once the critical events were identified, I used the three-dimensional narrative space and utilized the three commonplaces: moving forward and backward in time, moving inward and outward, and attending to place. As I came to understandings of the events, I engaged in dialogue with friends and colleagues to unpack these experiences and my developing knowledge and understanding. I pulled forward threads, or resonances I identified among my stories. In this way I uncovered understandings that emerged. Acting as my own critical friend, I sought to discern meaning and identify implications for myself, my living contradiction, and the wider landscape by constantly challenging my assumptions about how I felt or the realities of events. I constantly problematized the threads and the knowledge that was emerging in order to bring deeper understanding.

The threads that emerged were that of commitment I felt to the larger scholarly community and myself, the relationships that helped sustain me within and outside academia, and the academic pursuits I engaged in.

Threads: Looking Back

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) suggest that it is important to consider what the life pre and in-service teachers imagined as they began their journey to teaching. In my own work (Pinnegar, 2012) I confronted my own imaginings of what being a teacher would look like. I had imagined a public elementary classroom filled with student work and energetically engaged children. I imagined working with those children with behavioral or learning difficulties to determine ways forward that would be beneficial to the child and satisfy the educational system.

My imaginings of being a teacher after graduating with my teaching degree was not without the harsh realities that come with real-world experience but it did include an image of traditional employment. It seemed that traditional teaching was not in my future as I took a job at a childcare facility before going on to my graduate education.

As my dissertation was nearing completion, I again began imagining my life after graduate school. Once again I imagined myself in the traditional environment.

Walls filled

Books

Art

From kids

From adults

Sitting area

Warm tea

Snacks

The professional me

Readying for class

Video chat?

No, tomorrow

Lunch with colleagues after class

Writing music

Writing day

Writing snacks

Productivity in scheduling

Leaving my home

Others see it as my office

(Memory work, 2019)

It is clear that in my imaginings I did not wonder how I would be sustained. It was not a question because I imagined that, just as when I was doing my graduate work, the life and work itself would sustain me. What did not occur to me is how I might be sustained if I were not to enter an academic institution.

In 2018 at Invisible college in Toronto, I was confronted by the realities of my situation again as I presented alongside other scholars talking about what sustains us. I sat and listened as colleague after colleague described the difficulties they had in their lives and at their intuitions to be sustained as an academic. I listened as those in attendance also shared stories that illustrated the struggle they felt of being sustained within the institutions they worked.

When it came my time to share my experiences of being sustained, I realized how very different my experiences were from those in the group, but not necessarily those around the world.

"I felt almost angry. Everyone was talking about how hard it was to be sustained in the university. I don't disagree with anything anyone said but some said how they would leave and do something else with their lives if they could figure out what would make them happy. And here I was sitting thinking how much I would LOVE to be at a university dealing with

academia in some way. The others were reminders to clean or to call people yet it is clear that, even when not in a university setting, much of my life (or what I wanted for my life) was around the expanding my own knowledge and sharing knowledge with the academic and professional communities.

Building the House: Relationships in and Outside the Academic Community

One of my favorite quotes is from the John Donne 1624 poem, “No man is an island”. When I left my doctoral program I had felt a great sense of loss. I had left the place where, for me, I had wonderful support, colleagues who listened to my work, experienced scholars to help me think about my work, and relationships that provided me a break when I needed it. I imagined that when I entered another university setting I would be able to develop these same relationships that would sustain me in the university setting.

Without that natural structure I was forced to develop new and older relationships that would sustain me and make me more resilient to the hardships of being outside academia.

Bobby: Eliza?! Do you think Roscoe (Eliza’s dog) misses us? Eliza: I think he does. He’s probably missing us right now. Bobby: I think so too because we are friends and when you’re friends you want to play together. I have lots of friends. Like...Spencer and Jay and Cal...and YOU! (Conversation with Bobby, 2019).

Perhaps the most important relationships for me have been those outside of the academic world. The above conversation with Bobby, a three-year-old, was important for me as it made me realize the support I had from continuing to work with children. Though Bobby’s initial question was about my dog and the nature of friendships, my researcher brain began to wonder about how Bobby, and other children understood the relationships they had. My mind was peppered with wonders and questions. When I shared these with Bobby, and the other children I worked with, they obliged and shared stories and wonders of their own. “You’re a writer, right? You should write about this. It would be a good book” (Conversation with Xavi, February, 2018).

My academic and scholarly relationships have also sustained me. As with all things in the digital age, relationships are both easily accessible and difficult to maintain. So many times I had intentions to keep a schedule of talking with friends and colleagues about their work and ideas for projects to maintain those connections. These quickly grand designs soon failed to be executed. However, the relationships did not fade away. I had to accept a less structured form that would still allow other scholars to sustain me. As I struggled to maintain my identity as a researcher and scholar, it was my conversations with other researchers, scholars and teacher educators that helped me think about the ways I might be sustained.

As colleagues asked about what I was doing, they helped me to think about my experiences as a researcher. They encouraged me to inquire into the events and relationships in which I was immersed. Ultimately, I was the one who had to initiate conversation.

Eliza: Want to come to a late dinner with us?

Raegan: Yes! Then you can tell me what your next steps are and what research you are doing. I had to be open and accepting of the opportunities that came my way to talk with others, from Facebook messages, Instagram conversations, and actively participating in conferences.

Building the House: Engaging in Academic Pursuits

As with my relationships, it became clear to me that if I wanted to maintain some type of identity as a researcher and scholar, being active in academia, I needed to do those things that I would be doing if I were living out my imagined life of academia.

I had made a commitment early in my education that, no matter what happened or how life unfolded, I would always work to be part of the academy. I would continue doing research and share that research in articles and at conferences.

I would seek out opportunities to help new and emerging scholars with their work, to help strengthen the research communities that meant so much to me.

I sought out opportunities that would not only allow me to give back to the research community but would also help me sustain and develop myself as a researcher. Guest lecturing, reviewing articles for journals, and attending conferences were important. More impactful, perhaps, were the pre-conference workshops which provided me a place, once again, to sit with other scholar educators, discussing ideas, working through pieces of writing, deepening my knowledge of research and methodology, and being generally fulfilled.

"I nominate Eliza!" (AERA, 2019). As the relationships I painstakingly cultivated grew, so did my opportunity to serve the communities that had sustained me. As I was asked to review articles for journals, I began to wonder if the identity that I was so desperately trying to sustain was seen by others as being set. While not the life I had imagined, it became increasingly clear that the boards I served on, the journals I reviewed for, the research I engaged in, and all of the other academic pursuits I participated in were not about trying to claim an absence of myself as a researcher and academic but that it was an identity that I deeply held that was being sustained and allowing me to be resilient in my identity.

Conclusion/Discussion

From my review of all my data sources, three threads were revealed. And yet it is clear that the threads are woven together, overlapping, weaving together. These threads are not just stories to be told as a way to bolster the individual but are the way in which I have inquired and made meaning of the experiences of my life.

The first thread was the value of a strong sense of purpose and commitment to being and becoming a teacher educator scholar. I recognized that I had a clear sense of myself as a scholar and as a teacher educator. I knew I had the potential to contribute much to the research conversation and the development of teachers.

A second thread focused on the value of relationships. Two kinds of relationships were especially important. The first was relationships of support within the academic community where my ideas were valued and treated with respect. The second were relationships with children and family. Interactions in these settings provided evidence of my strength and insight in working with others and supporting children.

The third was my ability to continue to engage in academic pursuits. In addition, I determined that it was the intertwining of these threads that provide a web of sustenance and support from which my resilience emerged.

This study contributes to our understanding of the identity-making of teacher educators in spaces of challenge and struggle. It builds on the work of those who have looked at identity in terms of institutions causing us to look past the institution to define the scope of academic identity-making. It also presents new strategies for engaging in S-STEP work using past and current narrative accounts using the narrative commonplaces to push interpretation deeper.

Finally, by looking back one is able to envision the future. By looking at my past experiences I hope to imagine a way forward, strengthening my web of sustenance and allow me to become more resilient in times of difficulty and challenge when maintaining my teacher educator and researcher identity.

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