

Chapter 11

Becoming Together: Critical Events Across Early Career Researcher Experiences

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ABSTRACT

For teachers who exit the classroom to enter higher education, leaving can be heart wrenching and to many, unthinkable and unknowable. Consequently, in seeking change, such as the authors of the stories collected here, they do so to position themselves in ways that allow them to transform educational systems by contributing research-based understandings and offering new and unique ways to challenge the status quo. The authors hope that in sharing their stories they can also develop their own understandings of self as becoming researchers and teacher educators. This collective process shows the criticality of being able to lean on each other to actualize our goals of conducting humanizing education research that centers social justice teaching and results in action-oriented change. A departure from what the academy might expect, the narratives are honest and written with whole hearts as the authors provide insight into who they have been, how they are connected, and who they are becoming.

INTRODUCTION

In an ever-shifting world where change remains the only constant, it is a wonder how anyone stays still

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anymore. And yet, change and leaping into the unknown is never easy. For teachers who exit the classroom to enter higher education, leaving can be heart wrenching, unthinkable, and unknowable. Consequently, in seeking change, such as the authors of the stories collected here, they do so to position themselves in ways that allow them to transform educational systems by contributing research-based understandings to the field and offering new and unique ways to challenge the status quo.

With this in mind, we offer our narratives as four secondary English teachers turned doctoral students who despite being at different positions on the timeline of our PhD studies - a first, second, third, and fourth year - are bound by a shared love for literacy; positions as mothers, fathers, and friends; and a dedication to student-centered teaching practices and the power of narrative. Through our narratives, we share many different aspects related to the transition to higher education. We touch on reflection, passion, purpose, emotional work, crisis, the academy, mentorship, isolation, and identity. This collective process shows the vast experiences that exist across the many different dimensions of transitioning to higher education, and the criticality of being able to lean on each other to actualize our goals of conducting humanizing education research that centers social justice teaching and results in action-oriented change. A departure from what the academy might expect, our narratives are honest and written with our whole hearts as we provide insight into who we have been, how we are connected, and who we are becoming. We hope that in sharing our stories we can also develop our own understandings of self as becoming researchers and teacher educators.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our chapter is framed by narrative theory; specifically, we draw on narrative inquiry through Mertova and Webster's (2020) method of critical event narrative analysis. We draw on narrative inquiry because it is fundamentally about investigating how humans experience the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Mertova & Webster, 2020). We frame this chapter through critical event narrative analysis based on our effort to draw on stories from four different researchers and teacher educators. As such, "A critical event as told in a story reveals a change of understanding or worldview by the storyteller... It is almost always a change experience, and it can only ever be identified afterwards" (Mertova & Webster, 2020, p. 71). We turn to critical event narrative analysis considering our stories and our collective discussion exemplify the myriad of experiences and feelings that are invoked in this transition from K-12 teaching into higher education. Reflecting on critical events across our experiences as practicing teachers, graduate students, parents, partners, and friends, we hope to uncover themes that speak to the hope, care, and disruption that characterize our work with early career teachers and young people in educational spaces all while remembering, documenting, and honoring our development as emerging teacher educators for equity and justice in education.

Sharing Our Individual Critical Events

In sharing the following critical events, which are marked by the various insights we hold at our unique positions on our respective journeys, we invite readers to enjoy our chronological collection of transformative experiences. Jillian's narrative discusses the graduate school admissions process and the identity work that is often involved in this process. Chelsea's narrative is grounded in what motivated her to pursue teaching as a career and her doctoral studies. Andrea's narrative explores the intersections

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