TUGGING AT THE THREAD

Navigating the Journey from Teacher to Academic?

An Introduction

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There are many books that guide doctoral students through the PhD journey. For example, Thompson and Walker (2010) and Walker and Thompson (2010) are often held up as the go to guide for supervisors and students on how to work together to get the thesis written (see also Brewer 2007; Finn 2005; Oliver 2004). Such books provide advice on navigating the writing process and developing the student-supervisor relationship. However, these books often do not reflect the diversity of doctoral student professional experiences or personal histories. Post-graduate research communities in university institutes or faculties of education are often comprised of mature students with track records of working in schools or the wider education sector, often as middle or senior managers. They bring their own individual histories of practice, professional development journeys, and philosophical standpoints to the start of their research career – as well as multiple identities related to their social, professional, and economic worlds. Often, they embody what Thompson calls the 'later on PhD' (Thompson 2020), undertaken after a period of work, or alongside work, and often completed part time. Sometimes these students complete their studies alongside their full-time professional roles; this creates a distance between them and the university, impeding their ability to capitalise on benefits such as teaching undergraduates, or engaging in research groups that other PhD students may be afforded and that could, in time, further their academic careers (Moreau 2023).

For many of the women who describe themselves as mature students and early career academics, caring responsibilities for children and/or older parents are also a significant consideration in relation to

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the time they have available, as are a number of intersecting identities that are not necessarily described by traditional understandings of the PhD process (e.g. Bhopal 2018; Brown 2021). Therefore 'How to' guides often do not adequately deal with the range of working methods adopted by these types of students or managing supervisor/supervisee relationships influenced by the student's professional status. Given the complexities inherent to undertaking an extended period of study as a mature student, we wanted to write the book we would have liked to have read when we were navigating the process: a book that shares our experiences and insights, and may help the potential or current doctorate student, or Early Career Researcher (ECR). Therefore, this is not just another book about doing a PhD or Professional Doctorate. Rather it is about how women who identify as early career researchers have managed to navigate the journey from teacher to researcher or teacher-researcher, and those who make the transition to working for universities, to being and/or becoming an academic.

This book is innovative because, as a collection, the chapters address the materiality of women's lives, presenting their personal struggles as they navigate the unpredictability and uncertainness of the university sector. But it also presents an insight into what it means for women to become and be academics in a neoliberal context characterised by casualisation and the escalating demands of a performative culture. Whilst this book was written within an English context, it also contributes to the field of female oriented literature and feminist standpoint theory (Blackmore 2021: 27), and also stretches beyond it, particularly the established feminist leadership literature in the Global North (ibid.: 33) to fit a globally diverse field of academics who identify as women. Further still, it can be useful to any practitioner in a neoliberal, performative context (Goodley and Perryman 2021) or indeed in one that aspires to an audit-orientated, accountability model (Biesta 2008) to theorise personal responses to a global phenomenon (Sellar et al. 2017).

The stories told in this book are diverse and wide ranging, they encompass challenging identity work, tensions relating to balancing motherhood or caring responsibilities with academia, navigating the process of becoming a black academic, living and working with ADHD, difficulties related to insider doctoral research, understanding The Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the rules of the neoliberal agenda, and the effects of the precarious nature of ECR contracts. They are all connected by a thread relating to our profession as teachers. Teaching is a vocation rather than a job; as professionals we are motivated by social justice, the desire to make a difference not just to the students in

our classroom, but to wider society. It is this drive that led many of us to embark on postgraduate research, to unpick or investigate a puzzle or question emerging as a result of our practice. For many of us the research represented an extension of this 'professional love' (Page 2018), a way of understanding more clearly the pressures and issues of the education system, in the hope of tackling or influencing them. It is this that led us to pursue master's degrees and doctorates, and to persevere through to completion.

Early Career Researcher – Who Are You?

The definition of Early Career Researcher (ECR) is varied and contested. In an ideal world we are all early career researchers given that our journeys through research often reveal new (to us) knowledge and ways of knowing, and learning is a life-long process. However, within academia there are various interpretations and definitions linked to the universities we work in and the funders who provide the financial support grants we need for our research. According to UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), which directs the government's research and innovation funding streams, an ECR is anyone who is within eight years of completing their doctorate or six years since they started their first post (UKRI nd). In the 2021 REF exercise an ECR was defined as those who had their first post at a university with significant responsibility for research since 1 August 2016.

We find this definition to be restrictive and exclusionary. For a start, there are people who will never complete a PhD but who have a masters and work in a practice-focused department in academia – like teacher training. They may still want to, and many do, get involved in research. In addition, defining ECRs as being post-PhD ignores the research experience that some bring to their PhD journey from previous work – especially if they are studying for the doctorate alongside their academic teaching contracts. The definition also ignores much of the diversity of the (in particular female) life course.

While allowances are made by funders for being outside the definition in the instance of maternity leave or part-time contracts, they often do not take account of the bruising workloads that many academics undertake to perform at a level that is seen as acceptable by the academy. Those involved in caring responsibilities for example, or who are running a household single-handed, have less flexibility to juggle the different research, teaching, admin, and citizenship roles against which we are judged. There are other disruptions, either unique to the

individual (e.g. menopause, (in-)fertility, grief, long-distance commuting) or encompassing everyone such as the pandemic – which effectively halted most research and professional development opportunities in many universities.

Coming from and being part of the development of an Early Career Research Peer Support Network at the university where many of us work, we maintain a clear statement of being able to self-identify as an ECR. We argue that 'being' an ECR sometimes bears no relation to the point in time that doctorates were completed and that ECR support should not be limited to those who have recently graduated. And it is this starting point that we took when accepting chapter submissions. All of the authors of these chapters consider themselves to be ECRs, by virtue of their academic career experience. This is a label that does not always sit comfortably as most are not technically 'early career', due to arriving at the university with years of teaching and leadership experience from school settings. We therefore arrive with skills and pedagogies that makes us more prepared for academic teaching in comparison to our peers in other disciplines. However, while their experiences of education make them better able to fit in academic situations, their limited involvement in research projects places them, albeit liminally, within the confines of 'early career researcher' status.

Initial Tugging of the Thread – Our Shared Stories

When the world was shut down in 2020 during the pandemic, like many others in society we experienced feelings of extreme isolation. As teachers and lecturers, we were accustomed to intense periods of face-to-face interaction with our students. Indeed, much of our pedagogy and teacher identity was built upon these established modes of teaching, most of which had to be rewritten and adjusted to be delivered online almost instantaneously. This online migration led to significant dysfunctionality and disturbance to pedagogical roles and personal lives (Watermayer et al. 2020) In addition to this unsettling change to our established teaching practice, several of us were also relatively new to academia, and thus not part of existing support networks. This served to intensify our feelings of isolation. At the same time, the ECR support network that we were developing at the university, represented by the authors of the book, felt like added pressure for our colleagues. Early career academics are often on teaching-heavy contracts and therefore were overloaded during the process of flipping their teaching to online delivery – a process that is more complicated than the verb we

use to describe it suggests. Our planned networking and training events therefore felt like a step too far.

In an effort to both combat the feelings of isolation and maintain a space for the Faculty's ECR network that did not contribute additional stress during the initial months of the pandemic in 2020, we set up regular online 'coffee' sessions that became a drop-in space for those who just needed to check in and catch up. The aim was to provide opportunities for the corridor conversations that previously happened in and between face-to-face meetings. An online community was established that built upon tentative work that had started in the previous academic year to develop the ECR community. It was a peer-led group, shaped by those who chose to attend, that discussed research ideas or career progression for anyone who self-identified as an ECR within the (then) Faculty of Education.

As time passed, only a handful of people regularly attended, subsequently resulting in bonds being formed between individuals as we gradually got to know one another across the virtual space. This group became a safe space for the sharing of stories and experiences, and one in which we were able to provide a level of emotional support that was needed during a time of universal upheaval. It quickly became apparent that we shared common ground, had common struggles, and grappled with the same questions related to our move from school teaching to the university, and our place or role within the academy. From this network, and the discussions that 'tugged at the thread' of who we were, and who we were becoming, the idea for this book was formed. The more we shared with one another, the more we realised these stories had resonance beyond our small group and university, and importantly beyond the difficult months of the pandemic. We reached out to others in our circles, including colleagues, students, and friends made during our doctoral studies at other universities, and discovered that their experiences navigating the journey from teacher to academic spoke to our own.

The authors included in this book come from a variety of backgrounds. Some chose to complete professional doctorates part time alongside their (school) teaching careers, some left teaching as their doctorates neared completion, whilst others decided to remain in post. Some completed their professional doctorates whilst already working in the Higher Education (HE) sector, and others completed their PhDs full time, having already stepped away from a teaching career, subsequently deciding to remain in HE once their studies were completed. We wanted to capture a rich variation of experiences and career trajectories

in the selection of authors for this book, as a testament to the tenacity and determination of teachers who embark on doctoral study, and a demonstration of the many ways in which becoming a researcher can be approached and undertaken.

Each of the editors and contributors to this book has realised the need for support through the process – and of having access to the experiences of those who have gone before. Therefore, through the different stages of making the transition, becoming a professional student, and being an ECR, this book draws on the experiences of 13 women to focus on specific aspects of the transition process from teacher to academic.

The book aims to:

1. Answer the questions that we wanted answers to as we started our doctoral research journeys, following either PhD or professional doctorate routes to qualification.
2. Explore what it means to be an early career researcher and a woman transitioning from school-based teaching to work in academia.
3. Share stories and experiences in a way that resonates with others who find themselves in similar positions.
4. Develop understandings of our own places, as authors and readers of this book, within the context of higher education and the academy and our developing of an ECR community.

Autoethnography as Method

As we inhabit multiple worlds – as teachers, researchers, maybe mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters, partners, carers, friends, senior leaders, etc. – there are tensions and difficulties inherent to finding a place within these dissonant understandings of who we are, and how each world creates an overlaying lens through which we negotiate a sense of self. Seeing ourselves in the stories of others helps us to reconsider how we are positioned individually and collectively. This affords new understandings of the self, an outsideness (Bakhtin 1990: 88), which affects what it means to keep stitching and tugging on the thread as the images take shape and our place within the tapestry become clear.

As we step back and look at this tapestry, we note the bigger structures that we are working within and consider whether we want to add additional stitches here, tug at and unravel a thread there. We have chosen autoethnography as the methodology behind each of the chapters for several reasons. Autoethnography is the 'story of self, told through the lens of culture' (Adams, Homan and Ellis 2015: 1) and the

very best help us to understand how we have come to know and interpret our experiences. Therefore, autoethnography has a role to play as we stitch our own contributions to the complex tapestry of academia.

We enjoy the power autoethnography has to disrupt the established system that distances the researcher from their research. As women, we are also aware of the glass ceiling, of aspiring to be heard in meetings, of arriving troubled and being troublesome, of motherhood and the challenges inherent to balancing life at home and our responsibilities at work, or of being expected to pick up the pastoral slack as a single woman with no children of their own – as the pandemic highlighted. We therefore see a space for stories that are personal and emotional, and as such that demand a closeness that we felt other methods would struggle to achieve (Goodson 2017). More than this though, neoliberalist discourses can be restrictive as they promote the individual, rather than the collective. Indeed, Blackmore argues that 'the embodied academic and teacher was held and held herself responsible for her own self-regulation through processes of individualisation' (Blackmore 2021: 29). This book is unique in its aim to disrupt these insular practices and discourses through a collection of autoethnographies. We bring to the fore these stories, threads of identities and ways of identifying that we weave together, as it is through them that we hope to understand ourselves and to live more meaningful lives.

If this collection of stories is about self-understanding, it is also about understanding a collective experience of being a teacher turned doctoral student and higher education practitioner, and the expectation that this is perhaps a slower route to becoming considered an academic. These stories are about the worlds which we inhabit and how we try to present ourselves to not only attempt to fit into them, but also to believe that we are actually part of them. As Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain (1998: 4) argue: 'People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are. These self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as identities.' Each story in this book has strong emotional resonance for the teller, which describes a form of struggle to articulate oneself in such a way that they can be understood and seen. Some can be seen as counter stories (Delgado, Stefancic and Harris 2017: 50), but all are an attempt to 'connect ourselves and others' selves in tangible, meaningful ways' (Adams, Homan and Ellis 2015: 70). As such, we note our responsibility to our readers, to produce work that resonates and can assist them on their journeys. We live in interconnected worlds, so what

can feel like a personal story is often echoed in the experiences of those around us. This realisation led several of us to collaborate in the writing of our chapters, gaining comfort and solidarity from drawing out the similarities in our experiences. How we learn from these experiences – and use them to motivate or support others 'like me' (Downs 2017) – is the true project of autoethnography.

These stories act as a foundation for building a supportive postgraduate researcher and/or ECR community: sharing our experiences of this with others who might want to undertake similar projects to strengthen their own communities. It will enable a focus on the experiences of women who are, or were, school teachers embarking on research careers. Such a focus connects potential and current doctoral students with an understanding of what to expect, as well as supervisors and university-based research development teams with an understanding of how best to support the professional development of these early career researchers.

The ways in which ethics relates to the methodology of autoethnography is a complex one, because this methodological process positions us, ourselves, as the data subject so informed consent is not required in the traditional sense. We were aware however that the chapters do refer to experiences, individuals, workplaces, and research, which requires some ethical consideration. It is our aim to present autoethnography as a rigorous methodology and thus we sought and achieved ethical approval from the university in which we as editors are based. We have removed names of people, places and universities in line with British Education Research Association (BERA 2018) guidelines relating to anonymity and ensured these were presented in the vignettes as 'composite stories' rather than directly referring to individuals that may be identifiable.

Book Structure

We decided not to arrange the chapters in this book chronologically as we wanted to reflect the ways in which our histories, our present, and our futures are tangled, entangled, and complicatedly connected (Facer 2021). The chapters explore the motivations for and trajectories of women school teachers choosing to embark on research careers. These pathways either involve transitions to full-time academia or a focus on developing pedagogies of reflective practice through research-led teaching. They discuss the opportunities and challenges inherent to being

an early career researcher in the first years of an academic career or a research-focused school-based role post-doctorate.

Each of the stories shared in these chapters to some extent explores what it means to go back to being a student, completing an EdD or a PhD, as well as the experiences of being an early career researcher: from the precarity of navigating the short-term nature of postdoctoral research contracts and lectureships, to both the explicit and often underwritten hierarchies embedded within the knowledge production practices at the foundation of the ivory tower of academia. The authors all use autoethnography as their methodology; however they select a range of different theories to aid the readers' understanding of the experiences that are being explored.

Chapter 1

This chapter combines autoethnography and Institutional Ethnography to reveal to the author herself how the Research Excellence Framework has impacted on her journey of becoming an Early Career Researcher and academic. The uncomfortable reality of navigating and experiencing relative success, within a neoliberal system which the author resists, is examined in a bid to trace the development of an academic identity.

Chapter 2

This chapter uses Bakhtin's dialogism to explore the development of the author's research identity. Three extracts from a research diary, kept during the PhD journey, are analysed through this dialogist lens. This allows the author to trace the transition from teacher-educator and ex-primary teacher to researcher. The theme of gendered discourses emerges, as does the power of the autoethnographic process in allowing the author to examine the reorientation of the understanding of self.

Chapter 3

The author of this chapter uses themes from the Pink Panther to make sense of her experiences as an insider researcher – having undertaken her doctoral studies within her place of work as a secondary school teacher. Using Vygotsky's concept of semiotic mediation, the author examines the power of the Pink Panther as a creative and liberating force for making sense of her position as an insider researcher.

Chapter 4

In this chapter the author uses Critical Race Theory to examine the contexts within which her academic journey as a black female academic has taken place. The author also explores the role and power of using 'theory' to make sense of her becoming a black female academic in the context of a 'white profession'.

Chapter 5

The events shared in this chapter provide the framework for the author's discussion of her development as both a practitioner, and a researcher of her own practice. Using influences from affect theory and the learning that can come out of 'failure' and discomfort, and how this process is an integral part of being a researcher of one's own practice, the author examines the development of her own research and practice.

Chapter 6

In this chapter, the author considers the many plates that she is required to spin as a senior lecturer, new mother, job seeker and ECR. Using a Bourdieusian theoretical framework, she argues that, rather than considering the move from teacher to lecturer or doctoral student to ECR as transitional stages and identities, they make up multiple identities and part of a complex habitus. As such the fields and new rules of the game must be navigated using specific capitals, and this can be made easier if one is part of a supportive ECR network.

Chapter7

This chapter takes the form of a collaborative autoethnography, and it examines the experiences of one of the collaborators in inhabiting and negotiating the liminal spaces of Early Career Researchers in academia. With a focus on the intersection of interdisciplinarity and disability, the chapter explores the figuring of an academic identity as experienced from a perspective of being perpetually 'at the threshold' in relation to peers and colleagues.

Chapter 8

Using creative writing through a collaborative autoethnographic approach, the authors of this chapter explore lived experience of (in)fer-

tility and/or motherhood and professional precarity as Early Career Researchers and academics. Identifying how gender intersects with other social identities, the chapter uses these hidden stories to reveal how the pursuit of motherhood marginalises women within academia.

Chapter 9

Asking 'why here and why now?', this chapter utilises a collaborative autoethnographic approach to examine the authors' decision to embark on professional doctorates. Using vignettes inspired by their early PhD assignments, the authors examine their decision-making and identity formation through three themes – the influence of background and upbringing; the subject areas of their expertise; the influence of global events.

Chapter 10

This chapter uses the metaphor of the glass labyrinth to examine the world of academia, and to illustrate the workings within the 'figured world' of the Academy. Through telling the story of her experiences within the glass maze, the author reveals and celebrates the colourful threads of feminism, collegiality, and professional citizenship. It is through this narrative that a sense of identity emerges, and with this, the small daily choices that can make a difference within the glass maze.

Chapter 11

This final chapter uses the author's PhD research as a tool to explore the transitions between contexts and countries. Through reflecting upon some of the lessons learnt whilst working with young children, she argues that teaching is at the core of her story regardless of the age and maturity of the learners. This chapter explores the extent to which multiple transitions and a journey into academia represent a career change or a process of becoming a more rounded teacher.

Conclusion

The conclusion examines the importance of storytelling in developing an identity as an Early Career Researcher and academic. It discusses the use of autoethnography and the insights this has afforded. It then utilises a figured worlds lens (Holland et al. 1998) to explore the ways

in which the stories told in the chapters indicated the creation of worlds that help us to make sense of our changing positionality. This chapter concludes by demonstrating how our work together led to a mutually persuasive discourse that has supported our progression from teacher to ECR and continues to support us as we progress further as academics and add light to this journey for others.

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