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Reflections of a Researcher Teacher

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Vivienne Griffiths
 Canterbury Christ Church University
 vivienne.griffiths1@canterbury.ac.uk

Abstract

In this retrospective, autobiographical account, the author traces her career as a teacher, teacher educator and researcher, identifying critical incidents and key influences alongside changes in education and teacher education. The persistence of teacher and researcher identities, stemming from the early influence of Lawrence Stenhouse, is highlighted, as well as a continuing commitment to feminist research and innovative practice; but identity shifts and transitions are also prominent, according to personal and external contexts, policies and communities of practice.

Keywords

Teacher; researcher; teacher educator; professional development; transitions; identity; academic career.

Reflections of a Researcher Teacher

It is by virtue of being an artist that the teacher
 is a researcher (Stenhouse, 1988:5)

Introduction

In this article, I will explore some critical incidents and key influences during my career as teacher, researcher and teacher educator, using an autobiographical, life history approach (Goodson, 1992, 2003) and drawing on Åkerlind's (2008) stages of an academic career: including *academic landmarks*, *personal development*, *collaboration and support*, *making a difference* and *external recognition* (italics will highlight these terms throughout). My starting point is a model of teacher educators' identities shown in Fig. 1., which stems from a longitudinal, collaborative study of teacher educators' academic and professional identities that I carried out with colleagues at two universities in England (Griffiths et al., 2010, 2014).

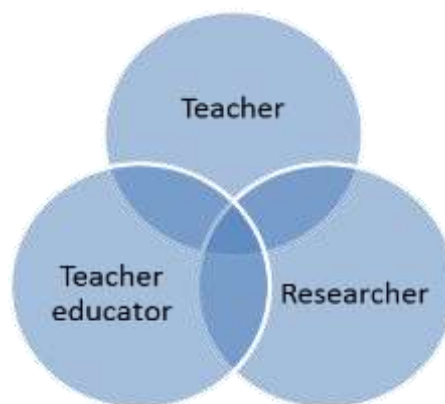


Figure 1. Teacher educators' multiple identities. From Griffiths, V., Hryniwicz, L. & Thompson, S. (2014).

What emerged clearly from this study is the persistence of a teacher identity among teacher educators who have made the transition from school to university, as others have also found (Dinkelman et al., 2006; Murray & Male, 2005); whilst researcher identities are generally harder to develop and maintain in the face of personal and contextual issues (Griffiths et al., 2010; Swennen & van der Klink, 2009). When our model was developed from an analysis of the teacher educators' accounts, it was like looking at myself in a mirror, apart from one key difference. Whereas most of the teacher educators found research a new and challenging experience, this was a core part of my identity from my first teaching post onwards, albeit in a non-academic context, and I can also track seminal influences from my own family history. However, I share with others the identity shifts and challenges to develop research alongside the intensive work involved as a teacher educator.

Autobiographical and life history research

Before turning to my development as a teacher, researcher and teacher educator, I need to locate this autobiographical account in the use of auto/biography as a research method (Merrill and West, 2009). This in itself has an autobiographical history. I first came across the use and power of auto/biographical narratives while studying for my doctorate in the late 1980s, when introduced to feminist research and the importance of the researcher's voice and location in the research process (Oakley, 1981; Stanley & Wise, 1983). Drawing on these innovative ideas, which had a powerful impact on me at the time, I brought a great deal of personal history and experiences into the research process in my ethnographic study of girls' friendships (Griffiths, 1995). The autobiographical elements provided important contrasting narratives in time, class and (in some cases) ethnicity, which added a rich, additional layer of data, whilst (to me) enhancing the researcher-researched relationships (ibid.).

Liz Stanley developed auto/biographical approaches in more detail in the 1990s (Stanley, 1995). She writes: 'Auto/biography has at its heart a project which is concerned with the artful construction of a self-in-writing' (ibid.:131). She cites Barthes (1975), who makes an important tripartite distinction: 'the self who *writes* constructs the self who *was*, but there is also the self who *is*, outside of the text' (Stanley, 1995:131-2, her emphasis). This challenges the idea of a single, stable or essential self and emphasises the construction of a reflexive account of self through the writing process. Goffman's (1959) ideas of the presentation of self are also pertinent here; these appealed to me as a drama teacher when I first read them, for their theatrical analogies of actors and roles, and the complex impermanence of self through interaction with others.

Goodson's (1992, 2003) work on the life histories of teachers, first developed in the 1990s, has also been influential. Goodson (1992) argues that it is important to study teachers and educators in terms of their background, life cycle, career stages and critical incidents, in order to locate their lives and careers in social and political contexts: 'a story of action located within theories of context' (Goodson, 2003:48). Similarly, Stanley (1995:10) emphasises the importance of 'connectedness', of family and social networks in influencing and shaping lives, but also stresses the power of cultural and political contexts. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three dimensions of situation, interaction and continuity are also strongly linked to this methodological framework and therefore particularly pertinent for investigating individual experiences, contexts and learning processes over time. I attempt to draw on all these in this short, personal narrative. In doing so, I am aware of trying to understand some of the complex interactions, relationships and influences of different stages of my personal and professional life; but also that the interpretation is self-referential and can only be a partial account. It is for this reason that I have added as much supporting evidence as possible.

Family influences

Like many of the post-war generation, I was the first person in my family to go to university, but

there was a strong tradition of teaching on my father's side, going back three generations. For instance, my great-grandfather, Thomas Griffiths, was headteacher of a Church Board school in Manchester for 25 years in the 1860s-80s and we still have the desk that he was given on retirement. My great aunt, Florence Rourke, was a pupil teacher who became headteacher of an elementary school in east London for over 20 years in the 1920s-40s (London Metropolitan Archives, undated). She was also a mentor of pupil teachers in her own school and inspired great loyalty in her teachers. She was a great influence on my sister and me as children, teaching us to read and enjoy learning through stories and games before we went to school. We inherited a case full of her teaching materials; some of her old lesson plans show that she had an imaginative approach to teaching within the strict confines of the time, using fables and other stories to teach spelling for instance, and instituting school field trips to the seaside at a time when children in the East End rarely left London. These early influences and family history gave me rich cultural resources and a strong teacher habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), together with a sense of the long-standing commitment involved in teaching; this was especially true for my great aunt, whose dedication to the profession was paramount and who never married (the marriage bar for teachers in the 1920s and 30s is described in Oram, 1996).

On my mother's side, there was quite a different tradition, of non-conformist autodidacts in south Wales, including my great-great-grandfather John Jones (Ioan Emlyn), a Baptist minister and self-taught biblical scholar who helped to found the Literary and Scientific Institution in Ebbw Vale and won awards for his Welsh poetry at the National Eisteddfod in the 1850s (National Library of Wales, undated). My grandfather, William Williams, who worked at Cardiff docks, survived a mustard gas attack at the Battle of Ypres in the First World War, and spent the rest of his life searching for meaning by studying mysticism, theosophy and eastern religions. I have a strong memory of seeing him surrounded by books, which he borrowed from across the world through Cardiff's inter-library loan service: my first experience of a researcher at work. His alternative beliefs, which were very much ahead of their time, were passed on to all his children and had a strong influence on my own childhood, countering the more traditional, middle class values and beliefs passed down through my father's family. Nevertheless, I accrued rich cultural capital from both sides (Bourdieu, 1975). In addition, I grew up with a strong strand of suffragist/ early feminist beliefs from my mother and women teachers at my all girls' grammar school (Girls' Day School Trust, undated).

First teaching post: the Humanities Curriculum Project

After training as a secondary English and drama teacher in 1970, I was full of idealism about education and set my heart on teaching in Leicestershire which, at the time, was one of the most innovative counties in England in its comprehensive schools' provision. For example, Countesthorpe College was way ahead of its time in offering learning hubs rather than traditional classrooms (Watts, 1997). Longslade Community College, where I obtained my first teaching post, was one of the pilot schools for the Humanities Curriculum Project (HCP) (Ruddock, 1976; Stenhouse, 1968). The main aim of the project was to develop an understanding of society through exploring controversial issues in the classroom with adolescents, using discussion not instruction as the core mode of enquiry (Schools Council, 1970). This could be seen as the forerunner to Citizenship as a subject, but with a radical, experimental pedagogy, grounded in 'research-based teaching' (Elliott, 2006:2), where the teacher explored packs of evidence with small groups of pupils on subjects such as the family, poverty and war.

While I agreed with the project's basic problem-based and student-centred aims and premises, which I had heard about on my Certificate in Education course, I had reservations about the recommended teaching strategy, which advocated the teacher adopting the role of a neutral chairman (sic) (Schools Council, 1970). Nevertheless, I explored this innovative approach with enthusiasm, albeit critically, and wrote my first academic article about the results (Griffiths, 1975).

As a result, I was invited to be a teacher tutor on one of the project's training courses for teachers, a mixed experience which was my first brush with academia in a teacher educator role, but which exemplified Stenhouse's advocacy of teachers working in *collaboration* (Åkerlind, 2008) with university-based researchers (Stenhouse, 1975, 1988; Elliott, 2006).

Stenhouse's model of the teacher researcher, 'The commitment to systematic questioning of one's own teaching as a basis for development' (Stenhouse, 1981:143), was one which I could associate with deeply and had a great impact on my own professional and *personal development* (Åkerlind, 2008), both as a teacher and researcher. For Stenhouse, the professional development of teachers was inextricably linked to:

curriculum development at the level of the classroom, and research-based teaching forged the linkage between them

(Elliott, 2006:8).

This was a very different model from the more recent standards-driven school effectiveness approach, based as it was in the 'complex particularities' of classroom situations (Elliott, 2006:7) with open-ended aims and outcomes. Stenhouse (1988:48) describes the importance of teachers conducting 'descriptive case studies' based on 'participant observation', in alliances with university researchers. However, he recognised the tensions between teachers and academics, and that 'educational research will be held accountable for its relevance to practice' (ibid.:49). In my own case, this tension was evident while on a secondment to the Women's Research and Resources Centre (now the Feminist Library) in the mid-1970s, where I came into contact with leading feminist academics, and in speaking at my first academic conference (Griffiths, 1977), where some of the academic papers seemed to have little grounding in classroom-based evidence and thus little relevance to teaching. Nevertheless, these early experiences led, in time, to my return to academic study, in order to research young people's experiences in classrooms more fully. Thus, during this period of full-time teaching, I had already obtained two key *academic landmarks* (Åkerlind, 2008; see also Griffiths et al., 2014): a conference paper and an academic publication, but I still saw myself as a teacher, in some contexts a teacher researcher, but very much positioned outside academia.

Doing a doctorate: ethnographic and feminist research

After more than ten years in the classroom, I was now an advisory teacher for drama in Wakefield in the early 1980s. Wakefield district, an industrial and mining area of high deprivation, had been part of the former West Riding and had inherited the influence of the educational pioneer, Alec Clegg, in promoting the arts in education (George, 2000). Like Leicestershire in the 1970s, Wakefield in the 1980s was (perhaps surprisingly) the source of much educational innovation; its courses for teachers at Woolley Hall, at which I provided much in-service teacher education on drama, were regarded as inspirational. A former pupil at one of the schools in which I taught drama at the time, describes the impact of this broad, arts-based approach to education (Robinson, 2013). With other advisory teachers, I was part of a drama-in-education team drawing on innovative teaching methods such as 'teacher-in-role' and 'the mantle of the expert', where the children are put in positions of responsibility, inspired by Dorothy Heathcote (Bolton, 2003; Heathcote & Bolton, 1994). We also drew heavily on historical research of the area on which to base our work, and I worked closely with the hugely knowledgeable Wakefield archivist, John Goodchild, to research early mining communities in Yorkshire, Wakefield's textile industry and the coming of the railways (Goodchild, 1978, 1987).

The opportunity to engage in first hand research, wide experience in working with children and young people using innovative drama pedagogies, and growing interest in feminism and education, drew me towards further study, via the initial medium of feminist activism. I joined the Manchester-

based Women and Education group, whose members were teachers and academics, and contributed rather polemical articles to their newsletter (Women and Education, 1980s). Members included Alison Kelly, who studied girls and science (Kelly, 1981) and co-led the pioneering Girls into Science and Technology (GIST) Project (Kelly et al., 1984; Whyte, 1986). Through her encouragement, I undertook a part-time master's degree with Kelly as supervisor, and she supported me to use drama as a research method in exploring young women's attitudes to gender (Griffiths, 1984, 1986). Although familiar with drama teaching, using this in a research context was new territory for me, and models of analysis were lacking at the time. Looking back, it was both generous and somewhat high risk of Kelly to support an innovative, qualitative study, as she herself was a quantitative researcher.

Following this, I was fortunate to obtain an SSRC (now ESRC) scholarship to do a doctorate and for the first time since the 1960s, became a full-time student in my mid-30s. However, at first I still very much saw myself as a teacher researcher, in the Stenhouse tradition, and when asked to introduce myself to the doctoral student group, described myself as a teacher doing a PhD. Kelly asked me afterwards why I did not call myself a research student, but this was not an identity with which I could relate at the time. I recalled this incident when investigating the multiple identities of teacher educators (see Fig.1.); it was a critical moment in my career (Goodson, 1992). Having been immersed in teaching for nearly fourteen years, the identity of a researcher in academia still seemed strange and alien, even though in different ways I had been engaged in teacher research over my whole teaching career. This relates, I would argue, to the reluctance of many teacher educators, who are former teachers, to label themselves as researchers or academics (Griffiths et al., 2010, 2014), even though they are involved in lecturing and other academic work, including research. The teacher identity is deeply embedded and seems to me to be related to ideas about authenticity and relevance (Kreber, 2013; Reay et al., 2005), in contrast to academia, which may seem rarefied and remote from practice. Lack of confidence in academic work and feelings of being an imposter also run deep (Reay, 2002).

My own confidence was challenged many times in undertaking an in-depth, ethnographic study of adolescent girls in a comprehensive school (Griffiths, 1995), although it was at the same time one of the most exciting and fulfilling things that I had (and have) ever done academically. This was a period of huge academic and *personal development*; as well as Kelly, Liz Stanley was another key *support* and mentor during this period (Åkerlind, 2008). Stanley and Wise's (1983) ground-breaking book on feminist research was, and is, a major influence. Through this, I started to analyse my own research relationships in terms of breaking down traditional research boundaries and giving young women a voice (Griffiths, 1988). I also worked hard in the research to position myself as a researcher rather than a teacher (ibid.). In different ways, Kelly and Stanley were both important mentors, at a difficult transitional time in which I was moving from a teacher and teacher researcher into an academic career and balancing in a peripheral participant role (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Mentoring and induction of teacher educators into academia and research, through formal supervision as well as informal support, emerged as important factors in our own study (Griffiths et al., 2010).

Becoming a teacher educator: surviving Ofsted, and research projects

In 1985, I obtained my first academic post as a classroom-based researcher at Sussex University, where I had been an undergraduate in the 1960s in its pioneering heyday. I was looking forward to continuing my research development, and ran a research methods module on a master's programme, but was almost immediately taken into the teacher education team because I was then the only person with a teaching qualification and (relatively recent) experience; 'recent and relevant' school experience was becoming a requirement (Gilroy, 1992). Conversely, on the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) team, I became the only person with a doctorate after its completion a few years later (later published as a book: Griffiths, 1995).

Sussex was a pioneer of school-based teacher education (see Furlong et al., 1988), and it was an exciting experience to be involved in such an innovative approach. Quite quickly, my main frame of reference was once again schools. I was visiting schools more than I was in the university, and undertaking a substantial amount of classroom teaching myself to model it for the students. Thus, while I was making the transition into academia, my identity as a teacher, which had started to take a back seat, was once more brought to the fore, while my researcher identity was pushed to the background. My own experience was to some extent in line with my own and others' research on new teacher educators managing the transition from schools (Dinkelman, 2006; Griffiths et al., 2010; McKeon & Harrison, 2010; Murray & Male, 2005; Swennen & van der Klink, 2009), and their peripheral positioning 'inside/outside the ivory tower' (Maguire, 2000). However, rather than seeing myself as a 'teacher involved with teacher preparation' (McKeon & Harrison, 2010:36), as many new teacher educators do, I positioned myself as a 'teacher educator with expertise about teaching' (ibid.) and research; and as a lecturer who also undertook teacher education. Perhaps this was more possible in the 1980s than it is in today's more tightly regulated teacher education culture.

Over the next 20 years, I took on a variety of roles, including primary and secondary English tutor, personal/link tutor, director of primary then secondary PGCE, and Director of Initial Teacher Education (ITE). This was my main academic trajectory (Åkerlind, 2008) during this extensive period and, for the most part, an extremely rewarding and enjoyable experience. As my identity became very closely invested in ITE and its leadership, the climate for teacher education was becoming more highly regulated, with the introduction of the then Teacher Training Agency in 1994 (Mahony & Hextall, 1997); regular Ofsted inspections from 1995 (Gilroy & Wilcox, 1997); a series of increasingly burdensome circulars, in which competences, later to become standards, were introduced (DES, 1989; DfE1993; DfEE 1997, 1998); and a National Curriculum for ITT (sic) (Graham, 1996). Space does not permit a full account of this period of increased regulation (Becher, 1992), which has become a familiar part of the ITE landscape, but it did impact on my own experience in a direct and negative way, when the Sussex Primary PGCE was one of the first casualties of the primary 'sweep' inspections in 1995 (see a detailed, critical account in Griffiths & Jacklin, 1999). The next years were invested in improving the programme to (Ofsted-graded) excellent standard, but the emotional toll on me and colleagues and sense of deprofessionalism were great (as in Jeffrey and Woods, 1996).

At the same time, I was determined (and required) to keep research active and was fortunate to be part of two major, *collaborative* research projects (Åkerlind, 2008): the first an ESRC project on groupwork with computers (Stronach & MacDonald, 1991); the second an Esmée Fairbairn project on mentoring in schools (Campbell & Kane, 1998), led at Sussex by Michael Eraut and Tony Becher respectively. The groupwork project was designed along Stenhouseian lines, with teacher researchers in each of the project schools working alongside university researchers; I worked with teachers in two schools undertaking classroom observation of children working with computers. There was an agreeable symmetry here, demonstrating in concrete terms my own shift in identity from school-based teacher researcher to university-based researcher. The mentoring project was organised in researcher pairs, who each investigated a different aspect of the topic in teacher education. A colleague and I focused on (then new) partnerships with schools; we worked with school teachers and university researchers nationally and our study resulted in an edited book (Griffiths & Owen, 1995).

Participation in these projects was vital in maintaining and strengthening a researcher role, alongside the day to day busyness of teacher education work. Like Kelly and Stanley at Manchester, Becher and Eraut were key *supports* and mentors in my academic development (Åkerlind, 2008); unlike Manchester, Sussex University had few women in senior leadership roles at the time (see Griffiths, 2009). My solution to lack of time was to use my own practice as a teacher educator as the starting point for research, Stenhouse-style, and extend from there into detailed case studies. For

instance, I led a longitudinal, *collaborative* study funded by the ESRC on the preparedness of newly qualified primary teachers (Griffiths et al., 2002), which followed beginning teachers from their ITE experiences into their first years of teaching and resulted in a book (Jacklin et al., 2006). Eraut's (2007) work on professional and work-based learning also encouraged me to study the then new employment-based route into teaching (Griffiths, 2007, 2011), one of only a few researchers to do so. Thus, through this quite long period, I was gradually developing an academic reputation and *wider recognition* for my research through international conference papers and publications, as well as hopefully *making a difference* to students' lives through my teacher educator role (Åkerlind, 2008).

The unexpected professor

The final stage in my academic career was an unforeseen and surprising one. Although I had become Head of the Sussex School of Education and achieved some measure of external success, I had not received equivalent internal recognition through promotion (Åkerlind, 2008), until my chair appointment at Canterbury Christ Church University in 2009, at the age of 60. Like John Carey (2014), I felt like an unexpected professor despite this *external recognition* (Åkerlind, 2008); perhaps with more reason, as women professors are still relatively rare and many women, like me, attain senior positions late in life (Griffiths, 2012). Maguire (2010) has studied women professors who underestimate their own capabilities and even feel that their senior positions, once attained, are somehow a mistake. This resonates with my own response at this time, which was another significant period of transition, albeit late in the day, to a new role in a new university.

There is a pleasing symmetry in my first (as student) and last (as professor) academic experiences having been in new universities. But there was also a sense of 'coming home' at Christ Church, having moved from a research-intensive institution where teacher education always felt somewhat marginalised (see Griffiths et al., 2010), to one where this activity was central. Feelings of belonging and authenticity (Kreber, 2013) were again important, although by this time I had moved a long way from the teacher embarking on a research journey. Through my leadership of research over the next five years, which involved building research capacity through mentoring the (largely) teacher educator staff (Griffiths et al., 2010), and engaging in *collaborative* research projects, I tried to *make a difference* in a new way (Åkerlind, 2008). Most recently, I have been exploring with colleagues the use of innovative visual methods in qualitative research with teacher educators (Hryniewicz et al., 2014).

Closing remarks

Looking back over this narrative, autobiographical account of my academic career, I am aware of several key strands that run through: firstly, my identity as a teacher, while changing in emphasis and context, has been consistent over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), though shifting into teacher educator and lecturer identities; secondly, and in parallel, my identity as a researcher has always been strong, though not always in academic (i.e. higher education) contexts. The emphasis throughout my teaching and subsequent academic careers on innovation and innovative practice, which I have always sought out through different contexts, has been inherent to, and a bridge between, these two elements. The particular configuration of teacher and researcher identities and dominance of one aspect over another has shifted over time, as the researcher identity gradually came to the fore. What also stands out is the importance of critical incidents in my career (Goodson, 1992, 2003), usually at times of transition between stages, moving from one community of practice to another (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

This brief account can only be partial and inevitably selective, and some aspects of my ways of working and core values do not emerge as strongly as they might, but have underpinned much of my work: for instance, a preference for collaborative research; an awareness of gender issues and

commitment to feminist ideals. Åkerlind's (2008) aspects of an academic identity have been useful as a way of reflecting on key stages and transitions. As I move into 'retirement', this multi-faceted identity remains strong and there is still a sense of more to do.

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