On the quest for an unusual research methodology: the stories of female career-changers who retrain as primary teachers

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ABSTRACT

This paper will explore my chosen data collection methods for a two-year, small-scale study following the experiences of six career-changing females who retrained as primary teachers, in England. This research has been conducted as part of a professional doctorate in education (EdD) at the University of East London, in the UK. The aim of the research is to extend knowledge and understanding of female career-changing early career teachers (ECTs), who have just qualified as primary practitioners. The data collection methods provide multiple ways for women's narratives and life histories to be privileged in the research process. In previous, similar research, large numbers of participants had been questioned about their career-changing experiences (via questionnaires and some interviews) but focused on both male and female participants. However, this more nuanced methodological approach offers an unusual way of collecting data, to shine a light on women's experiences and voices in a more collaborative manner. In addition, it will examine what the participants' experiences are in the context of the Early Career Framework (ECF, DfE, 2021) reforms and how this may impact them during the mandatory two-year induction period. This insight is important, as existing research into the ECF has only spanned the first year, due to the Covid-19 pandemic cutting other research windows short.

INTRODUCTION

Starting on my doctoral journey four years ago, I was on a quest to try and find an unusual research methodology. Not, it must be stressed, for novelty purposes – rather because I knew that I wanted to utilise interpretivism and tell these participants' stories, and be part of the story-telling process itself. A 'renewed interest in storytelling' (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009, p. 7) has meant that narrative inquiry has joined the landscape for researchers looking to get 'up close and personal' to their participants, akin to standing on the edge of a campfire – listening intently to both the stories told and the voices themselves. Historically, narrative storytelling can be seen as far back as 'Aristotle's examination of

Greek tragedy' (Reissman, 2008, p. 4) and 'mimesis' (action imitated). This included the whole experience of a plot weaving the events through a beginning, middle and ending with emotions high (and usually ending tragically!). It is highly likely that these types of stories functioned as moral tales; however, contemporary narrative is different, and according to Barthes (cited in Polkinghorne, 1988), also includes myth, folklore, drama and cinema, whilst Reissman (2008) extends this to include biographies, autobiographies, memoires, diaries and artwork. Incidentally, if you were to turn on a television or scroll through social media today, you would see that everyone has a 'story'; for example, politicians who try to frame theirs in a more positive and palatable way – pushing a narrative to influence or persuade. However, in the human sciences, stories are told by participants to researchers and become stories about stories (Reissman, 2018). In the context of my own research, these interpretative stories may have a reach beyond the individual participants, towards the community of ECTs and commentating on a fuller picture, but I am mindful that their experiences are personal and not replicable narratives. This is deliberate and stems from the start of the 'narrative turn'. Whilst the 'narrative turn' is thought to have begun in the 1960s, it did not become popular until the 1980s in the gradual shift from realism to an exploration of the personal life and the new identity movements of marginalised groups (Langellier, 2001). Women led the 'turn' in interpreting women's lives, alongside the foundational work conducted by Clifford (1986) and Geertz (1993). Denzin offers an explanation for when methodological shifts happen reciprocally – as narrative 'forces the social sciences to develop new ways of talking about self and society' (Denzin, cited in Reissman, 2008, p. 14). This 'turn' also coincided with the development in the technology of recording devices and capturing authentic voices through inexpensive video cameras. I have taken inspiration from this narrative turn, and technological progress, to capture the authentic voices of my female participants via oral histories (Gluck, 1977) and developed this further by updating an existing chronological time line tool.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Therefore, whilst, individually, none of my chosen data collection methods are new, as with most interesting musical compositions, the arrangement of the methods is where the magic happens! The three methods I have used are oral histories, semi-structured interviews and a chronological tool to plot critical incidents called 'The River of Life' (Denicolo & Pope, 1990). Oral histories detail the experiences and perspectives of participants (Leavy & Harris, 2019) and a more recent development is in the self-recording of participants' experiences (Armitage, 2011). The main reason for me choosing to include this method was the ability to hear, first-hand, the 'stories' of my participants at various stages of their early career; from induction to completing the mandatory two years of ECT. After listening to the oral self-recordings, I used semi-structured interviews as a follow-up tool and the main purpose of doing so was to gather responses that offered more depth. Using a semi-structured format allows the participant to be guided by the researcher's prompts (Cohen *et al*., 2017) but with enough freedom to express themselves fully, to allow for their authentic voices to be heard. Finally, the *pièce de résistance* was the use of the chronological tool 'The River of Life' (Denicolo & Pope, 1990), which was originally suggested to me by one of my supervisors as I attempted to explain what I was trying to achieve. This research tool can help to reconstruct the significant milestones in a professional journey and was developed as 'career rivers' by education researchers Denicolo and Pope (1990) to focus on the beginnings, endings and periods of strain during a teacher's career. It highlights the career changing incidents that were not first obvious (Woods, 1993; Tripp, 1993). After which, I decided I would plot these incidents on an online platform called Padlet, before hand-drawing these milestones on paper. They represented the twists and turns of a fast-flowing river, complete with unseen currents and treacherous drops. Being able to visualise a participant's full story would help me, as the researcher, make sense of their journey. It was also a helpful tool for participants to review and collaborate with in the first instance, to ensure that I had recorded incidents correctly.

TELLING THEIR STORIES OVER THE TWO-YEAR PERIOD

The data collection methods chosen, allowed for detailed reflections of the narrative as viewed through the perceptions held by the participants (and me, in telling their stories), over the two-year research period. As data will be collected over two years, and currently only year one is complete, this will be reflected in the treatment of the findings and analysis. Years 1 and 2 will be reported upon separately, before considering both years together, where they will be discussed as a whole. The rationale behind this decision was two-fold. First, it was important to report on the induction period as participants transitioned from trainee to newly qualified teachers, particularly to consider the impact of being career-changers and of the ECF reforms . Second, it will allow each year to be reflected upon in its entirety – to enable incidents to be recorded as individual events, rather than grouped together. This was important when telling the stories of participants, to allow their voices and detailed experiences to be told in full, rather than summarised. An additional advantage of treating each year of data collection separately was that it enabled me to reflect upon the successes and failures of the first year, to improve the experiences for all in the second year, as well as making reporting

on data findings more manageable whilst working full-time.

FIRST YEAR OF STUDY: DATA COLLECTION

First year data was collected over a period of eight months using the three methods discussed previously. To summarise, I collected between two and eleven oral histories for each of the participants (5–15 mins per recording) and this spanned the Autumn–Spring terms of 2022/23 during the participants' ECT1 year. I then conducted 30-minute, semi-structured interviews and added these, and the oral histories data, to individual timelines on a platform called Padlet, before representing these visually. On several occasions, incidents were mentioned for the first time during the semi-structured interviews and this was a result of a newer incident occurring after the recording of oral histories had been submitted. From here, data was then integrated (Creswell *et al.*, 2011) and I was able to identify 'critical incidents' for each participant and document this on the chronological timeline. I shared these timelines with the participants to provide them with an opportunity to co-create with me and amend or clarify details. As a result of this, one participant even added a new incident directly to the timeline – which was unexpected but provided a further opportunity for reflection as well as strenthening 'participant voice' to a method that was meant to be a summary of the previous two methods of data collection. Participants were able to continue to send oral history recordings for the first year until the end of the school year. One participant struggled to find time to record oral histories and yet stated, on a number of occasions, that she would still like to be part of the research. Whilst data has not been provided, it highlights the nature of the ECT1 year and suggests that workload has been heavy. This participant also has two young children, so her 'dual-role' could mean she has been overstretched. As a result, there was the potential for her

to catch-up on her experiences over the summer holidays or for me to replace this participant completely during the second year of data collection. After the timelines had been verified and completed for each participant, I created a drawing that represented the critical incidents visually, to represent the positive and negative experiences discussed. Having these 'Rivers of Life' (Denicolo and Pope, 1990) representations provided an opportunity to view the stories of the participants before analysing them.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The term 'narrative' describes the process of making a story and clarifying the context and meaning. Polkinghorne (1988, p. 13) states that it can be a 'spoken or written presentation…the kind of organisational scheme expressed in story form'. Moreover, there are many ways of carrying out narrative analysis and this is something that I had to decide from the four most appropriate methods. Marsh *et al.* (2018) stated that there is no singular framework or theoretical approach, rather it is about the context of the study and for researchers to forge their own route, or to choose a 'pick and mix' approach. Whilst Lieblich *et al.* (1998) state that identifying themes is key, Riessman (2008) argues that hearing the 'voices' of participants is crucial. Holistic content analysis, adapted by Beal (2013) from Polkinghorne (1995), is similar to that of narrative content analysis. However, instead of breaking down the data into codes, she suggests being more 'playful' with the size of the data elements used, in order to keep the stories as a coherent whole. This enables key phrases, words or whole paragraphs to illuminate the individual's story in association with the context in which events and happenings take place. Certainly, these three methods offered the great advantages of telling the participants' stories and hearing them express their experiences in their own, authentic voices. However, it was holistic-content analysis (Leiblich *et al.*, 1998) and Polkinghorne's (1988) 'emplotment'

method of working backwards and forwards, and across plots and sub-plots, to highlight key elements and get a sense of each 'story' and the meaning behind it that resonated the most. After which, the goal of analysis is to uncover common themes or patterns within the collection of stories. Barthes (cited in Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 14) explains that '…people have a narrative of their own lives which enables them to construct what they are and where they are headed.' Expanding upon this statement, Jerome Bruner (cited in Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 17) states that 'Narratives mode looks for connections between events', thus, the incidents charted in the latter data collection method can provide an insight into the journey of the participants as they present them. They can also help to make sense of the behaviour of others (Barthes, cited in Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 14) as 'We conceive our own and others' behaviour within the narrative framework …and through it, recognise the effects our planned actions can have on deserved goals' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 18).

NARRATIVE ORDERING

For conducting analysis, Lieblich *et al.* (1998) recommend that researchers read the texts several times, to ascertain patterns, before documenting their overall impressions, then code and note down the themes and record them. In order to track these themes in my own data, it was necessary to develop a flow chart to document this process. Initially, the coding used was too complicated and I was aware that by 'over coding' I was dictating the outcomes and themes, which weakened the nuanced contributions of my participants. As a result, using a diagram based on Iyengar (2014) I simplified the coding into positive/negative experiences, then, my overall impressions, to develop the themes from reviewing the word level labels and how these could be grouped to form a theme, and from these themes, a category. By using narrative ordering, which links events together and identifies the effect

one has on another, to create a 'whole' story, which Polkinghorne states that 'by inclusion, in a narratively generated story, particular actions take on significance as having contributed to a completed episode' (1988, p. 18). By organising the significance of events in a narrative, or story, a researcher can uncover the 'plot' and, in most cases, sub-plots. Like a traditional story, the developments within a plot can have an impact on the outcome of a story but they first need to be excavated as, without recognition of significance given by the plot, each event would appear as separate. Achieving this order depended heavily on the flow between data collection methods and I will now outline how I began to link them together for this purpose.

MAKING LINKS BETWEEN THE DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Partial transcripts of the oral histories were used to gather data from the participants' transition from trainee to ECT, and later on, to record critical incidents as ECT1 unfolded. Next, they were used as a springboard to ask follow-up questions at interview stage, before each incident that occurred was added to a chronological timeline. However, they were also used as a 'litmus test' for the positive and negative factors that impacted on the participants as they started their ECT1. The factors were listed in no particular order and more of an 'eyeball' of potential emergent themes. There were twice as many negative factors than positive on the lists and, whilst that may not prove significant at later stages of data analysis, at this first stage of data collection, it was telling. However, it was even more interesting to note that whilst the majority of the positive factors centred around the support received in school, the negative factors denoted a broader sweep of issues, mainly focused on the impact of the ECF CPD, mentor availability and workload. Whilst there were no surprises in these issues being spoken about, they correlated with the reasons behind early

career teachers leaving the profession (Ingersoll, 2001; DfE, 2018).

During the semi-structured interviews, listening and asking certain questions, in certain ways, the researcher forms part of the narrative and data analysis. Elliot Mishler (cited in Reissman, 2008) states that there are two active participants and that meaning is jointly constructed. Reissman (2008, p. 164) supports this, but goes further in saying that 'If we wish to hear respondents' stories, then we must invite them into our work as collaborators, sharing control with them, so that we try to understand what their stories are about'. So, whilst the questions followed up on what had previously been revealed in the oral histories, it was important that there was a natural back and forth between the interviewer and participant, so building in turn-taking between the longer turns of the participants that were needed to generate the narrative. Elliot Mishler (cited in Reissman, 2008) argues that during this 'messy talk' there is no one correct way of transitioning, but that the researcher has to make a decision based on practical constraints, such as time, or theoretical concerns. Elliot (cited in Reissman, 2008, p. 25) discussed the fact that 'Respondents are likely to find it easier to talk about specific times and places rather than being asked about a very wide time frame' and so the questions were broken down into ones that tracked through by time and the key markers of year one. Then, transcribing turns the interview into a record of data collected (Cohen et al., 2017), however it is also important to consider the way of transcribing the interview accurately, so that it reflects the narrative as told by the participants. As stated by Walford (2001, p. 93), 'The nature of the transcriptions or whether it is sensible to transcribe at all, depends on the focus of the research and the exact research questions that need to be answered'. So, there is a balance between gaining an insight that answers the research questions and transcribing the key incidents as raised by the participants. In order to ensure that

the key incidents were transcribed, whilst the research questions were pre-defined, the interview questions were formulated from the data provided from the oral histories and driven by the participants themselves. As previously mentioned, the oral histories were partially transcribed, but the interviews were transcribed in their entirety to mitigate the potential of forming a story that suited my own narrative. With this in mind, minimal corrections were made to the transcripts and, certainly, nothing was changed or embellished.

During the data collection process, I used a chronological timeline to weave the complex events together to create the 'whole', recognising the critical incidents to construct the story. Reissman (2008, p. 13) says, 'a good narrative analysis prompts the reader to think beyond the surface of a text, and there is a move toward broader commentary' and Polkinghorne writes, 'reasoning used to construct a plot is similar to that used to develop a hypothesis', (1988, p. 19). This chronological order was necessary to put the stories into the 'Rivers of Life' (Denicolo and Pope, 1990) visual and provide context of the two years of ECT, and within each year, considering the beginning, middle and ending. Being able to overlay the data onto one timeline had the added benefit of being able to integrate the data (Creswell & Clark, 2011) through exploratory sequential design to see the 'bigger picture' as well as explore key words and phrases. This made it easier to draw parallels between participants at similar stages of their ECT journey. In addition, themes have arisen that broadly follow existing research and also, shed light on new areas, especially the ECF (DfE, 2021).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have discussed the data collection methods used to capture the authentic voices of female career-changers who retrain to become primary teachers, during their early careers. I have outlined the methodological approach

and how the use of storytelling can privilege the experiences of participants and afford the researcher a place in the research. In exploring the unusual methodology and data collection methods, I will be able to privilege the voices of female career-changing ECTs during their induction period. The study has revealed that utilising oral histories and 'Rivers of Life' (Denicolo and Pope, 1990) chronological timelines has provided a more detailed insight into the participants' individual experiences, but also drawn together the experiences of the group as a whole that reflect the wider 'story' of what is currently happening in the development of ECTs. Whilst this small sample is not representative of any wider phenomenon, it has highlighted the key areas important to the teaching profession of mentor support, ECF reforms, workload and how career-changers experience their ECT years. Moving forward, I will begin to collect the second year of data, see whether further themes arise and examine the impact of the ECF in the second year for these participants. In addition, it will interesting to have a full view of the critical incidents for this whole two-year period. As the study has evolved, it will be necessary to review and reflect on the efficacy of the data collection methods in order to make any necessary changes required to make the second year run more smoothly. In conclusion, I hope that by choosing data collection methods that privilege the voices of females, the stories produced will offer a more nuanced view of their experiences of being career-changers and pinpoint the critical incidents that impact them and how they can be best supported. In doing so, I hope to make a nuanced contribution to the existing knowledge on the experiences of early career teachers joining the profession. ■

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