

Reflections on becoming a researcher

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Abstract

This paper offers an autoethnographic exploration of my experience of becoming a researcher. By revisiting my experiential beginnings as a student and my evolution as a professional, I reflect on my developing identities as researcher and writer. I use the metaphor of the Hero's journey to shape these explorations and highlight the experiential, ontological nature of my current learning experience as a doctoral student. I juxtapose my experience with patterns of student development found in the literature seeking to forge an authentic path through the sociocultural and personal challenges that pose internal dilemmas in my development. Through an exploration of Barnett's (2011) ideas of epistemological and ontological identities in learning, I discuss my own ontological development as a researcher/writer and the power of the written word as a way of "knowing" (Richardson, 2000) and working through my own "discursive struggles for identity" (Richardson, 2000) as best I can in the present moment.

"I can only tell what I know about my story at a given point."
(Etherington, 2004, p.23)

Introduction

As I begin this paper, I am aware of the whirl of ideas, memories, hopes and dreams that led me to begin this doctoral journey. I notice the changes in my thinking, my perceptions and my identity that have occurred in the last few months and increasingly understand the meaning of such sayings as "we are beings becoming" (Barnett, 2011, 2000; Crossouard, 2008; Etherington, 2004). As a developing researcher, I find myself traveling through ghosts of lives past and catching glimpses of future possibilities, in hopes of integrating them into the current moment (Barnett, 2011). I am aware that I am traveling on a predictable path (Gardner, 2010, 2008), that may be transparent to those observing me but feels new, fresh and unique in my experience of it. I see my passage as more of a hero's journey (Badenhorst, 2008; Campbell, 2004; Ylijoki, 2001; Campbell, 1949) than a predetermined academic socialization process (Gardner, 2010; Weidman, 2003) that renders my experience a themed, collective pattern of being. I am aware that I carry a deep "faith" (Barnett, 2011) that I will find my way and trust a sincere "hope" (Barnett, 2011) that I will find integration at some future moment. Amidst this dynamic land of changing forms (inner and outer), growing knowledge and grounding experiences, I reflexively (Etherington, 2004) watch myself settling into a static conception of my research interests which, although needed, limits the multidimensionality of my experience to one carefully crafted project that will meet the requirements of my program. I notice my transition from a practitioner/instructor to a researcher (Maclure, 1996) and again "hope" (Barnett, 2011) that I will find my place in an academic arena that doesn't always understand the drive of action researchers (Hamilton, 2011; Cochran-Smith & Donnel, 2006;). I know I am a researcher becoming uni-dimensional despite the sense of limitations this presents for my growing

researcher identity and its many subjective forms (Crossouard, 2008). The goal of this paper is to explore my own narrative as an evolving researcher. I will visit old and new selves, predicted and novel paths as well as individual and collective experiences. I will explore views of knowledge construction and the relevance of such ideas as researcher subjectivities and reflexivity. Through an exploration of the meanings of knowledge construction, modern learning, researcher modalities and developmental pathways, I will attempt to articulate that which I know, at this point in time. For as Etherington (2004) suggests that is the best I can do in the present moment.

My biographical beginnings

I am a product of the educational system. I know the truth and power of guidance, good teachers and learning. I was raised in a working class family in which I was the first person to enter university. Neither of my parents achieved their high school diplomas and each offered differing responses to my educational aspirations. My mother, a stay at home mom, supported me unconditionally to the best that she could without a knowledge of the world I sought to travel in while my father, a factory worker, discouraged my motivations, believing that the ‘real world’ would crush me and that my gender would limit me to having children and wasting whatever education I did receive. I grew up feeling different from those I aspired to become and never quite felt a sense of belonging in school despite my growing passion for learning. I was deeply aware of my social class though the majority of my “school” friends were from more educated homes of a middle to upper middle class nature, the majority of my “neighbourhood” friends did not obtain their high school let alone going beyond that into post-secondary. I have lived an educational life in this “in between” space. “In between” feeling grounded, welcomed and excited by this new world of learning and pulled by the inertia of growing up in a world for which education was a luxury rather than an expectation. I suspect that this space is one that others who grow through a working class background into other socioeconomic and educational realities experience though it is often hard to articulate. As a young girl, I had the sense of not really knowing where I “fit” long before I had the cognitive ability to understand this feeling sense. And now, a grown woman, I realize how these roots have shaped my development and attachment to university life. As I begin to reflect on my sense of identity as a researcher now, these early realities resonate deeply in me and I catch fleeting glimpses of understanding of how all of this has shaped the moment I am in now and the representations that I feel breaking down as they give way to new ones taking shape .

My educational self

As a young child, I knew the power of being seen and nurtured by teachers. Despite my mixed messages about education from my family and my internal representations of my social class and gender, my teachers consistently saw my potential and skill, supporting me in multiple small and large ways as well as very practical and deeply meaningful ways. This constant reinforcement from within the educational system continues until this very day, though the forms have changed, my experience remains one of being mentored to become the person I am today – a researcher becoming. As I began my undergraduate study, I recall the experience of having my mind open in ways that were new and exciting for me – deeply rewarding though foreign and uncharted territory. I recall one specific moment, in Fall of 1983 when I was a first year student - I was walking home from class and enjoying the colours of my favorite season as I heard the crispness of the dried leaves under my foot, suddenly as if carried by a swift wind, I was filled with deep

joy. Blissfully feeling my mind open to new and exciting ideas and future possibilities that, until then, I was unsure were mine to claim. This was my first glimpse that I may just find my way, that perhaps dad was wrong, it wasn't a false dream afterall. I was inspired.

The constant support from one teacher after another helped me stay motivated and find ways to overcome the financial and psychological hurdles that presented themselves along the way. As I gained in strength and ability, the task became easier and my motivation become more internal – guided by an inner and real world knowing that education could transform my world and a belief in a world I did not quite know but believed existed on the other side of my educational development. As a working class student, my pathway was not always as consistent and linear as many of my “school” friends. I would save money and work multiple jobs to support myself while my “university” friends travelled through Europe in the summer. I was too busy working and surviving in a new land that beckoned me – my travels were occurring in real life and inner landscapes. I consistently met professors, and employers, who encouraged me to get higher degrees, though at the time, I didn't see myself travelling too high, I was just happy to be able to travel higher than my family expectations would have suggested. When I began my graduate training at University of Ottawa, much to my surprise, one of my first courses in Educational Administration completely engaged me. I still recall my professor, for whom this was his last course taught before retiring, consistently and repeatedly asking me to please pursue doctoral studies – though deeply flattered, I was already beyond my anticipated educational milestone. I didn't see myself as a PhD student yet. I recall his encouragement to this day, and I still keep my final paper in his course, with its glowing feedback and final attempt to encourage me as he wrote “Please let me retire from this work, knowing you will pursue your PhD”. Since then, there have been a myriad of voices reinforcing the same message but my own evolving identity could not yet embrace such a possibility. So, as I continued my education, I continued working. My work experience became the bedrock of my academic life – supporting it in concrete ways, shaping it in practical ways and grounding it in a fundamental way.

My professional self

As I continued to work and study, I forged a strong sense of the importance of practice and lived experience. Returning to obtain graduate training was motivated by my desire to become a better practitioner though fueled by a deep love of ideas, learning and growth. These two selves – my educational and my practitioner self – evolved hand in hand, one informing the other. Increasingly, colleagues, friends, and professors encouraged me to pursue doctoral studies; however, at this point, I felt I needed more life and work experience to inform my decision and entry into the world of researcher. I decided that I would revisit this when I entered my 40's. Later, I read that Carl Jung (one of my favourite writers) held that it is only at mid life that we can truly begin to develop (Nugent & Jones, 2009; Staude, 1981; Jung, 1933). This made sense to me and cemented my decision, so I continued engaging in meaningful work realizing that I would explore this possibility later. Once I completed my masters degree in educational psychology, I did begin to teach as a sessional lecturer, which brought me great joy as it allowed me to maintain a connection to a world I loved as well as offering me a sense of giving back to a system that became the vehicle of my transformation. I also began taking on research projects as part of my work, which was the beginning of my researcher sensibility.

The Hero's Journey

As I look back over my life journey until now, it feels more like a passage through stages – cyclical stages of growth, death and rebirth (Welwood, 2000; Chodron, 1994; Rinpoche, 1992). I am reminded of the work of Joseph Campbell (1949, 2004) and the metaphor of the Hero's Journey which includes a departure, initiation and return. A story of passage that has been used to describe change management (Lapointe, 2012); the doctoral experience (Badenhorst, 2008); and, the masters thesis writing experience (Ylijoki, 2001). An apt metaphor to capture my experience of beginning, transformation and loss and then returning to a deeper sense of self, each stage marked by educational experience and leading to this moment of presence and entry into doctoral studies. As I begin to look more closely at my current educational moment – my initiation into doctoral studies, I am reminded that my “local, historical and partial knowledge is still knowing” (Richardson, 2000, 930) and it is worthy of exploration. I am encouraged by the writing approach expected for this article – autoethnographic, narrative storytelling as it “somewhat relieved of the problem of speaking for the “Other” (Richardson, 2000, 931). I am the “Other”. I am “both the site and the subject of these discursive struggles for identity and for remaking memory” (Richardson, 2000, 929). As I began to write this paper, I was trying to create an acceptable, and perhaps traditional, academic argument (Badenhorst, 2007) with which to present my experience. Of course, this resulted in no words flowing as I felt the inherent contradiction of writing about my experience and “proving” its worth. I relinquish this impulse for this moment, knowing I will return to it later as that is the journey I am on. For now, I will use this process of writing as a way of “knowing” (Richardson, 2000) and embrace the idea that writing is thinking (Badenhorst, 2007). I “hope” (Barnett, 2011) to gain insight as I retell my story of passage and create a psychological space (Starr, 2010) to engage in the process of “conscientizing” (Starr, 2010; Freire, 1971).

Departure

True to the hero's journey, entering doctoral study for me was a call to adventure (the first stage of the journey) - a call which began many decades ago when I, as a young child looked forward to the day when I would get to do homework. Anticipating the challenge and the learning, walking to the local library and getting lost in its contents, preparing my research papers with great care. My early writings inevitably surpassed the expectations of my teachers wherein I found my greatest allies on my journey. This call has recurred over and over again as I moved through my many years of training, in and out of my professional life and landing in the wonderful position of being a sessional lecturer and a successful professional in my chosen field. I was beckoned by the “ivory tower” (Lovitts, 2001) as I was propelled from it back into my professional world - refusing the call (second stage of departure) over and over again for fear of not belonging and not feeling ready to take on the task. For what place was there in this world for a little girl from William Street? Was my father correct? Were these false dreams which were beyond me? Ever and increasingly conscious of my “social class”, these experiences and memories stayed with me as I travelled, contributing to an “outsider” view of my own experience. Never quite belonging despite the deep pleasure I found in the academic world.

Multiple identities of class, gender, academic, practitioner, teacher, and educator bounced off each other in my mind and held me from answering the call. And yet, repeatedly and consistently, as far back as my memory can recall, I encountered supernatural aid (third stage of departure). Messages, supports, opportunities, mentors and a consistent seeing of my academic

self in my relations with others – it became a descriptor of the “self” others perceived in me – long before I saw it myself. Recurring again and again, as I refused the call, another messenger would appear – encouraging me to continue along my way. Somewhere in my 40’s, having gained significant professional experience, made contributions that I was content with, finished my masters training and become attached to the university as a sessional lecturer, I crossed the threshold (fourth stage of departure). I could no longer deny the call. As a close friend said to me, while I was in the final stages of resisting the call yet feeling myself crossing the threshold and living in the belly of the whale (fifth and final stage of departure), “Heather, if you don’t do your PhD, it is your choice now – you are clearly the one saying ‘no’”. After a long period of deep contemplation, I felt myself being expelled from the belly of that whale – it is time. I began exploring PhD programs in search of the one that best met my learning goals. If I was to take on this challenge, it had to be intentional, meaningful and engaging for me.

Initiation

Although I believe I have cycled through these stages multiple times in my life, those detailed experiences are not relevant to this paper’s reflection on becoming a researcher. At this point, I believe I am just beginning the initiation phase of my doctoral journey as I am entering my seventh month of full time study. Only time can tell the tale of how this metaphor continues to resonate with my personal hero’s journey as a developing researcher. For this reason, my paper will not carry this analogy forward through all the stages of initiation and into the final phase – Return. Instead, I will explore the implications of the first stage of initiation – The Road of Trials – for the remainder of my paper. In doing so, I will explore the ideas of reflexivity, socialization processes, my experience of becoming a researcher, knowledge construction, and the importance of hope and faith.

My doctoral self

So here I land, thankfully accepted into the program of my choice and happy to be studying leadership and organizational development which nicely integrates my professional self and the work that has guided me in the professional world for over a decade. As term one progresses, so do my trials as per the hero’s journey. Though the trials I encounter are inner trials rather than the trials that I will no doubt encounter in time, in the outer world. I notice the challenge of teaching while studying and feel my identity shifting as I decide to let this part of my work life go into the New Year. I have taught, albeit only one or two courses a semester, with great regularity over the last 14 years. I wonder am I a teacher or a researcher? Can I be both? And I have an awareness that I may not be able to manage both as I continue with my full time professional work when I leave my year of full time PhD study. This is a luxurious space that I rest and work in now as I lean into becoming as a researcher. I feel a loss in letting go of my teaching practice, much like the participants Maclure (1996) writes about as they transition from teaching careers to becoming action researchers. I too feel myself to be in a nomad’s land – somewhere between at the academic world and my professional world as I realize that as a researcher, my identity is deeply informed by the tenets and practices of action researcher. I am in the liminal space or transition space of a rite of passage. I am on the threshold of two worlds. (Purdy & Walker, 2012). I feel a resonance to French’s (2012) process of coming to terms with the dominant academic culture’s view of practice based research and I sigh...what am I to do?

It is odd to leave that part of my work and as I do I notice, that it is the practice of research that draws me now. I return to my earlier messages about affluence and intellectual pursuits and I again feel the luxurious space that I now inhabit. Few people I grew up with grapple with such dilemmas, whether they would want to walk in my life or not. I feel a deep resonance with the little girl who loved learning and school yet felt outside of it by virtue of early messages as well as the class and gender distinctions that shaped my early development. I am comfortable and can manage on the periphery though I am feeling those divides breaking down – in subtle and barely distinguishable ways.

At the same time, I begin to feel the residual effects of my early training as a researcher. My experience of the experimental and positivist model of research in my initial undergraduate Psychology courses propelled me to a more arts-based Psychology program at a different university. As I sat in another psychology lab course, this time watching and recording rat copulation behaviour before and after the injection of Haldol, I realized this is not the Psychology I want to study. So I left. I transferred to another university that offered courses in transpersonal psychology and allowed me to begin study in Law from a critical perspective. I still recall the experience as if breathing fresh air for the first time. As I entered this new university environment, I felt a sense of my own experiential journey through the “paradigm wars” which has been written of extensively since the writing of *The Paradigm Dialogue* (1990). I recall my honors paper which used Foucauldian analysis to explore how legal discourse constructed gender and find myself fondly re-remembering and experiencing this learning now. I am aware that research models have changed since my graduate training during which qualitative methods, though present, felt overshadowed by our more quantitative research models. I recall many conversations with a dear mentor during graduate school, who was of the quantitative persuasion, but took me under his wing – even though I was what he would fondly call “flaky” in my qualitative tendencies.

I am supported by my early training in reflexive practice as both an educator and a practitioner. My early readings of Friere (1970), Schon (1983), and Mezirow (1991) serve me well as I see how prominent this approach is in today’s educational research world. I have engaged in reflexive practice as a therapist, an educator, a facilitator and as a mediator. As a novice researcher, I am guided by Etherington’s (2004) work which highlights reflexive research practice and find my grounding here. I also take guidance from Seidman’s (2013) advice to new researchers to find our own way and listen to our own inner sense regarding preferred research methods. Although, like French (2012), I too found “the crisis of representation in educational research was for me liberating” (p. 9), I also feel the whirl of possibility of so many approaches to choose from, many of which resonate with me. This growing sense of multi-dimensionality as a researcher is indeed liberating, though I know that it will have to manifest throughout my research career rather than all at once. I realize that I must narrow my focus soon enough on my own research project, and no doubt enter into the outer, worldly trials as a researcher becoming.

Predictable socialization or unique passage?

I have read several authors who discuss the experiences of doctoral studies as well as junior faculty members (Lee, 2012; Drake, 2011; Gardner, 2010a&b; 2008a&b, Powell, 2007; Lovitts, 2001; Hawley, 1993). Hawley’s (1993) discussion, though dated, offered some interesting nuggets including the idea that “doctoral pursuit is a lonely quest of the heart and head” (p 7)

which surely resonates with my experience as my drive is as much to learn as it is to pursue a dream and make a contribution (however, small). She suggests that doctoral studies differ from previous educational pursuits in intellectual and psychological ways and states her main premise that “being bright” is not always enough as we need “street smarts” too or a savvy sense of when to follow the rules and when to follow your own “drummer” (p12). We are now to “produce knowledge rather than simply consume it” (p. 17). I feel very much drawn to this dialectical dance between being bright and being savvy, consuming versus producing. Here, I also see the emergent strength I acquired though all those years of “making my way on my own” and wonder if this is the required “savvy” she writes of. I seek to find the right balance between doing what is needed and doing what I need to make this a meaningful journey for me. Hawley suggests that students do not finish their degree because they “aren’t sophisticated in the ways of academe” (p15). Although I am quite comfortable accepting the role of “neophyte” as she suggests is required, I do not necessarily feel a “psychic cost” to this, it is a natural disposition perhaps grown from the trust and faith (Barnett, 2011) I have developed for the educational process that has nurtured me from my early days. I understand that “intellectual combat is a way of life in universities” (p23) and expect to learn from and engage with this “challenge and defend atmosphere” (p. 23). Unlike Hawley’s suggestion that academics are not rewarded for their mentoring, and therefore do not make good mentors, my experience is quite contrary. I have been mentored by many ambassadors of this system, and even when I have not found mentoring, I have found a way to learn from that experience too. So, I wonder how much of this is individual, unique, developmental and how much is socialized? I have felt, found and been encouraged to have agency (Allen, 2010) as I have moved through this world. I shall “challenge and defend” this experience as being as real as the experiences Hawley writes of in her research. Although it is still early days as a doctoral student, my experience is one of welcome and nurture - whether intellectual or emotional.

Individual or collective passage?

In reading some writings on the socialization process of doctoral education (Gardner, 2010, 2008), I was struck by the differences in relation to my experiences rather than the similarities. Like Hawley, Gardner (2008) also discusses the ABD experience (all but dissertation) as well as the movement from consumers of knowledge to producers of knowledge. I feel this shift occurring within myself and experience it as reflecting my own internal “trial” as I travel the path of my hero’s journey. For me, the issue is one of developing an identity of a “writer” and not just a “reader” (Badenhorst, 2007). One of my current challenges has been developing the practice of and confidence in myself as a writer. Although, like my developing identity as a researcher, I have written many documents, reports and articles over the years, I have not yet developed the identity of a researcher or a writer despite the reality that many friends, colleagues and mentors see this in me already. For this reason, an intentional goal of my current experience is to reflect on this and nurture this development in myself.

Gardner’s (2008) research on the transition phase, revealed that students struggled with the transition from a more “dependent” undergraduate experience as opposed to the required independence demanded of doctoral studies which often contributed to a sense of isolation and lack of opportunities for interaction with faculty. Again, using Hawley’s “challenge and defend analogy”, though in a slightly different way, this has not been my experience. While I am aware that I am in transition, mine is a more internal, ontological issue rather than a sense of wanting

“hand holding (Gardner, 2008, p. 347). I have not needed nor want to have my hand held, perhaps as a mid-career professional, I carry a different set of life experiences into my doctoral beginnings. Herein, the resonance to that little girl who felt outside and knew that if she was to succeed, she would have to do it on her own, forged an autonomous disposition that will serve me well through my PhD experience. Or perhaps this is what Drake (2011) writes of when she says that there are many varieties of doctoral experiences and for those who are practice based researchers, the sense of being an outsider is common. I realize that others (Gardner, 2010) would possibly view this as the naivety of a novice doctoral student or perhaps it is an example of what Hawley refers to as “street smarts”. It remains my experience regardless of how others represent it. I also have had the experience of feeling very supported by my supervisor as well as having opportunities to interact with other faculty. Although both Gardner (2010) and Hawley (1993) suggest that support from fellow students is most important in surviving the doctoral experience, my greatest supports have always come from many places – including faculty, supervisors, advisors and mentors. Though Gardner (2010) found a naive understanding in faculty regarding their role in supporting doctoral students, this is not my experience, for I have found many faculty who have supported me in small and large ways and do not appear to me to be “naive” to how important that support is. My many mentors, accumulated over the years offer further support to fortify my independent movement through the requirements as I find them. In terms of the types of development Gardner (2010) suggests occurs for PhD students - programmatic, relational and personal (p345), I feel myself learning in the first two categories but the majority of my current development is happening in the personal category on the level of identity. While some of my experiences have been and no doubt prove to be similar to others and collective in nature, in this moment, I feel my passage is more unique than collective which Drake (2011) suggests is typical of practice based researcher identity development.

Knowledge construction as the learner becoming

Perhaps it is my training and practice in psychotherapy which creates a natural disposition toward reflexivity, an experience which Etherington (2004) describes as “almost like a process of ‘coming out’ to me” (p.19). I have always gravitated toward this practice. Much like Super’s career developmental model which highlights the role of our evolving self concept as we move along our own career paths (Super, 1961). I have evolved as much through my personal as my professional experiences (Super, 1980). And the practice of reflection, has been both the force and the grounding of this experience. My earliest memories of reading about this was in my Adult Education training where I was introduced to the work of Mezirow (1991) and fully embraced the importance of engaging in reflection and encouraging reflection in those with whom I worked. This practice has deepened into the very fabric of my being. I recall multiple conversations with colleagues and friends who would consistently point to this quality in me, long before I realized its importance for me. Even as a young child, my mother would frequently interpret this tendency as “having the world on my shoulders” and remind me of my baby picture in which I naturally took on the pose of the thinker – hand to face as though thinking, long before I had the capacity to think - a symbolic representation of the trajectory of my life path. As the years passed, a dear mentor friend once contextualised one of my many “ethical dilemmas” as stemming from the fact that I actually practice what I preach – I reflect. For me, it is not that I think therefore I am, (Descartes, trans. 1950), it has often felt that I reflect, therefore I am. And so learning and education for me has been a process of becoming (Barnett, 2011; Crossouard, 2008; Etherington, 2004; Lave and Wenger, 1991). In learning, I have found myself, again and again.

Interestingly, Barnett (2011, 2000) critiques the lack of opportunity for students to reflect on their ontological selves in education. Though he writes of the undergraduate experience, his thinking seems relevant as it reflects my own beliefs and experience of the educational process. Education and learning for me has been as much an ontological experience as an epistemological one despite Barnett's suggestion that the dominant focus in university education is epistemological at the expense of ontology, my experience has integrated both. And, as much as I "challenge and defend" Barnett's suggestion, I also know the power of bringing ontology into learning and so I also agree with his determination of its importance in academic learning. As he beautifully describes this reality for students:

Student becoming, then, has a Janus-like appearance. The student lives in a new place, and acquires a new identity even; but is aware, even if only dimly, that things could be yet other. The student is here and yet not here. Here lies the 'authoritative uncertainty' of which – quite some time ago – Sinclair Goodlad (1976) spoke. The student is both sure and unsure of his or her ground. The student has hold of a rock but it is slippery. The substance of the rock is not illusory; the ways of going on – in essay writing, in the laboratory, in the studio, in the clinical situation, and even in running a student society – have evolved over time and they have a kind of solidity to them. Here are forms of life. But the student has also become aware that these forms of life could be other than they are. Here and not-here: this is the nature of the student's new being. This, indeed, is the becoming promised by a higher education" (2011, p. 9)

This dual character of student learning (here and not here), eloquently expresses my experience of becoming a researcher as I am and yet am not a researcher. The inherent contradiction of these words creates the space in which I transition (Gardner, 2010) and move through this liminal space (Purdy & Walker, 2012) at the threshold of a researcher becoming. The idea that "learning has an incessantly recursive nature" (Barnett, 2011, p. 7) breaths life into my experience and I move forward with *faith* (Barnett, 2011) that things will integrate at some future moment and *hope* that this future will indeed become my present moment – all in due time. In that I trust. For I deeply know the truth of Barnett's words "In order for learning to be authentic, one needs to venture forth into learning" (2011, p. 12). And so, my hero's journey continues as an "ontological matter, affecting the nature of being and becoming" (Barnett, 2011, p. 12)

Writing my way to my researcher self

As I bring this paper to a close, I return to the purpose for which I write, to offer my own narrative through an auto-ethnographic approach. I have embraced my "self as data" (Gadon, 2006) and realize that "it is a truism that you always bring yourself into the researcher process" (Gadon, 2006, p.2) And although I have conducted many research projects since I completed my masters training in 1999, I still do not feel to be a full fledged researcher. And so I seek doctoral training, to continue my becoming in the land of research, with faith that I will find my way and hope that I will attain the goal and not become another ABD (all but dissertation) (Hawley, 1993). My biographical landscape has cemented a trust in the process of learning and the

educational system. My many subjectivities as a student, a professional, a teacher and my developing identities as a researcher and a writer have and continue to pave my path through this hero's journey. Returning to the little girl who felt like an outsider despite her deep passion for learning, again and again – knowing that at some future moment she too will feel herself to be inside the domain that she moves in now. It is surely an ontological matter for me (Barnett, 2011). I know that my beliefs and experience have congealed into some core assumptions that will, and have, informed my choice of methodologies for my doctoral research interests and my methodological thinking as Crotty (2011) suggests. Even as I reflect back over this paper and my journey to date, I see how the critical realism which Maxwell (2012) writes of defines an approach to qualitative research that deeply resonates with me. I learned from a very young age that there were realities that existed outside of my knowing and my life journey has revealed that within that not knowing develops a knowing that is rooted in my own constructions over time and space. I have carried a deep and ever strengthening faith that these constructions would happen, long before I understand what this meant. And my experience has not only forged a fundamental hope that the future will be deeper than the present, as a researcher, it shapes my desire to do research in education in hopes of strengthening the system that allowed me to construct myself. My hope is that by understanding, supporting and collaborating with educational leaders to support healthy work practices for their selves, we will foster healthy work environments for their staff. It is my way of giving back to a system that has given me so much more than these words can articulate. I move forward feeling a growing internal compass to guide me, and a solid external structure to fortify me (including my relations with faculty, my doctoral committee, my PhD supervisor, many mentors and other students) and with a growing clarity of the path that will carry me through.

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