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Narrative practices in developing professional identities: Issues of objectivity and agency

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Abstract

This article presents an analytical model of binary dimensions of narrative practice perceived as two continua between the oppositions of subjectivity/objectivity and structure/agency. Such narrative practice is considered as a site for professional 'identification' and self-knowing. The analytical model provided a framework that was applied to a series of professional life history narrative events and follow-up discussions conducted with six early career teacher educators working across two contrasting sites for teacher education. The findings evidence participants' reflections within the narrative events that relate to the descriptors of each quadrant in this model and show that it has utility in describing and understanding the process of identification that takes place within narrative practice.

Keywords: telling stories, narrative, identity, identification, teacher educators

Introduction

Identity for early career 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 may also be true of other education practitioners who engage in similar forms of boundary crossing (Boyd and Harris, 2010).

This study used an adapted professional life history approach with six early career 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' (Amott, 2018). An analytical model that considers two binary dimensions – those of subjectivity/objectivity and structure/agency – operating within the narrative process was applied to the narrative events. The assumption in this model is that a move towards greater objectivity and agency in relation to professional identity is supportive for education professionals, particularly during times of transition. The basis of this assumption is explored in relation to the theoretical framing of the model. These dimensions are considered as continua, with the expectation of movement between them, rather than as oppositional extremes. The questions considered by this article are:

1. Is there evidence that participants in this study moved to a more objective and agentive view of their professional selves through their engagement with the professional life history narrative process?
2. Does this model support consideration of narrative storytelling practices?

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Researchers have used narrative practices (including the life history method) to explore professional identity for teachers for many years (see, for example, Beijaard et al., 2004; Clandinin et al., 2007; Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Kelchtermans, 1993). Applying narrative practices for consideration of teacher educators' identity in times of transition is an emerging area for research (O'Brien and Furlong, 2015; Sfard and Prusak, 2005); likewise, the use of narrative practices as a means to support early career teacher educators in engaging in identification with their new role (Amott, 2018; McGregor et al., 2010; Vloet and Van Swet, 2010).

From the start, it is important to recognize the dissonance in the application of a model that appears to function as a 'structure' that may prohibit a more nuanced and tentative analysis of these narrative events, as indicative of post-structuralist approaches. In order to adhere to the purported post-structuralist ambitions, the use of deconstruction (Derrida, 1978) is applied both to the theoretical framing of the model and to its application to the narrative events in this study. Finally, the findings are questioned and debated while identifying the possible utility of the model for future research.

The article starts by presenting the theoretical context in relation to the development of the model of binary dimensions of narrative practice. Next, it presents the research context, introducing the participants in the study and the assumptions made in engaging in the professional life history approach, justifying the application of a model to what would typically be an inductive analysis within narrative methodology. This is 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 post-structuralist article, the limitations of adopting such an approach are identified. Finally, suggestions for further research and developments are presented.

Theoretical context

This article presents one part of a broader study considering the development of professional identity for a group of early career teacher educators (Amott, 2016). The narrative events analysed in this study resulted from an adapted form of life history methodology. Traditionally, life history interviews ask participants to re-tell their personal stories in detail (Atkinson, 1998; Goodson and Sikes, 2001). These may take many hours in the telling, and, when transcribed, they form a mini-autobiography. The professional life history approach of this study focused only on the professional lives of participants. It also used a pre-prepared professional life timeline as the structure for the storytelling process, giving the storytelling a clearer focus.

Initial analysis of the narrative events from the professional life histories took a traditional inductive or 'bottom-up' approach, whereby the events were analysed and coded, without reference to a preconceived theoretical framework; themes were then derived. Of particular interest was an emerging theme of identification (Amott, 2018), which was considered to be a process particular to such narrative practices, and significant in supporting individuals to develop a greater sense of professional identity and identification with the new role. In considering this concept of identification within the relevant literature, particularly situated within a post-structuralist perspective on narrative practices, a potential theoretical framing emerged.

This section starts by defining the two key concepts fundamental to this study – professional identity, including the notion of identification, and that of narrative

practice. It then introduces the analytical framework and shows how it was derived from the literature and the relationship of narrative practice to a process of identification.

This research takes a performative view of narrative discourse and argues that identity is formed in discourse (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). If an individual is to engage in identification, then this construction of self-understanding is achieved through the process of discourse. 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' (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006: 137). Sfard and Prusak (2005: 16) 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 is potentially harmful because the reified version of identity 'acts as a self-fulfilling prophesy'.

In taking a performative view of identity, as constructed within narrative discourse, these stories should be viewed (1) as socially constructed and therefore nuanced according to the audience and (2) as multiple, meaning that a person might construct their identities differently for different audiences and purposes.

It is important to define what is meant by 'narrative' in the context of this research. In simple terms, narrative is 'telling a story'. Within this study, narrative has two functions: as a means and as a method. As the means, it is suggested 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; 'it is in narrative tellings that we construct identities: selves are made coherent and meaningful through the narrative or "biographical" work that they do' (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006: 42). Narrative is also the method that was used for this study, recognizing the unique potential of narrative data to reveal identity and provide some insight into participants' perceptions of their professional self. However, within a post-structuralist paradigm, identity and identification might be considered as fleeting, shifting or obscured, meaning that we might hold 'a variety of narrative identities' (Murray, 2003: 116).

It has been evidenced that for early career teacher educators, engaging in narrative storytelling, 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, 2018). As the literature shows, teacher educators tend to draw from their stronger identities as teachers (O'Brien and Furlong, 2015), and the transition from first- to second-order practitioner challenges the development of identity as a teacher educator (Murray and Male, 2005), as does the search for 'credibility' with students and teachers (Boyd and Harris, 2010).

If identification occurs within narrative practices, then what is activated within these storytelling episodes that supports this increased self-knowing? The study presented in this article considers that identification might be supported by the activation of objectivity and a sense of agency that is afforded within the narrative process. These two themes are derived from the literature and then applied in a thematic analysis to the narrative events that comprise this study. The theoretical positioning of the model for this study will be presented.

Presenting the analytical model: Binary dimensions of narrative practice

This framework was developed through exploration of the literature in relation to identity for education professionals, particularly from a post-structuralist perspective.

What emerged was the repeated use of binary dimensions, using contrasting or oppositional terms, operating within narrative constructions and overlapping into issues of identity. However, this study will present these as continua, recognizing that there might be a movement between these binary oppositions and thus degrees to which one or the other might be applied. The use of binaries, as a simplification of complex phenomena, is recognized and further critiqued prior to the conclusion.

The justification for the selection of the two binary dimensions of subjectivity/ objectivity and structure/agency is provided from the literature, with an additional note of caution for their adoption.

Subjectivity/objectivity

The first set of binary dimensions were considered to be labels that depict two aspects of self as subjective and objective. As Atkinson (1998: 10) writes, 'Stories bring order to our experience and help us to view our lives both subjectively and objectively at the same time.' Within the narrative episode, there is a tension between these two dimensions. The intention of the storyteller (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: 6). Likewise, Zembylas (2003: 221) considers that 'the self should be seen as both an object and a subject of experience'. 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 Butler (1997: 19), who also 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 post-structuralist research in particular is that of the 'self and other'. Kearney (2003: 54) 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.

Indeed, MacLure (1996: 282) suggests that we should consider identification (rather than identity) as 'an unceasable movement between the irreconcilable opposites of Self and Other'. Thus, there appears to be an alignment in the form of these three dimensions of subjective/objective, psycho/social and self/other. The use of the subjective/objective label has been adopted to embrace these other categorizations. There is an assumption that greater objectivity about the self is a helpful goal for individuals, particularly when considering professional identity during times of transition. Such objectivity may enable an individual to have a greater self-awareness of their professional identity formation and the influences that have shaped the way they view themselves as a professional. The model presented in this article further develops the benefits of objectivity.

However, in taking a post-structuralist position, it is important to resist the drive towards categorizing by such binary oppositions; rather, they can be recognized as

continua where an individual may be perceived (or perceive themselves to be) situated at any given point in time or in any particular narrative episode.

Structure/agency

The other binary dimension is that between agency and structure. This pervades much of the literature on discourse and identity, particularly within post-structuralist writing (MacLure, 2011; Roberts and Weston, 2014; Shim, 2011; Stronach and MacLure, 1997). Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 10) 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'. The focus of this study was whether the professional life history discussion itself forms an 'agentive' act for the storyteller and whether in the narrative process issues of power structures are revealed. There may also be a strong alignment between this dualism and that of subjectivity and power, explored by Butler (1997) and building on 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' (Butler, 1997: 11). Thus, power is not just external to, or 'pressed upon', the subject, but is also, 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' (Butler, 1997: 13). Again, there is an assumption that it is supportive for an individual to develop a greater sense of personal agency and to become more aware of the structures that are enacted upon the self within their professional context(s). However, there is still a continuum between structure and agency, along which one can perhaps journey towards greater agency, particularly activated through engagement with narrative practices.

Bringing the two dimensions together

In developing this model, the concept of contradiction in lived and told narratives, as discussed by Davies and Harre (1991), is pertinent. From their post-structuralist position in relation to discourse analysis, such contradiction is found within contradictory discourses. As a teacher transitions to becoming a teacher educator, the dissonance created by multiple discourses has two implications:

1. increased insight into one's own subjectivity and all its complexity as it is revealed through varied and contradictory discourses
2. increased political competence in dealing with unacceptable subject positions since their creation can be located within particular discourses. (Davies and Harre, 1991: 6)

It could be suggested that these two implications are in alignment with the two dimensions of this model. From that it can be inferred that the move along these continua towards increased objectivity and agency (or political competence in challenging subject positions) will support novice teacher educators as they engage with such narrative contradictions, particularly during times of professional transition. In presenting this model, and its subsequent application to the narrative events in this study, I suggest that this framework may have utility in making sense of professional transition and the notion of identification through the means of narrative acts. The model is outlined below and illustrated in Figure 1.
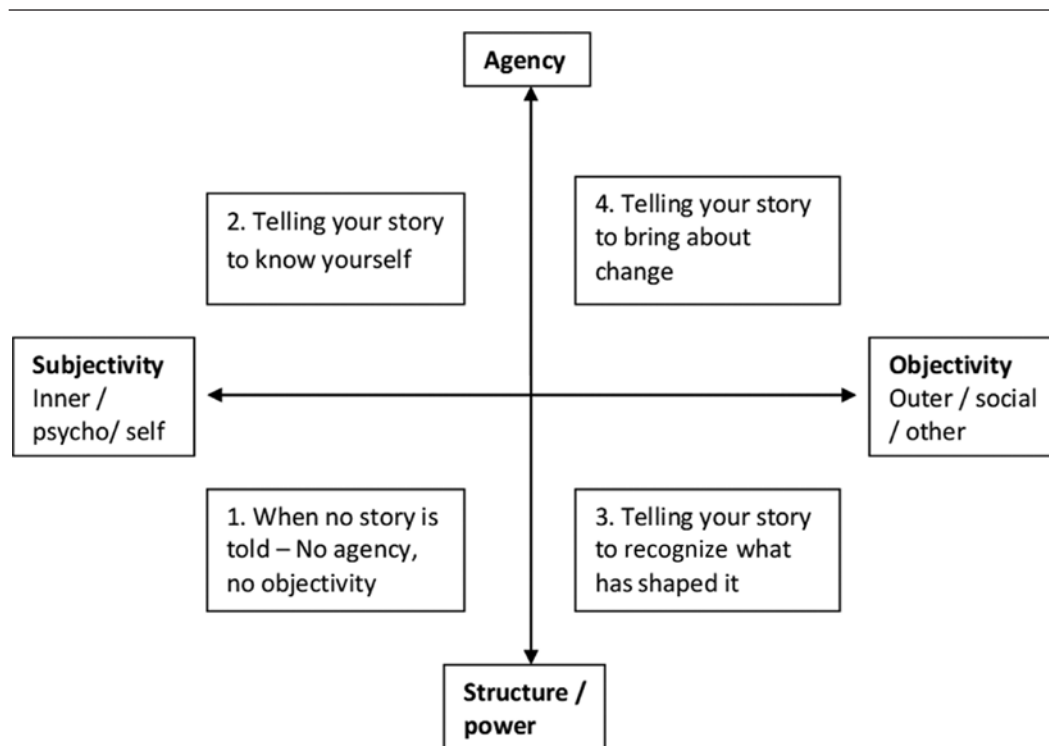
Figure 1: A model of binary dimensions of narrative practice (Source: Author, 2021)

The four numbered quadrants in Figure 1 can 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. It is 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' (Butler, 1997: 22).
3. Telling your story functions to reveal the structures of culture and society, or power, that have influenced the self and the story. It reveals 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. It reveals power as constitutive of the subject 'acted by'.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore the narrative episodes to consider if this model is useful for exploring and understanding the nature of identification realized within the narrative act.

The research context

The research context for this article comprises the researcher, the participants in the study and the professional life history method adopted. This methodology was considered as both a means for 'identification' and as a method for accessing rich qualitative data in a study of professional identity transformation for early career teacher educators.

The research was conducted as part of a broader piece of work considering teacher educator professional identity using a professional life history narrative approach. The researcher is herself a teacher educator with more than ten years' experience in the field. The researcher had an insider relationship with five of the six participants (either as a colleague or as a tutor prior to the study).

The participants were drawn from two contrasting contexts for teacher educators. All of the participants had previously been teachers (and in some cases advisory teachers within a local education authority). All of these teacher educators were colleagues or acquaintances within the field of teacher education and agreed to engage with the research, perhaps with a view to supporting a colleague, or as an opportunity to reflect on their professional lives and selves. Three from the first, more traditional, context were teacher educators working in initial teacher education (ITE). 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. The distinctive models of professional learning used in Reading Recovery are well researched (for example, Schmitt et al., 2005; Schwartz, 2013). Table 1 introduces the six participants.

Table 1: The participants in the study (Source: Author, 2021)

Pseudonym	Current teacher educator role	Years in current role	Prior experience
Elizabeth	Teacher educator in ITE (plus management role)	2	Spent many years working in both secondary and primary schools. Has a PhD.
Annie	Teacher educator in ITE	3	Some involvement with the university prior to this role, including working as a supervision tutor. Many years working in secondary and primary schools.
Emily	Teacher educator in ITE	1	A varied career in secondary and primary education. Worked within a local authority as a primary English specialist.
Rebekah	Reading Recovery teacher leader	3	Worked as a primary school teacher and as a specialist dyslexia teacher.
Jane	Reading Recovery teacher leader	2	Worked in two infant schools where she held some management responsibilities.
Joanne	Reading Recovery teacher leader	1	Worked in a primary school as a class teacher and then trained as a Reading Recovery teacher.

An adapted form of life history approach was developed that would 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. First, the focus was on professional life; personal life details need only be included at the discretion of the teller. Second, the storytelling episode would conclude with time spent in prospective reflection and consideration of possible career progression and professional selves in the future. Third, 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 storytelling. The life history narrative event started with the participant using their timeline to support them to re-tell their professional life history without the need for prompting from the researcher, except where further detail was considered to be helpful. The narrative concluded with the participant outlining their anticipated professional futures, as part of prospective reflection. These events lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The audio recordings were transcribed and shared with participants for their agreement (and further shaping, if requested).

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. In these discussions, the participants were again asked to engage in prospective reflection and to comment on how their previous reflections might have changed in the intervening time. Four of the six discussions were via telephone. All were less than 30 minutes in duration and were transcribed for later analysis. These discussions also proved to have value as instances of 'reflecting on reflection'.

The narrative events that form the basis of this study comprise the professional life history discussions and the follow-up discussion for each of the six teacher educators. The transcripts of these discussions were initially analysed using a 'bottom-up' inductive process that led to the formulation of the concept of identification (see Amott, 2018, for a full account of this analysis). A second, 'top-down', analysis, using the proposed theoretical frame presented in this article, was applied to the same narrative events.

Ethical considerations were adhered to in this study, with the ethical approval of the author's employing university and within British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines. Participants were able to check and amend the transcripts of the narrative events, as this could still be conceptualized as part of the process of creating a 'story of self'. In addition, pseudonyms were used throughout.

Application of the analytical framework to the narrative events

In order to consider the proposed questions for this study, the transcripts were reviewed for indicators that evidenced aspects of objectivity and agency, as suggested by the model. These indicators were coded to identify themes emerging that may provide further insight into the development of objectivity and agency within these narrative episodes. Table 2 summarizes the indicators applied to each quadrant.

Each quadrant, with the assumptions implicated in each, will be considered in turn. These findings are then discussed in the final section in order to consider the utility of the model in furthering understanding of the process of identification within narrative practice.

When no story is told – no agency, no objectivity

This point is purely theoretical and cannot be endorsed by the narrative events, as this study is 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.

Table 2: Analysis indicators in relation to the four quadrants (Source: Author, 2021)

Quadrant	Indicator
1. When no story is told – no agency, no objectivity	• Reflecting on a time before the professional life history interviews, lacking awareness of their professional identity
2. Telling your story to know yourself	• Awareness of benefits of the professional life history process • Awareness of their thinking in relation to the professional life history process • New awareness of their professional identity and influences on this
3. Telling your story to recognize what has shaped it	• Awareness of the structure/power influences that have impacted their professional lives • Recognizing the impact of choices made • Awareness of the influence of other people or contexts in shaping professional identity
4. Telling your story to bring about change	• Sharing insights learned in the professional life history process, possibly with the intention of benefit to others (known or unknown)

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

Telling your story to know yourself

If the narrative events supported a move to greater objectivity, then it could be expected that the participants would acknowledge that engaging in the process developed a greater self-understanding and identification. This was evidenced for all participants in the follow-up discussions. For example, 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.

There was evidence that the telling of the professional life history was an emotional process and not always comfortable. Joanne 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 realize 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 about the researcher listening to her life story, but it 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 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 it 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. This suggests that a move to greater objectivity may not be exclusive to narrative practices or that it may occur informally in other contexts.

Telling your story to recognize what has shaped it

If the narrative events supported a move to greater agency for the participants, it could be expected that participants would demonstrate a greater awareness of the structure/power influences that have impacted their professional lives. There were two key themes that emerged from the analysis in relation to this: considering choices and recognizing what had shaped their professional lives.

When participants reflected on their professional lives, they were able to identify significant choices that they had made and the structures/powers that influenced these decisions. 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, participants appear to become more aware of the influences that constrain these choices or the impact that choice has on their agency in life. Jane also recognized, in the process of telling her story, the value of doing 'the uncomfortable'.

Participants also evidenced agency as they recognized the powers that acted upon the trajectory of their professional lives. Rebekah, in looking back on her professional life history, recognized 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.

As participants come to recognize the forces at play within a professional life, this suggests that agency is in operation and might support an individual as they develop their careers.

Telling your story to bring about change

As participants move to a greater objectivity and awareness of agency in their professional lives, this might be evidenced in their seeking to bring influence or change to others. There were two participants who appeared to bring some insights about their learning, through the professional life history process, towards providing a shared understanding. This may imply a recognition that in telling their story, they might bring about some change as a result of participating in this study.

Annie appears, through the professional life history process, to have seen a connection to how she can support her work with student teachers. She 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'. She had subsequently sought to pass this insight on to her student teachers as part of the 'root and structure' of how she supported her students.

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 all right, 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 [initial teacher training] 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.

The sharing of this insight as part of the follow-up discussion may imply an awareness of the potential wider audience for this research.

From this analysis, it is evident that this model may provide a useful framework for considering the value of narrative approaches and, in particular, the professional life history process. The potentials of this model will now be discussed.

Discussion

The two questions that this article seeks to address will now be discussed in the light of the findings.

Is there evidence that participants in this study moved to a more objective and agentive view of their professional selves through their engagement with the professional life history narrative process?

The analysis provided seems to evidence the participants moving towards greater objectivity about their professional selves through the process of engaging in the professional life history discussion. This increased objectivity supports the process of identification, activated through this narrative event, as participants became aware of the benefits of engaging with the process. It was also evident that this was an emotional, and not always comfortable, process. This aligns with the work of Zembylas (2003: 213), who suggests that 'The search for understanding teacher identity requires the connection of emotion with self-knowledge.' There was a suggestion from these findings that such objectivity might be activated in other contexts which may also trigger identification.

The analysis also indicates participants developing agency through the narrative process. This was evidenced as participants came to recognize what had shaped their story. First, in reflecting on the choices they had made in their professional lives and the influence of structures/powers that constrained such choices. Second, participants came to recognize factors that had shaped their professional lives. This was often expressed as a conflict between participants' ideal professional life and the lived reality (which may be very different). This may align with Sfard and Prusak's (2005) notion of actual versus designated identities, and that holding these two in tension may create identity dissonance (Warin and Muldoon, 2009). Likewise, the narrative process becomes a site for increased 'political competence', as the contradictory discourses of the lived and told narratives were explored within this narrative act (Davies and Harre, 1991).

The fourth quadrant implies the potential for generating an increase in objectivity and agency to bring about change. The findings suggest two examples of this, where the participants developed new understanding during the narrative process, which they wanted to share, either with their student teachers or with a wider audience of peers (possibly through the research). These instances were both evidenced in the follow-up discussions, suggesting the value of 'reflecting on reflection'. This is an activation of critical self-reflection, leading to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991).

Does this model support a consideration of narrative storytelling practices?

The analysis presented in this account demonstrates the value of narrative storytelling in supporting development towards a more '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, Ben-Peretz et al., 2010; Bullock, 2009; 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: 215) notes that 'These stories are important both as means through which individuals understand themselves as well as tools for taking action.' Developing agency for education professionals might also be aligned with Sachs's (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. Such practices may also support her goal of a 'mature teaching profession' (Sachs, 2016). Jones and Charteris (2017) assert that 'Agency is

enacted through Transformative Professional Learning.' Drawing from Mezirow's (1994) transformative learning theory, this study shows that as participants engage in critical self-reflection or identification, activated by the professional life history process, this leads to premise reflection on the professional self. As Mezirow (1994: 224) states, 'The most significant learning involves critical premise reflection of premises about oneself.'

Narrative research has proven to be a valuable 'method' in understanding teachers' lives, and it 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. Also, Vloet and Van Swet (2010) utilized a biographical interview method based on psychoanalysis to support the understanding of self and identity for a group of teacher educators. Thus, this article makes a significant contribution to the growing body of research on narrative practices to support teacher educator identity transformation.

A critical view: Identifying the limitations of such an approach

It has to be acknowledged that in creating this model and using it to analyse the narrative accounts, this study might be at odds with the very post-structuralist epistemology it purports to follow. A 'structure' has been created that could be seen as a limiting straitjacket rather than a hypothesis that might bring creativity and understanding. It is therefore important, in true post-structuralist fashion, to deconstruct the above analysis and to identify the constraints within it. First, the analytical frame created may have caused a search for evidence that supported this construction, rather than drawing a hypothesis directly from the narrative events, as would be advocated by a more inductive analysis. Second, the expectation would be that the narrative events were analysed for evidence that might refute or disrupt this framework. This was the intention, but it cannot be guaranteed due to the researcher's closeness to the data and possible subjectivity. Third, the perceived alignment between different binary dimensions and the contrast to the agency/structure dimension could be called into question. Indeed, it may 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, yet to be identified from the literature or in the narrative events, that could have added a third dimension to this model. However, this model is justified if it proves helpful to narrative researchers and provides a way forward in seeking to uncover hidden assumptions. As Stronach and MacLure (1997: 5) note, it is important to confront 'the binary oppositions that have traditionally promised the comforts of certainty to philosophical thinking'.

Conclusion

This study suggests that the 'model of binary dimensions of narrative practice' might usefully be applied to the analysis of narrative practices with teacher educators and further develop understanding of the value of providing opportunities for these education professionals to engage in telling their stories. It would also suggest that this could be applied to the use of narrative practices with a broader group of educational professionals. In its application, it reveals a process within narrative practices: that telling your story supports greater objectivity towards the self; that it is an 'agentive'

act; that in doing so, it enables the teller to recognize 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 storytelling 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 might also be fruitful to give further consideration to prospective reflection and opportunities for 'reflecting on reflection' as supporting 'telling your story to recognize what has shaped it' or 'to bring about change'.

Notes on the contributor

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Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work.

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