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An Educator's Personal Perspective on His Schooling and Teacher Identity Development

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Abstract

This study uses narrative inquiry to explore the author's journey from being a disengaged and struggling student to becoming a dedicated educator. Through personal vignettes and reflections, the author examines key experiences that shaped his teaching identity, focusing on three main themes: disconnection from teachers, low expectations from others, and a lack of attention to school. A turning point came during the author's undergraduate studies, where a respectful and inspiring professor helped him reconsider teaching as a career. This experience motivated the author to become an educator who prioritizes student engagement and avoids the mistakes of his former teachers. The study highlights the importance of creating inclusive and supportive classroom environments, particularly for students who feel invisible or disengaged. By reflecting on his past, the author emphasizes how personal experiences can shape teaching philosophies and practices. The narrative inquiry approach allows the author to explore the connections between his past struggles and his current teaching identity. While the vignettes and reflections are deeply personal, they offer valuable insights into the challenges faced by disengaged students and the potential for transformative growth. The study concludes with the author's commitment to supporting all students, especially those who feel marginalized, and underscores the importance of empathy and respect in education. This reflection serves as both a personal exploration and a call to action for educators to create more inclusive and engaging learning environments.

Bir Eğitimcinin Okul Yaşamı ve Öğretmen Kimliği Gelişimine İlişkin Kişisel Bakış Açısı

Makale Bilgileri

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Öz

Bu çalışma, yazarın ilgisiz ve mücadele eden bir öğrenciden kendini adanmış bir eğitimciye dönüşme yolculuğunu keşfetmek için anlatsal sorgulamayı kullanır. Yazar, kişisel kısa öyküler ve düşünceler aracılığıyla, öğretmen kimliğini şekillendiren temel deneyimleri inceler ve üç ana temaya odaklanır: öğretmenlerden kopukluk, başkalarından düşük beklentiler ve okula dikkat eksikliği. Yazarın lisans eğitimi sırasında saygılı ve ilham verici bir profesörün öğretmenliği bir kariyer olarak yeniden değerlendirmesine yardımcı olduğu bir dönüm noktası yaşandı. Bu deneyim, yazarı öğrenci katılımına öncelik veren ve eski öğretmenlerinin hatalarından kaçınan bir eğitimci olmaya motive etti. Çalışma, özellikle görünmez veya ilgisiz hisseden öğrenciler için kapsayıcı ve destekleyici sınıf ortamları yaratmanın önemini vurgular. Yazar, geçmişini yansıtarak kişisel deneyimlerin öğretim felsefelerini ve uygulamalarını nasıl şekillendirebileceğini vurgular. Anlatsal sorgulama yaklaşımı, yazarın geçmiş mücadeleleri ile mevcut öğretmen kimliği arasındaki bağlantıları keşfetmesini sağlar. Kısa öyküler ve düşünceler son derece kişisel olsa da, ilgisiz öğrencilerin karşılaştığı zorluklar ve dönüştürücü büyüme potansiyeli hakkında değerli içgörüler sunar. Çalışma, yazarın tüm öğrencileri, özellikle de dışlanmış hissedenleri destekleme taahhüdüyle son bulur ve eğitimde empati ve saygının önemini vurgular. Bu düşünce hem kişisel bir keşif hem de eğitimcilerin daha kapsayıcı ve ilgi çekici öğrenme ortamları yaratmaları için bir harekete geçme çağrısı işlevi görür.

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INTRODUCTION

In a narrative inquiry course, a colleague of mine shared a vignette about his peers' positive reactions to his first comic book when he was elementary school and elaborated how the positive response of that young crowd to his first artistic creation led him to be the art teacher that he is now. The significant impact of one personal experience on that individual's career led me to question my career choices. Thus, I started to write series of vignettes and reflections to explore my past schooling experiences. After completing seventeen vignettes and eight reflections, and having discussions with colleagues in the narrative course, I decided to create a research paper out of these personal materials. Although this research paper consists of personal vignettes and reflections and closely resembles an autobiographical study, I choose to define it as a narrative inquiry study, since I wrote the vignettes and reflections long before I had any idea of presenting them as research. In addition, the creation of the vignettes was mostly fueled by conversations with my colleagues.

Throughout this research paper, I utilize a phenomenological approach to explore the connections between my past experiences and my current teaching identity, and following a suggestion made by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), I embrace my subjectivity in relation to these personal memories. I realize these vignettes and reflections display only my perspective on the situations, and I used my subjectivity as a tool to explain how a struggling student in the system became a teacher-educator and how these experiences affected his teaching identity. Although the vignettes and reflections in this paper are not generalizable to the general population, it would not be surprising to find that others have encountered similar struggles when they were in school.

My use of reflection and narrative as a methodological tool is purposeful. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest, humans are storytelling beings. For Richardson (2001), storytelling can be a valuable methodology for individuals to discover themselves and the world around them. Therefore, the utilization of personal memories and reflections can have a significant impact on an individual's growth and personality. Extending this purpose, I aim through my use of narrative to reveal my own perspectives as a student on schooling, perspectives that other individuals and teachers may share and benefit from. As Bleakly (2005) suggests, qualitative research methods—which include and often draw on personal stories—might provide opportunities to acquire a deep understanding of school

disengagement. Moreover, the exploration of narratives that rise from teachers' own experiences can present opportunities for exploring teachers' behaviors and thinking processes (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Carter, 1993); thus, the use of narrative can enable me to speculate about my individual teacher identity development.

I am a novice researcher and a former elementary school teacher. To those who know me in this context, it may come as a surprise that I was academically unsuccessful in my earlier school life and often disliked school and my teachers. They may wonder, as I do, how a student like me—who struggled with the system and its teachers—became an educator or how my previous personal and mostly negative experiences of schooling shaped my teaching identity. For the purpose of this study, I explore my previous experiences as a student by using a series of short vignettes about incidents that affected my teaching career, and I reveal my thinking process during the creation of this research paper through short reflection pieces. I chose to group the vignettes into three categories: (1) the disconnection between my teachers and me, (2) individuals' low expectations of me, and (3) my lack of attention to school. I composed a reflection for each category to explain my thought processes. Overall, the vignettes and reflections shed light on my transformation from a disengaged student who disliked his teachers to an educator who thrives to help detached students.

The Disconnection with my Teachers

September 1991. I got up before my mother came into my room. My backpack, which I had prepared the evening before, was sitting near my closet. It held my pencils, an eraser, an abacus, counting beans, books, and my notebooks, which my brother and I had carefully covered with bright, protective paper. I buttoned my blue uniform and grey pants and hurried to finish my breakfast. I was holding my mother's hand while we walked to school and was surprised to see so many other students and their mothers, all flowing in the same direction, a small river of people. After my mother helped me find my classroom, she hugged me and went home. The classroom was chaotic. While there were some students like me who were very eager to start class, many were crying and did not want their mothers to leave. Some parents were trying to squeeze into the small desks or talk with each other while most of the students waited quietly. Even in all of the confusion, I distinctly remember that I was proud of myself, since I was so enthusiastic to start my first class and meet my new teacher.

I am proud to say that first grade was the one of the most successful years of my educational career. I was learning to read very fast, and was getting much faster than my peers. Within two months, I started to spell. By the fourth month, I was reading well, and my teacher encouraged me to read in front of the third graders. I remember being nervous when the third-grade teacher introduced me to her class and praised my reading skills in front of all those students, who were older and more experienced than me. This was the first time I really felt pleasure at being academically successful. Unfortunately, it was a rare moment, one that I would not experience again for a long time.

February 1992. I was the first student in my grade to learn to read, and the news of my accomplishment spread rapidly to the other students' parents. My mother convinced me to not show my reading skills to everyone, since she—like many Turkish men and women—feared the "evil eye," which is the belief that if people are jealous of you, something bad will happen. One day, one of the parents asked me to read a random sentence. I read the sentence in my mind, but as my mother instructed, I did not read it aloud. The parent declared that I was not able to read and accused me of merely having memorized flashcards. I felt very angry and read that sentence a few times after the parent was gone, but I could not do anything at that point, other than feel frustrated. I did not know why my mom had not let me perform nor why my teacher had not protected me from that parent's harassment; however, I will never forget how desperate and frustrated I felt at that moment, since I could not perform the reading skills that I had worked on so hard.

December 1992. One day, during the winter of my second-grade year, the teachers announced that we should avoid a certain part of the school grounds, since the rain had made it very muddy. While I was playing during recess, I ran through the muddy area and a very angry school administrator suddenly appeared in front of me. He was holding a plastic jump rope that he had likely confiscated from another student. Even now I can see the rope clearly: a green string of plastic tubes with blue handles. The administrator murmured something about going to the muddy part of the school and savagely whipped my leg with the rope. The hit was so powerful that the marks were still visible when I got home. As a child, I was afraid to tell the truth to my mom because I feared the administrator would also beat my family. However, my mom helped me to calm down, and I told her the truth. Interestingly enough, my family did not do anything about the incident, since at that time in Turkey, individuals respected teachers' decisions without any hesitation.

December 2004. Although I was accepted to a school of education as an elementary school teacher, I had never seen myself as a teacher. I was hoping that by getting a degree, I could satisfy my parents, enjoy my life as an undergraduate student and barge into business life as a novice entrepreneur. However, when I was in my third year of undergraduate study, I took a course in classroom management. During that course—as was true in many others—I spent the lectures talking with friends. Despite having to warn me numerous times about my behavior, the teacher always did so in a polite and respectful manner. I always felt respected as a student and a colleague, and his approach toward my disrespectful behavior inspired me to think about my actions. For the first time in my life—sadly—I started to realize that there are very good teachers out there who are earning students' respect instead of merely demanding it. This enlightenment was a significant point in my career because it was the first time I thought that I actually might become a teacher. I started to focus on my course work, wanting to learn as much as I could to become a good teacher. A year after the course, we started our field experience, and I had a chance to work with students. I was surprised at how much pleasure I got from teaching, and realized that teaching was actually an occupation that I would be happy to do for my entire life. However, I promised myself that I would work to be the kind of teacher who is mindful of students who crave the teacher's attention. Who knows? Maybe I could change some of my students' lives the way that instructor had changed mine.

November 2012. Two weeks ago, I participated in a meeting to plan the 7th Annual Turkish Friendship Dinner (a significant event attended by over 150 guests). During one of our discussions, I used the blackboard to present a suggestion for solving one of our problems related to nametags. While I was speaking, a person whom I had just met suddenly asked if I was a teacher. Even though I did not realize it at the moment, I was using skills that I had gained from being in the classroom. Ever since I resigned my teaching position in 2008 and started my graduate program, I perceived myself as a student; however, moments like these helped me realize that my personality and skill sets are more complex. A stranger was able to perceive a connection between my actions and teaching. Interestingly, this person was able to see something I failed to recognize about myself; she had identified me as a teacher in a few minutes. One might wonder why I couldn't establish this connection. Was I refusing to accept this part of my identity due to my lack of love towards other teachers?

November 2014. When I look back and consider my earlier schooling experiences, I can see that although I was very eager to go to school and succeed academically, I got harassed by other parents and beaten by my administrator, and I couldn't get any protection from my parents or teachers. No wonder I neither trusted nor liked teachers, since I do not think many of them did much to earn my respect, if most of them ever cared about me as a student at all. On the other hand, I was lucky enough to encounter a few good teachers, which eventually inspired me to seriously consider teaching as a career.

While reviewing the evolution of Eriksonian and Neo-Eriksonian identity theory, Schwartz defines the concept of identity synthesis as an individual's ability to use childhood experiences to draft various sets of values during identity construction (Schwartz, 2001), and it is apparent to me that my negative schooling experiences and mistreatment of my teachers and administrators led me to build up mistrust, maybe even hatred, towards teachers. The detachment between my teachers and me was so severe that I couldn't bring myself to like teachers, even though I was becoming one. My passion towards teaching and my distrust towards schooling and my teachers present an interesting identity conflict that could also exemplify Mishler's (1999) suggestion regarding professional identity as a concept constructed by sub-identities that might not always harmonize with each other.

Individuals' Low Expectations of Me

June 1997. I spent most of my childhood years playing soccer with my friends in the streets of Istanbul, and especially during summer breaks I rarely went home during the daytime. Since my mother was concerned about how and where I spent my days during the summer breaks, in the summer of 1997, she decided to apprentice me to a barber. I actually cherish that experience, since I had a very sheltered childhood, and the experience I gained from that barbershop really opened my eyes to the life going on around me. However, seeing me as a barber's apprentice for the whole summer led my family to consider hairdressing as a career for me, since I wasn't very successful academically. Thankfully, my mother was persistent on supporting my getting a bachelor's degree, so I was able continue my education after all. I don't think hairdressing is a bad career—some hairdressers probably earn more than me. However, since I love teaching and interacting with students, and since lately I have discovered I can be very successful academically, it would have been a grave mistake for me to choose hairdressing as a career. Interestingly, although this decision would have significantly affected my life, at the time I did not put up any opposition to my family, and I let them shape my life for me.

August 2001. When I applied to undergraduate programs, I scored low on the OSS exam, a nation-wide exam for college applicants. Since the Turkish educational system relied entirely on this exam score, I was faced with two options: to become a teacher or spend another full year preparing for the OSS exam again. Since I did not want to waste another year on the same exam and possibly disappoint my parents, I enrolled in a teacher preparation program. I told myself that I could spend my four years enjoying college life, and after I finished my program, I could work in some other occupation. It is very interesting to recall how little I cared about my potential career as a teacher and how low my self-expectations were.

December 2005. Throughout my college education, I was never a model student. I spent most of my college life playing soccer, card games, and PlayStation with my friends, and I rarely paid any attention to my courses, my third year as an undergraduate. During one of my conversations with friends, I voiced my plans to take the LES exam, which is very similar to the GREs, which determine an individual's admission to graduate school, since I was planning to finish a M.S. program. Interestingly, one of my friends laughed in my face and expressed her surprise at my desire to get a M.S. degree, since I wasn't even very committed to the courses in my undergraduate education. It seems my peers also didn't have high academic expectations for me. Interestingly, though, I was one of the students in our school who scored very high on the exam, which eventually led to a scholarship for my graduate education.

November 2014. Since I wanted to get a M.S. degree, I applied and acquired an esteemed scholarship that covered the expenses of my graduate education in another country, as well as fees for expenses like health insurance, rent and living expenses. One of the requirements of this scholarship was reference letters, so I reached out to several of my undergraduate teachers to request them.

During a conversation with one of my teachers, he expressed his surprise at my success in getting the scholarship, and actually asked me, "How did you acquire this scholarship?" implying by his tone that he would never expect a student like me to get an opportunity like this. That question affected my mood, and I felt really disappointed in myself. Even though I had won the scholarship and knew I deserved it, one of my teachers could not reconcile that kind of success with me. What impression must I have given to my teachers as a pre-service teacher? I thought about it and blamed myself for not building better relationships with my teachers. Now, I realize that it was not my communication

problems that shaped that teacher's low expectations of me, but his lack of vision for his students. I admit that I was never a top student and that I had never put in extra effort to build a relationship with that teacher, but my GPA was higher than that of most of my peers. Now, it occurs to me that that teacher's lack of high expectations weren't directly related to me. He was just surprised because none of the students get a scholarship like that, since they received no guidance from the teachers in our school, and I was an outlier, curious and lucky enough to seek out and acquire that scholarship.

Although people around me generally loved and supported me, it was clear to me that neither my family, friends, teachers nor myself set any high academic expectations for me; unfortunately, this situation affected my performance at school, since I never had an opportunity to learn the meaning of academic success until late in my undergraduate education. Once I savored success, though, I gained confidence, and the academic successes started to pile up, and this motivated me to work harder to keep succeeding. Now, I am part of an educational faculty, and I am working closely with pre-service teachers. If I learned anything from these unfortunate circumstances, it is the idea that I should never forget that many of these young adults are capable of more than their performance in classes, and I, for one, have a chance to be a beacon that encourages and supports them to aspire to higher goals.

Lack of Attention from Teachers and Peers

1996-1999. Throughout my three years in middle school, I did not have any significant problems with my teachers; however, I always felt unnoticed by them. I was not a top student in my classes, nor was I at the bottom. Perhaps I was the typical C student that can sometimes get overlooked. I had some close friends, but overall, I was not very popular. Our classrooms were crowded (around 45 students per classroom), and none of my teachers (except one who was my father's friend) knew my name or devoted time to me outside of school. I was very active in my neighborhood and home; however, I felt ignored at school. I remember feeling like a ghost that has no effect on the lives of his teachers or friends. I believe this lack of recognition caused me sorrow and significantly affected my personality and outlook on education.

1999-2001. As soon as I started high school, I realized that there were two ways to get attention from both my teachers and my peers. I could be the student who works very hard and gets high scores (which would take a lot of work and so was not my preferred option) or

I could become a troublemaker (which proved easier and more exciting). I took it as my mission to create disruptions in school and regularly harassed my teachers. I used to pay close attention in class only for the prospect of catching a mistake made by a teacher, which I would expose to the entire class. Although I was doing this publicly, I did it very respectfully; thus, teachers could not do much about it other than to deflect or disregard my comments. In one physics class, we were making a lot of noise, and in response, our physics teacher once used a very rude word, *idiotic*, to describe our behavior. Even though I believed that we fully deserved that comment, I told him that he did not have right to speak to us like that. Now, I realize that even as a student, I knew that I was wrong; however, I often very carefully crafted plans to humiliate or irritate my teachers, so I could get the attention I craved. And it worked. Some of my teachers started to learn my name.

February 2005. Much has shaped my identity as a teacher, but one of the most important experiences was growing up as the youngest in a large family. I was the youngest of three brothers and a sister, and there was a constant struggle among siblings. Especially, two of my big brothers constantly lorded over me and bossed me around about everything. Struggling to acquire what I needed from two of my big brothers helped to increase my self-confidence, but somehow this confidence did not transfer to school, where I remained feeling invisible for a long time. In the third year of my undergraduate program, we created a number of group projects, and during those projects I realized that I could be very successful at school-related activities. I faced my fears and insecurity and developed my self-confidence. I always wonder, though, what would have happened if I had had more self-confidence at school in my early days. How far could I have gone? Could I have been an engineer, as I had always desired?

November 2014. As is likely true of all teachers, my experiences with and perspectives on the courses I took when I was student have shaped my teacher identity. In all honesty, I generally felt that I was not able connect with my teachers or peers during the most of the courses I took; and perhaps this experience has led me to focus on student interest and motivation in the classroom. As a result, I now aim to create classes that are so interesting that students cannot resist participating, so that many of the students who have trouble communicating with others or acquiring the attention they deserve can have an easier time in my classes. One moment of my early teaching particularly stands out in regard to achieving this goal. In my first year of being an educator, I created an activity for learning math and was pleasantly surprised when many students loved it and participated actively.

I'll never forget it. A half an hour into the lesson, a student asked me when we would be starting our class. At that point, I realized that most of my students did not even realize that they were learning. I couldn't have been prouder, and I decided that my teaching goals should be to create activities that position my students to learn content knowledge while having as much fun as possible, and to encourage them to be active participants, so that they have opportunities to connect with their peers and teachers.

Ethical Permissions for the Research

In this study, all the rules specified in the "Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive" were followed. None of the actions specified in the second section of the directive, "Actions Contrary to Scientific Research and Publication Ethics", were carried out.

CONCLUSION

As Walkington (2005) suggests, teacher identity is one of the pivotal concepts that affect teachers' beliefs, principles and actions, and as Tickle (2000) notes, teachers' professional identities can be shaped by home- or work-related personal experiences. It is apparent that my personal experiences during my schooling life had a significant effect on my teaching identity. The feeling of vulnerability was very dominant in my earlier schooling years, and the negative circumstances I encountered have prompted me to build a more protective teaching persona for my students. The few positive interactions I had with my teachers inspired me to strive to be a teacher who will not repeat the mistakes of some of my unsuccessful teachers and inspired me to create courses that encourage students to participate in activities and engage with their peers and teachers. Overall, I recognize my teacher identity as a constantly shifting and developing concept (Gee, 2000) that can influence my current actions, values and beliefs towards my family, teachers, peers and students and that is heavily influenced by my emotional responses to my past experiences, relationships and other environmental factors (Giddens, 1984). While finishing this narrative paper, I realize that I welcome even the most disruptive students without any hesitation. In fact, I welcome all students. And I realize now how much my experience as a withdrawn and forgotten student shaped me to be a teacher who does not want any of his students to feel this way. Be ready for me; I am coming for you. I am coming to try to understand you, so you can become visible again. I am coming to earn your respect, so that you can devote your energy to something better than humiliating an old man.

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