



## **THE TENSIONS OF BEING A RESEARCHER IN THE FIELD IN THE UAE**

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### **Abstract**

Practitioners conducting research in the field may experience tensions that are unique to the UAE because research on teacher educators' professional learning within the United Arab Emirates is an emerging field. My roles as a senior educational professional have inspired my interest in the professional learning of teacher educators and specifically in reflecting on my own professional learning. By enquiring about my own practice, tensions have emerged that may highlight the unique challenges that researchers in the field face in the UAE. This paper adopts a narrative inquiry approach to my personal and professional learning in the United Arab Emirates. In order to make empowering decisions about my professional learning, I have needed to develop a set of researcher dispositions, which has emerged from my awareness of the contextual challenges and opportunities within the UAE education sector.

**Keywords:** UAE, tensions, teacher, educational, professional.

### **1.Introduction**

The multicultural context of the UAE poses a unique opportunity for researchers because access to different communities to explore cross-cultural themes can be difficult, therefore, accessing people is compounded by the international and multi-cultural context of the UAE that "can be intimidating rather than inviting engagement with others" (Ryan & Daly, 2018:3). Research needs to be designed with sensitivity (Ryan & Daly, 2018). The Arab world has been defined as a "high context, communication environment where academics tend to avoid critical debate" (Ryan & Daly, 2018:3), with education described as 'consumerist' and 'not necessarily a gateway to knowledge' (James & Shamma, 2018).

As a complex cultural and economic environment, the UAE has changed significantly due to economic expansion and urbanisation (Sarmadi, 2013; Eroglu, 2014). Ryan and Daly's (2018) paper "Barriers to innovation and knowledge generation" explores the contextual challenges of creating professional knowledge

within the higher education sector in the UAE, and highlights the challenges both of conducting business and of doing social research in the country.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the professional learning of teacher educators was poorly understood, and their learning within the context of their roles, mainly in initial teacher training, was under-researched and undervalued (Ping et al, 2018). Since then, however, the increasing importance and higher status of teacher educators necessitates the acquisition of specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are different to those of teachers (Van der Klink et al, 2017). The majority of research on teacher educators has been located in Europe or in other Western settings, and most of the research has been conducted within initial teacher-training programmes; rarely with teachers in the field (Ping et al, 2018).

Research and knowledge creation may be better facilitated where there are established networks of teacher educators (Ping et al, 2018; Kelchtermans et al, 2018). Examples include research by professional organisations or networks such as the Association of Teacher Educators in the USA, VELON in the Netherlands, AITSL in Australia, and MOFET in Israel (Ping et al, 2018).

Many teacher educators, however, particularly those working outside of higher education settings, continue to operate in the profession without the ongoing professional learning necessary to meet the growing needs of today. These professionals need to acquire specific ‘habits of mind’ and ‘researcherly dispositions’ to enable them to conduct research within the field, and therefore develop their research identity within the profession (Tack & Vanderlinde, 2014). The process of conducting research is also a form of professionalization that can provide deeper insight into the quality of practices (Kreijns, 2019:1).

By operating in the field across different public sector spaces, and not connected to any higher education institution within the UAE, I have experienced several tensions of being a researcher in the field which has led me to question whether distinct professional skills are needed to survive and prosper in the UAE.

### Research Aims

My roles as a senior educational professional in UAE have inspired my interest in the professional learning of teacher educators and specifically in reflecting on my own professional learning. This paper highlights some of the tensions that I have felt whilst adopting narrative inquiry to reconstruct my own professional learning as a teacher educator in the field, in the UAE. I have therefore, operated within my own contexts to develop this research. Throughout my research I have lived in two different cities in the UAE and worked in a number of organisations as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1 my professional roles in the UAE**

Organization	Description	Location	Years
1	Worked as a Partnership Teacher in a British-owned, not-for-profit education management company. Worked in the classroom with teachers to plan, team-teach, observe and collaborate.	Al Ain, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Doha, Qatar	Dec 2008 – Jul 2014

	<p>Took on the role of lead practitioner coordinator to head the Lead Practitioner Programmed in partnership with The University of Warwick</p> <p>Acted as a school improvement partner based in a school, as well as project manager.</p> <p>Was one of three hundred staff working across a range of public and private schools.</p> <p>Operated on a two-year contract initially, and then a rolling one-year contract.</p>		
2	<p>Worked as head of school development for an Indian real estate and development company that owned two for-profit schools in Dubai.</p> <p>Was one of a few Westerners working with predominantly India staff based in Head Office, Dubai.</p> <p>Permanent contract.</p> <p>Responsible for developing two new UK curriculum schools in Dubai.</p>	Dubai, UAE	Jul 2014 – Oct 2016
3	<p>Act as CEO for a British-owned for-profit education management company.</p> <p>Overall responsibility for Middle-East operations.</p> <p>Permanent contract.</p> <p>Own shares in the company.</p>	Dubai, Abu Dhabi, UAE.	Oct 2016 – present
4	<p>Am one of the founders of an early learning centre in Dubai, licensed by the KHDA. Permanent contract.</p> <p>Own shares in the organisation.</p>	Dubai	Jan 2016 – present
5	<p>One of the owners and partners of an education research company that publishes reports on the sector.</p> <p>Permanent contract.</p> <p>Own shares in the organisation.</p>	Dubai	Sep 2015 – present

The details provided about my contract types are relevant as factors that have informed some of my data collection decisions. In the UAE, an overseas employee’s labour contract is directly linked to their residence visa. This means that the stakes have been high for me personally, as success in my roles in Organisations 1 and 2 was vital to maintain my residency and therefore my livelihood in the UAE.

As a result of my roles as a researcher, governor, teacher, teacher educator, mentor, coach and business leader, my professional identity is wide-ranging and fluid. On any given day, I might assume multiple roles, and perform tasks within each professional space. At times, I have struggled to maintain all of these roles because I have been responsible for “building bridges between worlds” (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011:140), as I have been accountable to people in different professional disciplines, namely in business and in education. By crossing different professional spaces in order to “establish continuity” in my roles and to build on my professional understanding (Bakker & Akkerman, 2013), I have responded to unfamiliar challenges, as I engaged in dialogue with different people, and composed an inner dialogue with myself as my values have been challenged. This has strengthened my understanding of the education sector, and how it functions within UAE society, but created personal tensions that I continue to manage.

One possible solution to navigating complex contexts is the notion of ‘boundary crossing’. A boundary is a socio-cultural difference that leads to a discontinuity in action (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Within this research, I have crossed multiple professional boundaries, within the roles I described in Table 1, and I have experienced

multiple discontinuities, and used different methods to access and continue dialogue with my participants.

These experiences on the edge of boundaries, and often between professional spaces can be categorised in four different forms (a) identification, the nature of different worlds working together but with discontinuities (b) coordination of activity flow, which leads to the overcoming of boundaries; (c) reflection on differences between cultural backgrounds, and practices, and an effort to shape and take different perspectives leading to new understandings; (d) transformation, which leads to changes in views and potentially the creation of new in-between practice (Daskolia, 2014:4).

My professional practice has been facilitated by the use of boundary objects such as written reports, visual research methods, learning skills rubrics, and quantitative research data. These objects have enabled me to bridge conversations when I have sensed that a discontinuity was about to happen, and therefore, they have allowed me and my participants to negotiate meaning (Daskolia, 2014:5). These objects have provided ‘interpretative flexibility’ and acted as a means of translation. They haven’t always immediately resulted in continuity as some of the objects I have deployed did not start out with this intention. This skill has been developed throughout this research as my inquiry has evolved, and as I have engaged in different professional spaces. This, along with the learning that has arisen from inter-cultural interactions have been sources of personal development and enrichment. The development of boundary objects, and inter-cultural competence have proved to be essential skills for me as a teacher educator in the UAE, and have helped me to navigate some of the challenges the education sector presents (Huber et al, 2014:24).

The skills involved in intercultural competence include empathy and cognitive flexibility, alongside the ability to adapt one’s behaviour to new cultural environments and act as a bridge or mediator in conversations between people from different cultures (ibid). Inter-cultural competence is the ability to bring about normality in an unfamiliar interaction where individuals from different cultures are disorientated within the conversation and setting. Within such interactions, boundary crossing can enable spaces to be created for professional practice sharing and professional learning (Engestrom, 1987). However, interventions can enable “asymmetries or power differentials” within interactions, as a result of how people interpret the language and cultural elements (Huber and Reynolds, 2014:18). My goal was to bring an understanding of the sociocultural differences that existed between participants, and myself and participants, to avoid discontinuities in interactions (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011:113) and to explore beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions that underpin respectful and equal discourse with participants, demonstrate tolerance of difference and an empathy to understand alternative perspectives (Harrison, 2015).

In light of the particular demographic challenges presented in the UAE, I have reflected on how the society and education community could be enabled to cooperate more closely, instead of living and working in silos (James & Shamma, 2018:507). This research is a narrative of my learning as a teacher educator in the UAE; a country that is grappling with issues related to globalisation whilst trying to maintain its national heritage (Christie, 2010). These issues include a reliance on foreign teachers without any formal teaching qualifications, and Western expatriates working within the public sector attempting to raise teaching standards. This requires the design of novel approaches to professional learning. The lack of an immediate research community to support

my development as a researcher in the field and to provide a critical perspective, in a similar way to the support provided by practitioner research communities in schools, has been on-going challenge of this research and the dearth of high-quality research both in the school and university sectors in the UAE, however, might be a contributing factor to this.

## **2. Literature Review**

A wider analysis of literature on teacher educators indicates that the majority of research has been conducted within Anglophone settings, and most of the authors come from European countries (Livingston & Flores, 2017:1). The range of methodologies adopted over the past forty years include theoretical papers and empirical studies, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods. I have selected some of the more recent literature that either provides contextual similarities to my professional roles, or has theoretical relevance to this study. I have not encountered any literature on teacher educators in the UAE that adopts narrative inquiry as a methodological framework or that explains how teacher educators in the field should best approach professional learning in the context of the UAE.

The transition from teacher to teacher educator continues to be a challenge, as teacher educators are reported to take up to three years to establish their new identity. Within that time, they are required to develop their pedagogy as a teacher educator and grapple with a research identity to be accepted into higher education (Maaranen et al, 2019:212). Teacher educators seeking to develop their research identity may find that their contribution to the research landscape of professional learning is undervalued, especially as they do not always work within academic research settings and are “uneasy residents in academe” (Murray, 2010:198). As ‘semi-academics’ (Vanassche, 2019:1) they may struggle to gain recognition as legitimate consumers and producers of research (Tack & Vanderlinde, 2019:16).

Additionally, teacher educators and practitioners in school settings often find the lack of research culture within their workplaces problematic; a situation that underlines their personal responsibility to conduct their own research in order to develop the necessary research skills (Willemse & Boei, 2013:355). I can identify with these statements, and therefore my connection to academia has been maintained through my doctoral study. The successful development of a research identity may be the bridge to academia, but crossing this bridge may be particularly challenging in a society without a strong research culture, or where research is still an emerging dimension of that society. Studies of teacher educators in Israel identified a range of challenges that may be encountered as they attempt to conduct research and develop a research identity without research structures and support mechanisms (Ben-Peretz et al, 2012; Guberman & McDossi, 2019).

In higher education settings, they operate within an institutional context, often with support structures such as unions, HR departments, and mentors. In developing countries like the UAE teacher educators may not have access to research structures and support mechanisms. There is potential therefore to research ways in which teacher educators might be supported to develop a research identity, which would be well designed, theoretically informed research to generate new insights in the field of teacher education (Murray, 2010:205). The research

should inform discussions around the development of future and existing teachers (Ben-Peretz et al, 2010:113) that contribute to knowledge of inquiry-based reflective models of professional learning (Ben-Peretz, 2012:120).

Kelchtermans et al's (2018) research was conducted with experienced teacher educators in Belgium, Ireland, Israel, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom. All these settings could be classified as developed countries with established education systems; hence the knowledge base that has emerged may be a reflection of those structures. This narrative research has been conducted in a developing setting, so therefore it addresses a gap within the field.

Within emerging research settings in developing countries, the concept of disposition can play an important part in explaining teacher educator behaviours and sensitivity to research opportunities, and their ability to respond to these (Tack & Vanderlinde, 2014). Three studies have framed this problem and explored the process of "inquiry of the mind" in teacher educators (Kreijns et al, 2019) alongside their 'researcherly dispositions' in complex environments with work-related pressures (Tack & Vanderlinde, 2014, 2019). Little is known about the psychological mechanisms of teacher educators, however; or how workplace factors contribute or impede to developing a teacher educator's ability to conduct research (Tack & Vanderlinde, 2019:1).

In psychology, a disposition is defined as a habit of mind or tendency towards a particular pattern of behaviour (Katz & Raths, 1985). The concept raises important questions such as: can dispositions be developed through experience? Are they immutable aspects of someone's character? What is the relationship between an observed behaviour and a disposition? (Nelson, 2015:87). For teacher educators, a researcherly disposition is "broadly defined as a teacher educators' habit of mind to engage with research—both as consumer and producer—to improve their own practice and contribute to the knowledge base on teacher educators (Tack, 2017:181). A teacher educator's researcherly disposition has three inter-related dimensions: 1) the affective dimension, which refers to the extent a teacher educator values a research-oriented approach towards their daily practice, as well as their capacity to be a smart consumer or reader of research; 2) the cognitive dimension, which relates to how well a teacher educator is able to engage in research in his/her daily practice; and 3) the behavioural dimension, which refers to a teacher educator's ability to carry out research activities (Tack & Vanderlinde, 2019:464). The dimensions are inter-related, since it can be assumed that the third dimension cannot be achieved unless the previous two have been (ibid).

The dimensions are helpful to explain different aspects of the teacher educator's research orientation. Teacher educators need to become more aware of the demands of their professional role and of how their "capabilities for conducting research are evolving" (Willemsse & Boei, 2013:357). Tack and Vanderlinde (2014) present a typology, the 'Teacher Educator Researcherly Disposition Scale' (TERDS), which consists of a 20-item questionnaire that can be used by teacher educators' to self-report researcherly dispositions. Within the question, they used first-person statements to explore each participant's self-assessment of their research capability, such as 'I conduct research to improve my own practice' and 'I have enough methodological knowledge to autonomously go through a research cycle (e.g., ask a research question, gather data, analyse and report data, etc.)'. The analytical framework within the study explores teacher educators' inclination to research, their sensitivity and alertness to opportunities, and their ability to follow through and conduct the research. This

analysis enabled me to gain deeper insights into the factors that influence a teacher educator to behave in a certain way and the scale of behaviours can be used as a tool for reflection (Tack & Vanderlinde, 2014:301).

The traits necessary in developing a teacher educator's research identity include having a strong personal interest, a positive attitude, and a sense of urgency, and these traits need to be informed by values and missions; while similarly, "our habits are context responsive" (Nelson, 2015:88). Tack and Vanderlinde (2014) offer a typology of three different types of teacher educators: The Enquiring Teacher Educator, who is defined as lacking professional knowledge and methodological expertise, and therefore lacking in cognitive and behavioural dimensions; The Well-Read Teacher Educator, which refers to a teacher educator who engages in reading academic literature from time to time, and who strongly values research as part of their occupation, but still lacks the behavioural dimension; and The Teacher Educator-Researcher, who demonstrates all three dimensions of researcherly dispositions (cognitive, behavioural and affective). A limitation of the Tack and Vanderlinde's study relevant to this research is that the research was conducted in a developed country, so the results may not be generalizable to the UAE. Nonetheless, I adopted the three dimensions of researcherly dispositions as an analytic tool within the context of my professional roles because the dispositions provide an appropriate psychological tool to frame this research.

Tack and Vanderlinde (2019) incorporate the research on dispositions with work-related pressures, professional growth, and job satisfaction to explain self-determination theory, which suggests that individuals have three basic psychological needs within the workplace: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Teacher educators are more likely to feel fulfilled in their roles when they have a sense of choice and psychological freedom (ibid, 462), and when they feel connected to and valued by others, and when they experience the need to self-report their competence. Further, the 'relatedness' dimension was the most important predictor of teacher educators researching their role.

Kreijns et al (2019) explored the development of a psychometric instrument to measure teachers' researcherly dispositions and improve understandings of teacher educators' sensitivity to research opportunities, along with their capacity to conduct research. In their study, these researchers created a scale with three dimensions to measure a teacher's ability to: 1) value deep understanding, 2) reserve judgment and tolerate ambiguity and, 3) take a range of perspectives and pose focussed questions. As a set of inquiry habits, they are general, and can therefore provide a scale of behaviours to reflect upon to judge one's tendency to conduct research. However, they do not include any inter-cultural elements that may be relevant to the UAE. The scale items are as follows:

Value deep understanding

1. I am critical on whether I did the right thing.
2. I wonder if I can improve my work.
3. I watch how colleagues do things in order to learn from them.
4. I ask others what they think of my work.
5. I try to collect information so I can evaluate my work.

Reserve judgment and tolerate ambiguity

1. I refuse to accept unwarranted assertions and explanations irrespective of how plausible they might be.
2. I have a certain tolerance for uncertainties and ambiguities in offered solutions and explanations,
3. I am willing to accept some uncertainty provided that finally there is insight into proven solutions and reasonable explanations.
4. I can deal with situations wherein solutions and explanations are not yet available.

Take a range of perspectives and systematically pose increasingly focused questions

1. I try, when it comes to sorting things out, to pose increasingly better and more targeted questions.
2. I try to view things from other perspectives.
3. I try to avoid prejudices with regard to solutions and explanations.
4. I try, by means of a systematic approach to investigations, to find evidence for solutions and explanations.

Although Tack and Vanderlinde's (2014) Teacher Educator Researcherly Disposition Scale (TERDS) and Kreijns et al's (2019) Dimensions of Inquiry Habits (Figure 1) are similar, Kreijns et al's (2019) scale appears to explore more psychological and cognitive traits as opposed to the more behavioural traits in Tack and Vanderlinde's scale. Professional learning that facilitates the development of inquiry habits needs to "focus on attitudes, communication, and reflection"; and teacher educators need to continue working on their competencies as life-long learners "who keep in touch with the latest developments and insights in their own field" (Kelchtermans et al, 2018:128). The majority of factors within Kreijns et al's scale have influenced my ability to develop a critical perspective in research, to reflect on my competencies as a lifelong learner, teacher educator and researcher.

Teacher educators may benefit from engaging with international research, and hence to reflect on how they can translate this cultural knowledge into their practice. I have benefited from reflecting on my identity, values and behaviours as this has helped to determine my conceptualisation of this cultural knowledge into a context where I have maintained, as a complex professional roles. Consequently, teacher educators' reasons for engaging in research are a combination of internal and external motivations that can coexist (Guberman & Mcdossi, 2019:7). The motivations may include a personal interest in the research, a desire to contribute more fully to practice, and/or obtain academic recognition and a more influential position within their organisation (Guberman & Mcdossi, 2019:11). However, not all teacher educators in Maaranen et al's (2019:213) study in Finland were interested either research or in the theory underpinning their practice. In both Dengerink et al's (2015:92) study in The Netherlands, and Guberman and Mcdossi's (2019) study in Israel, the minority of teacher educators that were active researchers did also contribute to the knowledge base of teacher education (Guberman & Mcdossi, 2019:2).

In summary, research by teacher educators is recognised as important for their professional development and as



a contribution to the knowledge base within the field (Willemse & Boei, 2013:355). Teacher educators who are involved in research, in order to enhance their own practice, are able to distinguish the benefits for their professional learning, and are more critical of methods and outcomes. Developing researcherly dispositions is of course critical, and specific instruments, such as the self-reporting questionnaire (TERDS) and Kreijns et al (2019) inquiry-habits dimensions may be useful aids in this process. More recent work from Tack and Vanderlinde (2019) emphasizes the importance of feeling fulfilled, connected and valued in the workplace, and that having a sense of ‘relatedness’ is an important predictor of the extent to which teacher educators conduct research within their role.

These studies have helped to shape the focus of my inquiry. In this study, earlier findings suggest that as a teacher educator in the UAE my sense of confidence in interactions with others, and ability to establish professional relationships across the different cultural contexts I operate within are crucial. In seeking to develop a researcherly disposition, deep engagement on a cognitive, affective, and behavioural level is required, alongside a specific commitment to study my own practice and to develop a research identity (Tack & Vanderlinde, 2014:314). Particular contextual challenges I face relate to the lack of value for research in the sector within the UAE and the lack of support systems to encourage it. A further personal professional challenge I face is the ability to manage uncertainty in this rapidly changing, neo-liberal educational context. This theme has not been discussed in great detail within the literature on teacher educators and is particularly relevant to my professional circumstances and central to this narrative inquiry.

### **3.Methodology**

I adopted narrative inquiry as my research methodology because of its theory/practice/reflection cycle of inquiry (Kim, 2016:18) that offers broad access to different disciplinary traditions (ESRC, 2008:7). This methodology has received growing attention as it has challenged traditional research approaches that claim greater validity. It falls within the qualitative research paradigm because narratives are “social, relational, and infused with power relations” (O’Toole, 2018:178), whilst also being “rigorous, creative, and political” (Trahar, 2013:xxi) at the same time.

Narrative as a methodology is concerned with lived experience (Bignold & Feng Su, 2013) which may appear to be contradictory in nature, as any experience by virtue, is lived. Dewey’s (1938) work combined with inquiry “provided the foundations for narrative inquiry, as well as reflective practice” (Craig, 2009:107) as a means for teachers to hold and express their knowledge (Clandinin, 1986). Narrative provides the human mind with a means to make sense of the world (Bruner, 1986; 2002) through processes of reflection (Craig, 2009) that are situated alongside inquiry; thereby serving both as a research method and a form of representation (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990).

Personal perspectives inform our decisions regarding our judgements of situations, people, and choices, and on what we intend as our purpose (Etherington, 2004:25). In the process of drafting this paper, I adopted the following criteria to ensure my research could be evaluated as an authentic narrative:

provide knowledge and information about the cultural context  
be open about myself and about my involvement  
in the context

be transparent about my participants and the context of their lives so that meanings can be generated

be open and transparent about my choices, and about the actions I have taken as a result, in order to bring the story alive and provide depth about the choices made within the specific context

create a sense of continuity and history for the characters involved so that individual stories and the histories influencing them can be determined

structure the document so that the learning episodes are coherent, and for my narrative to be consistent throughout (Etherington, 2004:82)

When these criteria are met, narrative can contain “good stories” that engage readers and capture experiences (Etherington, 2004:82). Crucially, some significant questions have been posed about the criteria for judging social science research. These include: does it make a substantive contribution to my understanding of social life? Does the work have aesthetic merit? Is my work reflexive enough to make me sufficiently visible and allow me to make judgments about the point of view? What is the impact of this work on me? Does the research provide the reader with an account of lived experience? (Etherington, 2004:148). I have attempted to address these questions within this research.

A narrative approach hinges on getting people to articulate their experiences through stories and to reveal more about themselves when they are thinking within the mind-set of story-telling (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007:46). Narrative inquiry represents the relational and interactive nature of human science research, with careful accounting and re-counting of the human story acting as its hallmarks. Narratives convey experience through reconstituting it, resulting in multiple and changeable storylines. These uncertainties of language can even be understood as a route to the unconscious if the unconscious is itself defined (ESRC, 2008:23). A key method of collecting data within this study was the narrative interview. Professional conversations can be facilitated by different enablers such as interview tools that shape the quality and content of the conversation (Timperley, 2018).

The researcher is indeed part of the research, and so building relationships is central to the process, in order to recognise the importance of co-constructing texts about interactions that acknowledge tensions and emotions within the story (Clandinin et al, 2010:84).

Research writing is a social construction, and people have always used structures as a form or template for their representations (Etherington, 2004:84). Journal writing—reflexive research in particular—has been recognised as an important part of qualitative research in general (Etherington, 2004:117). A disclosure of writing practices is therefore a disclosure of privilege and power, as the writer retains the ability to write from their interpretation of reality (Richardson, 2002:414). Qualitative writing is an intimate process, and therefore, the emotions should not be filtered (Etherington, 2004:83). Writing is not simply a means of transmitting information, but also a tool by which I can make sense of the world. It is a subjective exercise that can be used to create understanding (Denzin, 1990:2).

Writing always comes from specific perspectives, and the ‘truth’ it represents may never be completely objective. In written communication, the reader may come to a different understanding, rather than a

misunderstanding (Bolton, 2010). Writing creates closer contact with emotions, thoughts, and experiences (Bolton, 2010), and the writing in narrative inquiry is part of the analysis and the reflexive process (Conle, 2000).

### Selection of participants

The participants in this study were selected as people I had worked with in various capacities and because I was able to access their professional lives.

**Table 2 The Participants**

Name	Position	School/Location	Nationality
Ahmed	School Social Worker	Government school in Al Ain	Egyptian
Stephen	Head of History	Private school, UK curriculum, Dubai	British
Phillip	Deputy Head of P.E	Private school, UK curriculum, Dubai	British
Sarah	Head of Kindergarten (teacher educator)	Private school, US curriculum, Dubai	British
Salem	English Teacher	Private school, US curriculum, Dubai	Syrian
Michael	Head of CPD (Teacher educator)	Private school, UK curriculum, Sharjah	British

Table 3 presents an overview of the data given in each section of the findings, including the organisation I was working for at the time of the data collection; in addition to an indication of the forms my own personal narrative takes as it runs through each section.

**Table 3 Overview of data collection methods**

Findings	Data	Org
A	Personal writing from my blog and Organisation 1 newsletter	1
B	Personal writing from my blog Contextual data in the form of excerpts from a report	1
C	Survey data from the Lead Practitioner Accreditation pre-course questionnaire (43 teachers) Interview data from two teachers in a school in Dubai Narrative accounts from two teachers, one in Sharjah and one in Dubai	1
D	Narrative account from one teacher in a school in Dubai Survey data from the UAE Learning Network (525 teachers)	2

	Personal narrative writing from my diary Excerpts from emails (contextual data) Excerpts from reports (contextual data)	
E	Email communication between myself and a school principal in Dubai	3

## Reflexivity

Throughout my enquiry, I have been reflexive, working between my experiences, data, and the literature. Reflexivity is about coming as close as possible to an awareness of how others experience and perceive us. Being reflexive is about being “aware of our personal responses and to be able to make choices about how to use them” (Etherington, 2004:19), and being able to say with personal certainty how others perceive us. Reflexivity requires the flexibility to “consider deeply held ways of thinking and being” (Bolton, 2010:14). When we are reflexive, we become aware of the limits of our knowledge, and of how our behaviour affects others, including how we may even “marginalise groups or exclude individuals” (ibid). Managing uncertainty is one of the tensions of becoming reflexive. The essential uncertainty associated with reflexivity “makes it difficult to conceptualise, as certainty goes down and as experiential knowledge goes up” (Bolton, 2010:33). Reflexivity is an important part of narrative research as it “demands continued examination and critical appraisal of research practices and processes” (Larty & Hamilton, 2011:231); obliging the researcher to reflect upon and acknowledge their position and involvement in the research as well as their own subjective perceptions. Reflexivity also involves finding strategies to “examine our beliefs, behaviours, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions to strive for understanding of our complex lives and how we relate to others” (Bolton, 2010:13).

Furthermore, reflexivity represents a methodological process of learning about the self as researcher, which enables a greater exploration of personal, theoretical, ethical, and epistemological themes. Qualitative researchers engage in reflexivity “because they have reason to believe that good data will result” (Kleinsasser, 2000:155). The process of reflexivity is iterative, involving the researcher’s intentions, the participants’ views, and opinions that inform the data, as well as “the actual data, and the researcher’s biases that shape the representation of the data” (Pillow, 2010:275). When we are reflexive, and we reflect on these dimensions, we are active in constructing our surroundings, and we “then begin to take circumstances and relationships into consideration rather than reacting to them” (Bolton, 2010:14). As a result, personal, social, and cultural contexts become more prominent (Etherington, 2004:19) as I, the researcher, am implicated in the collection, analysis, and theorising of data; making these processes highly subjective (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012).

Reflexivity is not only a state of mind, but also an ongoing constituent of practice. It is not a technique or curriculum element, but “a pedagogical approach which should pervade the curriculum” (Bolton, 2010:9). The principle of reflexivity is based on the idea that reflective thinking is pivotal to my research. Reflexivity means that as the researcher I must be aware of the impact of my personal experiences while interacting with the other participants in the research. This principle also includes analysis of the ontological presumptions—my presumptions concerning reality. Closely related to this analysis is the process of epistemological analysis; that is; analysis of the presumptions concerning knowledge. For example, as a researcher I may assume that truth is

a state of affairs that prevails in the world surrounding me. On the other hand, I may believe, in line with constructivism, “that the world is constructed psychologically and socially in interpersonal communication” (Angen, 2000:385). As a reflexive researcher I must be aware of the fact that I have created the story. As researcher I expose the process of knowing to the ‘readers’ by stratifying the text in a way that helps them see my way of writing” (Winter, 2002:150). Narrative researchers need to reflect upon their identities, cultural expectations, and subjectivities when they are interviewing and interpreting interactions, and most importantly, when they re-visit the data (Chan, 2017).

As a pedagogical medium, narrative inquiry involves an intentional reflexive process of interrogating one’s own teaching and learning (Latta & Kim, 2009). As a researcher I have been aware of my role as narrator throughout the research process (Elliot, 2005; Plummer, 2001). In summary, reflexivity is the liberating aspect of narrative inquiry, as it frees the researcher to be honest about their perspectives (Bruce, 2008).

An advantage of employing a narrative approach is that it takes into account the subtle changes in individuals and groups of teachers as they shape and are shaped by their experiences in context (Dewey, 1938; Bruner 1990). In this study the interactive narrative approach has allowed my story and the different stories of participants to emerge (Trahar, 2010), in a process of sense-making, representation, construction, and co-construction of lived experiences; with myself as the researcher, playing a central role in this process (Squire; 2008; Wengraf, 2004). At the same time, I realise that the study of relationships is complicated and involves a high degree of empathy and understanding of others within context.

#### **4. Substantive Findings**

##### **A1: Researching in a complex context**

The challenges in the micro-contexts of the research, and my emerging identity, have impacted on my basic needs within my professional roles, such as the need to feel in control, so that I can make a difference, and feel that I have agency. The reflexive process has “been used to interpret the research rapport and the possibilities of data analysis as a relational endeavour (Gemignani, 2011:703). Notably, these experiences have enhanced my ability to take account of “subtle changes to school context [and] also in individuals and groups of teachers as they both shape and are shaped by their experiences in context” (Craig, 2010:109). When conceptualising the complexities of my narrative in the UAE (Squire et al, 2013; Trahar, 2013), I considered both the wider UAE context, and the smaller contexts I have operated in. I agree that knowledge is constructed in personal, shared, and public contexts (Bolton, 2010:52); and when all inquiry is viewed as narrative, it changes the perception of the boundaries and research traditions. As a result of this, my professional attributes have evolved to a point in my professional life where I need to feel in control of my professional situation in order to feel empowered to conduct research.

The challenge of conducting research as a teacher educator in the field within the complex context of the UAE has forced me to adapt to my surroundings. As an outsider to UAE culture, a non-Arabic speaker, and a Western expatriate, I am aware that my interpretations are from the perspective of my values and my perception of the

context. Ryan and Daly (2017) describe the UAE as an environment where engagement and critical thinking are lacking, due to the fact that UAE society is extremely private, and the country has existed in its current state for only forty-five years. By working in this environment, I have been fortunate enough to work with teachers, both in the public sector in Arab settings, and with Arab and Western teachers in the private sector. By conducting research in all these contexts, I feel privileged to have observed the different practices in all of them, and in turn, this experience has enabled me to evaluate my own limitations within the sector, and in the society at-large.

### **Substantive Findings B1: Personal agency as an on-going tension**

One of the most significant attributes that I believe has emerged from this study is my capacity to demonstrate agency. As a result of my awareness of my standing as a UAE resident who is not able to gain citizenship to the country, and due to my awareness of the nature of limited term contracts, government funded projects, and the fragility and uncertainty of the sector, I have personally sought agency throughout this research.

This may appear to be an on-going personal tension, as on one hand, I have sought to be in control of my personal situation, as a result of my self-awareness, but at the same time, I have sought challenges in un-familiar roles, and workplaces. With each experience, I have learnt about the contextual and structural challenges of conducting research and working as an education professional in the UAE. This has motivated me to learn more about each dimension of the sector so that I am able to make informed decisions about my professional career, and therefore, more educated decisions about my learning, and the learning of others.

At times, I have strategically anticipated opportunities and I have acted in an entrepreneurial manner in conducting this research, as my position as a business leader demands that I am alert to opportunities and responsive to the sector, which is primarily market-based. I have also managed personal uncertainties as I have transitioned professional roles from ones that were primarily focussed on education to others that combined the commercial and educational aspects, therefore requiring a broad set of competencies.

Conducting this research has led me to reflect on my role and how my personal narrative has evolved. My research aims have emerged by reflecting on the professional attributes and research skills I have gained, whilst considering Kelchtermans (2018) model which is broad, and dynamic in nature, and Tack and Vanderlinde's (2014, 2019) and Kreijn's (2019) researcherly dispositions which are accessible and they have enabled me to reflect on the psychological challenges of conducting research in the UAE. Other teacher educators may benefit from reflecting on these frameworks in a reflexive manner. This may help others to navigate un-familiar contexts whilst attempting to support teachers and teacher educators' professional learning.

## **5. Conclusion**

As the UAE's education sector is unique in its design, structure and stakeholders, the necessity to cross boundaries has been apparent to me, in order to be in control of my own personal situation. The implication has meant that at times, the cognitive load I have sought has been significant, as professional spaces that were un-familiar has meant that I have taken on the additional responsibility of learning within that space, whilst

maintaining an identity from another.

Operating between these spaces has meant that I could have been rejected from all of them, and not fully accepted for not adhering to the tacit rules of professional practice. However, as I have committed to operating in all of these spaces, I personally feel empowered because I see how the sector is structured, and how decisions are made. Further search on my personal boundary crossing might be an obvious future development of this research, which I could not foresee at the start of this research.

Research on teacher educators in the UAE is sparse, despite the size and growth of the sector. Without the capacity to access teachers, and therefore, form relationships, I would not have been able to explore the themes within this study. Without the experience of managing uncertainty in my professional roles, I may not have developed my awareness of the context, or of the limits of my knowledge and influence within it. Taken together, these professional attributes, I believe, form the connecting bridge between my roles as teacher educator and academic researcher in the UAE.

As a matter of my own personal responsibility, I have striven to acquire these attributes, which include the ability to conduct research, a sense of opportunism and urgency, and a set of more highly tuned sensory skills. Together, these have enabled me to conduct effective research and produce meaningful findings, whilst working in multiple professional roles in the UAE.

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