


## Chapter 7

# Reflections of an Academic Father: A Dialogic Approach to Balancing Identity

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter discusses the complexity of balancing the professional and personal goals and identities that can often seem incongruent as teacher educators manage the demands of life in the academy. The author explores that complexity by discussing what he learned from reflecting upon his efforts to balance the tension between his professional and personal goals as an academic and as a father. He draws upon dialogical-self theory to discuss ways the facets of one's identity can be brought into dialogue with one another as people respond to the challenges they encounter. The chapter describes the reflective process of engaging in dialogue with philosophical mentors that supported the author's efforts to manage the tensions created by feeling like his senses-of-self as an academic and as a father were at odds. By sharing his struggles and his reflective process for responding to tension, the author aims to help readers find ways to see tension as a mechanism for growth and their own complex identities as sources of insight.*

### INTRODUCTION

It's hard to imagine that anyone reading this book has gone through life without feeling like their personal and professional goals have been in conflict with one another at some point in time. This is, after all, a book that was crafted for teachers who have made—or are thinking about making—the transition from working in the K-12 setting to teacher education. This transition is one that includes a shift in professional identity: A teacher becomes a teacher educator and a researcher. Taking on this new role begins with doctoral coursework and the dissertation. The focus and commitment required by even this initial stage of the transition offers one example of the ways in which academics must learn to balance their professional and personal goals. I don't mind admitting that I found my doctoral coursework to be

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much more challenging and time-consuming than I imagined it would be. I didn't think it would be easy. However, even with my background as an English major, making sense of the readings in my doctoral courses required me to develop new reading habits that included allotting more time to understanding the material. That experience shook my confidence, and I found that my commitment to succeeding in my doctoral program made it difficult for me not to lose focus on some of the non-academic goals in my personal life.

The transition to academia is a complicated process of becoming that will test your ability to stay true to yourself and remain committed to the goals you set in all areas of your life. There are also plenty of new tasks to greet you on the other side of the crucible of a terminal degree program, such as the nerve-wracking process of sorting through job postings, preparing application materials, waiting to be invited to campus for a job talk, and settling into a new role in your shiny new job on the tenure track at a university.

The process of completing a doctoral degree program, getting a job, and securing tenure are just some of the things that you must manage while trying to remain focused on your larger scholarly motivations for making the transition from K-12 teaching in the first place. It can be easy to get caught up in these things and forget that there is an important scholarly issue that you want to address or a problem that you are passionate about responding to with your work. Getting caught up in the pressure to build a record of publication can make it easy to focus on quantity instead of content. That pursuit of quantity can obscure your scholarly passion, erode your motivation to focus on the issues that you find most compelling, and even make it difficult to maintain a healthy personal life. Trying to balance all of our professional and personal passions and the countless commitments that come along with them is not easy. At least it hasn't been for me. The push and pull our goals exert on us have the potential to cause us to throw ourselves so headlong into the pursuit of one that we can lose sight of others—even those that might have previously seemed to be the most important things in our world.

In this chapter, I address the importance of balancing the professional goals and demands of being an educator with the personal goals and commitments that fill our cups as human beings. I share my own struggles to manage the tension between my goals and senses-of-self as an academic and as a father to highlight the importance of recognizing, embracing, and listening to the various aspects of our identity that inform our personal and professional goals. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the process that has helped me manage the professional pressures and concerns of academia while also finding my way through the world as a new father. The intersection of these two significant facets of my identity made it quite difficult for me to effectively manage two powerful goals that, on the surface, seemed to be at odds with one another: enacting change I felt was important in the field of education and being a father who was a provider and a nurturer. To unpack my efforts to create healthy tension between these goals, I will discuss how I engaged in a philosophical dialogue with the scholarly mentors who helped me see that the various *I-positions* (Hermans, 1996; Hermans, 2013) I occupy could bring fatherhood *and* my role as a researcher/teacher educator into a productive dialogue. My goal is to offer points of connection to my experiences that might help readers embrace the struggles they encounter and learn from them by valuing and listening to the voices created by each of the various facets of their identities. I argue that each aspect of one's identity—their *I-positions* (Hermans, 1996)—and the goals that flow from them can inform each other in powerful ways.

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