Chapter 3
A process of (un)becoming
Life history and the professional development of teachers
Christine Halse

Introduction
This chapter traces the story of Sue, an elementary school teacher in Australia, and the process of (un)becoming that marked her experience of negotiating an identity as a teacher of a new anti-racist school curriculum entitled Studies of Asia. The concept of becoming is saturated with positive, progressive iminations of growth, development and forward movement. Yet the process of becoming (someone/something?) is never a calm, linear course. It is a knotty path full of twists and turns that always involves, if only partially and in passing, a process of loss, abandonment or (re)alignment of subjectivity and identity. It is this doubleness of simultaneously making and unmaking the self that is captured in the notion of (un)becoming and that is the focus of Sue’s story in this chapter.

Sue and I met ten years ago at the first professional development course for a new national initiative for a Studies of Asia curriculum. Thrust together by circumstance and serendipity, we continued our conversations irregularly over the ensuing years as our paths crossed at conferences and different professional development activities for teachers. On occasion, Sue would drop by my office at the university, ostensibly to ask my advice about resources and readings but more often, it seemed – at least to me – to talk about her school and to use me as a sounding board for ideas that she considered too dangerous to voice to her colleagues. In turn, Sue enjoyed and indulged my peculiar fascination with the stories of her experiences and learning and we became collaborators in mapping the biography of her educational journey.

My absorption with life history has its origins – I think – in the seemingly endless conversations with friends as a teenager at a Catholic girls’ school. This was a world where there were few distractions or options for entertainment. The narrative shaping of our present and future lives became a bond of fascination and satisfaction that sustained us through those turbulent years: first loves; friendships formed, broken and renewed; school, steady and exams; and teenage angst and rebellion. We would spend hours dissecting our own and each other’s lives: our feelings, motivations, anxieties and relationships.
When we had exhausted the full range of factual lives, we moved to fantasy: our desires, dreams, aspirations, and imaginings of the futures that we were sure we would construct. Our obsession with this pastime transgressed into the world outside-of-school, and we would while away hours continuing our conversations on the phone.

Perhaps if I'd grown up in a different, freer, more open-minded world, things would have been different. But an alternative to the continuous critique and construction of real and imagined lives was not conceivable for a Catholic girl growing up in the 1960s and 1970s. This was an era that caught the tail-end of mantillas, the Latin mass, a culture of animus between public (government) and private (Catholic) schools, and a suite of social regulations that were vigorously upheld as essential for growing up (becoming) a 'good Catholic girl': school uniforms below your knees; clean white gloves; hair tied back and off your face (did the nuns need to see your eyes to penetrate your soul?); respect for parents and other adults (this meant no back-talking to 'grown-ups' because 'children should be seen and not heard'); no dating until you were 16 years old and then only in groups chaperoned by an adult; no sex before marriage. Only the last has survived the decades, nominally at least, if not in practice.

To the best of my knowledge, the girls that I went to school with have moved beyond our once all-consuming interest in the history and formation of lives. Not me. Studying history and literature at university gave me scope to indulge my continuing fixation, and exploring race relations through the life of Australia's most famous and infamous Anglican missionary, the Reverend Ernest Gribble, for my doctorate cemented my interest into a legitimate, academic concern (Halse 2002).

Nevertheless, as a Professor of Education I continue to be surprised by how underutilised life history is as a research method, a framework for analysis, and a narrative strategy for communicating research findings. This is not because life history isn't interesting, but because its relevance, value and virtue over or as a complement to other research methods hasn't dawned on the horizon of those stakeholders whose decisions about research shape the sort of work that academics in education do: research funding bodies, policy-makers, government bodies, school boards, principals, teachers, etc. In Australia, as elsewhere, there persists a (strong) preference for predictable and conventional research methods: surveys, focus groups, and sometimes interviews. Rarely is life history used as a strategy for exploring, understanding and addressing critical issues that impact on educational policy and practice.

At its heart, this predilection speaks of an epistemological question about what knowledge is of value and of most worth, and an ontological question about the relationship between the private/personal and the public/professional realms.

Of course, there are always exceptions, and this chapter draws on one such exception. Nearly ten years ago I formed a mutually productive research relationship with the national body responsible for the development and delivery of a national professional development program (PD) in Studies of Asia for teachers. The PD was part of a major policy shift by the newly elected Labour government to move beyond Australia's historical economic and social ties with the United Kingdom and the United States and to position Australia more explicitly within Asia. The triggers for the change were largely economic: the growth of Asia's tiger economies, the emergence of China and India as future superpowers, and the development of Asia as Australia's major trading partner and primary source of new migrants. In this new environment, schools were assigned responsibility for creating a new generation of 'Asia-literate Australians' who could speak an Asian language and knew about the history, cultures, religions and societies of countries in Asia. The Studies of Asia PD had an explicit social justice agenda. Its goal was to create a more understanding and racially tolerant Australia by increasing teachers' knowledge of different cultures and societies in Asia, and to equip teachers with the pedagogical skills to integrate a Studies of Asia focus into all curriculum areas.

This chapter has emerged from a series of formal and informal conversations conducted on and off over the past ten years, and traverses a time during which Sue placed substantial emotional and professional investment in carving out an identity as an advocate of an anti-racist Studies of Asia curriculum in schools. While I focus on the life and work of one particular teacher, this chapter takes up questions that are central to the broader agenda of life history, identity and social justice: How is 'self' mediated by others? What is the subjective experience of engaging with issues of racial and cultural difference? What historical and personal resources empower or alternatively shackle efforts to bring about educational change for social justice? What are the implications for self-formation? What are the political possibilities of challenging normative ways of seeing and doing?

**Narrating the nation: the historian's voice**

Sue's story, and our relationship, cannot be isolated from Australia's history with Asia. Long before the beginning of British occupation in 1788, Madagascan sailors visited Australia's northern coast and traded with local Aboriginal groups. From 1852, indentured workers from China and India were brought to Australia to work in the sugar cane fields, and the gold rushes in the middle of the nineteenth century brought more than 100,000 migrants from south China. By 1861, Chinese migrants made up roughly ten per cent of Australia's non-Aboriginal population. Racism, couched in terms of economic anxiety and concerns about the moral and religious purity of the British colony, fuelled racial tensions. In 1861, there were anti-Chinese riots on the goldfields and the New South Wales government responded by imposing a poll tax on Chinese immigrants to regulate and restrict entry. Similar
nations and legislation followed in other states, prompting an inquiry by the Chinese government (1887) that concluded that the intensity of anti-Chinese discrimination was a breach of international treaties. Rather than triggering national shame, this reprimand inflamed anti-Chinese sentiment and, in 1888, the states introduced stricter restrictions on Chinese immigration that saw Chinese passengers prevented from disembarking in Victoria and New South Wales. This was the beginning of an assortment of policies designed to restrict non-white immigration and which collectively became known as the 'White Australia Policy', and which continued in various degrees of diminishing intensity until 1973.

This era is long past. Nowadays, eight per cent of Australia's population is of Asian descent, and migration, travel and globalisation have familiarised Australians with many aspects of Asian cultures and customs. In the mid-1990s, barely two decades after the end of the White Australia Policy, there was less familiarity with Asia. It was this lack that the Studies of Asia PD sought to redress.

Narrating a life: Sue's story

Sue had been teaching for five years when we first met. Her father John, like many men of his generation, did not finish high school but enlisted in the Australian army to fight in World War Two. When he returned from the war, John was restless and had a succession of different jobs. He settled down when he met Sue's mother, got work on the assembly line for a large car manufacturer and progressively worked his way up from the factory floor to section manager. Sue's mother, Clare, had more formal education than her father. If she'd been born in a different era or social class, Clare might have gone to university. Instead, she matriculated from high school, completed a diploma in secretarial studies and then worked in administration for an insurance company in the city. Like a generation of post-war newlyweds, Sue's parents took advantage of a special government housing loan for returned soldiers to build their family home. At the time, many considered the semi-rural suburb they chose on the outskirts of Sydney too remote, too isolated from the city's hustle and bustle and too poorly served by public transport to be a desirable location. John and Clare still live at the same address. The house grew as new rooms were added over the years and Sydney's sprawling growth has meant that this isolated outer suburb is now a desirable locale in the inner city. Clare stopped work when the first of her three children was born and the couple became adept at stretching out each dollar. John's veggie patch helped feed his hungry brood, Clare sewed clothes for herself and the children and, when her youngest began high school, Clare got a full-time job as the receptionist at the local doctor's surgery.

Clare insisted that her children complete high school and get a further qualification. Sue, the youngest of the three children, followed her mother's example. She graduated from high school and then secretarial college, and worked as a clerical assistant for several large commercial businesses before she married in her early twenties. Sue paid her way to devote herself to homemaking and childrearing when the first of her two children was born. Sue remembers these years fondly as a time of immense physical activity, emotional rewards, and public acclamation as a valued volunteer at the schools and sports clubs her children attended. It was also a time when she was haunted by a nagging sense that she should be doing more with her life.

When her youngest child started primary school, Sue enrolled in a Bachelor of Education degree at university, joining a new wave of mature-age women who benefited from a short-lived period of free tuition in government universities. Sue was the sort of mature-age student that young undergraduates loathe having in a class: she read all the readings; never missed a lecture or tutorial; slaved over all her assignments; consistently earned high grades; and loved her work as a trainee teacher.

Beginning teaching

Sue was in her mid-thirties when she began her teaching career at a medium-sized government primary school in a low socio-economic district about an hour's drive from her home. The school's historically dominant Anglo-Australian community had been gradually dwarfed by a swelling population of new immigrants from Turkey, Iran, Iraq, South-East Asia, especially Vietnam, the Philippines and the Pacific Islands. In our conversations, Sue painted a portrait of a socially and racially complex school. On the one hand, many pupils came from a diverse, multicultural community consisting of large extended families where English was rarely spoken at home and household income was sometimes irregular but where the family was a tight, cohesive unit and education was regarded as a ticket to economic and social upward mobility. Any child who was fluent in English, however, usually only stayed for one or two terms before moving to a nearby school with a reputation for the discipline and academic rigor needed to progress to a 'good' high school and university. On the other hand, the Anglo-Australian pupils in Sue's school hailed from a neighbourhood with a strong historical and territorial sense of ownership over their local school, but whose influence was being diluted by the influx of new migrant families. At the same time, 30 per cent of this group came from families where the household income was low, welfare dependence was high and inter-generational unemployment was familiar.

Because of its socio-economic and ethnic profile, the school was officially classed as 'difficult to staff'. As is typical of the Australian teaching profession, the overwhelming majority of teachers in Sue's school were women and Anglo-Australian. Soon after she began teaching, Sue found herself positioned between two loose groups in the school. Sue nicknamed the first group the 'residents' because it consisted of a small number of teachers, all in their
late forties and early fifties, who lived nearby and had been appointed to the school soon after qualifying as teachers at a time when the socio-economic profile of the school community was more homogeneous and affluent. They had been at the school for more than a decade and were not contemplating moving; they had accumulated a comfortable repertoire of skills and resources that made them feel secure in their classroom practice and sure-footed during staffroom discussions. The second group, which Sue christened the ‘sojourners’, comprised nearly 70 per cent of staff. Like Sue, all were at the beginning of their careers and this was their first school. All lived outside the district and, with the exception of Sue, all were in their early twenties. They were enthusiastic and committed but history decreed that they would eventually transfer to a school in a more affluent, ethnically homogeneous district that was closer to their homes. Since they were inexperienced and lacked a long-term commitment to the school, the sojourners ultimately deferred to the ‘wisdom and experience’ of the residents in any staffroom discussion. Relationships between the two groups were sometimes strained. The residents treated the sojourners solicitously. They welcomed the sojourners’ enthusiasm to take on tasks that would relieve them of some of their inchoate administrative responsibilities but were dismissive of their ideas about teaching. The stock advice to any new teacher was to ‘forget what you learned at university, this is the real world now’.

Beginning to become a Studies of Asia teacher

Not long after Sue and I met, I asked her why she had enrolled in the Studies of Asia PD. Her reasons were personal — memories of fleeting, positive encounters with Asia in her past: charting with Chinese students and collaborating on an assignment with two Sri Lankan students at university; an eye-opening three days in the Philippines during her first trip overseas; and four years as a host family to trainee Japanese students working at her son’s school. For Sue, the PD promised a continuation of these pleasurable, personal connections with Asia. There were also more complex, personal reasons:

My father fought the Japanese in the Pacific during World War Two. My parents would never buy anything Japanese — no cars, radios, electronic equipment, food — nothing. Dad never talks about the war although he’d obviously had some first-hand experiences. My friends whose fathers went to the war were all the same. I was quite nervous when we agreed to have a Japanese student stay with us. For a long time, I wondered whether or not to tell Dad. Eventually, we decided it was better to be open and honest. Dad said, ‘Well, it was my war, and I don’t expect you to grow up with the same kind of attitudes as I have.’ I was surprised but that really made me realize that unless we educate our children about other cultures then we are going to be continually fighting and being confrontational to people of different cultures and nations. I decided to enroll in the Studies of Asia course for the same reason. Dad wasn’t as accepting about the course — he thought it was unnecessary and that different races should just get on with their own lives — but it’s not that simple or easy. Is it?

One of the central goals of the PD was to stimulate teachers’ philosophical and ideological commitment to Studies of Asia across all curriculum areas. Sue placed particular importance on the social justice agenda of Studies of Asia and its potential to redress racial discrimination and build cultural equality:

... over the past four years, we’ve had Japanese students living with us (and) these experiences were part of a gradual process of becoming more tolerant of people who are different ... Understanding that difference has become an important goal for me both personally and professionally — and it is really very important to world peace. I know this is a very idealist view but, for me, it’s a very important part of why I’m so interested in Studies of Asia.

Inevitably, professional development involves teachers in a process of deconstructing existing practices, acquiring new theory in the form of knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values, and constructing alternative ways of doing, seeing and understanding. This process involves a realignment and remaking of subjectivity and identity. The anti-racist agenda of the Studies of Asia curriculum added a political dimension to this process by challenging teachers’ uncontested understandings of race and cultural difference that lie hidden in liberal discourses about race, culture and education (Gillborn 1997, Hall 1994). Sue, however, was unprepared for the new knowledge and understandings of culture and difference she encountered during the course and the ways in which it awakened a consciousness of her own ethnocentrism and prejudices. In this respect, the Studies of Asia course destabilized the investments and commitments that constituted her identity (Brezina 1992) and her heightened awareness of ‘difference’ also exposed her immersion in normative discourses of racial and ethnic identity. This event constituted what Slees et al. (1985) call a critical incident and Denzin (1989) describes as a ‘turning point’. For Sue, the course stimulated her to reflect on the ways in which she had perpetuated ethnocentric ideologies under the guise of being ‘open-minded’ and ‘tolerant’ of others, and triggered a conscious turning point: to make a moral commitment to the social justice agenda of Studies of Asia. In Sue’s words, the course involved:

challenging (and) re-thinking your own values; how you approach things; your own views; your own stereotypes; and re-thinking the way we may have reacted to people’s cultures at other times in our lives. That really changed the way I viewed things — I had an expected much personal development. The knowledge you gained of yourself as a person (was) a very, very positive experience...
Possibilities for Parochial Thoughts and Actions. While research suggests that personal transformation is integral to educational change (Butt et al. 1992; Fullan and Hargreaves 1992, Peca 1994; Rudduck 1991), the theorising of teacher professional development has been pervaded by a quest to identify 'best practice' models for transforming teachers and teaching (e.g. Hargreaves 1994). This goal implies a motion of Liberal individualism and agency that ignores how particular discourses construct school cultures, affect the choices available to teachers and constitute teacher identity in ways that facilitate or inhibit change.

Sue quickly discovered that constructing an identity as a teacher and advocate of Studies of Asia was a messy, difficult matter. During this stage of her life, she encountered a series of discourses that worked to undermine her desire and efforts to forge an identity as a Studies of Asia teacher.

1 Explicit Racism

When Sue and a colleague reported on their Studies of Asia PD at a staff meeting, they unleashed a flurry of comments from a small but vocal group of residents. By virtue of their age and experience, this group constituted the voice of authority in staff meetings and played a critical role in setting the boundaries of any discussion. By defining who was an authorized, legitimate and trustworthy person to speak on any issue, this vocal subgroup defined the approved discourse on any topic and delegitimised those who offered a different view or argument. This group, constituting what Henry and Tator (2005: 105–6) call the 'dominant elite', deployed two complementary discourses of deracialisation to resist change and justify preserving the status quo in the school's curriculum. The first was a discourse of denial that took for granted that racism does not and cannot exist in a liberal democratic society (Henry and Tator 2005). Thus, the subgroup of residents argued that racial tension was not a 'problem' in their school; that they were already doing a 'good job' in building a socially harmonious society; and that their school should just 'maintain a steady course'. The second discourse was a discourse of national identity (see Henry and Tator 2005) that ignores and excludes the life, culture and interests of minority racial and ethnic groups from the grand narrative of national history. Drawing on this discourse, the subgroup of residents argued that despite Australia’s geographical location in Asia, Studies of Asia was irrelevant and a 'waste of time' for Australian pupils because Europe was the cradle of Australian civilisation; there were too few 'Asian students' in the school to warrant a Studies of Asia focus; and learning Australia's history was a more important curriculum imperative.

I double that Sue would describe or theorise these discourses of opposition as I have done but the vigour of the resistance that she encountered and the experience of finding herself sidelined and silenced when she tried to present a contrary view was a confronting experience. Sue...
confessed to being: 'quite surprised at some of the stereotypes and brick walls that we hit... there were some racist comments that were coming from the staff. We were really quite stunned'.

2 Implicit racism

Looking at a strategy that theorists describe as a discourse of political correctness (Henry and Tator 2005), other teachers couched their opposition as a desire to preserve social harmony: a whole-school focus on Asia might be disruptive, single out students from Asia as 'foreign' or 'different', and maybe even trigger dormant anti-Asian sentiments in the school community. Aligned with this claim was a discourse of reverse discrimination: that children from non-Asian backgrounds would feel excluded if a Studies of Asia curriculum was introduced. Other teachers invoked the familiar discourse of the overburdened teacher to rationalise their non-engagement with Studies of Asia: high workloads; lack of time; other, more important curriculum priorities; syllabus constraints; inadequate funding and resources; insufficient training and support, etc. Because these arguments had some basis in teachers' everyday experience and because the notion of the overworked teacher was a familiar and well-worn discourse — a regime of truth (Foucault 1980) — they legitimised the indefinite deferral of Studies of Asia by constituting teachers as too exhausted and drained by their daily work to cope with a new curriculum initiative.

3 Silent racism

Sue found that the majority of teachers were either non-committal or evasive about the introduction of Studies of Asia: 'They haven’t been active against it but they haven’t been actively for it.' Trepagnier (2007) describes such passivity as silent racism: that is, the behaviour of often well-meaning people that works to produce and perpetuate institutionalised racism. At Sue’s school, passivity sometimes combined with more destructive forms of resistance, including criticism of Sue’s efforts to organise cultural events, purchase new resources or develop a teaching program focusing on Asian cultures and societies. The criticisms were always brief and never aggressive but they played on Sue’s anxieties as a beginning teacher with a heightened sense of responsibility for nurturing a new curriculum initiative:

There were times when I’d done something that I’d just a lot of work into — you know, a display or an event or something — and I’d get one of those frowns, backhand remarks from one of the other teachers that just ridiculed all my efforts. I took it personally. I shouldn’t have, but it would put me down. (sn) really hurt. I know I should have just thought ‘Oh yeah, get stuffed!’ but I took it personally.

Simplistic understandings construe racism as an individual attribute expressed through explicit discrimination, vilification or verbal and physical attacks by one race against another. Yet everyday forms of racism are better understood as a collective rather than individual phenomenon and as a process grounded in a shared system of beliefs through which individuals and groups construct a symbolic or imagined sense of community, a framework for interpreting who is “us” and who is “them” (that helps) to organise, maintain, and regulate particular forms of power and dominance (Henry and Tator 2005: 21–22).

(Un)becoming a Studies of Asia teacher

The real tragedy of this state of affairs, as Debrah Britzman (1991) reminds us, is that the conversations generated through such processes colonise the social imagination and reshape subjects and subjectivities. As Sue and I continued our conversations, it appeared that Sue’s resistance faltered and that she increasingly fell captive to the logic and authoritative voice of the residents:

I was very enthusiastic and wanted to really immerse myself in an Asian focus. The teachers aren’t racist. They are just strong women. They are larger than life characters and some are a bit long in the teeth (and) set in their ways. They have their comfort zone and they don’t want to move out of it. When teachers who’ve been teaching a long time, it’s very difficult to admit that you don’t know everything, and it’s very difficult to move out of a Eurocentric perspective, and several teachers pointed out that you can’t do everything. There were other programs with deadlines, the mid-year assessment, the class concert and the netball finals. There was just so much else going on that it was difficult to find the time or energy for anything else.

Perhaps Sue needed more resilience or stronger skills in countering these oppositional discourses. Nevertheless, identity is constituted in relation to broader social, cultural and political discourses and negotiated through relationships with others. Consequently, the absence of collegial validation undermined the interacts frameworks through which Sue had sought personal and professional affirmation. It eroded the identity investments she had made to Studies of Asia, and ignored reservations about her ability to become a Studies of Asia teacher. Sue found herself progressively curtailting the inclusion of Studies of Asia in her class and abandoning whole-school initiatives because ‘the staff just weren’t receptive’. She persisted with different degrees of effort to build Studies of Asia in her school for nearly three years until one day she sat in my office, nursing a box of tissues, and confided:

I now realise that what I want to do and what I can do are two different things. I haven’t changed my fundamental beliefs. In fact, I’ve just applied for twelve months leave so that I can live in Indonesia and learn the language. But now I realise that there are a lot more limitations on what is achievable in my school than I’d thought. It could change with time — though I’ve reckoned it’d only happen
slowly. That doesn’t mean that the PD wasn’t worthwhile. It changed the way I see things and a lot of my personal priorities. That still continues — even if changing what and how we teach (about Asia) takes a lot longer. I guess my commitment to teaching about Asia will continue ... although, honestly, I’m dubious about my enthusiasm — it hurts to keep banging your head against a brick wall.

Coda

At the end of last year, I sat down and wrote for the last time in the diary I had kept of my conversations with Sue about this phase of our lives and her struggles to become a Studies of Asia teacher. The diary was a mix of different texts: reminders about meetings and appointments; summaries of conversations together or on the phone; copies of notes and emails we had exchanged; my analyses of events in her life; and my own autoethnographic account of our experiences together. My last entry is in the latter category — an episodic (red)escription of our last meeting:

I can’t find Sue. I know she’s somewhere in the crowd but she’s so short and there are so many people swarming on top of each other, pushing and shoving to get a good vantage point. I can’t see her. I cross my neck and stand on my toes but without success. The thought occurs to me that if I stand on the nearby chair it would be easier to find her but I (reluctantly) discard this idea. Somehow a professor or a chair in full academic regalia seems undignified and inappropriate to the persona that I’ve surprised to adopt on such auspicious occasions. Finally, time runs out. The music has started and the academic procession has already begun winding its way into the Great Hall. After the ceremony, the crowd scatters quickly, regrouping in smaller clusters around the stalls staffed by students and alumni to buy official photographs, university souvenirs, weak tea and biscuits already made soggy by the humidity of the enveloping summer heat. In the thinly outswarm, we have no trouble finding each other. We beam, hug, and say: ‘Who’d have thought this would happen? Aren’t you clever? Aren’t we clever for making it happen?’

Sue didn’t go to Indonesia for a year as she’d planned — I think her husband convinced her otherwise — but the entire family did go there for four weeks on holiday. Instead of staying in a beach resort like most Australian tourists, the family rented a house in the mountains. Sue studied Indonesian, her husband became expert at bartering in the local markets and cooking Indonesian food, and her children relished the freedom of a less restricted lifestyle and became firm friends with the local children in the village. The family fell in love with Indonesia and they’ve returned to the same village almost every year since that time. Sue did return to her school, reversing the trend of speedy departures by sojourners, and still works at the same school, teaching Grade 3. Her commitment to Studies of Asia as a strategy for increasing knowledge to build racial harmony has persisted but taken another form. Disheartened by her early experiences, Sue abandoned her efforts to convert colleagues but persisted with an Asia focus in her own teaching, supported by a growing array of resources and knowledge she picked up during her family’s travels to Indonesia. Ironically, her persistence has enabled her to win the enthusiastic commitment of a substantial cohort of colleagues — both sojourners and residents — to Studies of Asia. At the same time, Sue has directed her energies to a new, related goal. Five years ago she enrolled as a part-time student in a professional doctorate in education (EdD) at my university, with a specific focus on bringing together the world of academic and students’ professional lives. Based on original research and a social justice pedagogy, Sue’s research has concentrated on developing a scholarly suite of resources for teachers wanting to integrate Studies of Asia into their teaching.

Professional and research implications

Too often, education leaders presume that teacher professional development means a seamless, straightforward pathway from course to classroom, yet wonder and bemoan that so little PD is actually implemented in schools. Counter to this position is a body of evidence that the professional work of teachers cannot be disconnected from their personal lives or from the cultures and contexts of schools. Arguably, this is particularly the case when professional development deals with challenging issues of social justice and cultural understanding. Sue’s story demonstrates the extent to which teachers’ invest their personal identities in their work, erasing boundaries between their personal and professional lives.’ (Zembylas 2005: 225). The story of Sue’s life enables us to see with detailed specificity how teachers’ learning and implementation of professional development actually works in schools and impacts on teachers’ identities in ways that shape curriculum innovation, educational change, and the possibilities for social justice. It is through such insights that it is possible to develop the strategies needed to empower teachers to implement their professional development learning more effectively in schools.

The implications for education researchers and policymakers are clear. Life history is a research method that provides a lens into the complex nexus of individuals and communities, socio-cultural conditions, and teacher professional development. It follows from this that incorporating life history methods into the conceptualisation, delivery and evaluation of teacher professional development opens up new strategies and possibilities for educational, social and individual transformation.
Chapter 4

Becoming a gay male primary teacher

Dealing with difference

Elizabeth Newman

Introduction

This chapter explores the development of the personal and professional identities of Ed, a gay primary school teacher. Through narrative we are pulled into his world and invited to ‘imaginatively identify’ with his perspective (Kohlberg Riessman 2008:9) from childhood through adolescence and work, but largely focusing on his move into primary teaching.

Ed is a member of a minority group. He is ‘other’ as one of the 10 per cent of men in primary teaching in England (TES 2008), as a second career primary teacher – currently a third of the teaching population – and as working-class wanting to move into the middle class. Most importantly for Ed, however, is that he is ‘other’ as gay.

Ed was one of a number of teachers interviewed for a thesis researching career changer teachers and I recount his story in this chapter. In engaging with the research I wanted to ‘turn up the volume’ (Clossgh 1998:129) on the ‘very personal business of being a man in a predominantly women’s occupation’ (Sargent 2000:411) and in Ed’s case being working-class, gay and making the journey into a middle-class heterosexual world which is numerically dominated by women.

Ed’s urge to tell his life story was a strong one. When he talked he ‘storyed’ himself in his core identity, his sexuality (Franklham 2001) and then into an identity as a primary school teacher. It was striking how, compared with his other male colleagues, he persistently referred to the importance of notions of identity, the significance of his ‘otherness’ (Smedley 1997:217) and the challenge it presented in primary schools, sites in which, to quote Epstein et al. (2003:15) ‘normative heterosexuality was maintained and enforced’.

Maguire (2005:14) citing Bauman (1996) says that ‘one thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs’. For Ed, identity was as Maclure et al. (1990:12) suggest, an explanatory device to draw together the personal and the professional, to justify and make sense of his conduct, career, values and circumstances. It was a ‘form of argument’ (Maclure 1993:312), a struggle between his ‘situational’ and ‘substantial’ self (Nias 1989:20),