

Chapter 24

The Reluctant Impostor: A Narrative Self–Study From Drop–Out to PhD

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ABSTRACT

This chapter recounts in both personal and pedagogical terms the journey of the author from a teenager who dropped out of high school to a young person who earned a GED. The pedagogical story then continues to trace the path to the author’s beginning as a middle grades educator and, ultimately, as a scholar who has earned a PhD and now serves as a teacher educator. The chapter draws upon narrative methodology, as well as self-study, to examine this transformation alongside relevant research literature. The author includes reflections from journal notes, accounts drawn from family interviews and photographs, and notes from former teacher/mentors in the process. Final conclusions speak to imagine new possibilities for a range of pathways to success in the educational system, and a centering of the power of literacy to empower a person in their lives.

INTRODUCTION

I remember that morning, those strange feelings of uncertainty and the implications for an adulthood I could not yet envision completely. I also remember the frustration I felt as a high school student. “People like you,” one of my teachers told me, “but they don’t understand you.”

Tracing the decision to drop out of high school and the events that led up to that moment in my life has been emotional work. This was true when I taught middle school English/language arts, and it is true now as I work at the university level in reading education.

In the process of preparing this chapter, I have revisited family photographs, contacted former teachers, and interviewed family members. As a third-year assistant professor who has earned a PhD, the younger self who dropped out feels like another person ago, as distant as a stranger on the other side of the world. Sometimes I want to go back and meet that kid, perhaps impart some words of advice, but the journey

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has been a series of treasures even through difficulty. As a First-Generation College Student, the world of being a middle school teacher was strange and new. Being on the teacher side of the experience was never something I expected. The same is true as a university professor. My primary response is gratitude.

I was (mostly) successful in the majority of school work and had earned most of the credits I needed. What was the breaking point of why I chose to drop out as a second semester high school junior? While my life does not contain a central thesis statement, if I were to boil down the purpose of this chapter it is this: I explore and recognize that learning and life are complicated processes, and I want to draw upon my journey to share with others. This immediately implies for me a negotiation of a savior complex, but it is not my job to save anything. Rather, I can share my story and practice listening to the journey others share with me. Based on my reflection and reading, I explore creative pathways for considering responses to students who have dropped out that are supportive, rather than steeped in judgment; I also contend that educators act as advocates who see their students first as people with great potential, and not as statistics or nameless entities who are simply deemed at-risk.

In talking with my mother, she had the sense that there was a plan, very much reinforced by the success I have found since dropping out. She recounted how the principal suggested that I was just “sitting in school” and knew what I needed to know already, moving me forward to get a GED and think about college. When the principal told her that I had found all of what I needed at school and that I was ready to move on, she saw the positive. There was talk of college, but I was not sure that was the direction I wanted to go. I did not know the options ahead of me, nor did my high school principal articulate a plan that could help me move forward in my journey with great detail. While higher education did come up, I thought that college would be the same as high school – I imagined the same teachers, the same students, and the same feelings of being in a place but not belonging. There were many positive teacher figures in my life who saw potential in me, and there were others who seemed to have a limited view of what was possible for a young person from rural Appalachia. As part of my work as a scholar, teacher, and ally, I never want to limit my students, regardless of their origin stories and intersections of identity.

TELLING THE STORY WITH CARE AND DETAIL

In order to examine this experience further, I am drawing upon the narrative inquiry work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) to examine the researcher’s changing positionality through the course of life-changes. Being a personal journey, I will eschew the typical use of a third-person reference to self, and I will also weave the literature on this topic throughout the chapter. To pretend that a change in language somehow removes me from my own experiences is a linguistic fantasy. The personal reflection contained in this chapter align with the narrative inquiry methodology.

In an effort to retain the collaborative and recursive elements of self-study, I have invited other voices to this work, from mentors to family members, and considered the artifacts I have reviewed in light of invited reflections. This is a story of person and teacher, and a story of one who found themselves at the boundaries/barriers of school experience, and yet who persisted and reentered the educational system as a teacher, mentor, and advocate for meaningful and healthy experiences with education.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested that such narrative inquiry should draw upon ways “to write about the whole context of a life,” across “a rich array of possible field texts” (p. 101). In keeping with a systematic and considered approach, I have included multiple sources of data and a variety of ways of

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