

Telling Stories – A model for considering the impact of narrative practices on supporting identity and identification, based on a study of teacher educators in career transition

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Introduction

Identity for neophyte teacher educators has been shown by the literature to be problematic. As individuals transition from teacher to teacher educator their teacher identity can become a source of 'credibility' with the student teachers they work with and this can stall the development of a more integrated identity as a teacher educator (Boyd and Harris, 2010). This study adopts an adapted Professional Life History approach with six neophyte Teacher Educators, with one to three years' experience in that role, in the expectation that such narrative practice might support them to develop their identity as a Teacher Educator and to engage in a process of 'identification'. An analytical model that considers two binary dimensions, that of subjectivity / objectivity and structure / agency, operating within the narrative process is applied to the narrative events.

The paper starts by setting the theoretical context for this study, particularly within a post-structuralist paradigm. It then presents the theoretical model of 'binary dimensions of narrative practice' followed by an analysis of the narrative events in relation to the positions implied in the four quadrants of the model. The utility of the model is discussed along with the insights it provides. True to a poststructuralist paper the limitations of adopting such approach are identified. Finally, suggestions for further research and developments are presented.

Narrative as a Means and a Method

Firstly, I would like to define what is meant by narrative within the context of this research. In simple terms, narrative is 'telling a story'. Within this study narrative has two functions: as a means and a method. As the means, I suggest that in telling their story participants might engage in a process of 'knowing oneself' or identification, and in so doing might reveal something of their sense of self or identity. As Benwell and Stokoe (2006) suggest 'it is in narrative tellings that we construct identities: selves are made coherent and meaningful through the narrative or 'biographical' work that they do' (p. 42). Narrative is also the method that I used for this study, recognising the unique potential of narrative data to reveal identity and provide some insight into participants' perceptions of their professional self. However, within a poststructuralist paradigm identity and identification might be considered as fleeting or shifting or obscured and that we might hold 'a variety of narrative identities' (Murray, 2003, p. 116).

Narrative is important for the individual as the 'means' by which they engage in a process of identification. Denzin (2000) argues that stories of self form a map by which the individual can navigate from point A to B. In my iteration of the Professional Life History method I consider that point B is the future self and that by activating prospective reflection within the construction of the story told it supports the individual to consider their 'possible selves' (Wai-Ling Packard and Conway, 2006; Whitty, 2002). The suggestion that narrative is also the 'means' for identification might align with Connelly and Clandinin's (2006) notion of 'ground' from which individuals can engage in self-narration, where they suggest that '[t]he narratives so constructed are then seen as the textual ground for people to retell their living; that is, to interpret their lives as told in different ways, to imagine different possibilities, and to... actively write their lives'. (p. 478)

Poststructuralist Views of Narrative

Poststructuralists view narrative discussion itself as a contrived situation in which the participant has agreed to, and is complicit in, creating a story telling episode in which they engage in a 'retrospective construction of prospective significance' (MacLure, 1996, p. 281). There is often an expectation that this retrospective construction would be an 'accurate' recollection of the professional life story and might be meaningful to the participant in the process of identification. The reality is that the context of the discussion, and most notably the influence of the researcher within it, might shape the story in particular ways; recognising that the research itself is 'story telling' work (Mishler, 2006).

Performative Views of Identity Within Narrative Discourse

Benwell and Stokoe (2006), in their book 'Discourse and Identity', persuasively argue that identity is formed in discourse. If an individual is to engage in identification then this construction of self-understanding is achieved through the process of discourse, either spoken or written. This perspective views identity as performative rather than essentialist, and that 'if selves and identities are constituted in discourse, they are necessarily constructed in stories' (ibid, p. 137). Sford and Prusak (2010) argue that an essentialist notion of identity is untenable 'because it leaves us without a clue as to where we are supposed to look for this elusive "essence" that remains the same throughout a person's actions' and potentially harmful because the reified version of identity 'acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy' (p16). However, the performative perspective is prevalent among narrative researchers and convincingly argued for in such work:

'Through life stories individuals and groups make sense of themselves; they tell what they are or what they wish to be, as they tell so they become, they are their stories.' (Cortazzi, 2001)

'We speak our identities.' (Mishler, 1999)

'We become the stories through which we tell our lives... Telling stories configures the 'self-I-might-be.' (Riesmann, 2003)

(in Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p. 138)

In taking a performative view of identity, as constructed within narrative discourse, we should view these stories firstly as socially constructed, therefore nuanced according to the audience, and secondly multiple, that a person might construct their identities differently for different audiences and purposes.

As stories, identities are human-made not God-given, they have authors and recipients, they are collectively shaped even if individually told, and they can change according to the authors' and recipients' perceptions and needs. (Sford and Prusak, 2010, p. 17)

Narrative and Identification

It has been evidenced that, for neophyte teacher educators, engaging in narrative story-telling, such as the Professional Life History, activates a process of identification which can enable individuals to develop a more secure understanding of their professional identity as teacher educators (Amott, 2016 and Amott, in press). As the literature shows, the transition from first to second order practitioner (Murray and Male, 2005) challenges the development of identity as a teacher educator, as does the search for 'credibility' with students and teachers (Boyd and Harris, 2010). Whilst

engaging in research can support development of an academic identity for teacher educators working within Higher Education Institutions (Roberts and Weston, 2014), it has been demonstrated that approaches to professional development for teacher educators that adopt narrative storytelling practices can support neophyte teacher educators to engage in 'identification' as they explore their transition from teacher to teacher educator, their roles and expertise as a teacher educator and their prospective roles as they consider how their career might develop.

Why Use Prospective Reflection?

Prospective reflection has been shown to be supportive of identification and identity transformation when incorporated into narrative practices, such as the Professional Life History method (Amott, in press). In this paper, prospective reflection is considered with a focus on its use as part of the process of storytelling and pointing to its value in activating memory, imagination and hope. Conway (2001) highlights the roles of both memory and imagination in prospective reflection, linking also to the concepts of hope and hopelessness in Freire's work: 'Hope is critical in helping people negotiate life's transitions and adversities, both personal and political' (1994, in *ibid* p103). It was expected that these three tools for identification (memory, imagination and hope) would be activated during the Professional Life History process. The activation of memory, imagination and hope are part of the 'emotions of identity' to which Zembylas (2003) refers. Memory, imagination and hope might be considered as tools that support critical self-reflection and identity transformation and that they interact with each other during retrospective and prospective reflection in the activation of critical self-reflection.

The use of prospective reflection within the Professional Life History process might also link to Anthony Giddens's notion of 'life plans': 'Life-planning presupposes a specific mode of organising time because the reflexive construction of self-identity depends as much on preparing for the future as on interpreting the past...' (1991, p. 85)

Theoretical Framework – Binary dimensions of narrative

In my reading of narrative theory and research I have been struck by the repeated use of perceived binary dimensions operating within narrative constructions and overlapping into issues of identity.

Subjectivity / Objectivity

The first set of binary dimensions I consider to be labels that depict two aspects of self as subjective and objective. 'Stories bring order to our experience, and help us to view our lives both subjectively and objectively at the same time.' (Atkinson, 1998, p. 10) Within the narrative episode there is a tension between these two dimensions. The intention of the story-teller (or at least the researcher) is for the subjective aspects of a person's identity or self-understanding to be revealed, in order to achieve this some degree of personal objectivity is required. However, the subjective nature of the autobiographical account means that this level of objectivity can never truly be achieved, '...the histories that human beings write are not the 'objective' accounts of events occurring across time that they seem to be; rather they are, like fictions, creative means of exploring and describing realities' (Andrews et al., 2000, p. 6). Likewise, Zembylas (2003) considers that 'the self should be seen as both an object and a subject of experience' (p221). Andrews *et al.* (2000) suggest that the 'outer' realm of society and culture and the 'inner' realm of personal characteristics form a distinct 'psychosocial' zone within the narrative construct. This might echo Judith Butler's seminal work (Butler, 1997, p. 19), in which she too identifies the distinction between the psychic and the social (or interior and exterior life) which is fabricated in the process of internalization, perhaps through the narrative process. Another notion that pervades particularly poststructuralist research is that of

the self and other. Kearney (2003) cites Bakhtin's theory (1981) of individual consciousness which draws from a triad of perspectives:

1. *Others for self: How we are influenced by other people or dominant narratives;*
2. *Self for others: How we present ourselves to the world. Our social persona;*
3. *Self for self: How we view ourselves from the inside' (ibid. p54)*

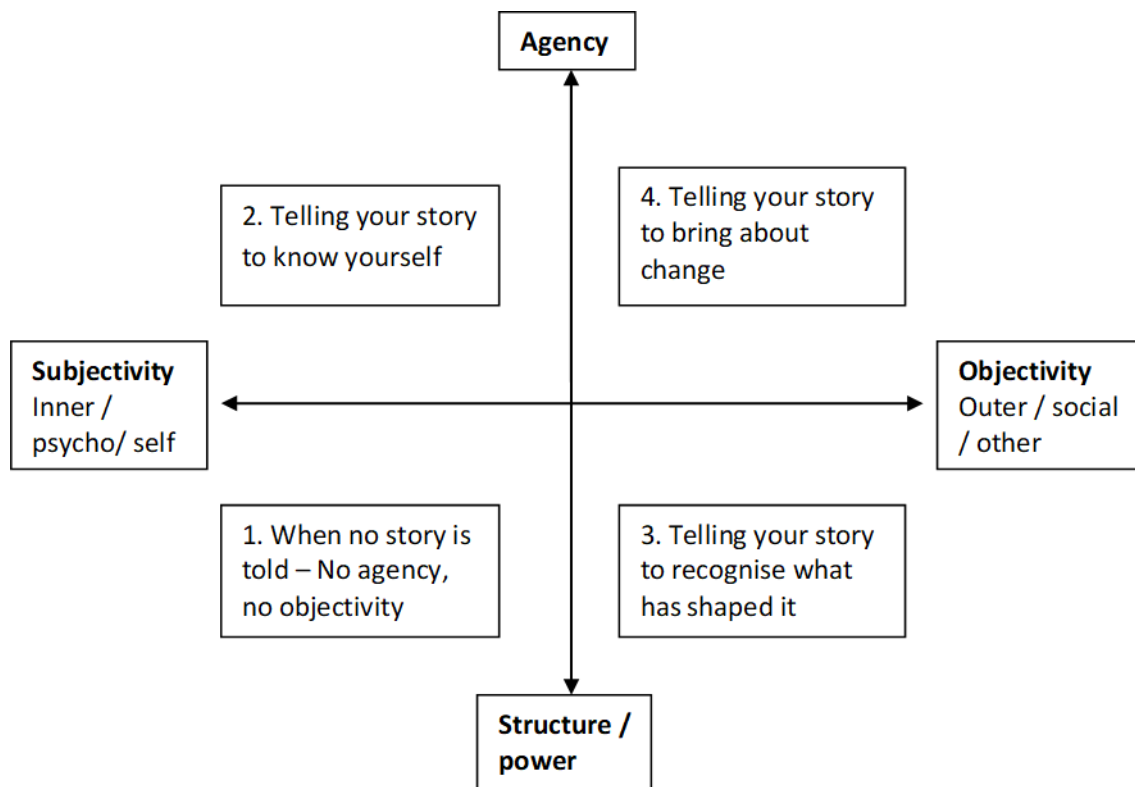
Indeed MacLure (1996) suggests that we should consider identification (rather than identity) as 'an unceasing movement between the irreconcilable opposites of Self and Other' (p282). Thus, I see an alignment in the form of these three dimensions of subjective/objective, psycho/social and self/other. However, I seek to take a poststructuralist position within this discussion and resist the drive towards categorising by such binary oppositions but rather to embrace the tensions inhered within them.

Structure / Agency

The other binary dimension that I wish to explore is that between agency and structure. This was first highlighted to me in my reading of Benwell and Stokoe (2006), but once activated in my consciousness it then pervaded much of what I read, particularly within poststructuralist literature. Benwell and Stokoe define 'agency' as an issue of 'whether people are free to construct their identity in any way they wish' and 'structure' as 'whether identity construction is constrained by forces of various kinds, from the unconscious psyche to institutionalised power structures' (ibid, p10). One focus for me is whether the PLH discussion itself forms an 'agentive' act for the storyteller and another is whether in the narrative process issues of power structures are revealed. In particular, I see a strong alignment between this dualism and that of subjectivity and power, explored by Judith Butler (1997) and building from the work of Foucault. The particular interest in Butler's work is the way in which she sees the paradox of subjection in which 'the subject loses itself to tell the story of itself, but in telling the story of itself seeks to give an account of what the narrative function has already made plain' (ibid, p11). Thus, power is not just external to, or 'pressed upon', the subject but is, in the narrative act, operated by the subject as resistance. 'Power not only acts on a subject but, in a transitive sense, enacts the subject into being' (ibid, p13). Thus, I resist the tendency towards 'othering' of the dimension of structure, perhaps in the light of the political aspirations of agency.

A model that considers the activation of agency and objectivity in the act of storytelling

In my exploration of these two different binary dimensions I wondered if they might be operating within the narrative process in a way that might support a framework for analysis. I suggest the following model as a means by which this could be explored:



The four numbered quadrants might indicate the following:

1. Before the story was told there was only subjective experience and the influence of structure/power on the self. At this point the individual lacks objectivity and agency.
2. A decision to tell your story is an act of agency. Seeking to reveal and know the subjective experience. In this act the subject is lost and the story becomes the object. This is an act of the conscience or 'reflective self-relation'.
3. Telling your story functions to reveal the structures of culture and society, or power, that have influenced the self and the story. Revealing power as external to the subject 'acting on'.
4. Telling your story to effect change in your life or to impact others is to take that objective awareness of self as a tool for agency. Revealing power as constitutive of the subject 'acted by'.

The purpose of this study therefore was to explore the narrative episodes (included as part of a larger piece of research) to consider if this model accurately represents the nature of identification realised within the narrative act.

Research Method

The Participants in this Study

These were drawn from two contrasting contexts for teacher educators all of whom had previously been teachers (and in some cases advisory teachers within a Local Education Authority). The sample was purposive in nature, drawing from colleagues and acquaintances within the field. Three from the first, more traditional, context were teacher educators working in Initial Teacher Education – Emily, Annie and Elizabeth. The second three were Reading Recovery Teacher Leaders, who were also experienced teachers but who engaged in an intensive one-year professional development programme to support them in their new role as teacher educators, providing training and

professional development for experienced teachers to become Reading Recovery teachers – Joanne, Jane and Rebekah. The distinctive models of professional learning used in Reading Recovery are well researched (Schmitt et al., 2005, Schwartz, 2006 for example)

The use of a Professional Life History approach

In this study, I sought to develop an adapted form of life history approach that could enable participants to engage in the construction of their professional life story with the expectation that this would be supportive for the development of their identity as a teacher educator. The more traditional approach to life history method (Atkinson, 1998) was adapted in three ways: firstly, the focus was on the professional life, in that personal life details need only be included at the discretion of the teller; secondly, the story telling episode would conclude with time spent in prospective reflection and consideration of possible career progression and professional selves in the future; and finally, the participant would prepare their own diagram of their 'Professional Life History timeline' in advance of the life history narrative event, providing a scaffold for the story telling. These life history discussions were all conducted with the researcher in a venue of the participants' choice and lasted between 30-45 minutes. Audio recordings were later transcribed and used for analysis in this study.

In order for participants to engage in reflection on their experiences of narrative storytelling, each participant agreed to a follow up discussion with the researcher (which took place within the following year). In addition, participants were asked again to use prospective reflection and comment on how their previous reflections might have changed in the intervening time. These discussions also proved to have value as instances of 'reflecting on reflection'.

Ethical considerations were adhered to in this study. Participants were able to check and amend the transcripts of the narrative events, as this could still be conceptualised as part of the process of creating a 'story of self'. In addition, pseudonyms were used throughout.

Findings

I wanted to know if this model was supported by the narrative events in this study and whether it provided further insight into the value of storytelling in relation to identification and self-knowing, but also as a source of transformative learning and identity transformation. I therefore analysed the transcripts looking for what I perceived to be evidence of each of the four aspects in this model.

1. When no story is told – No Agency, no objectivity:

This point is purely theoretical and cannot be endorsed by the narrative events, as I am starting from a point at which a story is told. However, Annie reflects in her follow up discussion that this was a very positive process for her and stated:

I mean to the point that I think that we all, every teacher, I wish I had done this before. I felt that 'why has it taken me this opportunity of being interviewed by you to make me think in that way?', but it hadn't occurred to me.

Perhaps these comments suggested that she recognised a point prior to the discussion when she lacked this objective perspective on her life.

2. Telling your story to know yourself:

It was clear from the follow up discussions that most participants found the Professional Life History process supported identification. Jane and Annie were both very aware of how constructing their Professional Life History had been beneficial to them. Jane noted that:

After you ask me to do it and I looked at what was involved in it I think it kind of made me look back over my whole career and look at the paths that I have taken and the choices that I have made and consider why I have made some of those choices. It just made me start to think a little bit more.

AND 'I think probably just having a clearer understanding of where I wanted to go.'

Emily saw the Professional Life History process as seeking out the 'reasoning behind' some aspects of her life, but questions whether she might have done this previously, perhaps in other contexts.

yes, I found it interesting as an exercise to think about the links in my journey but I don't know whether I was perhaps articulating what I had already thought, you know I had internalised.

Joanne noted:

I quite enjoyed having the opportunity to reflect on what I did and why I did it. And actually, not so much why I did it but to think about things having consequences in later periods of my career and particularly in my journey.

She found the process quite emotional as she faced the feeling that she 'wasn't capable of doing' that pervaded most of her career.

And so, it was quite emotional really to go back and think actually I realise now that I can do it but at the time I've always had those feelings all the way through that I wasn't capable of doing, reaching my potential, and someone else always has to say 'yes go on you can do it'.

She was also concerned that the Professional Life History process was 'self-indulgent really to be able to sit and do that'. Perhaps this was more a concern for me as the researcher listening to her life story but does imply a cathartic effect in the narrative process.

This contrasted with Rebekah who did not find it so easy to tell the story 'because with hindsight it's always difficult'. She found that in looking back on her life 'nothing was planned', 'it was more reactions to situations that happened' and that she did not have 'much control over that' or she did not 'have a lot of choice'. This gave her a sense of vulnerability in telling the story but still revealed a sense of knowing herself in the Professional Life History process.

Elizabeth was less convinced of the value of telling her story. She considered herself to be 'quite a reflective sort of person' and that she was sharing 'things that I have probably talked about at various times with other people'. This does not necessarily mean that she did not need to tell her story to know herself, but that she had taken opportunities in other contexts to do this.

3. Telling your story to recognise what has shaped it:

It is harder to find evidence that demonstrated a greater awareness by the participant of the structure/power influences that have impacted their professional lives, but there are some indicators of this.

Considering choices -

Jane was drawn to consider choices that she has made in her professional life:

...just thinking about the things that have helped me in the past and have influenced my choices and the things that I have enjoyed. It helped me to think about things that I was more comfortable doing and the things that felt uncomfortable but actually doing those uncomfortable things were the better decisions I made, and pushing myself a bit more. Rather than going for an easy option sometimes. I think the places where I took the more difficult option have been more successful.

In considering choices, one is aware of the influences that constrain these choices or the impact that choice has on our agency in life. Jane also recognised in the process of telling her story the value of doing 'the uncomfortable'.

Recognising what has shaped the life history -

Rebekah, in looking back on her Professional Life History, recognised the tensions between the ideal professional life and the reality of her experience:

I suppose we always look back and think it would be nice that everything went smoothly and you would want to go for things and have aims and that you fulfil those aims. So, I felt I sort of lurched a bit from one thing to another, mainly because of circumstances.

This too is a reflection on what has shaped the life history.

Recognising forces at play within a professional life –

Annie expressed this as 'a science':

it's through that constant contact with theories and practices and that collective reflection of being supported as a staff, ..., that actually I believe I developed myself as an effective teacher. I realise that it is not haphazard, it is actually a science, that if you do this, this will happen.

Another clear insight about the forces at play within a professional life, suggesting that agency is in operation and that knowing this 'science' might support an individual as they develop their careers.

4. Telling your story to bring about change:

I firstly want to recognise and appreciate the contribution of each of my participants to this process. Although they might not have directly seen the impact that agreeing to share their story might have on a larger change process, they were willing to trust me in my research endeavour that I sought to draw conclusions that might bring about new ideas and change opportunities. However, in addition to their reflections on the Professional Life History process, Emily and Annie both sought to bring some insights, possibly implying a recognition that in telling their story they might bring about some change as a result of participating in this research.

With the student teachers -

Annie appears, through the Professional Life History process, to have seen a connection to how she can support her work with student teachers and reflected:

Actually, it makes me think about what I'm doing now and how I can have a positive impact on how I approach my students. For example, in the professional studies, or my students on supervision. I feel as though it has supported me to reflect very deeply into the teaching that I do and its impact on the people that receive it.

On reflection, she wanted to acknowledge the growing confidence in her performance that had been gained through 'working alongside professional colleagues' and through 'every child in every class I taught or supported'. This insight she had subsequently sought to pass onto her student teachers as part of the 'root and structure' of how she supported her students.

Through engagement with this research -

Emily interwove into her follow up discussion her personal philosophy about developing a career in education, perhaps formulated in the Professional Life History process. She sought to identify herself as building a 'portfolio career' which linked to her metaphor of a 'rucksack' in which she selected from different parts of her experience. The values that she sought to highlight were: the importance of quick decisions and taking opportunities; seeing the landscape and staying flexible to adapt to perceived changes; and that change is okay, builds confidence and should happen regularly 'different challenge, different situation, different people'. For example:

I think seeing the landscape as its developed as well..., you need to just stay flexible, you need to collect the skills, you need to be able to look at other opportunities. And really the whole landscape around ITT is changing and you need to be able to position yourself in a place that you feel, I suppose happy to be contributing in a way that you feel is valuable.

From my analysis, it is evident that this model does provide a useful framework for considering the value of narrative approaches, and in particularly the Professional Life History process. The evidence from the narrative events appeared to show these different aspects occurring.

Conclusion

Does this model support a consideration of narrative story-telling practices?

The analysis presented in this account demonstrates the value of narrative story-telling in supporting an 'agentive' and objective view of self as suggested by the fourth quadrant - 'telling your story to bring about change'. Similar outcomes have been evidenced from teacher educators engaging in self-study (for example, Bullock, 2009, Ben-Peretz *et al.*, 2010, Izadinia, 2014, Vanassche and Kelchtermans, 2016) but this is an outcome that has not been presented in relation to narrative practices with Teacher Educators. However, in relation to teachers, Zembylas (2003) notes that '[t]hese stories are important both as means through which individuals understand themselves as well as tools for taking action' (p. 215). Developing agency for education professionals might also be aligned with Judith Sachs' (2001) notion of an 'activist identity'. She identifies two strategies to enable teachers to develop an 'activist identity'- the use of professional self-narratives, and the development of communities of practice.

Narrative research has proven to be a valuable 'method' in understanding teachers lives and has been adopted as part of the growing body of research into the lives of teacher educators (for example, Davey, 2013). That narrative might also be a 'means' of supporting teacher educators through the challenges of identity transformation into their new role has been less well researched. McGregor *et al.* (2010) used a collaborative peer group approach to support Teacher Educators in developing

their academic identities. Vloet and Van Swet (2010) utilised a biographical interview method based on psychoanalysis to support the understanding of self and identity for a group of Teacher Educators.

A critical view – Identifying the limitations of such an approach

In the very creation of this model, and its use to analyse the narrative, I am at war with myself as a poststructuralist researcher. I have created a 'structure' that I see as a limiting straight jacket rather than a hypothesis that might bring freedom and creativity. I could only justify this to myself if I were to deconstruct the above analysis and to identify the constraints held within. Firstly, I would say that the viewing frame I created caused me to search for evidence that supported this construction, rather than drawing a hypothesis directly from the narrative events, as would be advocated by a grounded theory approach. Secondly, I would want to feel that I also analysed the narrative events for evidence that might refute or disrupt this framework, and consider that I did not discover such evidence. I would however recognise that in my closeness to the narrative events and the participants I might be blind to contraindications. Finally, I would suggest that the alignment I saw between different binary dimensions and the contrast to the agency / structure dimension is subjective to my own viewpoint. Indeed, it could be argued that the agency / structure dimension could be aligned with the subjectivity / objectivity dimension, where agency is about taking an objective stance and structure is subjectivity, in the unknowing subjection to power at work upon the individual. In addition, there might be other binary dimensions that I have not seen in my readings or in the narrative events that could have added a third dimension to this model. However, I felt justified in developing this model if it proved helpful to myself and to others and provided a way forward in seeking to uncover hidden assumptions.

Future applications and further research

This study suggests that this model might usefully be applied to the analysis of narrative practices with Teacher Educators and may further develop understanding of the value of providing opportunities for these education professionals to engage in telling their stories. In its application, it reveals a process within narrative practices: that telling your story is an 'agentive' act; that in doing so it enables the teller to recognise power structures that have impacted on the self; and that through a sense of 'audience' the teller is seeking to affect change.

The findings of this study also evidence the value of narrative story-telling in supporting education professionals during times of transition. Some possible contexts for such narrative approaches might be: during induction processes for new teacher educators or other professionals; as part of annual appraisal / self-review processes used by their employing institutions; or through the engagement with self-research using narrative approaches for Teacher Educators.

Recommended further research would be into the application of this model to other narrative data sets to further consider its utility and the insights provided through this process. It is also suggested that further consideration of prospective reflection and opportunities for 'reflecting on reflection' as supporting 'Telling your story to recognise what has shaped it or in bringing about change' might be fruitful.

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