Epiphanic Moments in the Search for Myself as an Educational Researcher

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Abstract

In this auto-ethnographical paper the events, experiences, and ideas surrounding the development of my personal pedagogy as a K-12 public school teacher are explored in relation to my potential transformation into an educational researcher. Auto-ethnographical work combines elements of ethnography and auto-biography in an attempt to understand the cultural context of a given phenomenon. Through an exploration of several epiphanic experiences as both a student and a teacher, I attempt to analyze their influence on my self-conceptualization as an emerging educational researcher.

Introduction

I am a teacher, not a researcher; I self-identify with a culture that is at arms-length from the culture of professional research. Researchers in my school culture generally fall into the category of "they". As in, "they" don't know what they're talking about because "they" don't live our experience. "They" can say whatever "they" want, but "they" are out of touch with our reality. "They" pretend to care about educational issues, but "they" are more concerned with renewing their research grants. Teachers can conduct research, but this is the exception not the rule. It is much more likely that teachers will be the subjects of research and that the level of participation will vary. This has been my experience as a teacher and now I face a very daunting question: Why would I ever consider joining the ranks of "they"? To consider this question is to seriously reflect and analyze who I am as an educator and how I've arrived at my current position. Can I actually make the transition from professional educator to researcher or is this a false dichotomy, supplanted in my subconscious by my experiences and cultural connections? Maybe it's not a transition after all, but a process of becoming as outlined by Tedlock (2011). Becoming involves being changed by our experiences and although Tedlock (2011) articulates that this usually refers to experiences abroad, I would argue that this could also apply to someone moving into areas of potential within their personal or professional lives. The idea that we shape our experiences, and they, in turn, shape who we are, is one of the key points of my reflection. I am not an isolated individual. I am, and have been, a member of multiple overlapping communities that have influenced my thoughts, actions, and perceptions of what it means to be a teacher and what it will mean for me to be an educational researcher. This brings me back to my original questions of

who am I as a teacher, how did I get here, and how is this going to influence the researcher I will become.

Approach and Limitations

In an attempt to frame answers to these questions, I believe I must start by sketching an outline of what I think are some of the critical periods of my own educational experience. Within this vein, I will attempt to create an auto-ethnographical narrative of these events in relation to developing an understanding of myself as an educational researcher. Hamilton, Smith, and Worthington (2008) frame narrative inquiry as the process of studying, thinking about and sharing experience through story. Chase (2011) reinforces the idea that narrative is a legitimate way of understanding one's actions or the actions of others in relation to making sense of a larger meaningful whole. As I will be the subject of this inquiry, I will try to employ an auto-ethnographic approach of critically analyzing my position as a researcher. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) outline that auto-ethnographical work combines elements of autobiography and ethnography to illuminate and analyze personal epiphanic moments in terms of broader cultural experiences. It is within this framework that I will attempt to reconstruct the developmental process that has shaped my personal pedagogy and potential research position.

Working within the realm of auto-ethnographical narrative presents some challenges. There are limitations to working with memory and I've tried to lessen these limitations by supplementing my memory with textual artifacts, recordings and transcriptions of several conversations with former teachers and colleagues and several pieces of personal correspondence with current and former colleagues. During the conversations, I tried to pose open-ended questions in an attempt to let people speak freely about their experiences and not lead the conversation too much in one direction or the other. I have also purposefully selected these experiences. Even as I state their importance as reference points, I acknowledge that they are just a cross-section of a complex tapestry that contributed to my personal development, first as a student, then as a teacher, and finally as a potential researcher. I also acknowledge easy access to people that could either corroborate or refute my claims was a key factor in choosing these moments. Hopefully being aware of these shortcomings and enacting appropriate counter measures will help keep me honest in my endeavour.

This process has given me a fresh perspective on past events and has sharpened my focus on a number of different ideas related to my current practice. An analysis of the themes that are found within these sources will possibly shed some light on the development of my personal pedagogy and its influence on my developing position as an educational researcher. With any luck, this journey may turn out to be an important step in mediating the internal conflict between myself as teacher and myself as researcher.

The Early Years

> "Every child is a project, and has a different potential, even the gifted aren't gifted in everything" (personal communication, November 21, 2014).

I wasn't overly excited about school as a child. I remember or have constructed a memory about a turning point in my attitude toward school. It was early in my scholastic career, and although I can't pinpoint the grade, it was definitely in the primary years. I remember having what I would now call an epiphany; I was stuck in school and there was no getting out despite how I felt or what I did. Math, spelling, language and the rest of the curriculum had replaced my freedom to explore the world on my own terms and there was no turning back. Heavy stuff for a six or seven year old. Moving forward in my education I learned to deal with these feelings and apparently learned my lessons in reading, writing and arithmetic, although I can't remember much about those lessons. What I do remember are projects. Projects that gave me back some of that freedom I lost as an exploratory pre-school child.

I vividly remember making and self-publishing books, cooking, creating social studies projects and actively working with my peers on things that had meaning for us. I attended a small school, what my mother describes as a family school (personal communication, November 21, 2014). The school had a fluctuating population of no more than fifty students and my mother was one of the teachers. I was in her class for a large portion of my primary and elementary schooling. Looking back at my experience at this school I've always attributed the participatory nature of my early education to the small number of students, but while having a conversation with my mother regarding these early years something else surfaced from her perspective as a teacher. She reminded me that numbers aren't everything, she indicated that it was indeed easier to create student-centered learning activities with smaller class sizes, but more importantly the teachers have to be willing to engage, build and implement learning environments that foster student self-reliance and exploration (personal communication, November 21, 2014).

My mother related that she had many professional influences that grounded her as she developed her own personal pedagogy. The work of Howard Gardner helped cement her belief that children are individuals, and that achievement can take on many different forms and that it comes at different times. More importantly, the Christian belief that every individual is special and deserves to be treated with respect and dignity was a big influence in shaping her teaching practice. So, it was within this learning environment that my foundation of teaching and learning was laid. Moving forward, moments in my education that emulate this exploratory learning environment seem to anchor and influence my personal pedagogy to this very day.

The Middle Years

> "Ultimately the goal that I wanted to have in terms of my teaching and what was happening in the school was that the kids were engaged and involved and that they were given opportunities to try new things" (personal communication, November 23, 2014).

It seemed like everyone wanted to be in Mr. R's class. He was a new principal, new to teaching, new to our school and was willing to try different approaches and to do almost

anything to motivate and engage his students. Moving into the middle school years, my memories are more lucid. The hands-on activities I experienced in my elementary years continued through this phase and as I took the opportunity to speak to Mr. R. in the present, it became apparent that this was not by accident, but by design. At the time of his arrival, unbeknownst to me, the school was at the brink of being closed because the student population had dwindled to under twenty students. As I spoke to him about that time he revealed some interesting insights that I never had access to before from my perspective as a student. He told me that together with the other teacher on staff, my mother, they formulated a deliberate plan to consciously focus their efforts on creating a learning environment that was student-centered, engaging and fun (personal communication, November 23, 2014). They felt without moving in this direction, the school would surely close as there were other options in town under the denominational school system that was in operation in the province ("The Collapse of Denominational Education: Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage," n.d.; Williams & Press, 1992).

Again, a flood of memories bombard my senses when I recall this time. We were a multi-grade school and it was very natural for primary, elementary, intermediate and secondary students to work and play together. We never questioned that the bigger students looked out for the younger students, and as younger students, we always looked up to the bigger students as role models and heroes. It was in this structure that we were given opportunities to lead, explore and create within areas that had interest to us as individuals. This didn't mean that the curriculum was abandoned or that we never did a worksheet or wrote a note. Mr. R. made it quite clear in our conversation that they understood there are many different ways to meet a curriculum outcome and as much as they could, the staff created opportunities for their students to try new things in meaningful ways. It was this philosophy that led to things like theme weeks for science, language arts and social studies. Science fairs stand out in my mind, and I remember the anticipation of waiting to start work on our projects, experiments and presentations. The whole week was dedicated to the project, and I remember a sense of ownership in the creative process of problem solving and experimenting and it wasn't just for a grade, it was for the fair. A fair that we had a part in setting up and organizing. A fair where we presented our findings to our family, friends and other community members. The fair, as Mr. R. told me, was deliberately designed to engage and empower the students in a cross-curricular manner that had meaning (personal communication, November 23, 2014).

As my last conversation had poked a hole in my scheme about student population, I asked about the relationship between the small student population and the staff's belief in their hands-on approach. I received a similar answer as before, that it wasn't necessarily the small number. Although it may be easier to pull off with smaller numbers, it was the willingness of the staff to work together in formulating a vision, acting on that vision, and helping each other and the students along the way that made the difference (personal communication, November 23, 2014). As the student numbers began to rise and new staff were hired, a culture had already been cultivated at the school and these new members generally bought in and became collaborators in the process. It was a strange experience, almost surreal, talking to Mr. R. about his personal pedagogy, leadership and the professional learning community, or as he would like to say, the family learning

community that was developed during his time at the school. If I had a cross-reference checklist of things that I try to accomplish in my professional relationships and teaching practice to compare to what he described, all of the boxes would be checked. It is only becoming apparent now how influential these middle years were on my own personal pedagogy and approach to teaching and learning.

As I moved forward into new schools for my secondary and post-secondary education, I feel this sense of collaboration, community and family was lost. I remember pockets of creative and innovative teaching practices during these years, but for the most part they were practiced in isolation with what I felt was no real connection to the larger school communities that I found myself associated with. It wouldn't be until my teacher training that I would regain this sense of family and community within an educational sphere.

The Training Years

> One of the strategies I tried to use in that course was to let it be known from the beginning that I wasn't the expert in any of these areas, that you as the student brought your particular expertise and set of background life experiences and then my role was to bring that out through the variety of activities we did in class and the range of assignments to open your awareness and understanding of what was around you and perhaps, and more importantly, a better awareness of what skills and strengths you had and what students in the class had. It was trying to open up people to a better understanding of the potential they had (personal communication, November 15, 2014).
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> I give them [his students] a design problem, and I try to remind them that the solution will come over time. So, in more recent years I've been trying to let kids know it doesn't matter if your solution works or not, it's OK, just go back and try it again (personal communication, November 19, 2014).

Twenty strangers sit in a room. Computer monitors flicker, the silence broken occasionally by short bursts of small talk. Everyone seems anxious, nervous almost, or maybe it's just me. This is the scene that flashes through my mind as I remember the Faculty of Education's Technology Education cohort gathering for the first time in the summer of 2002. As a small cohort, representing approximately ten percent of the entire Faculty's education class for that year, we were cast into a unique situation. Although I didn't know it at the time, this was the beginning of my induction into a close knit community of educators that spanned my home province and beyond. Not only a group of diverse educators, with a wide variety of teaching styles, approaches and pedagogies, but also a group which had developed a culture based on students constructing knowledge and developing skills through problem solving and collaboration. Our little group would also grow very close over the coming semesters and the sense of family that emerged was very reminiscent of my early educational experiences. It was here that I began to examine the other side of the educational coin, what did it mean to teach and who would I be as a teacher?

It was in that same room that I heard the word constructivism for the first time. It was also in that room that I learned about the design process and the idea that failure and re-design were integral to the learning process. Mr. W. was an instructor during that time, and in a recent conversation he reminded me of those early days. He shared with me that the problem-solving approach of technology education in Newfoundland and Labrador continues to overlap with other areas of the curriculum he currently teaches. As a teacher, it's alright to let your students fail, if they know they can always start fresh and that everything we do doesn't come down to a final mark or grade (personal communication, November 19, 2014). The idea that solutions to problems take time to develop and that our initial thinking may only lead to more questions is paramount in the pedagogy of technology education within my local context. It is guiding principles such as these that helped shape my teacher training experience.

In that room with us was another individual. An individual who wasn't directly tasked with teaching us about technology education, but was nonetheless in a position to guide and mentor. Over the years I've been able to keep in contact with Mr. B. and many of the ideas sparked by our many conversations have stayed with me. While taking Mr. B's environmental education courses, the idea of what we would now call differentiated instruction came into play. Mr. B. never looked at the class as a homogenous group capable of completing the exact same outcomes, and he would push people to their limits. If that meant a biology major did something different than an art major, so be it (personal communications, November 15, 2014). In a recent conversation and as articulated in the quote above, Mr. B. reminded me that he never expected anyone to view him as the expert, rather it was important that the expertise be developed from our collective strengths. This idea of socially constructed knowledge and collaboration is something that I try to incorporate into my practice on a daily basis, whether it's at the intermediate or post-secondary level.

Looking back, the things I took away from my training that had the most value to me were directly connected to similar moments in my early education. I hadn't realized it yet, but the ideas and values that I had experienced and were becoming a part of me were about to collide with another reality.

The Teaching Years

> I think kids learn by doing and that they have to be engaged and you can't do unto children and you can't do unto adults, you have to connect things and make them authentic for them and you have to be engaging. [Teachers need to be] guiding [students] and being there to facilitate and helping them learn how to ask questions and how to find the answers to those questions rather than us always providing the perfect question and then the way to get to the perfect answer, because I don't think there is any such thing (personal communication, November 20, 2014).

"Fuck you then, bitch!" The words still ring in my ears. I can still see the hatred in his eyes, and hear the venom in his voice as he slammed his fist into the steel door frame

over and over again, just inches from my face. Just minutes before, I was supervising students in my school's learning resource center computer lab when I inadvertently derailed this young man's plans of perpetrating an act of violence against another student. My simple statement that he wasn't on the list and that he'd have to go to one of the other assigned areas of the school was all it took to shift his focus from the other student to me (School Discipline Report, 2004). This is one of many defining moments in my early teaching career and graphically illustrates the root of an internal conflict that was growing inside me as I struggled to find my footing as a new teacher. Although this incident wasn't directly related to a class, it cemented a sense of chaos that surrounded me and sharply delineated that I might not be prepared for this career.

Many new teachers don't have the skills to deal with classroom management or behavioural issues in general, and I was no exception (Doyle, 1985; Merrett & Wheldall, 1993). The contrast between what I wanted to do, and what I could do because of a lack of skill in this area, was causing me to experience what I would now consider to be a moment of cognitive dissonance.

As a new teacher trying to fit into an established school culture, this internal conflict began to grow. At the time, I was teaching primarily intermediate science and the dominant form of instruction at the school was transmissive. Although, at the time, I appreciated this instructional approach's emphasis on classroom management, it wasn't satisfying for the students or me. It was very difficult to think of doing anything different in a classroom setting. In my other role as learning resource teacher, I was in the middle of leading a multi-class project-based unit of study in language arts that incorporated problem solving, technology integration, group work, and creativity through a wide range of knowledge representation and student synthesis. This was in stark contrast to my classroom teaching and, based on my experiences as a student, I definitely felt more comfortable with the project-based approach.

I had the opportunity to speak to a former colleague that worked with me in those early years in an attempt to isolate some of these thoughts and the origins of my hands-on student centered approach to teaching. Mrs. P. was a guidance counselor at my school early in my career, and later moved to the role of principal. During our conversation she recalled a moment that crystalizes the experiences described above. I had come to speak to her about my class and she told me that during my visit I was very unsettled by the fact that I couldn't move in a direction that was more in line with engaging students in meaningful learning. At that time, the culture of the school remained very traditional and she believed I felt trapped by student behaviour and professional peer-pressure to conform to the status quo of instructional expectations (personal communication, November 20, 2014). Through this discussion I came to the realization that I wasn't trying to fight the status quo. I was simply searching for a way to align my teaching practice with my experiences as a student, but in doing so I was going against the predominant cultural grain of my school community. In the context of this inquiry her interpretation seems very plausible and helped close a gap in my personal pedagogy narrative.

This all brings me back to the questions of who I am as a teacher and what it means to teach, something that I've struggled with for my entire professional career. As I move forward in my career it has taken on another angle: What does it mean to be an educational researcher? Where do I find myself within the never-ending spectrum of paradigms and how will this influence my inquiry, not only for my dissertation, but for the rest of my career? Heavy-laden questions indeed, an almost impossible task for someone barely six months into a doctoral program. Taking the time to think through how I arrived at this moment has been challenging. Many of the experiences and perceptions that helped build this narrative have been floating freely in my subconscious with no real anchor point. It has only been through this concerted effort that I have been able to connect the dots in an attempt to understand my perspective on teaching and learning. Having a greater understanding of my perspective gives me a compass for charting my course as an educational researcher.

Self-Analysis of Personal Pedagogy

Memory is a tricky subject and some would argue that it is not a good source of data or knowledge. I would counter this assumption with the premise that without memory there is no knowledge. Audi (2010) contends that without memory we could not recall past events or shape perceptions of events, as they would only exist in the present moment. It is important to understand the difference between believing something happened and recalling something that actually happened (Audi, 2010). This is why I thought it important to have conversations with people who have shared experiences with me, to mitigate the possibility of constructing imaginary moments.

The auto-ethnographical narrative presented above crystalizes several critical points in my educational journey, but they are still only a fraction of the experiences that have brought me to an understanding of my personal pedagogy. Taking a critical stance on the experiences outlined above, I can see patterns emerging that have affected my development as an educator. These moments hold meaning for me and highlight patterns that have been re-enforced over time. Repeatedly, the ideas of student-centered, hands-on learning emerged from my memory and conversations. The idea of students exploring, creating, participating, and finding their own way in a supportive environment also emerge as key points. With these things in mind, it would be tempting to categorize myself as an adherent of any number of learning theories with a student focus. Multiple intelligences, social constructivism, mastery learning, expansive learning or inquiry-based learning fit nicely, but I believe would be artificial and too confining.

As a litmus test, I even went so far as to ask several current and former colleagues how they would describe my teaching philosophy. I asked via email and only told them it was for a self-comparison and didn't elaborate or ask any leading questions. Phrases such as: student driven, student centered, holistic approach, inclusive classroom, authentic learning experiences, meaningful curriculum, team approach, interactive, and all students are participants emerged (personal communication, December 1, 2014; November 22, 2014; November 23, 2014). These phrases seem to mirror the experiences explored through my auto-ethnographical narrative. With this added layer of perspective, it would

be even easier to pin-point my place on a continuum of teaching and learning theories, but I refuse. What I believe is closer to my perception of reality is that I try, and often times fail, to treat each student I encounter as a complex and unique individual. Within this context I hope I will have the opportunity to help, not hinder, my students in their pursuit of understanding the world in which they live. In trying to live out the above statement, I find myself constantly searching for diverse ways of reaching my goal, and in this way I reject the idea of compartmentalizing my personal pedagogy into any discrete category. It is from this mindset, shaped by countless personal experiences, that has brought me to the question of who I will be as an educational researcher.

Becoming an Educational Researcher

Now I find myself in a quandary. In rejecting the idea of placing myself into a pre-defined teaching paradigm I must face the fact that at some point in my doctoral studies I will be required to define and justify my position within an educational research paradigm. While I feel comfortable, based on my experience as a student and teacher, situating myself within a paradigm, further situating myself within the continuum of methodologies and methods will be difficult at this point. I have yet to define the inquiry of my dissertation and feel hesitant to move beyond defining my philosophical underpinnings, as moving beyond this point without a clear area of inquiry would be an exercise in futility. Futile in the sense that by pre-defining my methods I may unintentionally restrict the reach and scope of inquiry. Through this reflexive exercise I have come to think that it would be better for the inquiry to inform the methodology. With this premise in mind and at this particular point in my development as an educational researcher, I would feel comfortable placing myself on the educational research paradigm as a pragmatic participatory researcher.

Pragmatic in the sense that I have no problem in the possibility of actively mixing methods in the attempt to develop a problem-solving, action-oriented inquiry process as outlined by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2011), I find value in this idea because I have little interest in being an outsider and would rather be an invested active participant within the context of inquiry. Levin and Greenwood's (2011) statements that “pragmatism builds a direct link between theory and praxis.” and “reflection proceeds from acting in a real context, reflecting on results, and then acting again” (p. 29), reinforce my interpretation of the practical and grounded implications of subscribing to a pragmatic paradigm. The interwoven nature of theory and praxis is a foundational component of my self-conceptualization as an educational researcher and complements a participatory world view.

To subscribe to the participatory paradigm is to acknowledge that everyone within a particular context needs to be involved in the project being undertaken and that the knowledge created is communal (Drydon-Miller, Kral, Maguire, Noffke, & Sabhlok, 2011). To be more specific, Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) outline that ontologically and epistemologically reality and knowledge are co-created within a value laden context. Moving back into the pragmatic side of my self-conceptualization these ideas generally fit within my worldview, but I have difficulty with the ontological stance as strictly

outlined by Lincoln et al., (2011). I am uncomfortable with the idea that reality is completely co-created through social interactions and interpretations. This admission is a crystallization of an internal conflict that continues to grow as I seek to find myself as an educational researcher. At this point, I feel much more comfortable with the idea that there is a reality, but this reality is subject to our value laden interpretations (Krauss, 2005). I think this struggle is indicative of the process and may never end as I continue to grow as a researcher.

The ideas outlined above represent things that have value to me, they have axiological significance in this context. Perry suggests (as cited in Hart, 1971) that values stem from interest and that there is no value unless there is reciprocation between an object and an interest-taking subject. In this case the object would be the ideas surrounding participatory pragmatic research and I am the interest taker. If I see no value in this approach, the object, it would have no meaning and therefore my interest will be lost. It is my hope to develop enough self-reflective capacity to recognize the value of a particular approach and the ability to move to a more appropriate framework of inquiry when needed. Of more practical importance at this time is how my placement on the educational research continuum will affect the focus of my future inquires.

Possible Areas of Inquiry

Within the auto-ethnographical context and philosophical research framework that I've sketched out through this reflexive exercise, it has become clear that my possible areas of inquiry are far reaching. More specifically, many areas of inquiry within the public K-12 education system resonate with my personal pedagogy and educational research leanings. Student-centered approaches to learning, authentic learning, teacher collaboration, student and teacher engagement, inclusive educational practices, shared leadership, and multi-aged student relationships are just a few of the areas in which I could develop research inquiries. Regardless of the specific area of inquiry, I will attempt to engage in the process from a participatory lens in the hope of gaining a full and rich understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon in question.

Conclusion

The creation of my auto-ethnographical narrative through a process of personal and shared recollection has been both empowering and liberating. Not only has this given me the opportunity to critically think about and reflect upon the impact my lived experiences have had on shaping my world view in relation to education, it has also enabled me to focus on my emerging role as an educational researcher. Synthesizing this narrative has not been an easy task as recalling and reliving some of these experiences have been emotional. However, it was only through this creative process that I was able to construct a narrative that brought meaning to these seemingly isolated events. All of the experiences that were a part of the narrative had a common theme: The idea of actively participating in the learning process. This idea held true when I was an elementary, middle or university student, it held true when I was a beginning teacher learning my craft, and it still holds true for me now as I delve into the realm of researcher. At the end

of this paper, I am convinced that descriptions can only shed light on the surface of phenomena and that if I continue down this path I must remain true to my educational heritage and immerse myself in my area of inquiry regardless of the challenges this may present. Do I still want to be an educational researcher? After analyzing this narrative, I'm still unsure of my answer, but like all good stories, hopefully this one will leave the audience wanting to know more.

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