

**An Introduction:
Personal Histories as Medium,
Method, and Milieu for Gaining
Insights into Teacher Development**

By J. Gary Knowles and Diane Holt-Reynolds

When we were in school, our Speech and Communications Arts teachers outlined what they believed was a fool-proof formula for getting messages of importance from the mind of a speaker into the minds of listeners: Tell people exactly what you are about to tell them; tell people what is on your mind; tell them what you have told them. Tell, tell, and tell again. A catchy little algorithm! And it sounded so simple.

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The model stressed that listeners are and should be passive receptors, that messages could and should be transferred perfectly, and that speakers could and should control all the variables contingent to the message transferring process. So, we learned to do exemplary telling, to pre-empt listeners' objections to our theses, to eliminate distractions while we talked, to simplify, stream-line and organize that talk—in other words, to control our way to successful delivery and heightened learning.

That was years and years ago. Actually, almost

An Introduction

longer than we can remember. No self-respecting teacher educator of today would validate such a teaching model or show contemporary preservice teachers how to use it for communicating subject matter in classrooms with students. We know better. We have learned that ideas—subject matter knowledge—cannot be transmitted whole and intact regardless of how flawless the presentation. For any text, be it spoken or written, there are two perspectives—those of the speaker or writer, and those of the listener or reader. People construct ideas as they learn, and they use prior knowledge, experiences, and beliefs, as well as interpretations they generate in the moment, as the stuff out of which to build those ideas.

We know about this phenomena of constructed understandings through observations of children developing subject matter knowledge. But, have we learned it when the subject matter is **teaching** and **being a teacher**, and when the learners are preservice and practicing educators? How many of us as teacher educators work in programs of teacher preparation that subtly pressure us to act as if preservice teachers in our classrooms or in field experience settings have few or no ideas of their own, as if the ideas of practicing teachers are inherently and fundamentally flawed in some unspecified way, as if taking time to help teachers and preservice teachers discover and understand the multiple and various beliefs, habits, experiences, and visions that they bring with them to teacher education (broadly defined) and to classroom practice were trivial at best, an annoyance at worst? On this point Seymour Sarason (1993), reflecting on his long involvement with teachers and of the state of teacher preparation, observes:

Teaching teachers involves every psychological issue and principle involved in teaching children. The would-be educators, like the pupils they will later teach, are not uninformed, empty vessels, devoid of knowledge, assets, interest, and experience in matters educational. To ignore what the would-be teacher knows and has experienced, what that teacher aspires to be and achieve, is to seal off a gold mine in the face of poverty. (p. 150)

It is because we believe that learning to teach and learning to be a teacher are ongoing, perhaps life-long, processes and practices where intensely human, personal meanings are created and influenced by a myriad of prior experiences and meanings that we proposed and developed this special issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly*. Why write about personal histories? Because in one sense, they **are** teacher education. Teachers' lives as school pupils before they become teachers, their lives as scholars while they prepare to become teachers, their lives as variously contributing members of the workforce and society, and their lives as professionals in a career of teaching present few clear boundaries. Teachers have lives outside of the classroom in which they teach—despite what we thought when we were kindergarten pupils—and those lives are inextricably linked with the past as well as the present and the future. What they lived and learned in the past and what they live and learn today becomes a history they reference for their living and learning tomorrow. Because each person comes to teaching and teacher preparation with a

Knowles and Holt-Reynolds

unique perspective, personal histories, and the research based in them, shed light on the process of learning and practicing the activities of teaching and the roles of being a teacher. Our intent is that this collection of articles be highly pertinent as a resource for those who hope to influence teachers' learning in the present. Together, the collection of articles answers questions such as:

- What are personal histories?
- Why write about personal histories?
- Why research personal histories?
- How do personal histories shed light on the process of becoming and being a teacher?
- How do personal histories fit into pictures of teacher education and ongoing professional development?
- What are some of the potential ways to begin to understand the power of personal histories in the work and lives of teachers?

Professional Practice and Personal Histories

How did this collection of personal history articles come about? As editors, we can hardly offer explanations about our involvement in personal history explorations and pedagogies and the origin of this special issue without reference to elements of our own individual and collective experiences—snapshots of our personal histories if you will. What follows is offered simply as a glimpse of the interrelatedness between our interest in personal history research and pedagogy and our own personal histories. We do this because of the informal criticism leveled at those who research the lives of teachers; that too often researchers and teachers expect those they research or teach to reveal elements of their personal lives without researchers revealing aspects their own circumstances and experiences. What follows are a couple of frames from the movies of experiences that shaped our thinking about researching personal histories and their pedagogical usefulness for teacher education.

In the mid 1980s, Gary began explorations into his early experiences of family, school, classrooms, and teachers—elements of his own personal history—as a way of developing more appropriate understandings about his, then, present practice as a new university teacher. Elements of his personal history often played out more powerfully in his teaching than more formal theoretically-based elements of his knowledge about teaching. Why? Methodologically, he fumbled around trying to formally explore his practice and find answers, but felt thwarted because he had no readily available models of inquiry. Coming to the obvious conclusion that his personal history was integrally connected to the conceptualization of his teaching practice seems quite simplistic now. But, then, he was thoroughly engulfed in a sea of positivistic perspectives on researching and thinking about teachers' practices. There were others, he soon discovered, who had advocated a recognition of the

An Introduction

influence of personal histories in the learning to teach process.

In the period that followed, Gary explored ways of making use of elements of a small but burgeoning area of research that placed prominence on **the personal** (specifically, at that time, autobiographical, biographical, and life history research) as a way of understanding the socialization of teachers and the ongoing development of their practices. Traditional life history research approaches imbedded in the disciplines of sociology and anthropology offered potential strategies for exploring the intensely personal elements of becoming and being a teacher.

About this time, Gary was also engrossed in a study of parents who home-educated their children. Much earlier, he, too, had engaged in the practice of teaching his children at home, while in the principalship of an alternative secondary school. In that relatively isolated, rural location there were no facilities for his two kindergarten-aged children, and it was this fact that precipitated his home education activities. Most of the literature on home education in the early 1980s pointed to rather superficial reasons for parents to home-educate, and these did not ring altogether true for Gary. Deciding to use life history research methods, he explored the lives of a group of parents, finding the method particularly illuminating in terms of revealing the power of past experiences on the formation of parents' rationales for their practice. He extended that work to explore the actual teaching methods that parents used, finding that they, too, were largely grounded in their personal histories.

As a result of his grappling with understanding his own teaching practice and the experiences of parents who operated home schools, Gary encouraged preservice teachers to develop personal history accounts as a way of coming to understandings about the assumptions behind both their established and developing perspectives of working in schools and teaching young students. In addition, he embarked on other investigations using the life history method as a central research tool. For example, with preservice and beginning teachers, he examined some of the ways in which their personal histories influenced their thinking and played out in their practice.

More recently, moving to The University of Michigan, Gary extended his exploration of elements of preservice teachers' personal histories and professional development, being particularly interested in developing a pedagogy of teacher preparation that rested in **the personal**. At the time, Diane was finishing research at The University of Michigan that explored the way in which preservice teachers made use of their personal history-based beliefs about literacy. We (Gary and Diane) began working together some before Diane moved to Michigan State University.

Diane's interest in personal histories evolved from her study of literature. As an undergraduate student, she read and studied literature as a way to understand herself, others, and the world beyond her own experiences through the lives of characters in books. This academic grounding in the practice of looking closely at what characters say and do to infer motives, beliefs, and intentions blended

seamlessly with her early experiences sitting in Southern church services listening as pastors worked from the stories in sacred texts outward toward themes for living one's life. For Diane, stories were always the primary medium for knowing about the world and for understanding the perspectives of others.

When she began her professional life as a high school English teacher, she found an ideal context for exploring the connections between what Clandinin and Connelly now give her language to call “storied lives”—responses of student readers. However, what most interested Diane in those days was how students were able to reference past experiences to arrive at conclusions vastly different from her own, sometimes so different as to be “wrong.” The logic of students' errors, deviations, and revelations became increasingly fascinating to her. Their ready abilities to weave together the experiences of characters in books with their experiences as living adolescents, and to inform both their own understanding of themselves as well as their interpretations of those characters, became a source of delight, frustration, and inquiry for her.

When she left high school teaching and began the work of exploring the subject matter of teaching with preservice teachers, Diane brought with her this disposition for looking at how students use their lives to arrive at conclusions about material they encounter in classrooms. She was prepared to notice how, in a very different context—a university course on teaching, for example—preservice teachers re-enacted strategies she had seen high school teachers of literature employ. They used the stories of their lives as students to make sense out of theory-laden, premise-driven ideas they encountered in teacher education coursework. They referenced themselves.

As a teacher educator at Michigan State University, Diane spends time with preservice teachers inviting them to tell the stories they are using to guide their thinking about course work-based ideas. She encourages these individuals to make explicit the personal history files they have collected and out of which they operate when they first begin to think about what they want students to do in classrooms, to find the stories that tell them these actions are desirable. She encourages them to articulate what they imagine learning could be like and what they believe are the barriers to that learning, how teachers are supposed to act versus how we can imagine together that they could act, and to locate the experiences that inform this imagining. She has come to believe that teachers can make real decisions about *Myself-as-Teacher* only when they have an opportunity to look at the differences between what they have always believed teachers should do and what they can now envision that teachers could do. She hopes to help teachers become crafters of their pedagogies and the conscious authors of their lives in classrooms.

As collaborators, our personal histories influence the ways in which we interact and work, the ways in which we view teaching and teachers, the ways we develop our university-based course work and pedagogies, the ways in which we interact with our students, and the manner in which we research our practice and the practice

An Introduction

of others. Yet, in the process, we have each moved to modify the potential negative influences our respective personal histories have on our careers and professional selves, while at the same time magnifying those elements that can move and guide our professional development in particularly beneficial directions.

The general area of research into personal histories has, therefore, helped us each examine both our own assumptions and the beliefs of those whom we teach, and it has done this, sometimes, in profound ways. We are moved by the power of personal histories over the professional lives of potential and new teachers with whom we come into contact. We are so often reminded that we act out of habit rather than thought and that to influence or change our actions, we not only have to become aware of them as habits with roots and purposes in the past, but as conscious choices we can make in the present and future. Because of this, making explicit the connection between personal experiences and professional thinking has potential to influence future practice.

The Purpose of this Collection of Articles

We envisioned that this collection of articles would form a resource for personal history research and practice in teacher education. We wanted to bring together a group of articles that was solidly based in a genre of research that was uniquely personal, one based on the notion that personal histories and personal history accounts—records of experience—provide opportunities for powerful insights into teacher preparation and development. Initially, we envisioned a range of articles that included examples of research and practice set against ones that paid attention to some of the theoretical aspects of personal histories. We have, however, no such theoretical pieces in this collection. Instead, by circumstance, we opted to simply portray the varieties of ways in which personal histories are used, believing that some of the foundation of understandings about personal histories are laid open in the process.

One way to view this collection of articles is as a kind of “Mini-Handbook of Personal History Research and Practice.” If we look at the special issue as a sort of state-of-the-art handbook, then it might divide into three sections: First, the work of Diane Holt-Reynolds, J. Gary Knowles, Connie S. Zitlow and Gary DeCoker, and Ivor F. Goodson and Ardra L. Cole could be grouped in a category called “Personal Histories as Powerful Elements in the Education and Early Professional Development of Teachers: A Medium for Knowing about Practice.” The notion of personal histories being a medium for knowing is potentially very useful. Not only can personal histories be a vehicle through which teacher educators can come to understandings about those with whom they work, but they can be a productive avenue for preservice teachers and others, themselves, to explore in conjunction with their emerging practice.

The articles by Robert V. Bullough Jr. and Andrew Gitlin and Robyn Russell

illustrate the notion of “Personal Histories as a Format for Reframing Professional Action: A Method for Learning about Practice.” For these authors, the use of personal histories are an integral part of learning about practice, an opportunity to step back and review, an opportunity to both critique and reframe practice. In very different settings, then, personal history accounts proved to provide valuable insights into the work of established practitioners.

F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin, along with Margret Buchmann, offer insights about the use and framing of personal histories in vastly different yet related ways, and these could be described as “Personal Histories as Lived Experience in the Making of Professional Meanings: A Milieu for Creating Practice.” In both of these articles, the examination of personal histories as experience is seen as providing opportunities to facilitate substantial rethinking about practice; this is because they challenge us to work on, explore, and question the boundaries of our own experiences. But more than that, they encourage teachers to take charge of their professional development and move beyond the status quo.

Of course, these groupings of the authors’ various works associated with personal histories are misleading, in that they imply that each work falls neatly into one and not another category. In reality, it is impossible to think or talk about personal histories in any meaningful way without integrating each of these perspectives. However, as an organizational rubric, the three categories serve to illustrate some of the ways in which elements of personal history research and practice can inform teacher education and professional development. We see, for example, how the different authors reflect different foci across this field. Some of the authors of the articles, for instance, ask us to pay special attention to the effects of personal histories on inservice and preservice teachers’ learning. Holt-Reynolds offers a case study of one preservice teacher’s use of personal history-based influences and goals for making sense of university-based course work. And, in the process of exploring the thinking of a preservice teacher, Diane raises important questions for herself and other teacher educators. Knowles describes a beginning teacher’s experience in light of just a few elements of her personal history—the teacher’s central metaphor, and the ways in which it played out in her teaching. These are explored as are some other issues associated with pedagogy and research associated with personal histories. Zitlow and DeCoker offer case studies of three African-American students of teaching. These are individuals experiencing a teacher preparation program in a predominantly white, small, parochial institution, and their personal histories play out in some powerful ways. Goodson and Cole allow us access to the voices of second-career beginning teachers as they talk about learning to teach at the community college level.

Others describe in some detail programmatic applications of what we are learning about the powerful influence of personal histories on learning about and changing practice. In these cases, personal histories are potentially powerful as vehicles for altering practice. Gitlin and Russell detail the use of “educative

An Introduction

research” by practicing teachers as a tool for identifying features of their lives as teachers that they want to change. Working within a collaborative setting—university-school district—they make clear the potentials for substantially challenging the status quo. Bullough narrates his experiences as a well-experienced yet always developing teacher educator, using the notion of personal history as the basis for examining his pedagogy and the curriculum foundation for one component of a teacher education program.

The final two articles included here invite us to look at personal histories as processes both synonymous with and informative for lived experiences. Connelly and Clandinin encourage us to explore the recursive characteristics inherent to acts of story telling to name and understand our lives, which then become the practical knowledge out of which we live and so re-story our living. Buchmann’s commentary on what we can learn from the life of Charlotte Bronte brings this issue to a close. Here, she employs the meticulous techniques of historical and literary analysis to move from a story backward to a flesh-and-blood life.

What these authors have begun here—looking at lived experiences, listening to teachers as they transmute their experiences into oral narrative, freezing them into a literature that becomes this special issue of this journal, and publishing them for readers’ analysis—Buchmann’s treatment of Bronte’s fiction brings full cycle. For as surely as lived experiences become a narrative literature, so we hope that readers will find here grist for the mill—the stuff for constructing new ways to see, hear, live and understand their own lives, and the lives of those they teach.

Reference

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