16. BEING ME

In Search of Authenticity

“Being me” as a qualitative researcher can be harder than it looks or sounds. In this chapter I tell the methodological story of a 3-year life history study that aimed to explore the development of teacher professional identity. Through the telling of the story, I argue that critical to the achievement of authenticity in qualitative research is the achievement of a level of congruence between three key dimensions: design, process and reporting.

In the course of the study, I engaged eight secondary school teachers in a “prolonged interview” (Denzin, 1970) over the course of 18 months. In the interviews, participants were asked to discuss the history, key influences and orientations of their careers. Participants were purposively sampled so that they came from a range of contexts and were at various points in their careers – neophyte teachers, mid-career teachers, “middle managers” and principals. My aim, as with most qualitative research, was to take a forensic approach to the collection and analysis of evidence (wherein evidence might be used to “prove” the viability of a particular phenomenon or social practice), as opposed to an adversarial approach (wherein evidence is used for the purpose of developing understanding of a particular phenomenon) (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2007), and to shine a light on the experience of teachers in terms of the changing nature of their professional identity.

The theoretical framework and findings of the study itself have been written about elsewhere (Mockler, 2011a, 2011b), as has a reflection on the experience of conducting this research project as professional learning and development (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009). In this chapter, I use the methodological story of the study as a touchstone for arguing that authenticity in qualitative research requires an authenticity of design, process and analysis in the enactment of the research enterprise.

AUTHENTICITY OF DESIGN

Authenticity of design lies in a congruence between the researcher’s own way of seeing and being in the world and the enactment of the research.

Elliott Eisner (1998, p. 32ff) and Sharon Merriam (1998, pp. 6-8, 2009, pp. 14-18) have both offered a range of characteristics and dimensions of qualitative research that together highlight the importance of researchers’ self-awareness...
within the research field – the criticality of understanding both self as research “tool” or instrument, and the location and fit of the self within the field. A key part of understanding self as a research tool lies in recognising the links between one’s ontological and epistemological positioning and the methods one chooses to employ in the collection of data.

For any project, the selection of methodologies and research methods does not occur in a vacuum, and neither is the process of selection entirely dictated by the subject matter or phenomenon under investigation. Rather, it is linked fundamentally to the way in which the researcher approaches central questions of ontology and epistemology and the adoption of related research paradigms. Figure 16.1 broadly represents the dependent relationship between these elements in the establishment and execution of a research project and the corresponding critical questions that, for this researcher at least, are associated with each of the parameters ontology, epistemology, research paradigm, methodology and method.

![Figure 16.1. Research parameters and corresponding critical questions](image)

It could be argued that with ontology placed at the centre of the circle, the diagram represents the research parameters back-to-front, but a case for particular methodologies and research methods can only be made once one has “pushed through” each of the other layers of meaning by addressing the relevant critical questions. One’s epistemology is necessarily formed by the answers to questions relating to ontology and the nature of reality, and the research paradigm within which researchers operates is largely a consequence of their epistemological
beliefs, and so on. Furthermore, answers to critical questions relating to ontology and epistemology may give rise to the use of more than one epistemology, research paradigm or methodology within a single study.

This relationship between ontology, epistemology and methodology is explored in much of the literature relating to qualitative approaches to research. Guba and Lincoln (2008), for example, discussed the “competing research paradigms” of positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, constructivism and participatory research and their respective ontologies, epistemologies, axiologies and methodologies. Their thesis was that ontology and epistemology had very practical implications for researchers, and they argued the need for the researchers to reflect, articulate and act upon the values, axiology and beliefs which informed their research at the outset.

Similarly, Patti Lather (2006) represented the likely implications both “backward” (to ontology and epistemology) and “forward” (to methodology and research methods) of what she identified as the key research paradigms currently in operation in social research – the positivist, interpretivist, critical theory and deconstructivist approaches.

The point here is not to impose a simple classification, but rather to map epistemological and ontological multiplicities and “help us recognize both our longing for and a wariness of an ontological and epistemological home” (Lather, 2006, p. 36). Further, if we accept the importance of ontology and epistemology to the choice of particular research paradigms, methodologies and methods, part of the task of the researcher at the outset then must be to contextualise the methodology and methods employed in the current study with an explication of them, and in doing so, respond to Nancy Hartsock’s challenge to “‘read out’ the epistemologies in our various practices” (1987, p. 206), further defined by Lather as “learn[ing] to attend to the politics of what we do and do not do at a practical level” (1991, p. 13).

What, then, might be regarded as the ontological and epistemological home of this researcher? Given my background in history and gender studies, this study drew on my interest in postmodern approaches to history and historical research and the work of feminist scholars and critical theorists in terms of their ontological and epistemological base. Postmodern classicist Nicole Loraux wrote, by way of rationale for her radical reinterpretation of the “Golden Age” of Athens, “When confronted with democracy, with the word as well as the thing, and when confronted with antiquity too, I feel that I am in a strange world and thus entitled to attempt a new reading” (2006, p. 34).

Loraux’s new reading of old “text” stemmed from ongoing grappling with an ontology and epistemology not her own, but imposed on her from within the dominant discourse of her field. Her body of work aimed to subvert this dominant discourse, and in doing so established her new reading of old text as an alternative interpretation of history. This notion was similarly advanced by feminist theorist Adrienne Rich (1972, p. 18) in her development of the notion “re-vision” for the purpose of arguing for the equality-within-difference of women. She wrote, “Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text
from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival”.

It is from this “strange world” view, then, that I came to this study. The assumptions that underpin my particular ontological and epistemological “home” can be summarised as follows:

- That “reality” is shaped by historical, social, political and social pressures
- That “reality” is constructed and experienced in different ways by different individuals and communities
- That knowledge is necessarily contextual
- That knowledge can be emancipatory.

My decision to employ a life history approach was thus a consequence not only of the topic I chose to study – there are many ways that teachers’ professional identity could be studied – but also of a desire to establish a congruence between my own ontological and epistemological home and the methods I chose to employ.

Life history research dates to the early 20th century, when it was used primarily as a tool by anthropologists studying the indigenous peoples of North America (Goodson & Sikes, 2001, p. 6). Adopted by sociologists in the 1920s and 1930s, this approach to research then lay largely dormant in the growth of positivistic approaches to social research, resurfacing in the 1970s and 1980s in response to the “postmodern turn” and the associated rethinking of “evidence” and methodology in sociological as well as historical research (Goodson, 2001).

Life history is about lived experience. In the context of educational research, it presupposes that the connections between work life and personal life are complex and not open to separation. In the words of Goodson and Sikes, “Life history does not ask for such separation: indeed it demands holism” (2001, p. 10). In the investigation of teacher professional identity, then, life history was seen to be a highly appropriate methodology to adopt, because an understanding of teacher identity, of what it is to become and be a teacher, is inextricably linked to the personal and life circumstances of teachers themselves.

While authenticity of design, achieved largely by understanding and “reading out” our ontological and epistemological orientations and establishing congruence between them and the methods we employ in our research, goes some way toward ensuring authenticity in research, much hinges on the subsequent processes of data collection and analysis.

**AUTHENTICITY OF PROCESS**

Authenticity of process is linked closely to ethical concerns and considerations, most particularly in the context of an extended qualitative study such as this, as they relate to the nature and quality of the relationships between the researcher and the research participants.

A number of ethical considerations are specific to life history research while others are drawn from more general concerns relating to critical research. Conceptualised as in itself an enactment of ethics, critical research has as its
primary concern the socially just and democratic production of knowledge and ideas. As such, this study was in some ways “all about ethics”. Accordingly, embedded in the methods of data collection and analysis utilised in the study was a concern for the personhood and wellbeing of participants, a determination on my part to minimise the power structure inherent in the participant-researcher relationship, and the hope (although not a demand) that participants would engage with me in constructing their biographical narrative as drawn from the data collected. Framing these guiding philosophies and strategies, however, were the principles of informed consent and confidentiality.

In an attempt to offset the power differential between researcher and participant, interviews were held at a time and place nominated by the participant. I felt strongly that the issue of space was important and that an ideal space for one participant might be a less than desirable one for another. Participants were thus asked at the outset of the study to choose a place for interviews where they would feel comfortable and relaxed, and which also had conditions conducive to reflection and conversation.

In some cases, interviews were held within the grounds of the participant’s school, in some cases at the participant’s home, and in other cases at another location of the participant’s choosing, such as the university campus or a quiet café. I also felt that as far as possible participants should not be inconvenienced by their involvement in the study, and thus participants also nominated the location for interviews; in most cases this meant that I travelled to meet them, but for one participant each interview was treated as a special “escape” and most interviews were held in a location near neither his work nor his home.

In its very nature life history research is personal and close work. The quality of data gained in life history research to some extent relies upon the relationship between the researcher and the research participant, and a range of questions exist about the “relationship bargain” (Measor & Sikes, 1992) struck and the corresponding ethical issues. As Goodson and Sikes (2001, p. 93) suggested, “it would be entirely possible (although certainly unethical) to undertake life history research in a covert manner, under the guise of friendship”, engaging in what Lather termed “rape research” (1986, p. 263). Such a practice would surely be abhorrent to any researcher committed to ethical processes, but the very notion raises interesting questions about whose interests get served in the course of research, who gets something out of it and who does not. As Measor and Sikes (1992) pointed out, although the reason for researcher entering into the relationship with participants is usually quite clear – they wish to hear the story of the participant and gather data for their study – the reason behind the respondent’s participation is generally less clear.

In early (pre-interview) conversations with participants I purposefully asked each why they had chosen to participate in the study, in an attempt to allow (as far as one can) maximum agency for each within the study. Two indicated that they saw it as a professional development opportunity, a time for reflection and time out from the busyness of school life. A general sense came from all participants that for them it was not really about what they would get out of it, but rather taking pity on a researcher
whom they perceived to be doing meaningful work which was aimed at improving life for teachers and, ultimately, students.

The issue of “reciprocity” (Oakley, 1981), as a technique for building relationship and avoiding exploitation of research participants, is also particularly salient in a discussion of ethics in life history research. Reciprocity was initially construed as a means by which feminist researchers could overturn the patriarchal paradigm embedded in more traditional approaches to interviewing, but the potential for manipulation of participants is significant, for as Pat Sikes (1997, p. 21) wrote, “sharing information in order to be, or to appear to be, less exploitative can be seen to be instrumental and manipulative rather than socially supportive”. Aside from the ethical issues associated with possible manipulation of participants through reciprocity, I was highly uncomfortable with the assumption of similarities between researcher and participants which is at the heart of this approach.

To approach participants assuming that they shared aspects of my life experience and world view simply because of what I assumed to be their class/race/gender/context seemed to me to undermine the integrity of the project in two ways. First, in a study designed to investigate aspects of identity formation for participants, to make assumptions at the outset about their very “being” seemed counter-productive. Second, as a historian I tried as much as possible to limit at the outset my preconceived ideas about the experiences of participants or the contexts and events that may have led to key decisions in their lives to those factors which contributed to their inclusion in the study (i.e. stage of career and current school context). I admit that I probably achieved this with varying levels of success throughout the process, yet this kind of detachment would have been not at all possible had I been intent on creating a cosy environment based on our similarities.

Instead, I worked hard to be open with participants about the process, to use humour where it was appropriate as a tool to ease discomfort or awkwardness on their part, and to share aspects of my own experience when they inquired or, in very few circumstances, when it seemed appropriate for other reasons. These instances generally came about as a result of a participant asking me a direct question about my experience, rather than at my instigation. My personal style is such that I would have felt uncomfortable engaging in what Stephen Ball called “a reciprocal process of personal ‘social striptease’” (1983, p. 95); also I was wary of taking a “mutual storytelling” (Munro, 1998) approach, not wanting to be seen to be self-indulgent or wasteful of participants’ precious time.

Shared perceptions and experiences certainly emerged during the course of the prolonged interviews, but they emerged not because I was conscious of emphasising similarities between us but because as educators we found common ground as the relationship between us evolved over time. This may seem like something of a semantic difference, but the key point of differentiation for me lies in the intent. In this case, the common ground evolved organically, out of the discussions that took place over time, and as a result can be seen more as a by-product of the process than a research strategy. Furthermore, these conversations often took place after the conclusion of the interview as such, when a number of times in the packing-up and farewelling process, in the general social or work-related chit-chat that often ensued,
participants asked questions of me in passing which had been triggered in some way by our earlier conversation.

AUTHENTICITY OF ANALYSIS AND REPORTING

Finally, “being me” hinges on authenticity in terms of analysing data and reporting the findings of research. Heron (1981, p. 126) argued that participants “have a moral right to participate in decisions that claim to generate information about them”, suggesting that participation and collaboration need to happen “not only in the application of research but also in the generation of knowledge”. I was wary of expecting participants to engage enthusiastically at every step in the process of analysis, given their already generous commitment of time to the project in interviews. Two strategies were thus used to provide opportunities for participation in analysis and reporting processes, with an invitation issued to all participants to be involved in other ways should they wish. In the first place, each interview opened with a reflection on the transcript of the last, asking participants whether there was anything they wished to change or clarify, if there was anything that surprised them in hindsight, and so on. Second, a biographical narrative, drawn from all six interviews but which I had constructed as a narrative, was returned to participants with an invitation for one final meeting to reflect on the life history.

Although it can never be claimed that the power relationship in the context of a research project can be “flattened” any more than it can in the context of a classroom, the orientation of this study was such that it aimed to do so as far as possible. It cannot be denied that the “colonial relationship” (Munro, 1998, p. 12) present in all social research still existed, along with the possible pitfalls and vulnerabilities associated with telling one’s story, but my hope was that in being aware and sensitive to these I was best placed to work actively against them throughout the course of the study.

Interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed, with transcripts returned to participants for checking prior to the following interview. This process, usually referred to as respondent validation (e.g. Goodson & Sikes, 2001, p. 36), was a step toward “dialogical data generation” (Carspecken, 1996), where ideally participants and researchers interact dialogically in the collection and interpretation of data, in an attempt to “democratise the research process” (p. 155). In this phase, however, this notion of dialogical or collaborative analysis of data fell somewhat short of my ideal. Participants were very happy to review transcripts and in some way use them as a launching pad for the next interview, yet it became clear that their prevailing attitude in this process was that they were checking for inaccuracies or for parts of the transcript that they would prefer not to have made public, rather than reflecting upon or clarifying their comments in order to expand upon them. Only one participant who spent a great deal of time reflecting upon her transcripts and notating them for further discussion.

At a subsequent stage, when participants were returned an account of their biographical narrative (which I had constructed) and invited to meet to discuss it, the study came closer to the collaborative ideal promoted by critical research, named
MOCKLER

elsewhere as “jointly authored statements” (Bonser & Grundy, 1988, p. 6ff). Four of the eight participants took up the invitation to discuss their narrative at length, either by telephone or in person, and two participants entered into the “joint construction” process completely, reworking the narrative to our mutual satisfaction. Interestingly, the focus in this process for both participants was on “tidying” the extracts from the transcripts such that their contribution met what they perceived to be appropriate standards for inclusion in a thesis rather than, as I had expected, on debating and reworking the meaning I had attached to their life experiences as represented in the data.

This unwillingness of participants to engage at a deeper level with the data generated had, I believe, a number of underlying causes. In the first place, the hectic nature of teachers’ lives meant that they rarely had time to review transcripts between interviews. In fact, in the initial stages of the study some participants had suggested that rather than sending them transcripts between interviews, they would prefer to schedule extra time at the beginning of each interview to read and digest the transcript. While this seemed to me to be a good option (and preferable to participants arriving at interviews having had time just to briefly skim transcripts), in reality it meant that the transcripts were often subject to only a brief review which had the “check” described above as its aim.

Second, I believe that for some participants a sense of “researcher knows best” prevailed. That is, as the trust evolved within the relationship between us, participants came to understand me as a person who could be relied upon to not misrepresent them and to provide accurate accounts of our conversations. Moreover, it became clear to me during the process that for a number of participants, the process of reading the transcripts, with all of the “ums” and “ers” and half-sentences they contained, was in itself an awkward or embarrassing experience, and one they wished to dispense with as quickly as possible. Finally, it occurred to me that perhaps the participants did not find the data quite as captivating and fascinating as I did, and that this perhaps contributed to their unwillingness to ponder it and “unpick” it as I had hoped they would, seeing the process of analysis as my job rather than theirs.

The multi-layered process of writing, analysing, discussing, constructing, de-constructing and re-constructing accounts over the course of interviews and subsequently in the preparation of the final biographical narratives, however, regardless of its pitfalls, left me satisfied in the end that a level of authenticity had been achieved in analysis and reporting. All eight participants were content and comfortable with their representation as an accurate and authentic portrait of them at that specific point in their lives and careers.

CONCLUSION

The search for authenticity in qualitative research demands a congruence between design, process and reporting. In terms of life history research, authenticity is inescapable as a measure of quality: seeking to constitute and tell participants’ life stories in ways that ring true with the participants but are also methodologically rigorous is a complex and multi-layered process. It relies on a level of self-
awareness on the part of the researcher that allows fundamental beliefs about
knowledge creation and “reality” to be connected to the research enterprise; on the
quality of the relationship that emerges between researcher and research
participants; and on a commitment to faithful and reflexive analysis and reporting
that integrates participants’ voices in ways that are respectful and reflective of their
desires regarding their involvement. While we may succeed to different extents at
different times, the search for authenticity is always a worthy aspiration.

REFERENCES

The ethnography of schooling: Methodological issues (pp. 93-95). Driffield: Nafferton.
Chicago: Aldine.
An International Journal of Theory and Research, 1(2), 129-142.
Buckingham: Open University Press.
Campbell & S. Groundwater-Smith (Eds.), An ethical approach to practitioner research (pp. 113-
Research Papers in Education, 22(2), 199-211.
Groundwater-Smith, S., & Mockler, N. (2009). Teacher professional learning in an age of compliance:
Mind the gap. Dordrecht: Springer.
In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues (3rd
Heron, J. (1981). Experimental research methods. In P. Reason & J. Rowan (Eds.), Human enquiry (pp.
Routledge.
Lather, P. (2006). This is your father's paradigm: Government intrusion and the case of qualitative
research in education. In N. Denzin & M. Giardina (Eds.), Qualitative inquiry and the conservative
challenge (pp. 31-55). Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
Merriam, S. (1998). Qualitative research and case study applications in education. San Francisco:
Jossey Bass.
Merriam, S. (2009). Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation. San Francisco:


Nicole Mockler PhD
School of Education
University of Newcastle, Australia