



THE POTENTIAL OF STORY AS A RESEARCH METHOD TO CAPTURE THE LEARNING OF TEACHERS IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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Abstract

The United Arab Emirates has been better known for its knowledge dissemination rather than knowledge creation within the education sector (Ryan & Daly, 2017). The overall research environment might be obsessed with numbers because they create an illusion of objectivity (Damodaran, 2017). Story, as a methodological tool, has not been widely used across the sector, and this research method may be more appropriate for capturing the lives of teachers in the UAE. Story has the potential to capture the emotions, values and the human elements of the teachers working within the sector, and their lives here in the UAE. Stories that people tell should not be regarded as simple reflections of experiences or as transparent windows of their life envisaged through dialogue. This paper aims to offer new insights into the professional learning of teachers within the UAE education context. As the UAE has ambitious plans to be a knowledge driven economy, research should not be purely driven by quantitative targets that ultimately do not capture the essence of the context, and the emerging stories of the teachers that operate within the sector.

1. Introduction

The multicultural educational context of the UAE poses a unique opportunity for researchers. Access to different communities can be difficult, and, therefore, research needs to be designed with sensitivity because the context of the UAE “can be intimidating rather than inviting engagement with others” (Ryan & Daly, 2017:3).

The UAE is a country that is better known for knowledge dissemination than knowledge creation, due to its relative history (Ryan & Daly, 2017). Research in the UAE is therefore not listed very high in the global research rankings. The Arab world has been defined as a “high context, communication environment where academics tend to avoid critical debate” (Ryan & Daly, 2017:3), with education described as ‘consumerist’ and ‘not necessarily a gateway to knowledge’ (James & Shammas, 2018). This lack of research has implications for the “quality of academic researchers attracted to the UAE”, and consequently for the research environment overall (Ryan & Daly, 2017:2). This has motivated me to develop strategies in order to encourage knowledge creation and critical debate within the teaching community, where I have experienced similar challenges.

Throughout Western research on education, there has been a relentless focus on the ‘truth’ through numbers. Numbers can add a layer of certainty and perceived credibility to professional conversations, as numbers are less ambiguous than words and language and can bridge language barriers (Damodaran, 2017). Numbers can be framed in certain ways to get certain responses, and can create “the illusion of objectivity” (Damodaran, 2017:46). As my roles have involved working with investors and teachers from the Middle East and South Asia, I have seen a high degree of emphasis placed on the use of numbers to present ‘truth’. Within the business world, numbers offer a “sense of precision and objectivity and provide counterweight to storytelling” but this precision is often misplaced (Damodaran, 2017:4).

Stories, on the other hand, may be remembered more than numbers because they have “memorable features” (Damodaran, 2017:13) that can help us to “comprehend rich experiences” (O’Toole, 2018:177). As humans, we do not store experience as data, like a computer, “we ‘story’ it and we then remember the story” (Bolton, 2010:3). Stories can be used as artistic devices to prompt reflection, and crucially, transcend time, which adds to their significance (Kim, 2016). Stories hold significant promise for qualitative researchers because they are particularly suited as a linguistic tool in which human experience can be expressed (Polkinhorne, 1995). As stories often come from a personal perspective, it is difficult to argue against them as representations of because stories are “connected to human emotions and retold as representations of them” (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007:462).

Research Aims

By conducting research in this environment, and using a research method that is relatively new in the UAE, I aim to offer new insights into the learning of teachers within the UAE education context.

Literature Review

Although story and narrative inquiry are connected, there is also a clear distinction between the two (Kim, 2016). We have used stories for centuries, and retelling stories has been central to how people and communities have formed their identities over time (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007:36), and we have now returned to valuing local stories and lived experience (Etherington, 2004:27). Stories cross cultures, nationalities, places, and timeframes (Trahar, 2008), and have been used as a means of teaching religion, values, history, traditions, and customs, to help us understand who we are and show us “what legacies to transmit to future generations” in order to instil hope and stimulate resourceful thinking (Schram, 1994:176). Some communities, such as those that seek greater understandings through written texts and/or religious texts and cultures with strong oral traditions may be more amenable to stories and value their significance. Stories are not only fluid, but are shaped by “the temporal notion of becoming, and link knowledge, context, and identity” (Caine et al, 2013:581); helping people to shape their lives and interpret their past (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Stories like narratives, are open to interpretation but definitively, “narratives constitute stories and stories rely on narratives” (Kim, 2016:9); although the terms are often interchangeable in the literature (Moon, 2010).

We naturally talk about ourselves and others in a storied way. Stories are intertwined with other stories, and we tell, retell, and affirm in our own eyes and in the eyes of others (Bolton, 2010:31). In telling a story, the narrator takes responsibility for making the relevance of the story clear—so that meaning is created between storyteller and listener (Trahar, 2010:260). Writing out stories openly about personal interests is an enterprising process that, in turn, drives data generation (Conle, 2000:198) because within the writing process, stories emerge that are personal interactional, historical, institutional, and discursive (Riessman, 2008:105). This attracted to me to narrative inquiry, as a research method.

Narrative research may therefore simply include “interruptions of reflection in a storied life” (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007:464). Storied lives may have unplanned interruptions such as an unexpected event that disrupt someone’s identity, and thereby change that person’s outlook (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007). There is a distinction between thinking about stories and thinking with stories. The concept of thinking with stories is meant to challenge and build upon institutionalised Western research practices, in both the quantitative and qualitative fields. In other words, thinking about stories “conceives of narrative as an object”, whereas “[t]hinking with stories is a process” where we allow narrative to guide the process (Huber et al, 2014:226).

Story is a gateway through which a person sees their world, and when they interpret events, places and people, it becomes personally meaningful (Trahar, 2008, Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007). Storytelling is more complex than often thought and it is important to recognise that “stories can be used as a verifying mechanism, as a means of confirming or defending truths, and...as a means of control” (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007:462). Storytelling tends to be closer to actual life events than other methods of research that are designed to “elicit explanations” (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007:464). In this sense, narrative inquiry goes beyond telling stories; it may reveal “multi-dimensional meanings of society, culture, human actions, and life” (Kim, 2016:6).

People resort to a mode of communicating they are familiar with, and in this sense, they draw upon their cultural repertoire of stories, and synthesise these into personal stories. In the act of doing so, people “engage in creating and constructing certain kinds of self in specific social contexts” (Sparkes, 1999:20). In short, narrative is therefore a form of knowing, and also telling, so “a narrator, then, could mean one who knows and tells.” (Kim, 2016:6).

There are many potential benefits to adopting narrative inquiry (Phillion, 2002). Narrative has the potential to represent the nuances of communication, joy, happiness, sadness, and hope in people’s lives. It can reveal the specific factors that sit beneath contexts and people to “shed light on everyday issues and feelings” (Bolton, 2010:91). As narrative inquiry does not reduce human experiences to transactions, it can offer us insights into the spiritual depths of human

experience. It also “emphasizes the importance of claiming one’s voice, while also respecting and empowering the human person” (Bruce, 2008:324) through “an essential strategy of human expression.” (Kim, 2016:6). Narratives can be “seductive” and “their plots draw us in shaping the stories we tell often in spite of our experiences” (Richardson, 2002:414). Narratives do not mirror, but refract the past (Riessman, 2005:8) because narratives are “the intimate study of an individual’s experience over time and in context(s)” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000:21) that reveal their “beliefs, desires, theories, values, and so on” (Bruner, 1991:9).

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). This approach thereby has the potential to uncover uncomfortable truths as well as valuable insights into the “story in our lives that teaches us, makes us who we are, and can change us” (Nielsen, 1998:99).

Methodology

As narrative research is still a maturing field with few tight methodological and definitional prescriptions (Latta & Kim, 2009:684) and no “overall rules about suitable materials, modes of investigation” (Andrews et al, 2013:1), the onus is on the researcher to articulate how they gathered and analysed the data in a transparent manner.

Narrative research falls within the interpretivist and social constructivist paradigm of social research. My use of narrative inquiry is informed philosophically by a social constructivism. I believe that reality is socially constructed, and accordingly, we subjectively determine our behaviour through this by responding to people, places, situations, and contexts (Etherington, 2004:29). This epistemological stance confirms that knowledge “is socially constructed and always fallible, and, as such, there can be no theory-free knowledge: there are multiple ways of knowing” (Smith & Sparkes, 2006:178). The epistemological contexts relevant to this research are the settings outside the classroom but within schools that have been used to provide teachers—in non-judgmental ways—with opportunities to reflect on their careers and professional learning in the UAE (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995).

Narrative data has often been collected and presented through lived experiences, and then revisited and re-presented (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The approach is fluid, open-ended, and at times, complicated, as it involves experiences that are gathered from written, verbal, oral, and visual data from different cultural perspectives. The meanings are therefore both hidden and visible; attached to experiences that involve beliefs, both social and personal (Josselson, 2006, Trahar, 2013).

In framing this research, I started with my experiences rather than with theory (Huber et al, 2014; Kim, 2016; Bold, 2012; Trahar, 2010). In personal narrative inquiry, the motivation is therefore likely to come from the writer’s expertise and interests, together with the needs of the field, and is ultimately informed by the researcher’s values.

Based on my knowledge of the education context, I have taken an open-ended stance with my research design, which challenges conventional research traditions. This iterative process since the beginning of the study has taken greater shape with my emerging understanding of my learning within the context. Inquiry is a negotiated process, and the process of thinking narratively and inquiring involves an ontological commitment (Caine et al, 2013). My research design lacks linearity because the data is connected to my thinking and values as well as to my experiences, and decisions.

In talking to teachers and recognising the challenges they face within the context, I observed the potential and value in creating a narrative about the professional space in which we were operating. This task could not be approached through traditional forms of knowing. While narrative approaches are not appropriate for studies of large numbers of nameless and faceless subjects, they can capture the rich and deep nature of experiences and the nuances of my personal narrative and the narratives of my participants more meaningfully than other methodological frameworks (Riessman, 2005:8).

Additionally, as the author of these narratives, I am aware of the privileges and limitations of my writing. A writer has the privilege of entering the life of another person to gain an in-depth understanding of “their feelings, thinking, perception, and memories” (Bolton, 2010:17). All interpretations are provisional, however; made by positioned subjects who are prepared to know certain things and not others; analyses therefore are always incomplete (Andrews et al, 2013:205). In this study, my approach to writing is informed methodologically by Sparkes and Stewart (2016) who highlight the value of auto-biographical writing. This form of writing allows self-understanding to emerge over time, and has clear connections to narrative research and thematic analysis.

As my professional narrative has evolved, so too have the narratives of my participants. The way in which narratives are constructed is a key consideration in making sense of lived experiences (Bruner, 1990; Squire, 2008). It is important not only to recognise the possibility of a researcher bias, but also to acknowledge that the narrative account is a representation; not a direct observation (Clandinin, 2010:82). It takes time to develop trust—an essential aspect of the relationship—to ensure the “integrity of the stories told” (Chan, 2017:32) in an “ethical approach” (Charmaz, 2016:45). This integrity can easily be compromised when an outsider to the participants’ community enters the scene, and probably causes both the researcher and researched to demonstrate behaviours that are un-natural. In this view,

the researched and the researcher are seen to exist in time and in a particular context, each bringing with them a particular history and worldview. They are not static but dynamic, and so growth and learning are an intrinsic part of the research process (Clandinin, 2006:14).

In narrative inquiry the researcher comes into contact with “the intellectual territory of another way of thinking or working” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000:21). Tensions sometimes create competing or conflicting stories, and the researcher, as the one who “interpret[s] the story in order to locate the truth” should be aware of this (Clandinin et al, 2010:82). The researcher also needs to uncover the participants’ personal practical knowledge (Kitchen, 2005).

Narrative interviews

A key method of collecting data within this study was the narrative interview. The interviews were central to the kinds of stories told and collected (O’Toole, 2018:180). Professional conversations can be facilitated by different enablers such as interview tools that shape the quality and content of the conversation (Timperley, 2018). The co-constructed nature of interviewing and analysis was a vital aspect of this study enabling “further insights ... to be revealed and progressed” through listening (Taylor, 2017:103). Involving an exploration, both for the researcher and the participants, the co-constructed nature of interviewing and analysis is therefore a vital aspect of this study. As the participants were telling their stories, I listened and interacted with them flexibly to allow the stories to be related as fully as possible (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007:464).

I conducted this research with the assumption that I have co-constructed the participants’ narratives and the participants have re-presented their experiences (Riessman, 2008:3). I define this approach as ‘conversational sensitivity’ because the set-up and style are crucial to the interaction that takes places. This required cultural sensitivity, given the cultural diversity of the participants. In the narrative development process, I also became my own narrator whilst constructing the narratives of others (ESRC, 2008:37). I am aware that my interactions with the participants happened in a particular place in time, and they may have resulted in changes to those participants and their environments.

Collecting data involved the use of unstructured interviews and the exploration of texts and field notes. I felt that a single narrative would not be sufficient to unpack a participant’s narrative, as it might not take into account the range of contexts where a teacher or teacher candidate must self-position (Rice, 2011:151). Good narrative research through interviews entails interpretation, which begins during the interview itself. The interpretation can be fluid, but requires careful listening and engagement, and even then, the transcripts may not accurately demonstrate the context or the unfiltered truth (Riessman, 2008:3).

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). For clarity, a biography is always written in the third person, and autobiographical writing, in the first person (Sparkes & Stewart, 2016:113).

Data analysis

In light of the diversity of narrative research, there is no single approach to narrative research (Squire, 2008). How the analysis is done depends once more on the researcher’s idea of what constitutes ‘narrative’ (ESRC, 2008:34). Life stories need to be subjected to multiple forms of analysis as the stories are multi-dimensional and complex; they are constructed, and change with time and context (Smith & Sparkes, 2005:214). Data “must be translated into words so that they can be accounted for and interpreted” (St. Pierre, 1997:179, cited in Byrne, 2017:39), but certain elements may be difficult to capture, such as senses, emotions, and responses.

Narrative research can be difficult to interpret because story telling exists in “different layers, such as the interview”, in the re-presentation of the interview; or in the reflexive space between (Bolton, 2010:89); where the “interpretation has happened, and the retold story” (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007:466). The “interpretations of events can always be otherwise usually expressed as a kind of uncertainty” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000:31); an uncertainty that is often held up as another distinguishing feature of narrative research (Trahar, 2010:259). Narrative forms of representation can be effective “ways of representing results or findings in various qualitative and quantitative methodologies and are increasingly seen as an effective approach to knowledge translation and knowledge mobilization” (Caine et al, 2013:575). The implications of this are clear: our interpretations can only ever stem from the vantage point from which we see the world, which is always in a state of change.

The analysis of stories generally involves a multi-layered approach with a focus on form (how the story is told), content (what is said in the story), and context (wherein the story is produced and told), in order to illustrate the dimensions of temporality, defined as the “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000:50) in which the researcher moves between the different dimensions. Accordingly, the narratives of experience are constructed within the dimensions of ‘personal/social’ and ‘place’ that constitute temporality (O’Toole, 2018:177). The researcher can move from the outside to the inside during the data collection, analysis and representation stages

(Byrne, 2017:38). By its nature, narrative analysis is sometimes slow and painstaking; requiring attention to subtleties such as the nuances of speech, the organisation of a response, the relations between the researcher and subject, and the social and historical contexts. It is cultural narratives that make ‘personal’ stories possible. In a reflexive turn, researchers at the same time produce their own narratives by relating their biographies to their research materials (Riessman, 2002:6). Furthermore, different modes of thematic, structural, and interactional analysis may be appropriate within narrative research (Riessman, 2005; Kim, 2016; Bold, 2012). I have used elements of all three types of analysis and my interpretations of interactions in the data I have collected represent my choices made at a moment in time, and remain a constant source of material.

Participants

I selected two participants that I have worked with in a professional capacity in order to explore their professional lives over a four year period. I maintained a professional relationship with them but I built trust in order to gain access to their personal stories. The names of both participants have been anonymised to protect their identity.

Sarah, a white British national, worked in a private, for-profit international school located in Dubai (School A). Initially employed on a two-year contract, and then on a one-year rolling contract. Sarah was an unqualified teacher, with a B.A. in Physical Education. The school, which followed a state curriculum from the US, was classed as ‘acceptable’ by the KHDA in its inspection report in 2013. The school owner was Lebanese and the nationalities of the students ranged from American, Syrian, Palestinian, Lebanese, Emirati, South African, French, Egyptian, and Canadian, with no single nationality dominating. The teaching staff were equally diverse; however, many had no teaching qualifications. In the school’s 2013 KHDA report, it stated that the school’s teacher turnover rate was relatively high, at 34 percent.

Salem worked in School C on a two-year contract. The school, which followed the US curriculum, was part of a group of schools owned by an Emirati family. The school, which had opened in 1979, had received a ‘good’ rating in its DSIB 2016 inspection, and the vast majority of the teachers were from Lebanon. The student population was entirely Arab, with some Emiratis also attending the school. A candidate for NEASC accreditation, the school had not yet been awarded the status as of 2016. In its 2016 inspection report, it was noted that “teachers have good subject knowledge and give clear explanations in lessons. They assess students’ attainment and progress effectively. Some teaching is of very good or better quality. Overall, teaching and assessment are good.”

Findings

Narrative account of Salem

Salem was committed to completing his Masters after completing the programme but he struggled with the Masters course, as the war in Syria had affected his family. I felt a sense of responsibility and obligation to support him because of his personal situation, and because he was committed to gaining a qualification to create a better life for himself and his family. The experience of re-connecting with him exposed me to another worldview, and to a philosophical viewpoint that enabled me to gain a perspective of a teacher seeking support but who had ongoing personal struggles. I asked him how the war in Syria affected his personal and professional life as a teacher in the UAE, and he commented:

More than 300,000 Syrians have lost their lives and more than 11 million have fled their homes in seven years of civil war. The realities of day-to-day life for ordinary Syrians tend to get lost amongst the depictions of the horrors of the conflict, the complicated fault-lines and political agendas. Of course, the war that is happening has lots of negative effects even on us, people who are considered away from the whole situation as bodies but our souls are connected deeply to homeland, the impact lead me to always have an anxiety, worries, frustration and even depression sometimes. Seeing all the loved ones in such a place full of hate and danger and watching them go away without being able to do anything is truly heart breaking, but my faith in Allah, close friends and holding on to hope helped me go through my learning journey, knowing nothing is impossible if you put for yourself an aim and work your heart and soul to reach it. Being positive all the time won't let you feel shallow when you face something that might bring you down. To overcome all hardship and severe circumstances is a great challenge I accepted remembering a good proverb, when there is a will there is a way.

Salam was very conscious that as a Syrian national, he might be perceived differently by others, and could be limited in where he could reside due to the political situation. I was aware that the stories he shared with me might be conditional, and that he might not have been telling me everything that sat beneath them, but I still considered his personal situation when I interacted with him because he decided it was important to tell me about it. As my behaviour towards him was influenced by my aggregated knowledge of him, it could therefore have been both biased and self-confirming because his story was “connected to human emotions” (Savin-Baden & Niekerk 2007:462). During a conversation, I asked Salem about the challenges of living in Dubai:

Finances are a major concern to anybody looking for a new life overseas and [the] cost of living takes...the vast

majority of expenditure. The cost of education becomes the crucial point of discussion. I feel the heat of increased fees in schools and universities. Learners have no choice but to accept whatever the case might be because professional learning is needed regardless its costs.

As researchers, we become more “cultured when we take the time to learn the nuances of our research, including the people that form the focus of it” (Phoenix, 2013:74). This implies that I needed to be very clear about my position and awareness of myself with my participants, as I collected and analysed the data, and interpreted it from the perspective that I had already influenced the data from my presence and purpose.

When I worked with Salem, I was careful to use language that was clear and coherent and I frequently checked on his understanding. Salem’s most memorable professional experience was his visit to the UK. We organised a trip for teachers and school leaders from the UAE to visit schools in the UK and attend an education conference. Commenting on the experience, Salem noted:

The most memorable experience of learning [was] when my school sent me abroad in 2009 to [the] United Kingdom to attend [a] SSAT Educational conference, which was a turning point in my life and inspired me...to apply what I have seen through my field trips to some UK schools in London and Birmingham. I used to have motivations toward achieving more effective classroom management and a better learning environment. This experience changed me as a teacher. I came to understand that differentiation; critical-thinking questions are very important in education and have [a] positive impact on the students’ attainment. I am committed to providing a safe, supportive and positive environment which promotes learning and [to] the achievement of successful outcomes following school welfare policies.

In my conversations with Salem, it was clear that his visit to the UK had a profound effect on his outlook and on his worldview. The trip enabled him to reflect on his teacher identity in various ways as well as on his beliefs about teaching. He was also strongly motivated to complete the accreditation programme prior to the visit, and then later his Master’s in education. At the same time, Salem was acutely aware of his fragile place within UAE society—perhaps because of his personal struggles—and his position as an Arab working within the private sector in Dubai. As he explained:

I’ve been fortunate in my own university education; I had wonderful professors. I want to be that same kind of teacher—who not only encourages students to learn—but also sets an example that inspires others to teach. I can work and study effectively in most environments regardless of my age [and of any] sickness [or] disasters in my homeland that face me. I am ambitious to get high qualifications to extend my knowledge to [improve my] teaching in schools or colleges.

The school was popular, especially within the Arab community. There were waiting lists for entry, and the school sought validation from the KHDA to confirm the quality, as the owners felt that their overall approach to education was misunderstood by the regulator. Salem explained that the external validation from the KHDA was one of his biggest professional frustrations:

One of the most common causes of unfulfilled expectations is getting [the grade of] ‘satisfactory’ in the KHDA report for many years. Success starts with having a solid plan to guide school improvement efforts. My school improvement process consists of many critical components. These elements sound simple enough in theory, yet putting them into practice can be quite challenging. KHDA Inspectors have already blamed the school’s unusual policy, which has now been changed, for low attainment among students.

His identity was a common talking point. When I tried to focus on his individual approach to learning, and his role, Salem said:

I consider myself as a teacher-leader because I played a wide range of roles to support my school and student success. Whether these roles are assigned formally or shared informally, they build the entire school's capacity to improve. Because teachers can lead in a variety of ways, many teachers can serve as leaders among their peers.

My role as a teacher is to guide and encourage. This vocation requires patience...perseverance and [a] strong commitment to professional learning through sharing the good practice.

I was not sure if he was being honest here or was just trying to please me.

I also demonstrate my commitment to the quality teaching model by applying the framework in my lessons to ensure they are meaningful and engaging for students.

Salem argued that his role as an educator was:

...to counsel students, help them learn how to use their knowledge and integrate it into their lives so they will be a valuable member of society. Teachers are encouraged to really tune in to how each individual student learns and try to really challenge and inspire them to learn.

Salem was eventually awarded a master’s degree from the University of Warwick. I sensed how important it was for him to gain the qualification. It made me question the purpose of learning for teachers like Salem, where there are very real implications for his livelihood and his family’s life. He rarely spoke about the actual content of his work; and he viewed the experience as transmissive in nature but highly valuable in its outcome for his personal situation.

His professional growth was entirely driven by external factors (Taylor, 2017), and achieving his qualifications enabled him to have agency. I asked him about the significance of the qualification to him personally and to his family, and then his professional life. He responded with:

Reaching a long life goal can be really tough. The path has been filled with pain, stress, endurance, almost giving up, nervous breakdowns, exhaustion, criticism, challenges, obstacles.....yet, somehow for some reason - it feels like all that was meant to be. That it's all OK. Because, when I see a person in life I was able to make a difference -- all those concerns just vanish. A feeling of intense joy sweeps over me. The pain doesn't matter anymore. Spiritually I am a role model to my family members to get a master degree at the age of 50 regardless all hardship I faced.

It provided a variety of opportunities to internationalise my experience, and develop my professional skills and become more professional in my job as a successful teacher and by applying what I learnt into the real world. Teachers learn best by studying, doing, and reflecting; by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see. This kind of learning cannot occur in college classrooms divorced from practice or in school classrooms divorced from knowledge about how to interpret practice. Professional development strategies that I gained through my learning through Warwick University led me to succeed and the good practice that has a positive impact on students' attainment.

As a result of the new teacher-licensing regulations, Salem is mandated to complete compulsory teacher training and an exam to determine if he can gain a teacher license, and he must undertake a language course to remain in his position despite the fact that he has a Master's degree from the University of Warwick. If he fails to fulfil these requirements, he will not be able to teach in the UAE, and it may affect his residency. I asked Salem how this would affect him personally and he commented:

The KHDA's new teacher licensing regulations mean that every teacher must hold a KHDA-approved teaching qualification in order to be granted a UAE Teacher License. This requirement is most likely to affect negatively teachers who do not have a formal teaching qualification and those teachers whose qualifications come from a university or training institute which isn't recognized by the KHDA.

Narrative account of Sarah

In order to get around the local labour laws, and due to Sarah's lack of a teaching qualification, the school—unable to obtain a visa for her as a teacher because she did not possess a teaching qualification—processed a Labour contract for her as a teaching assistant. She was passionate about sport and the opportunities it provided for young people. However, due to staff shortages and a lack of teacher retention in other areas of the school, she was asked to work as a kindergarten teacher, without any previous experience. This starting point of a teacher educator being unqualified as a teacher is therefore not included in the research, which is based on routes that are more conventional. The department was rated as 'unacceptable' by the KHDA when she joined, and despite her lack of experience, she did not view the department in a positive light. The interview extract below illustrates her perception:

When I started my role, the Department was lacking in many areas and as a result the level of education offered and the learning environment was very poor and in some cases unsatisfactory.

As a novice teacher in a foreign country, not wanting to be viewed negatively by her peers, Sarah made a concerted effort to research what she deemed to be best practice. She valued her professional identity, perhaps more so than other teachers I worked with because of the school's 'unsatisfactory' label. She was aware of how her status, due to a lack of professional qualifications, may be viewed by others; and this factor had been a strong motivating factor for her to learn and demonstrate her capability within the school. Sarah articulated her insecurities in leading others as they may learn about her status, and as a result of this, she wanted to be even better at her role. Her approach to professional learning had been purely self-motivated, not driven by the need to get qualifications for their own sake, and at the same time, she ensured that her professional knowledge was current and in line with that of her 'qualified' colleagues. In this further interview extract below, she explains this predicament:

I have been encouraged to learn for myself, to research and become actively involved in early years education in Dubai in order to further my subject knowledge. The only time I found that the lack of qualification affects me is when I am knowingly leading teams of staff and I am aware that some of them are more qualified than I am but that is probably more of a personal concern...than professional. However it has led me to want to be extremely good at my job so that my professional status and qualifications never get called into question.

Sarah's comments illustrate her commitment to developing a deeper understanding about her role. She was aware of the type of encounters and relationships that may affect her work, and committed to overcoming any difficulties arising from these. She indicated that she had been 'encouraged to learn for myself, to research' to inform her teaching practice. She had been "actively involved in early years" teaching in Dubai, showing a relatedness to others within her peer network. This demonstrates a high degree of personal responsibility at the same time. Sarah leads a team of teachers and works with students and parents, although she is unqualified. The need to be feel competent in her role has motivated her so her "professional status and qualifications never get called into question". The work-related

psychological pressure of performing in her role without having the foundation of a qualification may have created a level of uncertainty and challenge but she is able to manage these challenges. She was aware that her success had come at a price and that she may not be able to translate it to another setting because of this lack of appropriate qualifications.

In return for her loyalty to the school, Sarah was rewarded with greater responsibilities, and promoted to the role of Kindergarten Coordinator, with responsibility for 24 teachers. I saw similarities between her level of responsibility and my own when I first moved to the UAE. Her teacher identity had never been established in the UK, so the formative training that professionals receive before starting their teaching career had not prejudiced her approach, either to learning about the profession or to her own professional learning. Her learning had not followed a path that many other teachers or teacher educators in the international sector or the UK sector had taken; and she had not worked in or received any training in the US curriculum before undertaking the role. She had, in essence, started a new career in a different country, without any training, with a curriculum different to the one she was educated in, and had also been thrust into a leadership role. I empathised with her and admired her courage. Because of this context, she had not brought the usual prejudices or assumptions about professional practice into her role as a starting point. Subsequently, with her enhanced role, Sarah was driven to learn more about the profession and on how to improve the quality of her teachers and the outcomes for the children. She noted:

It has made me more determined to achieve. I have been very fortunate that as a result of my performance, I have been given yearly promotions in terms of responsibility and management. I have therefore had numerous challenges and by proving that I have the capacity to lead, I have been rewarded with [further] increased responsibilities.

In Sarah's situation, the context fuelled her learning and professional growth. Although her learning was situated, and much of her knowledge was tacit, she was able to learn on the job and demonstrate progression within that specific context. It is important to note that I did not learn or engage in these conversations with Sarah immediately within my role, it took time for her to open up and share her insecurities. Despite us both being British, I was an outsider in this school context, and I was the perceived expert charged with improving the school. I could have highlighted her lack of qualifications as a limitation in her role but I observed her expertise within the context, and I relied on her situational understanding of the people and environment for my own success within my role. Although qualifications can be significant in career terms and represent a sign of commitment (Eraut, 2008:6) as well as establishing a benchmark of standards; for schools that are struggling, this situation highlights that there is a balance between recognising personal success stories that have emerged as a result of the context, and recognising which new regulations to implement in order to improve the outcomes within the context. I probed Sarah about her predicament, and she commented:

Whilst I fully understand that qualifications are key in terms of academic achievement I have also experienced in my school working with both qualified and non-qualified individuals that real-life experience can sometimes be far more rewarding and beneficial than achieving an extra qualification. Skills required to be in a management role can't be taught from a book or in a lecture theatre- skills need practice, individuals need opportunities to problem solve and face challenges to know how to resolve them.

Whilst I am extremely keen to expand my academic qualifications, I would say I am not driven to as I don't feel at this point in my career it would benefit me. However I do know that in other countries that I would not be able to work in my current position without such qualifications so therefore that would be my main reason for obtaining additional qualifications- should I find myself moving.

I have found working in the UAE that requirements and regulations for qualifications are limited and unlike other countries, they are maybe not as regulated here. This has worked well for me as I have been able to flourish professionally and have opportunities that elsewhere I would most likely not have had. To move elsewhere and gain the qualifications required to work in a similar position as I am now, I would almost be going backward in terms of professional stature.

It was clear that Sarah had developed a significant amount of cultural knowledge about the school and about her own learning as a professional. Although she had not worked in any other school setting, her popularity with parents, alongside the positive evaluations of her work in the external inspection reports, suggested a large degree of confidence in her abilities. As all the parents were fee paying, her popularity and success may have been driving factors in the school's popularity with parents, and therefore, its ability to generate revenue despite its low KHDA inspection rating. Within market-based education sectors driven by parental choice, fee-paying parents that provide revenue influence school owners' decisions most, above the quality of learning. Sarah's popularity may have arisen from her position as a Western educator serving mainly Lebanese children, in a school with very few other Western teachers. As the school was not considered expensive in fee terms compared to other schools in Dubai, parents may have felt that Sarah's presence and skills added value at the school.

I observed that Sarah demonstrated competence within the context of her role, and was provided with the autonomy to run her department. She read research to inform her practice, rather than conducting research with methodological expertise. Situational drivers such as the need to improve the school's position in the external KHDA ranking, and

the need to engage in development initiatives influenced Sarah's approach to professional learning. In this extract, Sarah articulates the approaches she had taken toward her professional learning:

Professional development is limited in my school and so therefore I select areas that I wish to improve in and use various approaches to increase my knowledge and practice. This includes networking and individual research. If I observe areas in need of improvement or [if] my staff ask me for advice in areas I am not so confident in, I want to be able to answer, demonstrate and teach so this instigates my willingness...to research and further my own learning. Being able to learn and then put theory into practice makes the 'want to learn' far more appealing.

In her pursuit of finding 'what works', Sarah demonstrated considerable professional agency and her inclination to deep learning. She recognised how learning should be connected to real life and how teacher-learning is critical to the profession, which is constantly evolving. Utilising her experience of how she learned at university enabled her to learn more effectively to improve in her teacher educator role.

I like to be in charge of my own learning and identify the areas that I wish to improve in. I like to connect new concepts to what I already know and build upon these. At school/university, I used to learn better when relating what I was learning to real-life. My job allows me to master the connection between these two elements, which makes the whole learning process more enjoyable for me.

The world of education and teaching practice is constantly changing and therefore I keep myself fully up-to-date with research and available opportunities that will be of benefit to the teachers in my department. Learning opportunities shouldn't stop when you become a teacher or an educator—teachers need to have the opportunity to continue their love of learning and to keep up-to-date with changes in education.

Sarah's recognition of autonomy as her own personal driver and the need to keep up to date with relevant research demonstrated her awareness of her 'self' in the context. As I also worked in the school, I was aware that the research culture there was not strong; and so Sarah had displayed a high level of personal responsibility and professionalism to achieve positive outcomes. In the time I worked with Sarah, she undertook the Lead Practitioner Accreditation, and a middle-leadership programme that I facilitated in the school in order to gain professional qualifications within her workplace. Her commitment, and success within the school may suggest that she had agency within that "particular socio-cultural context" (Philpott & Oates, 2017:319) but not beyond it, due to the professional limitations she had as a result of being unqualified, therefore external factors.

Despite the research noting that early career teacher educators tend to learn more through training, in Sarah's case, it was the opposite, as the context had fuelled her personal motivation to learn. Perhaps there were other factors associated with living in Dubai that motivated her too that I was not aware of. Her approach to learning is captured in the comment:

My approach to learning primarily involves trial, error, and reflection, which optimises effective, deeper learning as far as I am concerned. I observe, I analyse, I evaluate and then I problem solve. To encourage this, I like to network and share best practice and ideas with other professionals and where necessary, I will enhance and develop my skills and what I learn through independent research.

Learning as an adult goes way beyond pedagogical experiences, I am no longer learning to learn; I am learning to teach and therefore the way I go about learning has changed significantly. My learning doesn't just involve 'me', like it did at university; what I learn now impacts my staff and all the students in my Department.

The scale of the challenge within the school was large, but Sarah's confidence and the outcomes of the KG section meant that I did not have to expend as much energy on working with the teachers in KG. I worked more with Sarah herself so she could manage her team. We devised a strategy to improve the performance of her underperforming teachers. Sarah worked directly with the teachers to co-plan, co-observe, and co-analyse videos of other teachers and I modelled the steps at different times. We implemented this over a sustained period of time with two teachers. Sarah viewed the improvement of her department as a result of the improved approach to professional learning:

As a result of the improved approaches to professional development provision there has been a clear improvement in various success criteria. With regards to my department I have seen the biggest impact in teachers who were initially identified as performing at an 'unacceptable' level moving up to 'acceptable' and in some cases now achieving consistently 'good' ratings.

In the lead up to the DSIB inspection at the school, I was asked to write documents and reports about the teaching and learning there. I tried to model the writing process for Sarah, as this was an area for development I had recognised during my work with her. She understood that writing was critical to her role, and the ability to write for different audiences would enable her to demonstrate her capability. We spent a significant amount of time completing the school self-evaluation form. Composing educational documents and improvement plans were an integral part of her role; but her lack of any formal training meant that no one had introduced her to this task, so it was completely new to her. Sarah articulated her awareness of language and how she adjusted her writing according to the audience to ensure they fully understood the message. She explains this in the extract below:

As my leadership role has increased so too has the requirement for me to write quality, academic documents that not

only guide me in my role but also other members of the leadership team, staff and quality assessors. I have become far more aware of the different audiences that I am writing to and in turn always ask myself: who am I writing for? What do I want them to know? Is my writing directing or informing the reader? The answers to these questions guide the direction of my writing.

As Sarah was writing mainly for non-native speakers, this comment, which comes from her own perspective, displays her awareness of the cultural component present in writing (Bolton, 2010), and that her audience may interpret her words in a way she had not intended. Her comment also suggests that writing is a “subjective exercise and one that is used to create understanding” (Denzin, 1990:2). The nuances and subtleties of language may not always be recognised between teachers and teacher educators in multicultural settings because the dominant language used, in my case, English, forms “part of the invisible ritual imposed” on the teachers (Kramsch, 1998:1). An emphasis on the impact of language use in multicultural professional learning would help develop a greater awareness both among teachers and teacher educators within the UAE, so that the communicative implications could be explored when working with non-native speakers of English.

Sarah was cognisant of the international environment of her school and the importance of language and meaning in her communications. The school had a significant Arab population of non-native English speakers and Lebanese teachers who were responsible for implementing the US curriculum. Sarah’s experience of communicating in this environment (right from her first teaching job) meant that her awareness of language and culture had been critical in her day-to-day work. Despite her lack of any formal training or qualifications in education, Sarah had developed a language of learning, and then re-presented it for non-native speakers of English in the school. In this extract, Sarah explained her awareness of language:

I work in an environment of educators that come from all over the world. Their language is different, their training has been different, their knowledge and opinion of education and how it should be delivered is different and therefore I have grown to ensure that anything I write—as much as possible, speaks the same language as the audience.

For documents that I write that involve instructing others, such as policies and training manuals, I issue feedback forms to allow the audience to critique my writing and to assist in helping me improve. I ask detailed questions such as: What did you think was most and least helpful? Are there any sections that you found confusing? Did any parts seem like they were lacking in detail? How could the document have been improved to assist in your understanding? I use this quality feedback to improve different areas of my writing and as a result over time, I have seen the quality of my writing improve as I am far more aware of the audience for which I am writing. I used to write in a language that made sense to me but I wasn’t always aware that those that were reading my writing found it difficult to or couldn’t comprehend my choice of language or style of writing. This in turn was having an impact on the effectiveness of my documents as (especially with instructional pieces) the audience weren’t always clear about what I was explaining or requesting and therefore were not meeting my performance expectations—not because they weren’t capable or didn’t have the capacity to, but because I had not been clear enough in my explanations and hadn’t taken into account the audience I was writing for.

This awareness of language and the nuances of communication demonstrated Sarah’s own self-awareness and her impact on others (Bolton, 2010). She also displayed ‘cognitive flexibility’ by adapting her enhanced awareness of others and engaging her stakeholders in the process of improving her own practice. Although Sarah did not speak Arabic, her narrative indicates some “intercultural competence” nonetheless (Huber & Reynolds, 2014). She arranged for written policy documents, manuals etc. to be checked for understanding by users, and respectfully adjusted according to their feedback, in her efforts to achieve a common language around learning. In retrospect, I could have explored this aspect of her learning in more detail, as the findings could potentially be applied to other teachers in similar positions as Sarah. I could have explored the power structure of the situation, and the fact that she was a white, British National in a position of power making decisions about her own learning and the learning of others, whilst confessing insecurities about her professional knowledge and status. Although I respected her commitment, I wondered if she was aware of her privilege, and if non-white, non-European person be afforded the same respect in this context.

Conclusion

One of the emerging themes of this study has been the nature of workplace learning, and specifically regarding qualifications. Perhaps, one of the challenges that education professionals face within the UAE is the limited options available to gain education qualifications. As the UAE is a developing country with a huge expatriate workforce, I question the structure of implementing the teacher-licensing initiative. As it is a mandatory initiative, the balance between retaining fully qualified and good but un-qualified professionals has not been struck. I see the value in qualifications but a teaching workforce that operates under short-term conditions can simply choose to move elsewhere if their needs are not catered for.

As the UAE teacher-licensing initiative expands; and the regulations force teachers and schools to take a specific route of professional learning, the situation may prompt teachers to look elsewhere in the international sector. As the vast majority of people living in the UAE are foreign workers, the idea of moving to another country for work is already familiar, and although the regulations are well-intended, the structure of education does not appear as the framework of the research on the professional development of teachers. The regulations could therefore be a contributing factor in a teacher's decision to look elsewhere, and this can result in lower retention rates within the international school sector.

For teachers, the new teacher-licensing regulations stipulate that the training and cascade model with prescriptive content is the mandated form of professional development. This indicates that the regulator believes that control over the type of professional learning should remain at the government level, rather than on a school level. In my opinion, this approach is fraught with limitations given the diversity of beliefs within the country. As a consequence, the professional learning space may in essence; become less diverse due to the pressure to commit to the government's prescribed professional learning. The implications of this mean that schools may be forced down the path of training and delivery to the exclusion of other models, even though a different model may match their specific school challenges more closely.

For Sarah, this would mean pursuing a formal teaching qualification in order to remain in her position, and may have a personal impact on her life in the UAE if she wishes to remain. For Salem, despite having a Master's in education, he is required to undertake the mandated training in order to keep his job. A big question I am grappling with is the case of teachers like Sarah who have demonstrable expertise and yet are unqualified. Should developing countries like the UAE look at different approaches for teachers that harness expertise through professional workplace accreditation rather than forcing all teachers to attain mandatory qualifications? Doing so might allow for the best outcomes due to the context of the UAE, as a country in the midst of its story and thereby, to build capacity within the system using the resources already available.

One of the strengths that I believe has arisen from this research has been my awareness of narrative as a research methodology, and how the open-endedness, and fluidity of narrative has enabled me to use a variety of data to address my research questions. Due to my perception of the context, and the need to act with urgency, I would argue that access to data and participants superseded research design; narrative inquiry enabled me to capture the challenges of the context, perhaps leading to richer findings than other methodologies could have done. Within other research contexts, narrative may be more appropriate for teacher educators who need to work at speed with limited access within their professional roles in order to build relationships, rather than dwell on a specific research design, and potentially lose out.

In a region that has become preoccupied with quantitative, measurable targets in education, narrative studies can encapsulate the rich tradition of oral storytelling in a valuable methodological approach to educational research. Building a network of narrative researchers within the region would enable a novel data pool to be developed that is quite different from the quantitative dominant approaches used elsewhere. The expansiveness and entrepreneurial nature of narrative inquiry has potential to capture the complexities of other contexts.

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