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## Learning and Changing: The Shaping of a Teacher's Identity through Time, Across Spaces and in Different Contexts

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## Learning and Changing: The Shaping of a Teacher's Identity through Time, Across Spaces and in Different Contexts

### Abstract

This research paper explores the confluence of significant events in my life that shaped my identity as a teacher and researcher. I employed autoethnography to explore my personal life journey across time, space and context, in order to identify and to analyse the significant moments of epiphany that impacted on my decision to become a teacher. The findings of this study reveal a number of universal qualities of good teachers across three continents who, independently and unbeknown to each other, acted as role models in shaping my identity and my desire to become a teacher in order to serve the communities in which I live. Today, I see myself as a lifelong learner, constantly adapting to change and using new technologies to empower my students with the best possible opportunities to self-regulate their learning and to achieve their short and long-term goals.

### Keywords

Identity Formation, Professional Identity, Effective Teachers

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### Acknowledgements

To those teachers who crossed my path and actively supported me in my life journey.

## Learning and Changing: The Shaping of a Teacher's Identity through Time, Across Spaces and in Different Contexts

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I am an experienced teacher of 29 years doing research in education as part of a doctoral degree. I decided to carry out this study in order to illuminate and to explore the significant events in my life that served as turning points in my decision to become a teacher. I set out to simply understand who I am and why I chose to dedicate my life to teaching. In the process of revisiting personal historical events and recording past memories, I began to realise that there was a clear pattern in what had shaped my sense of identity. This pattern was shaped by good teachers who crossed my path and built my capacity to overcome challenges and to achieve my goals. Thinking about this was important for me as I was able to develop a better understanding of myself, myself as a teacher and how good teachers empowered me to accomplish my dreams under very challenging circumstances. Some people think that a good teachers is someone whose students get high academic results. I think that good teachers use strategies to establish strong positive relationships, explicitly teach concepts, provide constructive feedback, and practice differentiation to foster deep student engagement with subject matter (Hattie & Yates 2013).

By engaging in autoethnographic research I was able to explore the deeper issues associated with the factors that contributed to my student success, hidden in the epiphanies of life episodes, from childhood to adulthood. In my self-study, I could determine factors that related to how I developed adaptive behaviors through time and in different contexts across geographical spaces (Bandura, 1995). Autoethnography is a research method where the researcher and the subject of the research is the same person. The investigation commences with the person in question recollecting and documenting records of significant life events that marked his or her life forever. As the researcher engages in a reflective analysis of the written memory recollections, he or she gradually begins to form fresh insights into the self and how it was developed into the "I am" now through time and space (Custer, 2014). Autoethnography in Greek is a compound word consisting of three terms, namely: auto (self), ethno (cultural) and graphy (writing). In writing my autoethnography, I analysed a collection of written records that chronicle and illustrate my personal experiences so I could explore and build my understanding of the various phenomena that shaped who I am today as a person and as an educator who is driven to search for the optimum learning spaces and conditions for my own

students (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). As adults, we tend to replicate the good things that happened to us and to do the opposite to the bad things that we experienced. Engaging in autoethnographic research was a very challenging yet highly engaging task, requiring me to relive both positive and difficult moments that marked my path in the process of becoming who I am today. Ellis and Adam (2014) note that,

Autoethnography requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions, asking over and over if we have penetrated as many layers of our own defenses, fears, and insecurities as our project requires. It asks that we rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who and how we want to be. (p. 271)

Today, I consider myself to be a very lucky person living my childhood dream of being a teacher touching the minds and hearts of young children. I have written this autoethnography to seek a deeper understanding of what drives me as a person and as a teacher. This investigation explores my personal lived experiences and the turning points during three periods of my life in three different countries where culture, people and events played a significant role in shaping and transforming my identity. Each event, at a specific moment in my life, once located in my memory is “described, fashioned into a text to be performed. This moment is then surrounded by those cultural representations and voices that define the experience in question” (Denzin, 2013, p. 32). The words, actions and voices of those teachers who crossed my path and gently acted as compasses in my life, helped me to navigate through the challenges and the unexpected unfoldings of events, take a prominent place in this study. According to Custer (2014), “autoethnography can radically alter an individual's perception of the past, inform their present, and reshape their future if they are aware and open to the transformative effects” (p. 2). Through the lessons uncovered from this investigation, I hope to become a better teacher more capable of contributing to the success of my students. To assist this research, I used various artifacts including: letters, photographs and notes from significant people in my life including teachers. Searching through my photographs brought events into stark focus. In some cases, the absence of photographs was as telling as their presence. Reliving these events in my mind, over and over again, in order to distill the essence of each experience was a challenging but at the same time a fascinating and transformative process. I present my stories in three sections. Each section starts with a new beginning, and each involves a radical and confronting changing sense of identity including, my name, language for everyday communication, religion and culture as I migrated from one continent to another. The first section explains my early life in Brazil, the second recounts my time in a Greek village and in a Greek orphanage, and the third describes my initial experiences migrating to Australia.

### **Brazil: “Call me Jose Nicolau”**

In 1969 Conquistinha was a small rural area in the outskirts of the city of Uberaba in Brazil. Mum and dad worked on the farms for the rich landlords in the area. Our house, made of mud bricks, was located by the banks of the river “Uberaba”. It consisted of two separate areas: the kitchen and a bedroom. In Conquistinha, I spent some of the most memorable moments of my life with my two sisters playing by the banks of the river and surrounded by banana, mango and coffee trees.

One day, mum made the big announcement, “We are moving to Uberaba, your father found another job. It will be easier for everyone”. That explained why we had not seen dad for a number of days. The news of moving to a big city filled me with excitement. “You will be

able to go to school and I can also find a job,” mum continued. I was totally, oblivious of the poverty around me, for me this place was a paradise. I could not fully understand why we had to leave Conquistinha.



Figure 1. My Brazilian community in Conquistinha (1970).

Our new house was at the back of a soap factory. It wasn't really ours, my father had met "uncle" George, a Greek professor from the University of Uberaba who owned the factory and the house. He was kind enough to let us live in the house located at the back of the factory. It comprised of a small kitchen, a bedroom and a small bathroom. The property was surrounded by a high wall, a few banana trees and a couple of mandarin trees breaking the monotony of the surroundings. Soon my paradise, Conquistinha was long forgotten. On Sundays mum took us the church, which was about one kilometer from the soap factory. After church mum returned home and I went to the Sunday school at the back of the church where the two nuns and the priest fed us, as we listened to stories about Jesus. One Sunday, the priest looked at me and said, "Jose Nicolau, these pencils are for you!" I could not believe my eyes ... The priest extended his hand and gave me two pencils. My first pencils ever, at the age of five ... It was one of the happiest moments in my life. I ran all the way home and into my mum's arms with the two pencils in my right hand. "Look mum," I exclaimed, "Padre gave me two pencils!" Mum smiled ... She appeared to be equally as happy as myself with my new pencils. Soon, I put the pencils to good use. The kitchen wall became the perfect canvas for my "writings" and drawings. But mum was not impressed. The pencils were confiscated immediately, "Jose Nicolau, I will give you the pencils back when we buy an exercise book!" she said. I cannot remember mum buying any exercise books. She did not have the money to buy it.

Two years later, at the age of seven, I learnt to read and write thanks to my Prep and Grade One teachers. I looked forward to learning, as I took the long walk to school along the paddocks on the right side of the dirt road and the usual mud brick houses on the left side. Before classes we all lined up outside the canteen area for a cup of milk and a slice of bread that sustained us for the day. The school building was new but small. Some classes commenced at 8.30 am and finished at lunch time, just before the second shift of students arrived for their lessons. On the days that mum worked, I had to wait for my younger sister outside her classroom until the end of the school day for the second shift. From time to time I would climb

up the window to see what was going on inside her classroom. One day the teacher opened the door and invited me inside. “Jose Nicolau, I heard that you are good at reading,” she said, “would you like to help my students?” I could not believe what I was hearing! The teacher wanted me to help her? “Use this ruler to cover all the letters of each word, then reveal one letter at a time as the child sounds it out and reads the word. It’s easy!” she explained. From that day on, I did not have to spend my time waiting for my sister outside the classroom. I was a very important teacher assistant.

Life in Uberaba was tough for both dad and mum. Dad spent very little time at home. He didn’t have time to play with us or go to places together. Working as a laborer at the hydroelectric power station outside Uberaba was not very rewarding. Dad was not even earning enough money to cover the day to day needs of our family. Eventually, he gave up. “We are going to move to Greece!” he announced looking very relieved for having made such a difficult and important decision. Mum was committed to follow dad to the other side of the world. I had no choice ... I was happy and curious to get to know Greece but at the same time sad to leave behind those I loved. I had no concept of how far Greece was from Brazil nor the consequences of my parents’ decision to make a new beginning in a new country. The move from Conquistinha to Uberaba had only been a short trip on the back of a truck with all our belongings. Now, we were taking just three suitcases on the bus from Uberaba to the airport in Sao Paulo.

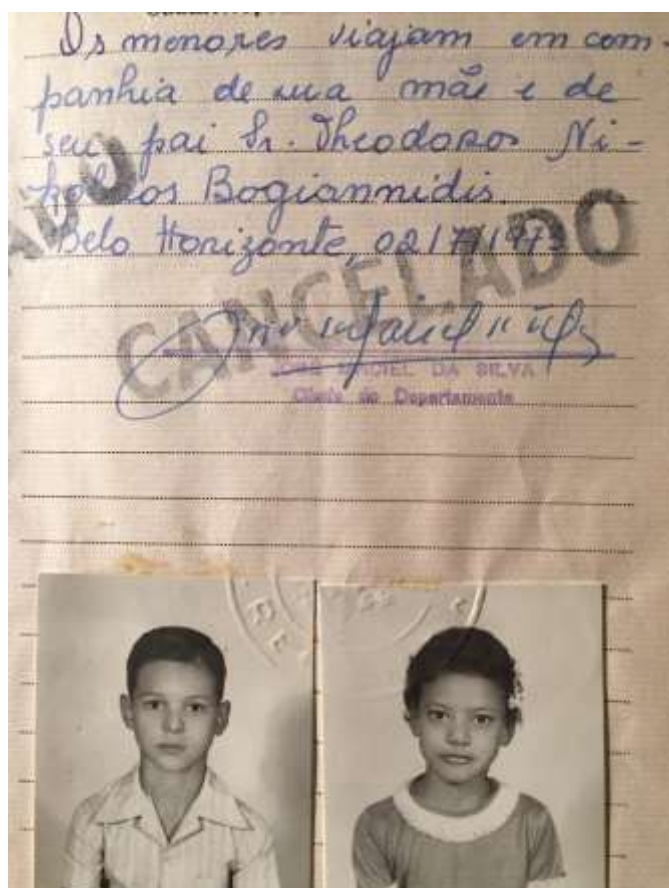


Figure 2. Jose Nicolau and younger sister, July 1973.

### Greece: “Call me Nikola”

Four days later, we arrived at dad’s village in northern Greece. It was July 1973 ... I had only seen images of life in Greece in the famous Greek first grade textbook (Alfavitario)

used in elementary schools in Greece in the 60's and 70's and some photographs of beautiful islands, which I had not yet spotted anywhere while looking through the window of the bus, on the way to my father's village from Athens. We arrived early in the morning ... Dad seemed confused as the driver put his foot on the brakes at the first bus stop outside his village. "Lakkia!" shouted the driver and opened the doors. We had arrived at dad's village, Lakkia. As the bus took the turn and disappeared around the bend, a man looked at us and approached dad. "Thodori!" he shouted with excitement. I could not understand anything else. The man, seemed excited and called my father's name several times as he hugged and kissed him. Soon, more people came out of their homes wearing pyjamas... They were overjoyed ... hugging and kissing my father with eyes full of tears. We found ourselves surrounded by piercing eyes scrutinizing us from top to bottom.



Figure 3. Father Panagiotis and my family after our Christening.

During the first days at the village we stayed with my paternal grandmother and grandfather. A number of people visited us. Amongst them, the school teacher, Mr. Giorgos, and the priest of the village, Father Panagiotis. They appeared to be engaged in serious long conversations with my father and my grandfather, possibly, about our future. The reality was that now we were probably in a more difficult situation than when we were living in Uberaba. We could not afford to have our own house. There were no jobs for my parents. We could not speak Greek. We were Catholics who could only speak Brazilian-Portuguese. Our destiny was in the hands of grandfather, the priest and the teacher. Soon, dad broke the news to mum, "You

and the children have to be re-baptised and we have to get married again". I was confused. I could not understand why. A few days later, we were all christened at a nearby Greek Orthodox Monastery and given new names. They called me Nikola.

I commenced classes in September, at the local primary school. Mr. Giorgos was the Grade Four teacher. He actively took the initial responsibility for teaching me Greek. Mr. Giorgos, made me feel welcome. I followed him everywhere. The other teachers insisted that I should attend the Grade Two class, even though the children were younger than me ... In my mind, I had made my choice. Every time they took me to the Grade Two classroom, I ran back to Mr. Giorgos' class. In the end the other teachers gave up. Initially, I had no idea of what was going on during the lessons. Mr. Giorgos tried to help me as much as possible. I could not read, write or understand what they were saying ... My classmates looked after me and somehow we were able to communicate ... Within a few weeks, I began tentatively reading and writing, but I still could not understand everything.

Almost six months had passed since our arrival at the village. Both mum and dad seemed very content with our new life. Dad managed to get temporary work at the coal mines in the nearby city of Ptolemaida. And mum could not wait to break the news of her pregnancy, "You are going to have another brother or sister." she told us, one day after school. I wanted a baby boy but my older sister insisted that it was going to be a baby girl. Towards the end of the school year mum left for the hospital. She had gone for a long time. One day a distant aunty picked me up from school. "Your mother is coming home," she said. I could not wait to see mum and the baby! Many relatives had gathered at grandpa's house. They did not seem to be happy that mum and the baby were coming home. "It's time, let's go," said in a soft voice my aunty said, "mum is here" and she wiped her tears. On the way home, I held her hand as we walked to our house to the sound of the tolling church bell. People dressed in black came to the side of the road as we passed in front of their houses. No one had the courage to tell us the truth ... mum had come home for the last time and there was no baby brother or sister.

The school year ended, summer had arrived. We moved back to grandfather's house. The priest, father Panagiotis and my teacher, Mr. Giorgos had visited us several times. They talked about us. After much deliberation, Father Panagiotis broke the news. "Two orphanages have agreed to take you. Nikola, you will go to an orphanage in Florina and your sisters will go to an orphanage for girls in Kastoria," he explained. I had no idea how far apart were the two cities or how long we were to live separate. My world was crumbling why surrounded by people who felt sorry for us. "Don't worry, I will come back for you and one day we will find our way back to Brazil," whispered my older sister before boarding the bus with my younger sister.

A couple of days later, I was on another bus on my way to the orphanage for boys in Florina, a city close to the northern borders of Greece. The principal of the orphanage called me into his office. His cold smile disappeared as soon as he began reading my school report. Soon, he commenced shaking his head from left to right. It was bad sign... Suddenly, he broke the silence ... "Nikola you are a very weak student ...," he exclaimed. I sank into the armchair and put my head down. Mr. Giorgos was very happy with all my progress. I had even passed the grammar test he gave me at the end of the year. Mr. Giorgos always told me I was a good student. I did not like this principal at all. As I walked out of the office the lady at the front desk gave me a number. "You are number 22," she said. This was my new identification. Soon, I realised that every child at the orphanage was identified by a number.

The primary school was located inside the orphanage. There were only two teachers and two composite classes. At school, no one was punished for misbehaving. No one had the courage to misbehave. The students used to get punished for not giving the right answer, not keeping eye contact with the teacher during the lesson or not having completed their homework. Like everyone else, I was scared from the minute I entered the classroom to the



end of the school day. Not raising your hand after a question by the teacher was an indication of not knowing the answer or not paying attention. I always raised my hand whether I knew the answer or not and prayed that the teacher would not pick me. In Brazil, the teachers had loved me and they never punished me for not knowing the answers.

By the end of primary school, I felt a strong desire to become a teacher. I wanted to become a good teacher, who would work at the orphanage and not punish the children for giving the wrong answers. I wanted to put a stop to the violence and injustices that were going on in the orphanage. Put an end to the misery that lay in the hands of the principal and the other supervisors who always walked around with a stick in their hands. I wanted to be a teacher like my Brazilian teacher and Mr. Giorgos, who cared about me.

In 1976, I successfully completed the high school entrance exams. I was very happy with my results. The first year in high school was not easy. I could not keep up with the amount and the pace of information I had to process in each lesson. The teachers taught directly from textbooks ignoring my needs. I was just another student. "You should seek help outside school," they advised me. I could not afford private tuition after school like most other children. The principal of the orphanage was not impressed with my performance. I spent hours studying with my friends at the orphanage, trying to help each other. I had just managed to pass all subjects but I decided to quit High School and enroll myself at the technical school. The pace and the practical nature of the lessons at the technical school were more suitable to my needs. My dream of becoming a school teacher was to remain just that, a dream.

At the technical school, the Physical Education teacher became my wise friend and mentor. He always pushed me further believing in my ability to succeed. "Work hard and you can achieve anything you want," he would say looking in my eyes. And I believed him... Studying, on many occasions, till 2 o'clock in the morning under the dim lights, in the allocated study room at the orphanage, became a routine. I wasn't alone... A few of my friends were there too, working hard in order to find a way to escape from their past by transforming their dreams into reality through education. We supported each other and ignored the freezing winter temperatures outside and no heating inside. During those challenging days, I was inspired by my PE teacher who was always there for me. Athletics training became part of my daily routine. He pushed me hard and never let go of me. I was so lucky to have him. He helped me set clear goals and taught me the meaning of hard work, discipline and study routines. His voice still echoes in my ears every time I think of the relay race at the athletics competition against the other schools, at the end of my last school year. This was the race of my life. My relay team was in last position and the leading runner from one of the opposing teams, was about 70 metres ahead of me. I was the last runner for my team. I had never run the first 200 metres so fast before in my life. I almost gave up during the race as I was running out of energy and quitting was an easier option. "You can do it! You can do it! Don't give up!" the voice of my PE teacher disrupted my thoughts as I was slowing down, out of breath and ready to quit. It was as if he could read my mind and knew that I had almost nothing left in me to complete the race. I found the energy to focus on the finishing line and keep going. In the last metres, the crowd commenced cheering and encouraging me to run faster. I caught up with the leading runner and eventually I crossed the finishing line in first place. Somehow, my teacher and the crowd had carried me through the race. I suspect that in their minds they believed that I could win the race. Personally, I did not know if I could ... until the moment when I started believing in myself because of my teacher.

Success followed me off the tracks too. Soon, I was getting top marks at school and my dream to become a teacher was re-ignited. I was determined to do my best at school. My PE teacher continued to support me. The exams at the end of year 12 held the keys to my goals. Like the relay race, I knew that time was against me and I had only one chance to succeed. I did my best and waited for the results to be published in the papers ... I had passed all exams

and to my surprise, my average score placed me in the top 10% of the total student population in Greece who had sat for the Year 12 National Exams. It was an automatic ticket to the course I wanted to study. The high scores allowed me to enroll at the Physical Education Academy, in Thessaloniki. My PE teacher was happy and proud of my success. “You did it!” he said “take my track spike shoes, I don’t need them any more”. He probably knew that I could not afford to buy my own.

My successful results were now the catalyst to leave the small city of Florina and move to Thessaloniki, the second largest city in Greece. Within the first days of enrolling at the Physical Education Academy, I began to see and feel the mountain of challenges ahead of me. Lost in my thoughts and away from the safety net of the past two years in high school, I felt helpless. I began wondering, how I could wait for another six years, four years of study and two for the compulsory military service, before I was in a position to take care of my two sisters who were still living in the orphanage with no opportunities for a better life. I had to do something ... Four months later, I was onboard a flight to Australia.

### **Australia: “Call me Nick”**

In Greece I had met my future wife who was a Greek-Australian. I decided to follow her to the other side of the world leaving behind the dream I worked so hard to achieve. Everyone thought that I was crazy to give up my place at the academy, which guaranteed an ongoing teaching position after graduation. My PE teacher and friend was the only person who could fully understand my decision to temporarily give up my studies in order to attend to more pressing family matters ... “Do what you have to do but don’t give up your dream to become a teacher...” he advised me. I knew that I had to start all over again, learn a new language, meet new people and get used to a new culture. I arrived in Australia at the end of 1982 and spent the first year learning English before being accepted for the Diploma of Primary Teaching Degree at Toorak College. I had failed to gain a position to study PE. I was good at track and field, I could play soccer and basketball ... but I could not play cricket, tennis nor Australian football... “Sorry Nick, you have not passed the physical tests and we cannot offer you a place at this college” said one examiner after the other.

Eventually, I settled for a Diploma of Teaching course. It was in a science lab at Toorak College as a student-teacher, that I first used a computer, an Apple 2E. The lecturer took us through step-by-step how to use the computer for word processing. I used a 5¼ inch floppy disk to save my work. Although saving to a floppy disk was a slow process, it worked for me. I could save, revise and edit my work before printing. It was much more efficient than handwriting essays or using a typewriter. For me, 1989 was one of the most exciting years, early in my teaching career. The availability of technology eliminated most of the challenges related to multi-age students in the same classroom. I used explicit teaching strategies in conjunction with computers to cater for the needs of my students in small groups. Soon, I bought my first multimedia computer. I used it with my students to bring their stories to life through animation and sound. I was inspired by the possibilities of technology in the classroom. I embarked on a mission to develop digital products and strategies to make learning engaging, relevant and fun for every child in my care.

In 1993, I travelled back to Brazil for the first time. My Brazilian grandmother had passed away two years before my return. According to my uncle, she was waiting for me and kept saying that “Jose Nicolau is the only one who will one day come back home”. Grandma, left behind a shoe box for me. In it, she had put family photos and the letters that mum had posted to grandma from Greece, including her last letter. They had not received any other news from my family after mum had passed away. My older sister, left the orphanage and tried to find work in Thessaloniki. Her dream to return to Brazil never eventuated. She was killed by a

truck, at the age of 25, trying to cross a busy intersection in Thessaloniki. My younger sister eventually made her way to Australia with the assistance of my new family.

### Discussion

I have written about my life in three distinct periods, each marked by a new name, language and culture. Throughout my life, my identity has been re-defined by those around me. My wishes were never consulted. In my efforts to understand the changes and my transit years from Brazil to Greece and from Greece to Australia, three themes emerged as major agents of change having impacted my life. All of these have contributed to the development of the person and the teacher that I am today. These themes include: identity formation through time and context, attributes of good teachers and the role of technology in empowering individuals to realize their goals.

I am thankful to my teachers who never gave up on me, who allowed me to dream and to experience success by building my capacity to be, to have and to believe that I could achieve anything I wanted. Thanks to those teachers I have achieved my childhood dream of becoming a teacher. Today, I have a dream job and I am always searching for the best strategies and tools to empower my students. Good teachers stand by on the side and gently empower their students to become whatever they want to be. Educating students is more than the accumulation of knowledge. It is about preparing students to take control of their lives, encouraging them to follow their passion and to create the future they want to live in. Good teachers know their students and seamlessly use tools to prepare them for what is now a technology rich world. As Austin and Hickey (2007) point out, teaching is socially transformative education that “requires authentic knowledge of and connection with the experiences, histories and hopes of those who inhabit the margins. This means that educators must enact pedagogies of enablement, restraint and solidarity” (p. 22).

Students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century live in a complex world consisting of seamless interconnected physical and digital spaces. They have access to vast amounts of information and are connected to each other and with people around the globe. These students face their own challenges while forming a personal and social identity of who they are and what they want to become. As a teacher, I use this wealth of knowledge to create the best possible learning spaces and conditions for my students. As other teachers did for me, I differentiate the needs, interests and hopes of all my students including those whose voices are lost in the complexity of everyday interactions and personal challenges. Having experienced abrupt sociocultural changes, I am aware that what teachers see, is not the same as who students are. These hidden factors that may affect student engagement, performance and identity formation.

#### **Theme 1: Identity Formation (Name/Language/Religion/Culture)**

Identity is viewed as two interwoven parts developed over time and space; namely, personal identity and social identity, which “is largely defined and affected by others and the relationships with them” (Lichtwarck-Aschoff, Geert, Bosma & Kunnen, 2008, p. 372). I have become who I am today as a result of personal experiences, interactions with people in my life as well as decisions and actions I have taken over time in different places and contexts. The act of tracing my living memory and carefully examining the phenomena that contributed to the shaping of my identity was a difficult and thought provoking endeavour. According to Custer (2014), “it is not an easy task to relate to who we were in the past and understand how that translates into our identity today, but it is worth the effort in order to reap the rewards of reflexivity and introspection” (pp. 1-2).

At the age of five, I was not preoccupied with cultural, religious, language, education,

socio-economic or geographic factors. These were matters for my parents and the grown-ups in the small community of Conquistinha who nurtured me and provided everything I needed as a child. The acquisition of positive identities by young children “begins in these early experiences of affection and an affirmation, typically rooted in a small number of close relationships, with mother, father, siblings or wider family members according to circumstance” (Woodhead & Brooker, 2008, p. 4). The Brazilian-Portuguese language was my initial instrument for learning and developing my identity (Brooker & Woodhead, 2010). As my family moved from Conquistinha to the nearby city of Uberaba, I had the opportunity to attend school and to be introduced to formal learning. My sense of identity came to the forefront when one of the teachers invited me to assist the younger students. According to Woodhead and Brooker (2008), “participating and contributing are important components of belonging ... [and] a sense of belonging is integral to, and inseparable from, many important aspects of identity” (p. 6). I knew I wanted to be somebody who could make a difference.

With hindsight, I am now aware of the economic problems that forced my family to migrate to Greece. As a child, I left behind my city, relatives, familiar culture, language and school for a new beginning on the other side of the world (James, 1997). During that period my identity changed abruptly as a result of challenges associated with culture, language barriers and religion. In the first few months, I was very silent in the presence of others, as I could not communicate in Greek. I felt like I was at ground zero in a totally new environment. This silence is “a universal characteristic of the uprooting experience, [which] is shared by all immigrant children irrespective of nationality, economic status, family stability, or any other factors” (James, 1997, p. 98).

The village community had its own group identity; there were certain ways of thinking and doing things as well as religious beliefs. Portuguese no longer served me as the vehicle for communication and learning. The only way to blend into the community and to regain an identity and a voice was to completely surrender to the wishes of the local community and let it shape me (Stryker & Burke, 2000). I had to bury my past as if it never existed before, whilst my parents were more preoccupied with the basic needs of food and shelter (James, 1997). My new identity evolved over time. I had a new name, a new religion and Greek language was slowly replacing my mother tongue, Portuguese. At school, I was accepted by my peers and had developed a good relationship with my teacher. Identity formation is an ever changing and evolving process.

With the death of my mother my sisters and I were sent to orphanages in different cities. Upon arrival at the orphanage, I received a new identity, I was reduced to a two digit number. At the same time, the negative feedback I received from the principal of the orphanage shook my image of who I was and what I was capable of achieving (Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010). Developing fluency in Greek was a key aspect for success in my education. According to James (1977), “even when a child has learned the conversational aspect of a second language, it may take five years, on average, to learn those aspects of language related to cognitive and academic functioning” (p. 100).

A sense of being fully recognised for who I was came to the surface during my adolescent years. The successful combination of physical and academic activities brought me social recognition and personal satisfaction (George et al., 2013), thanks to my Physical Education teacher who acted “as an identity agent” (Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010, p. 78) and positively influenced my actions and decisions to the point that I was determined to become a teacher in order to give back what I received as a child.

## **Theme 2: Attributes of Good Teachers**

In rural Conquistinha, I was informally learning from the people around me through observation, play and imitation (Bruner, 1996). When I moved to the city Uberaba, I had the chance to attend Sunday religious classes and formal schooling. Adapting to life in Uberaba was not a major issue. With the assistance of the teachers and surrounded by my peers, my learning experience became richer and faster (Hinton & Fischer, 2010). When one of the teachers invited me to assist the younger students during reading sessions, learning to read became a meaningful and engaging task (Vosniadou, 2001). I was inspired and I felt empowered knowing that the teacher believed in my ability to assist other students to learn. Being actively involved in helping others accelerated my knowledge of the Portuguese phonics system and allowed me to develop reading fluency (Frager & Stern, 1970).

After moving to Greece in 1973 and with no Greek language skills, I felt trapped, unable to move to the future or go back into my past. It was not until Mr. Giorgos, the teacher at my father's village, appeared and made an effort to break my silence. In a short period of time, a relationship of trust was developed between the two of us, which was an essential element for my learning and for moving forward (Beard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2010). I was eager to learn and Mr. Giorgos, believed in me and made me feel that I was capable of succeeding (Beard, Hoy & Hoy, 2010). Mr. Giorgos was patient and caring. He allowed me to attend his class and tried to cater for my needs with the limited resources available at the time. According to Hattie and Yates (2103), "the act of teaching requires deliberate interventions to ensure that there is cognitive change in the student ... [and] sufficient understanding of the student's understanding as he or she comes to the task" (p. 23).

As I moved further up the education system a number of teachers including the principal of the orphanage employed the most unproductive strategies to educate children. They showed a disregard for students' linguistic, cognitive and emotional needs as well as lack of empathy. Their teaching strategies were based on fear, humiliation, physical and emotional pain.

My physical education teacher was different. He was caring and interested in guiding and building my capacity to do well in Physical Education as well as in all subjects (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1992). Under his guidance I developed discipline and good study routines as well as cooperative skills that enabled me to work with my peers on the more complex educational activities for long hours into the night (Hattie & Yates, 2013). My success in track and field spilled over to other subjects. Soon, I was receiving positive feedback and encouragement from teachers and peers that kept me motivated in pushing the limits of what I believed to be possible. Teachers were taking more time to explain concepts and appeared more committed in ensuring my success (Phelan et al., 1992). Perhaps, though, the most intriguing strategy that my Physical Education teacher employed was the gradual release of control that allowed me to think critically and to develop self-efficacy to adapt to new challenges (Bandura, 1982, p. 122). My Physical Education teacher had provided me with lots of opportunities to develop a "strong sense of efficacy [...] through mastery experience" (Bandura, 1995, p. 3). He was always providing me with constructive feedback and advice through friendly dialogues whilst gently pushing me to do better. I commenced believing in my capacity to achieve my goal to become a teacher. It was not going to be easy but I had the support and I was prepared to persist and to work hard (Bandura, 1995).

The major obstacle that could have derailed my plans to become a teacher, when I arrived in Australia, was my lack of communication skills in English. However, thanks to good teachers, who in the past had helped me experience "successful performance accomplishments" (Sewell & St George, 2009, p. 60), I was able to front the new challenges with more confidence. Although, I found myself in a totally different environment and I had no communication skills in English, I knew that it was a matter of time, access to relevant resources, personal effort,

persistence and small steps to achieving my goals (Bandura, 1989). Moreover, “the evidence suggests that positive expectations are a necessary but not sufficient predictor of occupational choice. Believing that one can succeed at an occupation is critical to one’s decision to enter that occupational field” (Eccles, 2009, p. 84). At the end of 1986, I graduated as a Primary school teacher from Toorak College. Victoria, Australia.

### **Theme 3: Technology as a Vehicle for Self-Regulation**

As a child, I was always optimistic and eager to explore the world around me. Pencil and paper gave me the opportunity to organise my thoughts in written format and to make better sense of my environment (Clay, 1977). However, optimism and curiosity were not enough. What allowed me to take advantage of pen and paper were my fluency in oral communication, my writing skills and a strong disposition to learn and to achieve my goals. According to Beard et al., (2010), “optimism has been found to be one general disposition that strongly influences outcomes” (p. 1136). In Greece, teachers and books remained my only sources of knowledge. A few years later, while completing my teaching degree, I was introduced to computers, which allowed me produce better quality work and saved me hours of study time. However, I only began to fully grasp the power of technology in education during my first years of teaching.

As a new teacher, technology assisted me in reducing the challenges of working in a multi-age bilingual program. A small number of stand alone computers with no internet connection gave me more options for engaging students through desktop publishing, educational games and multimedia packages (Atkins et al., 2010). Technology was useful for producing bilingual teaching resources, for addressing individual needs (Vosniadou, 2001), for making repetitive tasks fun and for providing pupils with real life purposes for communicating in the target language. Students could self-regulate their learning using computers as well as using pen and paper. According to Bandura (1995), “the rapid pace of technological change and accelerated growth of knowledge are placing a premium on capability for self-directed learning throughout one's lifetime; otherwise, one's competencies quickly become outmoded” (p. xi). In this technology rich environment, I had more time for teaching and for providing targeted feedback, which is a crucial aspect to student achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Effective teaching and learning is an active process that involves both students and teachers at the center of the process (Hattie & Yates, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

In this autoethnographic study I explored a number of my personal life episodes in an attempt to bring forward phenomena that contributed to the formation of my personal and professional identity. It was a journey through time, across three countries: Brazil, Greece and Australia. My personal and professional identity formation was and continues to be a complex and lifelong process influenced by people, circumstances, personal thoughts and actions through time and space. At every stage of my journey and through the thick and thin of various episodes, the need to learn, to belong and to actively contribute to those around me dominated my life. At each stage, my identity was redefined by the expectations, the beliefs and the values of significant others in my immediate environment including the great teachers who crossed my path nurturing my knowledge and skills and empowering me to achieve my goals.

Now I am a teacher myself. I try to replicate and honour the good teaching and teachers that I encountered. As a teacher I value the skills and the knowledge of individual students. I empower students by involving them in real life tasks and by developing a sense of agency, which impacts positively on their self-confidence. I trust that students can use their knowledge

and skills to make positive contributions to people around them in the process of mastering whatever they are learning. I try to raise the effectiveness of my work by developing strong positive relationships with students and by establishing a supportive and conducive to learning environment. At the same time, I trust and treat students as capable learners and they trust me as someone who can contribute to the development of their knowledge and skills. Together we embark on the lifelong journey of learning and changing by differentiating the lessons at all levels including: resources, processes and outcomes. During this learning journey, I get to know my students and I tailor my feedback according to the objectives of the specific task and the idiosyncrasy of the student. I want my students to feel comfortable discussing their strengths, areas for improvement and to actively seek feedback and support when required. I always seek to improve my own knowledge and skills and armed with the appropriate resources and technological tools for the right tasks, I feel better equipped to cater for the needs of all students in my care. I make explicit connections between theory, skills and “hands on” activities where students are required to apply what is taught in real life situations. I aim to assist students to become self-regulated learners by encouraging them to set their own goals, to establish study routines, to employ effective learning strategies and to reflect on the outcomes of their actions. According to Wirth and Perkins (2008), “the single best measure of mastery in a subject is time spent intellectually engaged with that particular subject” (p. 12). I am fully aware that excellent results demand mental preparation, clear focus on the end goal and an environment that provides constructive and positive encouragement at the right time as required (George et al., 2013).

From my story, I have identified a number of important factors that shaped the person I am today. My identity is constantly evolving over time, across spaces and different contexts. Identity is synonymous with learning and changing and the good teachers who crossed my path, built my skills, my knowledge and my capacity to self-regulate my own learning in order to achieve the goals I set for myself. With time, I learnt to adapt and to use strategies and tools to solve problems and to overcome language, religious and cultural challenges. My good teachers believed in me and strategically helped me to know who I was and empowered me to imagine everything I could be. I am unique but in some ways I am not – so many students in schools, experience changing linguistic and cultural contexts. By telling my story I hope to provide an example of just how complex a student in a class might be. Today, when you meet me, you will think I’m a Greek-Australian but once you know me you will find I am a Brazilian-Greek-Australian. Such complexity should be recognized and valued by teachers. The child and student that I am has formed me as a teacher. Those who work with teachers in pre-service courses and in professional development should be aware of the often passionate drives that bring young people to their courses. It has long been recognized that one good case can illuminate the general. I hope that my autoethnography will shed light on the complex lives of teachers and students.

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To those teachers who crossed my path and actively supported me in my life journey.

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