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In Jen's Shoes – Looking Back to Look Forward: An Autoethnographic Account

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Abstract

This paper discusses the monumental events in my life that have shaped my two professional identities, teacher and researcher. I used autoethnography as a research methodology to traverse my personal life narratives across two different countries: Vietnam and Australia to seek and to examine my dual cultural identities, and how they shaped me. I am a passionate teacher who believes that teaching can change the world through the causes that I care about such as anti-racism and equity in education for students from all backgrounds. In this case study, data were collected by semi-structured interview and reflection on journals. Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The findings are reported under four themes that reflected the stages of my life: designed in Vietnam, made in Australia was the first phase, growing up in Australia, my schooling years and professional years. By making sense of the narratives and involved, it helped me to understand myself better, who I am as a teacher and the causes that I believe in. As an Australian with hybrid cultural identities, I am the norm in contemporary culture.

Keywords

Cultural Identity, Identity Formation, Professional Identity, Effective Teachers, Activism Teaching

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In Jen's Shoes – Looking Back to Look Forward: An Autoethnographic Account

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This paper discusses the monumental events in my life that have shaped my two professional identities, teacher and researcher. I used autoethnography as a research methodology to traverse my personal life narratives across two different countries: Vietnam and Australia to seek and to examine my dual cultural identities, and how they shaped me. I am a passionate teacher who believes that teaching can change the world through the causes that I care about such as anti-racism and equity in education for students from all backgrounds. In this case study, data were collected by semi-structured interview and reflection on journals. Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The findings are reported under four themes that reflected the stages of my life: designed in Vietnam, made in Australia was the first phase, growing up in Australia, my schooling years and professional years. By making sense of the narratives and involved, it helped me to understand myself better, who I am as a teacher and the causes that I believe in. As an Australian with hybrid cultural identities, I am the norm in contemporary culture. Keywords: Cultural Identity, Identity Formation, Professional Identity, Effective Teachers, Activism Teaching

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”
– Nelson Mandela

I am a PhD candidate exploring boys' writing and digital literacy and primary teaching. I started teaching in 2012 after a successful career in marketing. My passion for teaching comes from my background as a child of Vietnamese refugee parents. It is never easy to start a new life in a foreign country, as we faced many physical and economic hardships. Education was the key that changed my life. I believe that education is the agent of change to make people more understanding of different cultures and eliminate racism. My doctoral study has enabled me to learn more about the cognitive process of writing and how boys learn to read and write in today's classroom. I am also interested in looking at the way technology plays a part in the process of the teaching and learning to write. This autoethnography study looks at my cultural identity and my professional identity and the reasons for my passion for teaching activism. I concur with de Brun and Willingham's comment, “We teach who we are” (de Bruin, 2016, p. 408; Willingham, 2009, p. 59). The process of questioning who I am as a teacher and researcher allows me to ponder on the events of life that have shaped me and made me who I am. This research process helps me to understand myself better and it is only through the critical analysis of myself and my experiences that I understand that I am led to hold certain values which I have applied to my teaching. Those values also helped me to choose the topic of my research and the passion for that research to make a difference to children's lives (de Bruin, 2016; Tenni, Smythe, & Boucher, 2003). I went through the major events in my life and critically questioned those events that shaped my identities—I deliberately use the word identities because I do believe that we have many layers of ourselves. Pearson said, “I have many identities, many

layers, we all do” (Pearson, 2017, p. 1). A person’s identities are underpinned by complex sociocultural contexts across his or her lifetime (Fung, 2014).

The Researchers

Jennifer Sze is a Vietnamese-Australian teacher and PhD candidate whose research interests is in boys’ literacy, digital technology, education reform and teachers’ identity. This study began by Jennifer reflecting on the four major narratives that shaped her personal and professional identities. It started when Jane Southcott, her PhD supervisor, interviewed Jennifer. She took away the interview transcription and transcribed the interview. In addition to the interview from Jane, Jennifer looked back at the four narratives and critically reflected on her experiences, her values, her education pedagogies and started to question on how she viewed herself as a teacher. She posed questions about her teaching values and the reasons behind those values (de Bruin, 2016; Cann-Milland & Southcott, 2018). The aim of this study is to analyse Jennifer’s dual cultural identities: Vietnamese-Australian and how this hybridity has impacted on the way she lives and teaches. The data came from her memories and discussions with families and friends through conversations (Cann-Milland & Southcott, 2018; Fung, 2014). We, being Jane and Jennifer, wrote the narratives from Jennifer’s perspectives and analysed the data by sorting them into themes. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, both authors read the data independently and coded the data by keywords and phrases in the margins. Through numerous meetings, we discussed, challenged, and refined our data (Cann-Milland & Southcott, 2018; Georgoulas & Southcott, 2017; Mawson, Berry, Murray, & Hayward, 2011). Throughout the article, Jennifer, the first author, will be referring to her narratives in the first person. Jane Southcott is an Anglo-Celtic-Australian. She is an experienced qualitative and phenomenological researcher. Through the sharing of our professional and personal identities as teachers and researchers, we have understood the lived experiences of those with hybrid identities (Georgoulas & Southcott, 2017). The rest of the article has been designed and written by the two authors.

Cultural Identity: Pho Meets the Lamington

Before I present my stories, it will assist people to understand the cultural and historical context that surrounds the arrival of Vietnamese people in Australia. Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War officially started in 1962; Australia’s commitment consisted of army personnel, particularly in air force and navy personnel (Australian War Memorial, 2018). By the end of the war in 1975, the first wave of Vietnamese refugees to arrive in Australia were the orphan infants evacuated by Operation Babylift before the fall of Saigon in April 1975 (Museum Victoria, 2018). The first boatload of refugees fleeing Vietnam arrived at Darwin Harbour on April 26th, 1976 (Museum Victoria, 2018). Today, there are 236,700 Vietnam-born people were living in Australia at the end of 2017. This is equivalent to 3.4 per cent of Australia’s overseas-born population and 1.0 per cent of Australia’s total population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017).

Pho is a Vietnamese soup made of beef or chicken stock with rice noodles and thin slices of beef or chicken. It is a very popular dish in Vietnam; people believe it came from the French’s dish pot-au-feu (Nguyen, 2013). Lamington is an Australian culinary icon, lamingtons can be made of any cake, but the best ones are made by using large cubes of sponge cake dipped in chocolate and sprinkled generously with fine desiccated coconut (Puckles, 2017). The reason I have used this metaphor to describe my identity is that I am a Vietnamese-Australian. I love both countries and both cultures dearly and yet, somehow, I never quite am accepted by either nation. When I am at home in Australia, I am treated differently because of the way I look.

When I am overseas, I am definitely Australian. I have my Australian passport and you know I am a true-blue Aussie when I open my mouth to speak—especially when I swear! I have described the above heading as “pho meets the lamington” for this reason.

Designed in Vietnam, Made in Australia

I was born in Vietnam and lived in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) for eleven years. I came to Australia on the 7th of February 1985, I remember it vividly because Michael Jackson’s “Beat It” was everywhere and Madonna’s “Borderline” was blasting on the TV. I still remember the first time I stepped out of Tullamarine Airport with my mother; it was a sunny summer day in Melbourne, I was wearing a yellow cotton dress, and yet I was freezing! I was expecting my father to pick us up, as I have not seen him since I was six.

My father was a South Vietnamese soldier, so after the war ended, he, like thousands of other Southern Vietnamese men, got put into a Vietnamese “Education Camp”—a glamorous term for “jail for the defeated.” After six grueling years in jail, my father was released and came home to Saigon. Unfortunately, he was a Southern Vietnamese soldier; his “crime” was too great for him to find a job or to do anything. He was a prisoner in Saigon and life was so tough. We were so poor and there was never enough food to eat. My father escaped Vietnam with twenty of his friends on a little fishing boat. Mother and I stayed behind because it was too dangerous, and we would be a burden to him. My father’s crew endured severe hardship; they met pirates when they were in Thailand water. The women were raped, the men were beaten up, and the pirates took all the valuables these boat people had. When an Indonesian vessel rescued them, all they had was whatever rags they had on their body and they were on the brink of death due to starvation and thirst. Due to Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War, when he applied, my father was accepted to come to Australia. He was lucky compared to the refugees who were trying to escape their own war-torn countries and who still hope to come to Australia today.

After my father settled in the refugee camp in Nunawading, a suburb in Melbourne, he proceeded to apply for mother and me to come to Australia. Five years later, mother and I touched down at Melbourne airport. All the euphoric feeling of meeting my father, only to have my father again evaporated again upon seeing my cousin Tan and my aunt; they picked us up, not my father. My father had met another Vietnamese woman when he was in refugee camp, and he could not face my mother and me. He just left us there to face the grim reality of being poor, desolate, and not knowing a word of English in the Lucky Country. My heart was broken. My dream of having a family with a mother and a father and a white picket fence around the house was quickly replaced by the cruel reality that I was fatherless again. When I was born, my father was fighting in a war, so I never knew who he was until he briefly came home when I was six. He quickly left Vietnam after his release from jail. I never got to know my father. Given the circumstances of my parent’s impending divorce, I felt bitterly disappointed and resentful.

Growing up in Australia

I grew up in a Housing Commission flats in Richmond, an inner-city suburb of Melbourne. Today it is a “cool” suburb where all the “cool” hipsters buy their organic soy lattes with their environmentally friendly KeepCup. The Richmond I knew back in the 1980s was a dangerous, poor, working-class suburb with a high unemployment rate and drug addicts everywhere. Life for me as a kid was tough because I was raised by a single mum who needed to work around the clock to make ends meet.

One event etched itself on my memory. The “laundry incident” led me to be an absolute geek to fight my way out of the cycle of poverty. I realized early that education was the key to changing my life. As mentioned, my mother was hardly home, as she needed to work to raise me. I was by myself and in those flats where you have one communal laundry for the whole entire floor. One day, I walked into the laundry to wash our clothes. Before my eyes were three naked, stoned, drug addicts laid flat on the floor. As a vulnerable 11-year-old, I bolted and went back to our apartment. From that moment on, I knew I had two choices:

1. To study tirelessly to have a good education and get the hell out of there, or
2. End up being like those people that I saw in the laundry.

Fortunately for me, I decided to go for option one which resulted me in being where I am today. I believe that the difficulties of my childhood shaped the way I view education and work ethics. I did not have any other choice than the circumstance I was placed in when I came to Australia: being raised by a single mum and living in a drug-infested suburb of Melbourne. I grew up in a household with no cultural capital; there were no bedtime stories, no books to read, no food to eat, and no companions for me outside of myself. I do sometimes wonder how I turned out to be the way I am now. Am I disputing the common belief that children who come from a minority, poor background often do not do so well at school? Such children are often seen as not staying on task, frequently misbehaving, and thus not performing to their true potential (Maynard & Lowe, 1999). Am I what Gee (1996) described as “discourse,” the way I talk, listen, value, behave and interact with others, absorbed long before I began formal education? (Honan, 2013; Gee, 1996). According to these theorists, I would have acquired discourse through socialization with my surroundings through my family and social settings (Comber & Thompson, 2001; Gee, 1996). In my case, I had no one there to guide and support me. My mother, although she strongly believed in education herself, endured economic circumstances in Australia, which meant that she left me at home alone so she could work. My discourse was the school I was in, the friends that I had, and the books that I borrowed from my local library. I credited my upbringing to the mean streets of Richmond and the books I read. I was and still am a voracious reader, and I have always loved learning new things. I learnt from books, and the visual poverty I saw in Richmond taught me how to be tough, resilient, and, at the same time, fiercely determined to be a success in life no matter what.

My Schooling Years

We often discuss the importance of stability in a child’s school life, especially in the primary years. In my case, I went to four different schools from Year 5 to Year 12. That was because I was left to my own devices, and I followed whomever I was best friends with at the time to attend the same school as them. My father had abandoned us, and my mother was too depressed to care. More importantly, she simply had to work whatever menial jobs she could find to raise me. My first school I went to when I came to Australia was Richmond Central Primary School. Back in 1985, this school only had a few Asian kids, and the other Asian kids either had been born in Australia or had been in Australia for a while; hence, their English was fluent. For me, besides “hello,” “goodbye,” and “thank you,” I did not know any other English words. I felt like an alien dropped into a place with strange customs and practices. I was put in Mrs. P’s class, and she was very unmemorable. As I did not speak any English, it must have been difficult for her to teach me as she was juggling to teach a class of rowdy kids and a little Vietnamese girl who could not understand anything. I did not make any good friends there, so I did not feel any connection to the school.

When I was in Year six the following year, I moved to Collingwood College because of a family friend who went there. I thought I would be able to enjoy the school better because I had a friend there. Collingwood College was a much bigger school than my last school as it had classes from Preparatory (Kindergarten) to Year 12. The school reflected the suburb's multi-cultural demographic of Vietnamese, Chinese, Greek, Italian and many other nationalities who had called Australia home. I had fond memories of this school, it was there that I met my best friend, Tuyen, and she is still my best friend today. The difference between Collingwood College and Richmond Central Primary School was that at the former I had friends who I could connect with.

You would think that after two school changes I would stay at Collingwood College to complete my secondary school. For reasons that I cannot remember now, Tuyen and I decided to move to Richmond Girls High school to complete our secondary years together. We were there in Year seven and eight. I did not like this school at all because in my teenage mind, I hated the separation of the races within the school. The students hung out with students of their own ethnicity. I knew I could never be a true Vietnamese girl, as I did not fit into any groups. In my mind, I thought all the Vietnamese girls were too "Vietnamese." By that I meant they only spoke Vietnamese, ate Vietnamese food, and had no interest in integrating themselves into mainstream Australian culture. I, on the other hand, considered myself Australian as mother and I had Australian citizenship, and I wanted to be completely "Aussie." I wanted to speak English with an Australian accent. I wanted to fit into the Australian society, culture, and way of life. Simply put, I wanted to be a true Australian. I did not want to be labelled "Nip" or "Ching Chong."

The last school I went to from Years nine to twelve was a Catholic girls' school in Fitzroy, the Academy of Mary Immaculate (AMI) with a uniform that reminded me of the TV sitcom "The Flying Nun." Tuyen and I decided to go to AMI as we had had enough of the girls' school in Richmond. AMI was a school with a strong Catholic ethos. Nuns and teachers who were not nuns taught us. I was shocked the first time I saw our Principal; Sister Eileen wore a skirt and I could see her knees! If there were ever a time when I felt I hated being Vietnamese the most, it would have been during this period. At AMI, the demographic consisted of students from Anglo-Saxon and European backgrounds. There were only a few Asian students; in my year there were only seven of us from Vietnamese and Chinese backgrounds. The Vietnamese girls were constantly speaking Vietnamese to one another, and they seemed to have no aspirations to go to University and have a career. I was determined to be a success. At the time, success to me meant to have an education, and the only way to get out of that horrible hellhole I called home was to get a university degree. I was resolved to go to either the University of Melbourne or Monash University do a Bachelor of Commerce, or a Bachelor of Law. Nothing was going to get in my way. I put my head down and studied hard for three solid years. I graduated with one of the highest VCE scores at my school; I got a Scholarship with one of the most prestigious consulting firms in the world, Deloitte.

I remember I told my home teacher, Mr. Kean: "Sir, I applied for the scholarship with Deloitte." He gave me one of those "I don't think you'll get it because of your background" looks and said: "Don't get your hopes up, Jen; firms like that don't look at students from our school. They only pick the rich private school ones, you know, the likes of Melbourne Girls Grammar or MLC—not a Catholic school like ours." When I got my scholarship, I hid it from everyone, as I did not think they would believe me. I also told myself, after I finished year twelve, I would never want to see those girls again. Looking back, I believe I had made up my mind that in order to be successful, I needed to surround myself with people with ambitious goals. I felt the girls at my school had no aspirations to have a career. I deliberately removed myself from the Asian group and stood alone the whole year because I wanted to be different. In my mind, being away from them would give me an opportunity to study harder, perfect my

English and submerge myself into the Australian culture even more. Simply put, I wanted to blend in and be an “Aussie.” During the final year of high school, I felt the acute loneliness of being in a third space. I was not part of the Asian group because I did not want to be labelled as “one of the Asians,” and yet my non-Asian school friends, mainly the Greeks, Italians, or Australian school friends still did not accept me as one of them. To them, I was one of the Asian students who stuck to their own little group and did not converse in English. This feeling of loneliness and not fitting into anywhere was to follow me into my university years and also later on in my working life. I supposed this feeling of being an outsider was influenced by the abandonment by my father. It was also influenced by being a part of two cultures—Vietnamese and Australian. Now, the feeling of not fitting in still stays with me, but instead of feeling down about it, I decided to accept it for what it is and get on with my life. I know I can never change the way I look; to the Australians, I will always have my Asian face. To the Asians, I would be seen as “mat goc” —a Vietnamese word to describe someone who has lost their cultural roots and belongs nowhere. But I ask myself how can I have lost my “roots” when I feel strongly connected to both trees? The Vietnamese tree of my birth and the Australian tree have both shaped my identity, my values, and my beliefs.

Why am I an Aussie when I am overseas and an immigrant in Australia?

“Where are you from?” an American Southern drawl accent asked me in a youth hostel in Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco in May 1999.

“I am from Melbourne, Australia” I replied.

“Man, I love Australia, but I don’t like your Prime Minister, she sure sounded like a racist chick.”

“We don’t have a female Prime Minister, like EVER” I told him.

“Oh, that’s really neat. I thought I saw some red hair woman with a funny accent spoke on the TV the other day and how she was really against Asians in Australia.”

“No, she is just one of our politicians that somehow got voted into our Senate, unfortunately.”

“Yeah, but you are as Aussie as, your accent is so Aussie. It’s kinda cool.”

“I know, I am an Aussie” I said.

My American friend mistook one of our politicians to be Australia’s Prime Minister at the time when she was giving her maiden speech to the Senate and her views towards immigrants were not favourable, especially towards Asians. I told my new friend that people like her are the reasons why I became a teacher. I believe racism comes from ignorance. None of us is born as racists; it is how we are taught in our family and our community that shape our views towards other races. I needed to tell the story above to demonstrate the point that I am forever positioned in this third space. One foot in a Vietnamese culture and one foot firmly planted in the Australian culture. Vietnamese do not accept me as Vietnamese as I am too “Aussie” in my mannerism and the way I live. Australians look at my Vietnamese face and automatically stereotype me, hence the comment I often hear when I open my mouth: “OMG, your English is so good!” or “You must know the best pho place in Melbourne given that you must be living in either Richmond, Footscray, or Springvale, right?” These suburbs are where most Vietnamese live in Melbourne. I do not live anywhere near those suburbs. In fact, the suburb where I live is whiter than white! It is as traditional as “roast beef and three vegs” where the demographic is predominantly Anglo-Saxon. To give a different example of what happened when I am at home, one winter a few years ago, a family moved in next to my house. When my neighbour found out that I was going to Hongkong and Singapore for a holiday, he asked:

“Oh, are you going *home*?” I looked at him strangely and retorted: “Believe it or not, my *home* is right next to yours. Australia is my home. I am not Chinese or Singaporean, I am going away to get away from the cold, mate!”

Professional Story

I knew I would be a teacher and I was born to do this job. It is my calling and I feel like I can make a difference. I viewed my childhood experiences and how education has helped me to become who I am today. I am grateful for the education I received because without it I would not be where I am today: a successful contributing member to society. I have had three career changes thus far: Marketer, Teacher, and Academic. I became a teacher in 2012 when I was thirty-eight years old after I had my two boys. Prior to being a teacher, I was a marketer working in a corporate environment, and my job was to create marketing and public relations campaigns for the brands I was working for. I loved my marketing career as it provided the creativity that I craved, and the communication skills required me to persuade the market to buy my company’s products. This ability to be persuasive has served me well as a teacher. Steve Jobs said in his Commencement speech at Stanford University, “Life is about connecting the dots” (Jobs, 2005). Having great communication skills as a marketer, combined with my maturity as a mother, gave me the patience and commitment to be an effective classroom teacher. I completed the Master of Teaching at the University of Melbourne, and I was offered a position at a school in Melbourne with a middle-class Anglo-Saxon demographic. The sort of school that’s situated in an idyllic suburb where the students come from stable families. It was a school I loved as I had spent the year prior completing my pre-service teaching practice there. When the Principal offered me the teaching contract, she said: “I believe you would be an asset to this school because of your ethnicity.” I believe the Principal meant that with my Vietnamese heritage, I could enrich and extend the school’s monoculture. I sincerely hoped I did. We live in a globalised world, and I believe that the more children are exposed to different races and different cultures other than their own, the more compassionate and understanding they will become.

I feel very proud of my Vietnamese heritage, and I believe that because of the influence of this culture, I am a unique person in that I am more compassionate and I am able to comprehend the nuances from two different culture perspectives. I feel ultra-sensitive towards the race issue because there is too much stereotyping by people. In my experience, the people who were racists towards me because of the way I look are either ignorant because they have not travelled overseas or have not been exposed to Asians. In the very few occasions where I experienced racism when someone was racist towards me out of xenophobia and not because of ignorance, it was more in the form of nasty throw-away comments such as “Go back to your home country, you F&*#@ Ching Chong.” I viewed these outbursts as being from people who needed help rather than people whose opinion I should let affect my countenance. This sensitivity of race makes me defensive and vocal when someone make comments that I consider offensive. For example, when I taught a year one class in 2014, one of my students pulled his eyelids upwards to resemble a typical Asian slant eyes; I told him firmly not to do that as it is offensive to Asian people. To some of my colleagues, I felt an invisible wall between us. They do not know how to handle someone like me. A strong, out-spoken, and direct person with plenty of attitude and not afraid to tell them to pull their heads in if I hear something that is not right. This sense of fighting for justice and what is right has always been my core principle and the attitude of not taking any nonsense from anyone has made me a lot of friends and enemies. I am not sure my Vietnamese heritage has anything to do with it. Even if I were an Anglo-Saxon by race, I would still be the way how I am today: direct, honest, assertive, and

opinionated. So does race have anything to do with the way I am? Or am I just born that way regardless of whether I am a pho, a lamington, or a strange combination of the two?

Autoethnography as a Research Methodology

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that focuses on the researcher's own voice and personal experiences (de Bruin, 2016; Nethsinghe, 2012; Sutherland, 2015; Vrayn, 2006). It is a method where the authors can express their thoughts in a personalised style by telling the reader their narratives. This method stems from postmodern philosophy and its intention is to link the personal and cultural inquiry and expression. (Wall, 2006). The word auto means personal experience to understand the ethno which is the cultural experience (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, 2011; Holman, 2005). This approach challenges the traditional ways of doing research and representing others (Ellis, 2011; Spry, 2001) and approach research as a political and social act (Adams & Holman, 2008; Ellis, 2011). Theorists such as Barthes (1977), Derrida (1978), and Radway (1984) advocated the understanding of new relationships between authors, audiences and texts (Barthes, 1977; Derrida, 1978; Radway, 1984). They appreciate narratives were complex and provided a rich background to comprehend morals and ethics (Ellis, 2011).

The researcher uses autobiographical data to tell their narratives, autobiographical data is data contains information about oneself (Brewer, 1986; Tenni, Smyth & Boucher, 2003). In our study, we began with a conversational interview between Jennifer and Jane. This was transcribed and then Jennifer wrote reflectively on her past experiences. We selected the strongest of those narratives for inclusion. The popularity of this research method comes from scholars who were seeking positive response to critiques of traditional ideas about what and how research should be. These scholars wanted to focus on making meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience. They wanted research that would entice readers to issues of identity, lived experiences that were perhaps silenced from the writer's past and to form representations to deepen the reader's capacity to empathise with people who are different from them (Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2011). Autoethnography offers researchers and readers the opportunity to open up a wider view on the world, renouncing the rigidness of what constitutes meaningful and useful research. This method allows researchers and readers to comprehend the writers' interpretations of what and how they perceive their lived experiences and interpret them through their lens (Adams, 2005; Ellis, 2011; Wood, 2009).

Autoethnography is a research method where the authors select lived experiences and examine them through a critical lens (Bartleet & Ellis, 2009; Fung, 2014; Hamilton, Smith & Worthington, 2008). Autoethnography researchers examine these events in their life to construct their identity through reflection, the personal stories become data used to address the research question: How do Jennifer's dual cultural backgrounds impact on her teaching philosophy? (Fung, 2014; Roberts, 2004). It can be seen that one can create one's identity by one's stories and autoethnography confirms the development of one's identity (Eakin, 2008; Fung, 2014). We analysed the stories by reading repeatedly, coding and building themes. The aim of this article is to investigate the formation of my personal and professional identities as a teacher, PhD student and activist for the education causes I am deeply passionate about. What drives my motivation to embark on the journey? Why am I so committed to stamp out racism through education? These are the questions I want to explore as I share my narratives.

Discussion

Writing this journal article has been like seeing the best psychologist in my forty-four years of existence. I started to question the layers of my identities and reflected upon the major

events in my life that had made me who I am today. Reflecting on my own life, I appreciate the importance of not judging, stereotyping, and generalising—instead, I appreciate people as complex who are shaped by their experiences and the layers of their identities. My layers of identities are Vietnamese-Australian, mum, teacher, academic and PhD student. These layers make me who I am and I would not be who I am without these layers of identities.

My teacher's identity could be defined by the causes I am passionate about; anti-racism, a "fair go" for students from disadvantaged backgrounds like myself. "Fair go" is an Australian language to mean to be fair to somebody by giving him or her a "fair go." It demonstrates the Australian value of egalitarianism of fairness to all. I feel deeply in my heart teaching as my calling to eliminate racism one child at a time. I believe we become racists through the influence of our culture, our interaction with our circle of friends, family, and the community to which we belong. These are the discourses I wish to explore (Gee, 1996; Heath, 1982). My teaching ethos is activism teaching; it is conducted by teachers or activists who are interested in the processes of change making and uses education as a tool to empower the social change in the cause that they believe (Tripp & Muzzin, 2005). It is teaching that involves teaching the students about real world issues and bringing them inside the classroom. For the most part, today's schools are still essentially "a book-based cultural experience that was formulated to suit the context of parents and earlier generations" (Pendergast & Bahr, 2007, p. 38). The process of writing this autoethnography article has been a difficult soul-searching process. I have tried to be honest and look at the events in my life through a critical lens and ask critical questions to make me who I am as a person and as a teacher.

The first important event was being born in Vietnam during the years where the Vietnam War just ended in 1975. I know what it feels like to not have enough food to eat, to be separated from both of my parents as they were being punished by their political beliefs. My childhood up until eleven years of age was shaped by loneliness, hunger, insecurity, longing for a family. I missed my father and wanted us to be a family like everybody else, but he was in prison. My mother was also separated from me at the time as she needed to move to another city to find work. The bitter and sour of pho in me gladly absorbed the sweetness of lamingtons when I came to Australia in 1985. The second significant event was coming to Australia and experiencing a completely different culture and learning a new language. I had to grow up fast as I was forced to be the "mother" to my own mother who was deteriorating in a spiral of depression due to the dissolution of her marriage. She had to work day and night to raise me, and we lived in those horrible drug-infested housing commission flats where unemployment, poverty, and misery exist daily. I resented being a Vietnamese at that time because I associated being poor to the lack of education. In a way, growing up in such a harsh environment has made me believe in the power of education and what it can do to a child like me. I am grateful for the education I received from Year 5 in Australia up to now. Those fundamental years have shaped my values, beliefs, work ethics, and a sense of equity and fighting for the underdogs that instil in me today.

My schooling years in Australia were a jigsaw puzzle of four different schools, and I had total control of my study, as my mother did not get involved with my school life. My father left us, and my mother was too busy with work and dealing with her own issues to care about me. The truth is I did not have one teacher that was significant enough for me to remember. In 2012 when I did my Master of Teaching, one of the questions I was asked was, "Who was your favourite teacher and why?" I tried to remember all the teachers I had over the years and I could not name one. My memory of the teachers I came across were average; I did not feel like they were passionate enough to leave an impression on me. They were doing their jobs in an era where government schools were being closed down by the then Victoria Premier. The teachers were disenchanted, unengaged, and dispassionate. I knew that if I were to become a teacher, I would have to have passion and view it as my calling. There is a Greek word that describes this

feeling, it is called *meraki*, it means the soul, creativity, or love put into something; the essence of yourself that is put into your work (Definitions, 2017).

I have to deal with the constant struggle of being accepted as an Australian on a day-to-day basis. I got better at dealing with this issue as I get older. I am not as angry as I used to be when someone makes stereotypical comments about the Asian or Vietnamese race, or when they comment with surprise at how good my English is. I have come to love and appreciate both cultures, Vietnamese and Australian, and take the good parts of both cultures that form who I am. I no longer feel like I need to constrain myself to be an “Aussie” or a Vietnamese. I feel that I am an Australian-Vietnamese. I feel blessed to have both cultures. As a teacher and academic now, I feel that it is my calling and duty to make a difference to children’s lives. I particularly wanted to help those children who come from broken homes whose parents are refugees. I want to help them to achieve success in life through education. I feel a duty to help those children who come from a similar background like I was. I view teaching as my calling to help these children to have a good education. By having a good education, hopefully, they will be successful in life later one.

I have come to value and appreciate autoethnography as a research method as I write this article; “especially in an academic community, the ability to be a highly critical-reflexive thinker-practitioner will be a bonus to research in any discipline” (Fung, 2014, p. 16). At times, it has been painful to look back at episodes of my life such as those early years when I first came to Australia with my mother full of hope and expectations of a happy life, but the reality was the opposite of what I had hoped. The flashback of the laundry incidents and the images of those drug addicts lying naked on the cold hard floor hit me like a migraine. I physically flinched at the images as they appeared in my head. At the same time, the happy memories also appeared. When I wrote about my professional identity as a teacher, I remember my fantastic Year 1 class (six-year-olds) at my old school. I remember the children’s faces, and I wonder what they would look like now. As I continue with my teaching and research, I hope I will always stay passionate, determined, hungry, and happy.

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