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# Past, Present, and Future: Narrative Reflections of a Novice Researcher

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## Past, Present, and Future: Narrative Reflections of a Novice Researcher

### **Abstract**

In this article, I use an autoethnographical approach to explore how I identified my research interests of student voice, action research, and students as scientific researchers. My purpose was to identify some of the influences on my academic life. To achieve this goal, I used my writing as a method of both data collection and analysis combined with my parents' interpretations of events to create narratives of my lived experiences. This process allowed me to make sense of how my lived experiences shaped my decision to become a doctoral student and the choices I have made as a novice researcher.

### **Keywords**

Autoethnography, Subjectivity, Writing As Inquiry

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### **Acknowledgements**

Dr. Janet Richards, for helping me find my voice. And to my parents, for helping me with everything else.

## Past, Present, and Future: Narrative Reflections of a Novice Researcher

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*In this article, I use an autoethnographical approach to explore how I identified my research interests of student voice, action research, and students as scientific researchers. My purpose was to identify some of the influences on my academic life. To achieve this goal, I used my writing as a method of both data collection and analysis combined with my parents' interpretations of events to create narratives of my lived experiences. This process allowed me to make sense of how my lived experiences shaped my decision to become a doctoral student and the choices I have made as a novice researcher. Keywords: Autoethnography, Subjectivity, Writing As Inquiry*

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***“I feel like I’ve been in a coma for the past 20 years. And I’m just now waking up.”***

- Lester Burnham (Cohen, Jinks, & Mendes, 1999)

My mother, sister, and I sit on a blanket on our tiny concrete front porch. If it was raining or cold, we would have been inside kneeling on the couch to stare out the window. This day is sunny and the fresh smell of spring is in the air. We lived three houses down from a busy road and my sister and I impatiently stared at the corner. We could see the traffic rushing by on the adjacent street but no cars turned down towards our house, which meant neither did our father. My mom kept us occupied by singing with us. We changed the words of an old song *She’ll be Coming ‘Round the Mountain* to fit our current situation. “He’ll be coming ‘round the corner when he comes!” we all sang loudly.

It had only been twelve hours since he left for work at the printing business he owned but it might as well have been twelve days. He always worked long hours and often went in to the office on Saturdays. My dad inherited the family business that had been passed on through the generations of my family since the late 1800s.

At the time, my mom was an emergency room nurse who worked long hours overnight. Because my parents worked opposite shifts, they would take turns taking care of my sister and myself. My mom gave up weekends as well as holidays with her family to take care of strangers. She was sleep deprived and exhausted but always made sure there was dinner on the table. I asked my mom to describe how this time was for her.

*When you were an infant that was a bad time. I worked 11 to 7 every night. To stay awake I would read to you and I would mix up the words. We would lay on the living room floor and I would realize I wasn’t making any sense. Sometimes I would think, what the heck am I saying? And I feel like I missed so much with both of you because I was so sleep deprived...you do what you have to do for your family.*

Both their hard work and sacrifices taught me valuable lessons. And I always believed my parents have had more of an impact on me than anything else. At first, I did not think either of my parents agreed with me, or perhaps my dad was just being humble when I asked him.

*Yeah well I didn't think I had much of an impact at all. We didn't really badger you to get good marks or anything like that. We let you figure out for yourself rather than force you to do anything. So I guess it was a passive thing; an indirect influence rather than direct.*

My mom said something similar when I asked her how she felt she influenced my decisions.

*You don't always feel like you influenced your child's decision. I think we've allowed you to make a lot of your own decisions. Good or bad. I'm not sure whether that was because we identified you needed to make your own decisions or we got frustrated and let you make your own decisions.*

I think they both were right; they had an indirect influence because I watched them work so hard all of those years and it was likely because they allowed me to make my own decisions that I decided to follow my own path. The first major lesson I learned from my parents was what having a good work ethic really meant. I never feel like I have done my best, even when I have. However, I work hard at everything with the intention of success. Using my parents as my role models, I learned hard work is necessary if you want to reach your goals. My dad reflected, *"I was working 60 hours a week. I would go in on Saturdays. But I would come home for dinner at night and I would never go back at night."*

And it is true, he did always come home for dinner to the sounds of his three ladies singing and eagerly awaiting his arrival. However, this turned out to be a very conscious decision on his part. He told me about a time when his dad wasn't there.

*My dad would go back at night. Sometimes I would get there at five in the morning and he would be there. I guess I was a little like him in that respect. But he didn't have a lot of time for his kids. One time we went up to Algonquin Provincial Park in Canada. We rented these canoes. You had to canoe through these lakes and hike from one lake to the other. He was going to come up on a Wednesday. We were there first and I remember looking through these binoculars and I could see these two people coming in these canoes and they got closer and closer and it wasn't him.*

I asked him if he ever came. He replied, *"No. He didn't have time...I hope I wasn't like that with you guys."*

I think it hurts so much to hear him say this because when I was younger, I did wish my dad was home more than he was. But I realized as I got older that hard work is necessary in order to reach your goals. And as an adult I have never regretted he did not spend more time with us.

My dad eventually decided to sell the family business. He worked so hard for so long I always just thought he had kind of a Kevin Spacey type breakdown like in *American Beauty* where he quits his job, blackmails his boss, and then gets a job with the "least possible amount of responsibility" flipping burgers (Cohen et al., 1999). But as it turned out, he did not have a breakdown. He did it for my sister and me.

*One of the reasons I sold it is because I didn't want you and Missy to feel like you had to take over. I wanted you to do your own thing. My dad never pushed me into it. But my great uncle really pushed me into it. He was always pushing*

*me into stuff. He bought me a little printing press one year. He was always pushing me and I didn't want to do that to you or Melissa.*

I was surprised I never knew this about him. And even more surprised to find out by learning from his great uncle and father and then selling the family business my dad had set me up to learn the second major lesson: always follow my heart and do what makes me happy.

**“My giant goes with me wherever I go.”**  
- Ralph Waldo Emerson (1993, p. 18)

For this manuscript, I engaged in autoethnography to explore how I identified my research interests of student voice, action research, and students as scientific researchers. I think to be a good researcher, you need to have an understanding of yourself and the extent to which you experience subjectivity in your work. In addition, it is impossible to separate the self from one's research (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015). Therefore, I felt it was important to identify some of the influences on my academic life. To achieve this goal, I focused on my parents' influences on my academic journey.

This entire manuscript is organized around the idea of past, present, and future as related to my research and academic goals. I used quotes to mark the beginning of each section. For the introduction, I used a Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) quote from *American Beauty* (Cohen et al., 1999) because my dad really liked the movie when it came out. I also feel it characterizes how I am coming to understand myself through writing. I used a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson (1993) to begin the overview section because it is a good representation of how we can never leave ourselves behind, even in research. The quote by Evelyn Fox Keller (1983) begins the “past” section. She wrote this about Barbara McClintock, who was a geneticist in a male-dominated age. She also happened to understand genetics better than most of the men she worked with and had very little patience for nonsense. I think it represents how I have made my own path in life – and how I have followed my heart. For the “present” section, I opened with a quote from Sylvia Plath because to me, it symbolizes how I am learning more about myself and becoming more comfortable in my role as a researcher. Finally, my mom and I both love Stephen King, so I used a quote by him for the last section, the “future,” to represent fearlessness in moving forward. Figure 1 displays an overview of the structure of this manuscript and how the narrative moves from past to present to future.

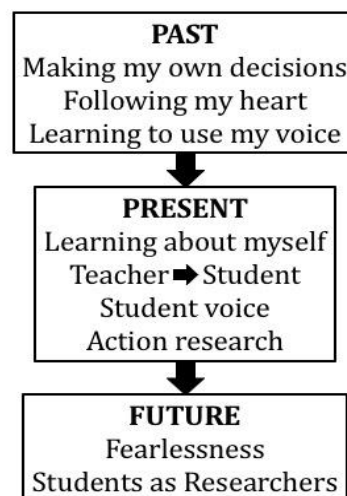


Figure 1. Structure of manuscript. This figure displays an overview of the structure of this manuscript and how the narrative moves from past to present to future.

I chose to engage in autoethnography because the focus of this research was on myself and my experiences (Adams et al., 2015; Grbich, 2013). I accomplished this autoethnographic research by using personal narratives (Richardson, 1990) interwoven with conversations with my parents to create a multi-voiced story (Ellis, 2004). I used my writing as a method of both data collection and analysis (Ellis, 2004; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2002) alongside my parents' interpretations of events to recreate my lived experiences. The interview and written data were summarized into narratives for the purposes of this article (Grbich, 2013). I played the role of a researcher-storyteller and cycled between relevant personal stories and research literature (Vickers, 2008), which allowed me to make sense of how my life experiences shaped my decision to become a doctoral student and the choices I have made as a novice researcher (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

I began by writing narratives using memory data (Grbich, 2013; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2002) but found I had a lot of gaps. I collected data from other sources that included old emails, texts, and conversations with my parents. I used an old photograph to reconstruct the story about my friend's birthday. I started to write the introduction but needed help from my mom to remember which songs we used to sing. I dug through my old emails to reconstruct the thesis story. Finally, I talked with my parents to fill in any remaining gaps in my memory and complete the narrative. In addition, they provided input into Figure 1. I also requested my parents read the final manuscript to verify all information was correct to the best of their knowledge and they were comfortable with the material before I sought publication. In this way, we engaged in "process consent" as my parents were involved throughout the entire project from the design to data collection to the writing of the text (Adams et al., 2015).

***"Being a woman and a maverick was simply too much."***

- Evelyn Fox Keller (1983, p. 84)

My parents saved enough money so I would not have to pay for my Bachelor's degree in Biology. They would have been proud if I had stopped there. But as I approached the end of my years as an undergraduate, I knew I would continue with my education.

Again, the belief I could always try harder and do better intervened. It took me a few more years and a move to Florida, but I went back and got my Master's degree in Environmental Science.

My Master's thesis took a long time to write. I was assured this would be the semester I would graduate more than once only to eventually be shot down again by one or more of my committee members who wanted me to add or change something significant. I began working on my thesis during the summer of 2010 but did not finish until the summer of 2012. I was first told I could finish the summer of 2011 and then again in the fall only to be turned down both times.

After the last time this happened, I asked my dad to read my thesis before I sent the final draft off to my committee. My mom was working full-time and he had recently sold the business so he had some free time. I put off emailing the draft as long as possible, rewriting every sentence and editing every word. It needed to be perfect. I was more concerned about what my dad thought of my work than my thesis committee. Deciding the paper was "good enough" (I would never feel it was perfect for him), I finally emailed the draft to him. I got his reply a few days later and was relieved when he seemed impressed. In addition to a multitude of various comments, he wrote, "*you've done a breathtaking job.*" But I got carried away with work and school, which apparently worried him. A few days later he wrote, "*I'm thinking maybe I wrote stuff which you took as cavalier...your effort is only one I can only attempt to understand.*" Of course, I thought no such thing and in fact, his emails gave me hope and I felt

confident enough to send it to my committee after the revisions. When my dad read my thesis, it was the first time someone had read it who actually valued what I had to say.

When I was immersed in the science field, I knew nothing of learning styles or theoretical perspectives on education even though I was in academia and would soon get a job teaching middle school. All I had was examples of good and bad teaching. I struggled with the dynamics of power within my thesis committee. Professors can sometimes rule over the classroom and in higher education, the “habit of repression is the norm” (hooks, 1994, p. 147). However, engaging students in their own education allows them to become part of the process and to express their voice (hooks, 1994). I never questioned the power imbalances present within my committee. However, after reading ideas from critical theorists, I realize now the power struggles that existed within the group.

I knew I often wished I was allowed more of a say in my own education. My mom pointed out, “*you’ve always been very opinionated...you’ve always been that way and wanted to make your own decisions.*” It is not natural for me to be silenced. I knew I could have had more of a voice in my thesis project. I tried on many different occasions to have some input into the project and process, but my voice was always dominated by a member of my committee. I felt it became their project and I had lost ownership. I even chose to not to publish the paper when I finished, because it did not feel like my own work.

After my experience with the suppression of my voice in my own educational experience, I entered the teaching profession with ideas of my students being more active in their learning. Paulo Freire (1970) says educators should avoid the banking system of education where knowledge is simply deposited into the minds of the students. This type of educational system creates passive learners, resists dialogue, and inhibits creativity that could be expressed if students were allowed a voice (Freire, 1970). I realized it was important to have a say in my own education and moving forward, I vowed to myself I would fight to let my voice and my students’ voices be heard.

***“I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart: I am, I am, I am.”***

- Sylvia Plath (1971, p. 243)

It was my friend’s birthday, he was turning 16. My other friend and I made him a yellow cake with chocolate frosting. We walked from my parents’ small kitchen to the adjacent dining area and presented the cake to him topped with lit candles. The three of us, along with my little sister sang, “Happy Birthday to you!” We sat at the table and watched him, with his dark brown, longish hair, face propped on his hands, smiling and making a silent wish before he blew out the candles.

His dad had kicked him out of the house and he was living with various friends of ours – sometimes someone different each night. On this particular day, my mom had insisted on washing his clothes and having him over to eat. He was a homeless kid, who probably hadn’t washed his clothes in weeks, and she did not judge – she simply helped him.

My mom has always been warm, giving, and open-minded. She wants people to be safe and happy. When I go home to visit she still will not sleep until I come home. She is a nurse in both profession and soul. I asked her about this friend and how she took care of him.

*That’s just me. And that’s why I went into nursing – to take care of people. So in a way, I was taking care of him...And it’s funny because my mother identified that trait in me way before I did. She’s the one who talked me into going to nursing school.*

I cannot say I am as caring and maternal as she is, but I did inherit her open-mindedness. I used to say I wanted to change the world in some way and my mom could always see that in me. *“Am I surprised you’ve gone this far? Not really. I always thought you’d do important things.”*

I thought becoming a teacher was a way to accomplish this goal of changing the world. However, when I was teaching, I always believed I could do more if I was not confined to the classroom. I felt the need to listen to my students and let them tell me what they needed but I felt limited in my ability to make a difference based on their responses. I would do my best to seek their opinions and ideas, but I often felt I could not put into action any plan to include their voices in the classroom. I felt restrained by content I was required to teach, pedagogical methods I was required to use, and an overall lack of a culture in schools that would support student voice efforts. For example, many students did not understand the importance of certain content, but I had no choice about whether to teach it or not. In addition, we were required to use Marzano scales to help our students assess their learning. Very few of my students found this helpful but unfortunately, there was nothing I could do as this was a district-wide implementation. This feeling of helplessness moved me towards my decision to seek a PhD in science education.

## **Student Voice**

Remembering how I felt as I was writing my thesis and how I felt my voice was repressed, I struggled with how I could give my students an opportunity to share their ideas. I frequently asked them what they needed out of science class and school in general. I did not know this had a name until I started reading about student voice in a class I took at the beginning of my third year as a doctoral student.

Cook Sather (2006) defines voice as “a term that asks us to connect the sound of a student speaking not only with those students experiencing meaningful, acknowledged presence, but also with their having power to influence analyses of, decisions about, and practices in school” (p. 363) and suggests student voice includes the concepts of rights, respect, and listening. Having a voice means one has power, presence, and agency and they have the opportunity to speak one’s mind, be heard by others, and have an influence on outcomes (Cook Sather, 2006). Hadfield and Haw (2001) define student voice as an “involved act of participation where people engage with the organizations, structures, and communities that shape their lives” (p. 488).

Student voice has been largely ignored in schools and classrooms (Furman & Calabrese Barton, 2006). However, I believe students should have a say in what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. For me, it is not enough for students to learn the material – I think they should be able to find meaning in their education. Research on student voice has demonstrated one way educators can help students find value and meaning in science is by allowing them a voice (Furman & Calabrese Barton, 2006). In addition, listening to students can alter the power imbalances present in the classroom (Cook Sather, 2006; Furman & Calabrese Barton, 2006).

## **Action Research**

I always try to be better at everything I do and I attempt to excel at work. But as anyone who has ever taught knows, it is difficult to “excel” at teaching. Even though I felt I was doing the best for my students, and including them in the learning process, I always felt I could improve. I needed a systematic way to explore my teaching and make improvements based on the data I collected.



Classroom action research typically involves the use of qualitative, interpretative methods of inquiry and data collection by teachers with the goal of improving their own practices (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). Action research is a cycle of research and action, although it is not always an organized cycle (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). This type of research has arisen out of critical theory and involves self-reflection and honestly critiquing one's own practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). Action research strives for truth, social justice, and caring and recognizes learning can be accelerated and intensified through critical awareness (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002).

In my experience, action research is uncommon in schools. Either teachers are not aware it exists, or they do not know where to start. I was not aware it existed until recently. However, I think schools and classrooms can benefit from the implementation of an action research program. I believe giving teachers a method to systematically examine their practice can improve science teaching and learning.

***“You can, you should, and if you're brave enough to start, you will.”***

- Stephen King (2002, p. 270)

I went home and visited with my parents not long ago. My mom and I were sitting and talking on the couch. She told me, *“I wish I could be like you. You live life so fearlessly.”* In the days and months since we talked, I have thought of the conversation often. I asked her about this during one of our conversations for this manuscript.

*Well I don't know if it's fearless but your sense of adventure amazes me. Because I'm not like that. You travel a lot, you do things outside of the box, and you always have a good time. I don't know where you get that from.*

Ironically, my mom's comment made me more fearless. Sometimes (often) I do wonder if I am making the right decision about something. But I remember my mom's words and it is easier to trust myself and my decisions.

My dad started volunteering with the local fire company a few years ago. I thought he was looking for the adventure and passion in a career he had been missing his whole life. But it turns out he was also looking for job satisfaction.

*I have gone through EMT training and jumped out of windows and been in live burns, actually in a burning room in training, so I have far exceeded what I thought I was capable of. I've used what I've learned to help out in the community. I wasn't a very community-minded individual so I've changed a little in the last few years. I kind of think of this as a second career. I'm the secretary of the fire department now. And they made me an EMS lieutenant – I'm in charge of the SUV now. I can tell people what to do at EMS scenes. That's about 70% of our calls. I got top responder for the second year in a row – I respond to more calls than anyone else.*

And now I find myself feeling proud of him as he felt proud of me while I was writing my thesis. I also realize, at the age of 37, I still look to my father as a role model. As he has grown older, he shapes his present and future into what he wants them to be. I think I know where I learned to be fearless.

## Students as Researchers

Advocates for youth voice claim they have both the right and ability to shape their future (Jones, Stewart, Galletta, & Ayala, 2015). As a teacher, I believe the effectiveness of my teaching relies on my students' outcomes and satisfaction with their educational experience. Therefore, I think it is important to blend their voices with scientific research.

This is why I am turning to the idea of students as researchers. I believe it will give students a voice in the educational process and help them find school more relevant and meaningful.

Students acting as scientific researchers may have multiple benefits on science learning. Students can increase their motivation towards and engagement in science (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2010). As a result of scientific research, students can develop science agency and a desire to change inequities in the world (Bahou, 2012; Basu, Calabrese Barton, Clairmont, & Locke, 2009; Calabrese Barton & Tan, 2010; Mallya, Mensah, Contento, Koch, & Calabrese Barton, 2012). They may also develop new identities related to science (Furman & Calabrese Barton, 2006). Finally, working as scientific researchers may give new meaning to students' educational experiences (Rahm, 2002). All of these benefits can address power relations within science education and create a more equitable environment for all students to learn science (Furman & Calabrese Barton, 2006; Mallya et al., 2012).

## Conclusion

The purpose of this manuscript was to explore the origins of my research interests and possible subjectivity issues that may arise within my research. By including my parents in the dialogue, I created a multi-voiced narrative (Ellis, 2004) that helped me better understand my academic self. I not only learned more about myself, I got to know my parents a little better in the process. I think this reflection was an important step in examining my role as a researcher.

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### Author Note

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I would like to thank Dr. Janet Richards, for helping me find my voice. And to my parents, for helping me with everything else.

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