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Teacher identity

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TEACHER IDENTITY

The potential of autoethnographic research for restoration, renewal and retention

Nadia Mead

Introduction

Throughout my teaching career, I have been involved in action research as either the researcher or as a participant. In the compulsory education sectors, both in England and Australia, I was involved in several projects that included examining the causes for lowered academic achievement for students transitioning from primary to secondary; pilot projects for new policy and curriculum; leading staff wellbeing surveys; leading school culture surveys; and mentoring other teachers who wanted to conduct their own school-based research. All these projects used action research methodology and methods.

Choosing school-based action research methodology has many advantages. It allows teachers to investigate a specific issue, or problem of practice, that is highly relevant to their working environment, and to feed back the results into their class or across the school. Direct impact and change from the research are visible and the response to improvement is easily measurable. If the research is to remain in the school, there is no need to apply for ethics approval as the information gathered will not be disseminated outside of the school and its staff, and so confidentiality will be retained. Typically, schools tend to use action research cycles for gathering valuable data about students and school curriculum and practice. Abundant data are readily available and the process of action research is often amenable to continued cycles of collection and analysis. Teachers can collect both quantitative and qualitative data in the forms of whole school data and participant responses, and this easy access to plentiful data is essential when dealing with the time constraints of a busy school. There is no need to adapt or amend features of the study as the work has been carried out with the students, staff and other stakeholders in mind. A specific school’s lens has been applied and so the outcomes are highly relevant to its context and needs.

Educators have contrasting views about what constitutes research and differing opinions on the value of school-based action research (Harris, 2006; Rossi, 2012; Whelan, 2018). To undertake research in the first place, a teacher must have sufficient drive and motivation to willingly embrace the extra work that comes with conducting a research project, especially one that might not have an impact outside of their own classroom. There has to be enough conviction that the entire process will be of benefit to them as a classroom practitioner and also for their personal and professional growth.
Goodnough (2011) acknowledges that collaborative action research is one way of engaging teachers as researchers, encouraging them to reflect on their “perceptions, beliefs, and practices, which is critical for classroom-based change and personal and professional growth” (p. 84). Teachers are skilled collaborators, reflecting on their practice and adapting curriculum and pedagogy to meet the needs of socially, culturally, and linguistically diverse classrooms. Conducting action research in school settings allows teachers to use these skill sets and formalise them in ways that can inform future policy and practice within their own settings and potentially across others. The data teachers are already collecting facilitates deeper learning for all involved, whilst also providing opportunities for collaboration that transcends everyday professional interactions (Leat et al., 2015). Consequently, action research is a useful and robust way of embedding evidence-based practice, and a valuable way of developing teachers as researchers with continued benefits for their students, colleagues and wider school communities.

However, there are potential problems with ownership and agency when teachers are not the instigators within the research projects (Goodnough, 2011; Rearick & Feldman, 1999). If the project is handed down, because of a school review or problem identified at leadership level, for example, then the teacher researcher will not have ownership of the study. There are further issues when teachers are not empowered by the research and instead perceive it as only relevant to their immediate community and therefore not meaningful or purposeful beyond their own classroom or school. Berger et al. (2005) acknowledge that even when the act of research has a positive impact on the teacher, there is often little impact on the school or its culture and so any research is “either benignly ignored or actively rejected” by colleagues (p. 94). If teachers’ perceptions of school-based action research are that it isn’t real research, then it can be difficult to motivate busy educators to engage with additional work outside of their already pressing classroom responsibilities.

This was certainly my experience of action research in compulsory education sectors, both in England and in Australia. In 1990s England, there was very little guidance offered to teacher researchers who were required to design and conduct a project without clear frameworks for data collection and analysis. In contemporary Australia, the local Education Authority offered minimal assistance through graphic organisers at the onset of a suggested project, but provided little follow-up for the duration of the research. For me as the researcher, it appeared that the project instigators were only interested in the results (Leat et al., 2015) and not in the actual process of the research project, nor were they interested in the impact on my colleagues and me as teacher researchers. As a practitioner who already valued research, it was hard to accept that others were not as invested in the transformational opportunities. Consequently, this kind of approach did not support my identity as a teacher researcher and some projects I was involved in never came to fruition because of a variety of barriers such as time commitments, staff changes and dwindling interest or support.

Teacher identity: teachers as researchers

Creating the identity of a teacher researcher is an important element of sustaining a research practice and for generating a research culture in schools. Teachers’ commitment, effectiveness, and resiliency are interrelated with their identities and so any attempt at building capacity for research must incorporate a socio-cultural approach to developing teacher identity which acknowledges it as an ongoing process, rather than a static one, and encompasses social context as an integral part of identity and growth (Leat et al., 2015; Souto-Manning, 2012; Taylor, 2017).
Willemsen and Boei’s study (2013) revealed that despite already working in academia, even teacher educators who were responsible for training teachers still required support and guidance to conduct their own research at the same time as fostering a research identity in their pre-service teacher students. Evidently, nurturing a research identity takes time and requires ongoing scaffolding and mentoring at all levels of the education system. We expect school leaders and education authorities who encourage research in schools to communicate the purpose of the study and convey its relevance to the whole-school community. However, there also needs to be a consideration for how educational leaders support teachers to become researchers in a way that focuses on fostering and sustaining teacher researcher identities. The literature on teachers’ professional identity identifies the importance of paying attention to the personal aspects of a teacher’s identity, especially when rapid educational changes may conflict with teachers’ personal values (Beijaard et al., 2004; Taylor, 2017). Perceived differences in the roles of ‘teacher’ and ‘researcher’ can be barriers to developing teacher researchers.

Creating their own research project is crucial for a sense of teacher agency and empowerment. It is also vital for developing the identity of the teacher as a researcher. Teachers who have agency over their chosen study, and embark on successful research, are transformed by the experience. Once a teacher researcher identity is established it is difficult for them to step back into a non-research mindset and return to previous teaching practices (Whelan, 2018). The literature on teacher researchers tends to reflect and voice only the successful instances of action research in schools and might not be truly reflective of all action research being conducted (Leat et al., 2015; Whelan, 2018). If that is the case, why does this methodology tend to be the default position for in-school studies?

**Autoethnography as restoration**

Autoethnographic research is a qualitative approach that uses “personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience” (Holman-Jones et al., 2013, p. 22). By embedding a personal voice in the research, the autoethnographer must ensure the study makes a purposeful comment on culture and cultural practices whilst reflecting on the nuances of personal experience. The researcher must also show how aspects of an experience can marginalise or silence certain people and their stories. An autoethnographic research project acknowledges the audience and openly seeks contributions to further the work at the same time as restoring the specific perspective of the researcher.

Academic discussion is mixed regarding accusations that autoethnography is self-indulgent (Anderson, 2006; Buzard, 2003; Campbell, 2017); however, there are clear definitions to ensure the autoethnographer is contributing new knowledge to scholarly learning. Holman-Jones et al. (2013) describe it thus:

> If an author writes to tell a story to illustrate a sad, joyful, or problematic experience but does not interrogate the nuances of this experience in light of general cultural phenomena and cultural practices, then the author writes autobiographically.

> If an author experiences an epiphany, reflects on the nuances of that experience, writes to show how the aspects of experience illuminate more general cultural phenomena and/or to show how the experience works to diminish, silence, or deny certain people and stories, then the author writes autoethnographically.

(p. 23)
Consequently, the autoethnographer’s narratives are essential elements for sharing the learning and for building relevance for others who share the researcher’s cultural position. The data produced become an insider’s knowledge that extends the research conversation and helps others in the same cultural group to better understand and learn from their experiences. In the case of teacher researchers, their experience and knowledge gained from the research process are of particular pertinence to other teacher researchers and also to teaching colleagues.

The benefits of using this kind of research methodology in education is that it validates the subjectivity of a researcher’s voice and experiences, and acknowledges the learning others can gain. Autoethnography binds its researcher and readers together as humans navigating cultural experiences and analysing their impact upon the study’s outcomes (Carless, 2018). Instead of de-personalising lived experience, autoethnographers celebrate the emotional threads of events and weave them together to make sense of how these experiences affect the researcher, acknowledging how sharing these findings will help the other members of the researcher’s shared group (Benoit, 2016). These personal experiences are crucial for disrupting social norms and for promoting social change as they prompt us to engage with ordinary experiences from a unique perspective. A teacher’s personal experiences are embedded in their daily practice in the classroom and with colleagues. Using autoethnography acknowledges all of those factors rather than concentrating on only one aspect of a teacher’s working life – for example, just focussing on the classroom – when everything at work, such as staff meetings, playground duties, planning and marking, plays its part in shaping the teacher and the teacher’s practice. The leadership of a school and the interaction with the wider school community will also affect a teacher’s working life, and autoethnography facilitates acknowledgment and analysis of such influences. It would be possible to encompass all those perspectives in action research, but using the autoethnographic teacher as the lens produces a unique insight into a shared experience. For a profession that is founded on relationships, and a daily practice that values each student as an individual with individual learning needs, it is counter-intuitive to negate those emotional elements in a research methodology that silences or removes subjectivity. With autoethnography, teachers can examine their practice in a way that maintains the human element of teaching, such as building relationships with colleagues and students from diverse backgrounds, whilst also interrogating and making meaning from their own cultural and social contexts.

The data collected during autoethnographic research restore the visibility and agency of the researcher rather than the researcher simply being a facilitator for the collection and analysis. This visibility maintains a personal connection between the researcher and the group for whom the data are being collated, allowing for an emotional engagement with the reader. With this kind of research, the expected audience will be others in education and therefore the researcher already has an advantage of engaging the reader whose own experiences are likely to overlap with the researcher’s.

The narrative aspects of autoethnography allow the researcher to use storytelling “as a way of knowing, sharing and relating” (Holman-Jones et al., 2013, p. 37). These stories provide details, purpose and meaning that a more clinical and objective study cannot. During the construction of these texts, there is a constant awareness of how this work will affect its readers. In a school-based context, fluctuations in commitment, time, concentration and wellbeing will be better reflected and more accurately captured using autoethnographic methods such as personal stories and journalling (Dyson, 2007). The methodology also documents the personal growth and evolution of the researcher as they happen and provides methods for collecting and analysing them. The opportunity to “retell narratives of experience” (Winch et al., 2015, p. 210) allows an individual to share their personal struggles as they develop their roles of both teacher and researcher into the one role of teacher researcher.
Autoethnography begins with a specific point in time for the researcher and acknowledges the open-ended nature of its approach. Its reflexivity is more representative of lived experience which changes with maturity and circumstance. As such, it is an approach that validates the experiences of the researcher at any point in their lifetime or work. Early career teachers’ perspectives offer an insight into the education system (Orland-Barak & Maskit, 2011) and present potential explanations for why teachers are leaving the profession within five years of starting. Mid-career teachers offer a different and equally valuable perspective of why some experience dissatisfaction with teaching (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015). For teachers who are leaving after many years in education, their stories are rich sources of information regarding the changes they’ve experienced and how they’ve endured throughout.

Autoethnographic methods are easily mapped onto a teacher’s daily practice. For example, Chang’s (2008) identification of “self-observational data” (p. 90) are the data that record behaviour, thoughts and emotions as they happen. They can also be recorded over time to reveal patterns that offer insights into personal domains. Teachers collect such data when evaluating a lesson or when evaluating a teaching day, examining the details of their teaching practice and interpersonal interactions to ascertain successes and areas for improvement. “Self-reflective data” (Chang, 2008, p. 95) are the data that result from self-analysis of who you are and what you are. These are the data that will inform your philosophy as a teacher and are crucial aspects of forming your teacher identity. They are also an important aspect of developing cultural identity and cultural membership, which is something teachers engage in when collaborating with colleagues and interacting with members of the wider school community. This depth of knowledge and experience is the rich and nuanced data traditional action research methods would marginalise or make invisible. With the ongoing shortage of teachers in Australia, it is vital to empower educators by reinstating their professional voices and allow their lived experiences, or “personal practical knowledge” (Clandinin, 1999, p. 108), to be instrumental in reshaping educational policy and school improvement.

**Autoethnography as renewal**

It is fitting that a defence of autoethnography should be my own experience. When I embarked upon my doctoral studies, I was dissatisfied and disillusioned by the education system. Like my colleagues, I felt my voice as an experienced educator had been silenced. I had reached the point where after a 20+-year career, I was ready to leave it behind. In fact, the reason I started a PhD was to provide myself with an intellectual distraction as I planned my exit strategy from education. It was intended to be something separate from my life as a teacher and something completely disconnected from education. However, as I began to use an autoethnographic approach to my studies, my identity as a teacher refused to be silenced and eventually became the central theme of my doctoral work. I recalled key moments from my career, some of which were deeply upsetting, and re-examining these episodes from my teaching career stirred up “extreme emotions” (Chang, 2008, p. 72), despite being situated in the distant past. Adams et al., (2014) name these key events as “epiphanies – those remarkable and out of the ordinary life-changing experiences that transform us or call us to question our lives” (p. 26). In my case, it wasn’t until I employed an autoethnographic analysis that I was able to face them again and recognise them as fundamental to the development and trajectory of my teacher identity.

An autoethnographic lens meant I had to analyse these events from an academic perspective and glean meaning from them for not only myself but for the readers of my work, and so I reworked them into narratives and scenarios with more satisfying conclusions than the original occurrence. I journalled throughout the remembering, recording and rewriting,
allowing me to analyse the episodes in ways I had not done so previously. I was surprised to find the process was frequently confronting. When conducting autoethnographic research, there is an element of vulnerability and exposure and so the researcher must be prepared for encountering personal conflict when analysing experiences that have been remembered in a particular way. The research process can force the researcher to re-examine and re-consider the experience from a new perspective. Knowing more about ourselves as teachers “changes us, provokes growth, jolts us out of complacency – sometimes radically, in ways that can seem transformative” (Pithouse et al., 2009, p. 48). Dyson’s autoethnographic exploration of his own teaching acknowledges the transformative aspects of the methodology and says it brings about a “change in our consciousness, precipitated by our personal research” (2007, p. 45).

This was certainly the case when I analysed my earlier journal entries from my doctoral study. Common threads became apparent and I could pull these themes together to identify key aspects of myself as a teacher and how I perceived the school system. When I started the research process, I had a fixed notion of the education system no longer having a space for a teacher like me and that it was time to move on from the world of education. I believed that my voice as a teacher was no longer valued and had been silenced by leadership both inside and outside of my own school. Working through the autoethnographic methodology forced me to re-examine these preconceptions and slowly pick away at the barriers I had erected as a self-defence mechanism. I realised I had experienced more joy than misery from my teaching career and it forced me to acknowledge that I had made a positive impact on students and colleagues. Consequently, I was motivated to continue to make a difference and to acknowledge that what I had perceived as attempts to silence my teacher identity were instead provocations to make my identity and experience count. However, it was only after using an autoethnographic approach to research that I felt enabled to argue the validity of my personal experience and identity as a teacher and also to consider the possibility of remaining in education.

Autoethnography restored my voice as a teacher within a system I’d lost confidence in. Autoethnographic methods validated my experience and skills and showed me I still had much to learn from and share with colleagues. Examining my experiences through journalling and narrative writing, I realised the importance of giving a voice to my personal values of what it is to be a teacher and for shaping my teacher identity. Autoethnography showed me how my values were no longer aligned with the general education system but that I did not need to leave. Instead, it gave me the tools to use my learning to widen the learning and experiences of others in the education system and made me realise I could make a difference by staying and continuing to advocate for a research methodology that establishes the teacher as front and centre of the study, acknowledging the experience and expertise of the teacher researcher, and contributing to the important process and evolution of teacher identity and empowerment.

Action research that is purely based on ‘improving’ teacher practice and/or student outcomes has at its very heart a tacit assumption that teachers aren’t yet good enough. When reinforced by the media and government, why would teachers embark on something that means they’re complicit in their own condemnation? Autoethnography does not assume a need for improvement and instead offers the teacher researcher opportunities to interrogate key events from their careers (Adams et al. 2014; Pinner, 2018), analyse their reflections, and disseminate their findings with those who share similar experiences and fatigue with purely outcome-based research that has resulted in cycles of short-term frameworks and initiatives introduced by the government of that time. Autoethnography reframes the purpose of the research to one focussed on learning and growth – positive changes associated with a growth mindset – instead of one that presents a deficit model of thinking. As an ‘insider’, the teacher can explore the education system experience from a personal perspective, providing expert
insights that will benefit others who are also in that system as well as permitting others from outside the system access to otherwise privileged information. The methodology itself requires deep reflection and analysis, which aligns with the professional skill set of teachers and provides further opportunities for data-driven reflection (Pinner, 2018). Phillips and Zavros (2012) adopt autoethnographic approaches for arts-based research and explain how “substantive qualitative educative research can be conducted drawing on practitioner knowledge of the craft” (p. 52). Teachers are skilled practitioners with a deep knowledge of the ‘craft’ of teaching and so drawing on a research methodology that enables an exploration of marginalised or disruptive paradigms can reveal enriching and sustainable perspectives that are not valued by more traditional means (Estrella & Forinash, 2007).

Unlike school-based research, an autoethnographic study can extend beyond a specific school community and reach a wider audience, thereby disseminating academic knowledge and professional experience beyond the narrow focus of a particular educational system. Adams et al. explain that “Most autoethnographers write to help others and to make life better, and, given the use of personal experience, explicitly seek to reach audiences both inside and outside the academy” (2014, p. 44). What readers of the study will experience is a piece of academic work that ‘sees’ and ‘hears’ teachers and invites them to share their learning forward. Where action research favours more objective approaches and outcomes, through erasing the researcher’s biases, autoethnography validates and acknowledges the biases of the researcher and does not shy away from their impact on practice. It is also unafraid to expose failures or difficulties and sees them as learning opportunities for further growth instead of weaknesses (Pithouse et al., 2009).

Embarking on this kind of research becomes a form of professional development that is tailored to exactly what the individual teacher’s needs are which is an essential aspect of building capacity in teachers (Baguley & Kerby, 2012; Charteris & Smith, 2017) and developing and sustaining a researcher mindset.

Autoethnography as retention

After four years of tertiary training, teachers are qualified professionals (Shulman, 1998) who are able to collect, analyse and evaluate their student data and use the evaluations to inform further teaching. Over the course of an academic school year in Australia, teachers are responsible for providing end of semester summative reports to parents and carers, informing them of where their child sits in relation to Australian Curriculum benchmarks and also, sometimes, where their child sits in relation to peers. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (2011) are embedded in teacher training programs and used as a measure to determine if pre-service teachers are permitted to graduate. These standards remain applicable throughout a teacher’s career with mandatory requirements for teachers to undertake ongoing professional development. Becoming a teacher is not a static one-off training stint. Becoming a teacher is a commitment to lifelong learning and personal growth.

Daily, teachers collect quantitative and qualitative data about each of their students and make professional decisions about further action. This could be through the reflection process after a lesson and thinking about how to plan the next one. Sometimes, the collection, analysis, evaluation and action taken happens within seconds. Over the course of one lesson, a teacher can analyse data on the go and take the required action to ensure all learners have the support they need as they need it. Killen (2015) refers to this as ‘reflection-in-action’ and explains how teachers are teaching and analysing their practice simultaneously, as well as monitoring
how students are reacting. He says that for reflection-in-action to take place, teachers need to be able to “frame problems almost subconsciously, generate hypotheses and immediately test them” (p. 106).

Teachers, in short, are highly skilled professionals and even more skilled researchers. But do they see themselves as such? At a time when teacher morale is low and reflected in the numbers leaving the profession, it’s important that teachers acknowledge the skills and proficiency they possess. A report into the perceptions of teachers and teaching in Australia found that although the Australian public feels that teachers are respected and trusted, this perception is not transferring to the teaching community who still feel underappreciated for the work they do (Heffernan et al., 2019). ‘Teacher bashing’ in the media is commonplace and there are regular stories questioning the standard of teaching in Australia. If media reports are the only or loudest point of reference for teachers, then it is easy to see why they become disheartened by a reported public perception that is inaccurate.

Autoethnography validates each teacher’s voice and acknowledges the individual’s contribution to scholarly and industry knowledge. It gives renewed meaning and purpose to teachers’ experience at any point in their career and could become a preventative measure against teachers leaving the profession. Teachers leave for many reasons (Chang, 2009; Glazer, 2018; Kelchtermans, 2017) and one of those is feeling undervalued by the school, the system and by society. Kelchtermans concludes that “a crucial condition for teachers to stay in teaching is a sense of emotional belonging, based on a shared view of educational goals and norms in the school” (2017, p. 969). Engaging with autoethnography guarantees an emotional connection with the work being studied and, because of its methodology, autoethnographic research is conducted with the full expectation of being shared with others from the same cultural group.

As the established data source, the autoethnographic teacher is seen, heard and valued from the outset, evoking a positive mindset and sense of belonging for the duration of the project, providing opportunities for the teacher to demonstrate how personal and professional experience has been shaped by aspects of teaching and what other teaching professionals can learn from this. Autoethnographic research focuses on the identity of the teacher and so its impact is transformative – it affects both personal and professional identities and is therefore not beholden to a particular set of data attached to a specific school site or cohort of students. It transforms the person conducting the research and is therefore transferable into the range of roles they occupy in their personal and professional domains.

Not only is the voice of the teacher restored in autoethnography; it is also valued. Rather than projecting the research outside the teacher self, autoethnography encourages the teacher to consider and validate their own personal and professional experiences. Its methodology aligns closely with the values and ethics of a profession that demands critical reflection and constant data analysis. It also moves away from purely quantitative methods and uses qualitative methods to accurately reflect teacher experience.

Developing a research identity ensures the sustainability of a research mindset and a continuing impact on practice. Teacher researchers who employ an autoethnographic approach will be using a methodology that maintains a self-awareness of how their teaching values evolve and how their pedagogy could evolve in response. Autoethnography invites the teacher to value each stage of their career and identify what each stage brings to their practice, reminding them that teaching practice and knowledge are not static but in need of constant renewal. More importantly, autoethnographic research provides a potential solution for teacher researchers who desire academic rigour without losing the visibility and the voice of their teacher identity in their work.
Conclusion

Autoethnography empowers the teacher researcher because it:

- Validates the teacher’s knowledge and skills at any point in their career;
- Restores the visibility and agency of the teacher as researcher;
- Acknowledges all aspects of a teacher’s lived experience; and
- Sustains the transformational outcome beyond a specific school community.

References


Teacher identity


