

# **Storytelling as Self-Study: Exploring the *Bildungsroman* of Teacher Educators**

The Self-Study Group

## **Abstract**

This article presents the reflections of *The Self-Study Group*, a community of teacher educators and scholars. In this article, we utilize the theoretical framework of *Bildung* and the literary genre of *Bildungsroman* to explore the work of being a teacher educator. Drawing upon the results of a narrative self-study, we explore how, for individual teacher educators, the significance of teacher education stems from one's life story, including lived experiences from being a child, being a student, and being a teacher. We argue that the acts of authoring and telling of stories have the potential to illuminate the interconnected nature of the personal and the professional dimensions of teacher educator self-formation.

Teaching and teacher education are endeavors that require professional judgment and expertise (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Sato, 2014). At the same time, however, the work of being a teacher and, likewise, the work of being a teacher educator, are highly personal projects (Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991; Korthagen, Kim, & Green, 2013). By drawing on the results of a narrative self-study of 11 teacher educators working at Texas Tech University, a large university in the Southern United States, we will, in this article, argue that, for teacher educators, the personal and the professional are intertwined through a process of narrative meaning-making.

A robust body of evidence supports the significance of self-study as it relates to teacher educators' professional development (Beauchamp, 2015; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015; Zeichner, 2007). Some of this research underscores the manner in which teacher educators' professional growth is rooted in the personality traits and strengths of the individual teacher educator (Evelein & Korthagen, 2015; Korthagen, 2004; Korthagen et al., 2013). Other research emphasizes the significance of teacher educator autobiography in shaping teacher educator identity (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Elliott-Johns, 2014; Williams & Ritter, 2010; Wood & Borg, 2010). In this article, we will add to the tradition of self-study research by applying the philosophical framework of *Bildung* (the cultivation of the self) and the literary genre of *Bildungsroman*. We believe that, through storytelling, teacher educators can deepen their appreciation for the ways in which their personal journeys have formatively shaped their professional commitments.

## **Narrative Thinking**

While generalities and abstractions are useful tools in human thinking, human thinking does not always operate in these terms. In his seminal book, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Bruner (1986) argued that human beings operate according to two complementary modes of thinking: the paradigmatic mode and

the narrative mode. The paradigmatic mode of thinking relies on logic and empirical evidence, whereas the narrative mode of thinking employs stories to understand the meaning of human actions and experiences. While the paradigmatic mode emphasizes objective, generalizable knowledge, the narrative mode highlights the subjective truths that are revealed through particular stories (Polkinghorne, 1995).

The paradigmatic mode of thinking is not, itself, problematic; however, this mode of thinking is problematic when it eclipses the significant role that narrative thinking plays within human experience. Unfortunately, much social science and educational research (implicitly or explicitly) asserts the superiority of generalizability over the meaning to be gleaned from personal stories (Biesta, 2007; Crotty, 1998). In this article, we wish to reassert the significance of narrative thinking within the genre of teacher educator self-study.

## Bildung and Narrative Inquiry

The goal of narrative inquiry is not to discover objective truths that can be verified via empirical method but, rather, to provide insight into what is most vividly lifelike. Stories, compared to empirical data, have unique properties (van Manen, 1990, p. 70, *italics in original*), including the following:

- Stories provide us with *possible human experiences*.
- Stories enable us to experience life situations, feelings, emotions, and events *that we would not normally experience*.
- Stories allow us to broaden the horizons of our normal existential landscape by *creating possible worlds*.
- Stories can appeal to us and involve us *in a personal way*.
- Stories allow us to turn back to *life as lived*.
- Stories evoke the quality of vividness in *detailing unique and particular aspects of a life*.
- Stories *transcend the particularity of their plots and protagonists*.

These features of story extend to the German philosophical tradition of *Bildung* and the literary tradition of *Bildungsroman* (see Hardin, 1991; Kim, 2013; Kontje, 1993; Pinar, 2011). *Bildungsroman* narratives focus on the cultivation and education of the self, highlighting the ways in which individual maturation and personal growth occur. Importantly, the theoretical framework of *Bildung* assumes that the actualization of potential requires more than the manifestation of innate talent; rather, *Bildung* assumes that maturation requires willful self-cultivation (Wahlström, 2010). The concept of *Bildung* asserts that the formation of one's self occurs throughout one's lifetime and through one's interaction with the social world (Mortensen, 2002; Schneider, 2010). *Bildungsroman* are the specific narratives that communicate these processes of personal growth and self-formation. In other words, it is through our own personal *Bildungsroman*—that is, the narrative of self that we author throughout our lives—that we carve out our place in the world.

## Methods

In order to explore the manner in which the philosophical framework of *Bildung* and the literary tradition of *Bildungsroman* illuminate the self-formation of teacher educators, we, a group of teacher educators working at a large Southern university, individually responded, in writing, to the following prompt:

What was your journey towards becoming a teacher educator? How did your past experiences (for example, your past experience in schools) shape your journey? What are some specific moments that shaped who you became as a teacher educator? What does it mean to you to be a teacher educator? Is being a teacher educator personally significant work to you, and, if so, in what ways? How are who you are as a person and who you are as a teacher educator intertwined? How has your work as a teacher educator shaped (and continue to shape) the person you are becoming?

After composing these narratives, we shared these narratives with each other, looking for common features among the stories. In this article, we will present particular sections from the collected narratives in an attempt to connect the data in such a way that we are able to present the reader with a coherent, overarching story (Kim, 2016). As the overarching theme, we found that our own personal and professional challenges played a significant role in shaping our commitments to our work with teacher candidates. We focus on three dimensions of lived experience that illuminated this theme: being a child, being a student, and being a teacher.

### Being a Child

Shannon writes,

One of the first things I do with my new cohorts is to have them write about their “why”—why they want to teach—and I try to get them to make that emotional connection that will sustain them through the tough times because teaching is hard work. I model writing about their why for them by reading mine to them....[The] truth is, [when I was a child] school was my escape, my place where I trusted the adults to make me feel safe...All that mattered is how I felt when I was at school. It was my escape and it was my way out, my opportunity to create a different life for myself. My teachers were my positive adult role models that I needed and that all students need, that all students deserve...[Therefore,] in much the same way that I [as a teacher] could connect with many of my middle school students given my [personal] background...I can connect with my pre-service teachers, as many of them have faced challenges themselves.

Yvonne writes,

My personal experiences define me as a person and teaching became intertwined with who I am because teaching has always been a part of me from a very young age. It was the dream of becoming a teacher that kept me focused and became my escape for survival. My personal struggles and victories as a child in classroom environments dictated what I would fight to stop or what I would work hard to accomplish when I became a teacher. My mother’s example of perseverance gave me the daily strength...The personal experiences of growing up in poverty... in a single parent household helped define who I am today. Practicing my dream of becoming a teacher by playing pretend school in my backyard with my neighbors and brothers helped me

become a teacher educator...Pretending to be a teacher gave me the motivation and strength to focus on that dream and not on my hardships...Being bullied and laughed at in school for bringing burritos for lunch and feeling like an outsider also helped me become an effective educator... I tell my students and parents at the beginning of every school year, that I am a mother first, then a teacher...I want no child to ever feel they do not belong, I do not want them to ever feel afraid and isolated when they are in a classroom. I want every child to feel that the teacher cares.

Elizabeth writes,

My personal home life when I was in junior high [influenced my decision to become a teacher]. This was a time when being at school is when I felt the safest. I clung to learning and reading was my passion. I realized later after I began my teaching career that this time in my life influenced my desire to be a teacher and specifically a middle school teacher because I wanted to be there for students that were experiencing struggles and who needed someone to care for them...My life as a child was chaotic and I had to learn to be very aware of my surroundings and learn to read people in order to know how to interact with them...This quality carried over into the classroom where I learned that maybe the most important thing I could do for my students was to make them feel safe and loved.

## Being a Student

Linnie writes,

I was extremely shy as a child and lacked confidence in all settings outside of my home and family—particularly in the school setting...I often felt anxious at school...I coped with my anxiety by learning to blend in and go undetected in classroom settings. I seldom talked to my teachers and they seldom engaged me directly because I was not disruptive and I received good grades. Then, in middle school, I had a teacher who noticed that I didn't talk in class and he continually put me in situations that required me to speak. He was subtle about it initially and would incorporate little tricks such as giving me a heads up that he was going to have me answer a particular question or have me read or explain a passage to the class. Over the course of that year, he made a point of speaking to me outside of class and would ask me about things that interested me. Without me even realizing what he was doing, he created opportunities for me to feel comfortable in his classroom and I gradually gained confidence to instigate conversations with my peers and to participate in classroom discussions. This was the first time that I remember thinking that I wanted to be a teacher. This teacher helped me find my voice and it fundamentally changed my life...My own experience as a struggling student led me to discover that all students can learn if they have the appropriate support—both emotionally and academically. My dedication to teaching was set.

Ana writes,

My older siblings...unable to speak any English, were thrust into a school setting in which they were not valued, their culture and language were not respected, and in which they were subjected to outright abuse by teachers for not knowing how to speak English. Most of my brothers dropped out of school, and I always wondered what would have been if the school system had respected and supported them...I realized that I had [to take] on the responsibility to make sure that children would never be treated the way my family and I had been...My anger at [the school] system and at authority figures that tried, even now, to use the color of our skin and

the language we spoke to deny us—Latinos, other ethnic minorities, people in poverty—opportunities that could have transformed our lives, fueled my practice as a teacher educator. Every time I thought of my own school experiences and those of the people I loved most in this world, I told myself that this had to change, and I made it my mission, my life's work, my obsession...I worry that if I do not advocate for [these] students by preparing the teachers who will serve them, no one else will.

Cheryl writes,

As a child I hated school...I survived [my teacher's] daily ritual of humiliating children in my 6th grade class...These were the personal issues I had with the institution of education...But there were also social injustices that a child should not have had the ability to recognize—but I did...In examining my autobiographical memories...I can mentally see the little girl I used to be and the teacher events that made me feel invisible...My autobiographical educational experiences, and my love of learning in this context has been difficult and painful for me. To remember being...treated invisible brings forth my deepest sadness that penetrated my youth...My experiences developed an empathy in me for what students may feel in the classroom.

## Being a Teacher

Aaron writes,

When I became a teacher, I quickly learned how I had been largely mistaken about my assumptions about teaching. The job is not 9 to 5. Instead, I worked from 7 am to 11 pm each day. The job was much more time-demanding than I had anticipated. I also realized that there is more to teaching than showing and telling (despite the fact that the majority of the teacher colleagues in my department did, in fact, teach by showing and telling). Nevertheless, while this instructional approach works for *some* students, it does not work for *all* students. And, when you are a teacher and your teaching fails, all of the blame falls on you...Feeling overwhelmed and feeling like a failure made me feel awful... Now, as a teacher educator, I am often struck by the fact (the irony?) that I am teaching future teachers, when I have no credentials to do so, other than the fact that I have been a teacher in the past and that I study teaching and teacher education as an academic...I truly believe that there is no job as difficult or as potentially frustrating as being a teacher...So, there is certainly a sense of humility—maybe even shame—that comes along with my identity as a teacher educator—i.e., I do not feel worthy to teach novice teachers how to teach...At the same time, however, I am very proud of my identity as a teacher educator, precisely because I appreciate how difficult teaching is and how complex schooling, teaching, learning, and education are...I am, therefore, grateful for the fact that I have the opportunity to help pre-service teachers and early-career teachers to appreciate this complexity. I am hopeful that the more they recognize the complexity inherent in teaching, the less they will blame themselves for their failures (as I did).

## Discussion

As we authored our *Bildungsroman* related to teacher education, we found that our journeys from child, to student, to teacher, and, ultimately, to teacher educator, were littered with struggles, difficulties, and painful memories; and, yet, these past obstacles and their lingering pain served to inspire our self-cultivation into professionals who would advocate for future generations of students and teachers.

For example, feeling invisible as a student inspires the commitment to train future teachers to teach and reach all students; experiencing school as a nurturing safe space as a child illuminates the critical importance of cultivation, within future teachers, the disposition to manifest care towards all students; struggling through the unexpected complexity of teaching instills a motivation to help future teachers to anticipate and prepare for this complexity. In other words, by conceptualizing our personal and professional journeys—from child, to student, to teacher, to teacher educator—as projects of growth and self-cultivation—that is, as *Bildung*—we were able to see how, throughout our unique individual journeys, we transformed our challenges into motivations and our weaknesses into strengths.

The narrative genre of *Bildungsroman*, therefore, serves a unique purpose within the context of the self-study of teacher educators, for at least two reasons. First, while other scholars (Korthagen et al., 2013) have explored the value of having teacher educators reflect on how their personality strengths manifest within memorable positive moments of professional practice, the *Bildung* framework affords teacher educators the opportunity to reflect on how both positive *and* negative experience have formatively shaped their work and identity. As illustrated in the narratives presented above, struggles, challenges, disadvantages, and pain all seem to have a significant role in the authoring of meaning in the context of teacher education.

Second, the theoretical framework of *Bildung* illuminates the manner in which a teacher educator's professional practice is necessarily situated within the context of the story of the teacher educator's own life. As Elizabeth writes,

My identity as a person and [my identity] as a teacher educator are very intertwined. I could not possibly separate my teacher self from my total self. But, why should I separate the two in the first place? I cannot compartmentalize feelings of vulnerability, fulfillment, self-doubt, and accomplishment...I am always in flux, and the feelings within are just intertwined.

As Elizabeth's words articulate, a narrative understanding of one's professional practice is necessarily linked with one's own holistic sense of self. The authoring and telling of stories related to our personal lives and our professional lives—and, furthermore, by highlighting the connectivity between these two dimensions of lived experience—may be able to help teacher educators to crystalize and to reorient themselves towards the personal mission inherent within their professional work.

## Narrative Inquiry as a Complement to Professionalization

As the narratives presented in this article demonstrate, being a teacher educator is a role that is both professionally *and* personally significant. Hence, we believe that while the field of teacher education requires shared, professional standards (see also Ball & Forzani, 2009; Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013; Sato, 2014; Zeichner, 2007), we encourage educational researchers and teacher educators to be open to narrative inquiry as a way of cultivating their holistic sense of self as a teacher educator (Kim & Zimmerman, 2017; Kubota, Menon, Redlich-Amirav, & Saleh, 2015; Williams, Ritter, & Bullcok, 2012). We conceptualize narrative inquiry within teacher education as a vital complement to the professionalization of the field.

Rather than delineate meaning within teacher education through exclusively professional, empirical, and paradigmatic terms, we advocate narrative inquiry as a possible entry point for the exploration of subjective truth. Through the authoring and telling of stories, self-study can serve as a meaningful way for teacher educators to think beyond professional standards and to root the significance of their work within the context of their lived experience. Furthermore, while each teacher educator has a unique story to tell, we were, through the collective inquiry presented in this article, able to distill common threads of meaning: Challenges fortify commitments; weaknesses can be transformed into strengths; the personal informs the professional, and vice versa.

We will close by presenting one more narrative. Shannon writes,

Fast forward...to 2001. Those of us old enough to remember immediately think of 9/11. I, however, remember that year for more than just that. January, my mom passed away after a battle with cancer. July, I was laid off which was expected due to a corporate restructuring, something I knew was going to happen, but still a big blow. And 9/11, a birthday forever ingrained in my memory, a birthday with little celebration, numerous tears, tragedy, unbelievable images and a search for answers. How could I celebrate my life when so many people's lives were taken away? If I died today, would my life have been worth it? Was I making a difference? Unfortunately, the answer to those last two questions was no. I was working all the time at a job I didn't particularly like...I was a mom of two elementary-aged children. I was a wife, a sister, a daughter; the list goes on, but was not fulfilling any of those roles to the best of my ability...Honestly, some of them were being completely ignored. Worst of all though, I was going through the motions in every sense. I had no focus, no purpose. No, I was not making a difference. It was clear to me and I decided to change that... "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I asked myself that question once again and the answer was an emphatic, "I want to teach." So I did.

In this passage, Shannon asks an existential question: "If I died today, would my life have been worth it?" In other words, is my life something that I want to live for? When I die, will I regret the choices that I did (and did not) make? Asking and answering these questions can help individuals to gauge the meaningfulness inherent within their personal and professional lives (Längle, 2003; Pines, 2002; Tomic, Evers, & Brouwers, 2004). We have found that self-study through the authoring of *Bildungsroman* has helped us to recognize that the professional and the personal are always intertwined and always wrapped in autobiographical and existential questions of significance, purpose, and meaning.

Each person's life can be understood as a story, and the story that we choose to tell about our lives and about our work helps us to understand who we are in the world. Note that this understanding cannot be dictated or mandated. Not even the most erudite educational experts can tell us how to derive meaning from our past or how to chart a meaningful future. Instead, such meaning must be willfully authored, using the text of lived experience.

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**The Self-Study Group** is a collection of 11 teacher educators and scholars who work at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, TX. We have carved out the time and space to reflect on our individual and communal experiences in an attempt to better understand the significance of teacher education in our lives. Group members include: Aaron S. Zimmerman, Cheryl A. Bottoms Brewer, Linnie Greenlees, Elizabeth Isidro, Zinab Muñoz, Yvonne Cásares Khan, Ana Torres, Shannon Watson, Elizabeth Woodall, Amani Zaier, and Xi-aofang Zeng.