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Confessions of a Novice Researcher: An Autoethnography of Inherent Vulnerabilities

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Abstract

In the field of doctoral student education, novice researcher identity literature is largely authored by research supervisors or other senior scholars. Novice researchers' firsthand accounts of their triumphs and tribulations are relatively un(der)represented. This autoethnography draws on data generated through reflexive analytic memos and conversations with my academic advisor to offer just that: a firsthand account of my researcher debut, including the inherent vulnerabilities I experienced throughout the practicum process. The paper then asks the reader to consider what it might look like for doctoral education programs to make visible the ongoing internal negotiations of one's researcher identity.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Researcher Identity, Vulnerability, Novice Researcher, Doctoral Education

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Confessions of a Novice Researcher: An Autoethnography of Inherent Vulnerabilities

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In the field of doctoral student education, novice researcher identity literature is largely authored by research supervisors or other senior scholars. Novice researchers' firsthand accounts of their triumphs and tribulations are relatively un(der)represented. This autoethnography draws on data generated through reflexive analytic memos and conversations with my academic advisor to offer just that: a firsthand account of my researcher debut, including the inherent vulnerabilities I experienced throughout the practicum process. The paper then asks the reader to consider what it might look like for doctoral education programs to make visible the ongoing internal negotiations of one's researcher identity. Keywords: Autoethnography, Researcher Identity, Vulnerability, Novice Researcher, Doctoral Education

Introduction

Kierkegaard argued that while we can only live our lives moving forward, we can only understand them looking backwards (as cited in Hayler, 2012, p. 1). This story, which is set in the summer of 2017, represents my experiences as a graduate student as I negotiated my emerging identity as Researcher. Situated within my practicum research study of English as a second language (ESL) teachers' identity negotiations, I use autoethnographic methods to explore the vulnerabilities and self-doubt inherent in conducting research for the first time.

Autoethnography—a methodology which traditionally has been tied to either autobiography or ethnography (Ellis, 2004)—is perhaps better understood as “ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation” (Chang, 2008, p. 48). An autoethnographer writes with the understanding that it is not possible to discover nor declare the truth of one's lived reality (Dyson, 2007; Medford, 2006); rather, as Canagarajah (2013) explained about the writing of his own professional identity negotiations, “the very act of composing this narrative enabled me to further explore some of my hidden feelings, forgotten motivations, and suppressed emotions” (p. 261). Autoethnographers do not shy away from emotions because rather than seeing emotions as biases to be somehow eliminated, they are instead celebrated as “unique sources of insight to be valued and examined” (Tillmann-Healy & Kiesinger, 2001, p. 82).

Work of this nature reveals multiple and, at times, conflicting layers of consciousness in an effort to understand aspects of one's life lived within a context (Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington, 2008; Sambrook, 2015); however, it is not done without a certain level of risk to the researcher. As Hayler (2012) explains:

In some ways the blank page is perfect as it is: uncomplicated, unchallenging, and uncontroversial. Once you make your mark and begin to tell a tale of who you are, things can seem to both open up and narrow down at the same time. You play your hand, reveal yourself and begin that story in one way or another.
(p. 3)

Autoethnographers accept that opening up their life to learn about self and culture also opens up their life for public consumption (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Winkler, 2018) and possible critique (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009; Haynes, 2011; Pelias, 2004).

In line with Day (2002) and Roberts (2014), the piece you are about to read will toggle between two voices to offer a layered account of my experiences. First is my real time, reactionary voice in the form of daily memos chronicling my experiences while collecting practicum data. I share these memos—in their raw, unaltered form—to make known my worries, triumphs, and (perceived) failures. The second is then my reflective voice of today responding and discussing these memos now nearly three years after the memos were written. With the exception of the introduction, each section of this autoethnography will honor and make space for *both* voices. The methods section, for example, opens with the first memo I wrote during the data collection process, and the conclusion ends with the last. Yes, presenting data outside of the findings section is uncommon in most forms of qualitative writing, but I have chosen to take some creative license with the structure of this autoethnography. This piece is a story of my reflections on the lived experiences as a novice researcher. However, my reflective voice would not be possible without the real time, reactionary one captured in the memos themselves. To share one without the other would be to privilege the product over the process.

I invite you now to join me in a look back on my practicum research experience. It all began, and thus begins in this autoethnography, with the first memo—written as I was working to recruit participants. What you need to know is that I had one rule going into this process: all participants needed to be new to the profession. I was—in theory—recruiting first-time teachers.

My Methods

Research Memo: Two weeks prior to the start of the program

The program hasn't even started yet, and I've already messed up. I broke my one (and only) rule.

I just agreed to let Lesley¹ join the project. She has a master's in TESOL—a disqualifying degree when it comes to the project—except she also self-identifies as a first-time teacher. What am I supposed to do? She wants in, and here's the thing: Who am I to question her identity?

In the spring of 2018, I successfully defended my practicum paper before my committee: Dr. Carrie Symons, Dr. Bethany Wilinski, and (now Dr., but then) doctoral candidate Matt Deroo. Only once this milestone was complete did I finally allow myself to look beyond the teachers' experiences in the research study and examine my own experiences. As I (re)read the memos I had generated over the course of the summer, I found myself reliving powerful emotions. Had I really been so uncertain of my role as a researcher? Several of the memos were nothing more than a string of questions—many of which went unanswered. Were participants saying, for example, what they thought I wanted to hear over dinner instead of what they were really thinking? Were they filtering themselves in some way? Why? And how would I know if they were? Here I was, a newly-minted advanced doctoral student, and all I could think about were

¹ All names are pseudonyms with the exception of the members of my practicum committee, who generously agreed to let me use their real names after reading the finished manuscript.

my potential missteps. I was feeling vulnerable and insecure as a researcher; it was then that I decided to write this autoethnography.

The Practicum Study

Before donning my autoethnographic hat for the remainder of this piece, it is important to provide a very brief overview of the practicum study, as context will prove important when reading the memos. My practicum study was an ethnographic case study of pre-service teachers' (PSTs) *imagined teacher identities* (Barkhuizen, 2016; Xu, 2012). Participants were recent American college graduates who had chosen to relocate to South Korea for a period of one to three years to teach ESL in South Korean primary or secondary schools. For six weeks during the summer of 2017, my 12 participants along with approximately 60 other PSTs participated in an intensive teacher preparation program at a rural South Korean university. Following participants throughout the summer, I conducted interviews, hosted weekly small group discussions over dinner, observed their practice teaching, and collected myriad artifacts, all with the aim of understanding PSTs' imagined teacher identities as well as the process in which these identities were being negotiated. Over the course of the six-week program, and in addition to all the other data being generated, I wrote daily memos detailing, not only the events of the day, but also my emotions and lingering questions.

The Autoethnography

These are the memos that first caught my attention, but they are not the only source of data that I drew from for this autoethnography. Guided by Chang's (2008) book *Autoethnography as Method*, I looked for ways of incorporating personal memory, self-observation, and additional external sources beyond the memos. In addition to the approximately 50 pages of memos generated in the days leading up to the start of the teacher preparation program and then throughout the six-week program, I also recorded my biweekly advising meetings with my advisor Dr. Carrie Symons (from here on simply referred to as "Carrie"). While our topics of conversation often focused on the practicum study, these recordings still captured moments of personal memory and self-observation as I would often confide in Carrie about my questions and/or concerns regarding my abilities as a researcher.

In the spring of 2018, I generated additional data as I began toying with the idea of writing this piece. Knowing that memories and other materials of recollection are, as Bochner (2007) described, "the product of an archaeological dig, a trace of the past always in need of interpretation" (p. 200), I looked for ways of making meaning of my writings. Borrowing a suggestion from Chang (2008), I met with four doctoral students who were also currently engaged in practicum studies at the University to share anecdotes, recount moments of great triumph, and name our worst fears as novice researchers. These reflective conversations were modeled after interactive interviewing techniques (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997), with the hope that by coming together as a community of novice researchers, we would be able to probe deeper into our insecurities and vulnerabilities while also supporting one another as we gained greater insight into our emerging researcher identities (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004).

When faced with making sense of approximately 50 pages of memos and more than 5 hours of recorded conversations with Carrie and my peers, I spent weeks reading, listening, and memo-ing. It was then I realized a large portion of the memos' content was beyond the scope of this autoethnography; large portions of each memo focused strictly on the day-to-day events of the preparation program and were thus more geared towards the practicum study. The self-reflective passages that I needed to focus on were intermixed, so I dug through my backpack in search of my trusty pencil case. Then, armed with an orange highlighter and

cartoon-themed post-it notes, I returned to the memos for yet another read through. Highlighting only passages where the focus centered on *my* emotions and/or experiences and then summarizing each passage into a single word or phrase scribbled on a post-it, I began to make my way through the stack of documents. Words or phrases like *asking questions*, *self-doubt*, *making decisions*, *perceptions*, *realizations*, *relationships*, and *self-care* spilled across every page. But to what end?

Not knowing what to do next, I did what any graduate student who has ever worked with Dr. Bethany Wilinski would do; I wrote memos. I wrote about each of these words or phrases, considering connections between them. I wrote to discover the underlying concerns in which each phrase was rooted; I wrote to find my footing in this story; I wrote to find myself among the pages. Through this process, I came to three realizations about myself as a novice researcher: (1) I struggled to set aside the ever-present feelings of insecurity and self-doubt, (2) I often second guessed my role within and relationship to others in the teacher preparation community within which I was working, and (3) In a space where it was so difficult for me, as a first-time researcher, to silence the insecurity, practicing self-care was crucial.

My Findings

In this piece, I focus on the complications—the moments of self-doubt and insecurity—rather than those of greater confidence. This focus is intentional. Following Adams's (2014) lead, I am choosing to write this confessional tale as a way of making sense of difficult experiences—ones that I did not anticipate, ones that caused me to question myself and my preparedness as a researcher—in the practicum research process. While there were certainly many small triumphs throughout the six-week data collection process, I write this piece not to play back a highlight reel, but instead to help me understand and make sense of the myriad difficult emotions that I experienced as a first-time researcher in hopes of better navigating them in the future.

Confession: It's all an act

Before beginning my practicum, I took three research courses at the University: an educational inquiry course as well as introductory courses in both qualitative and quantitative methods. I had written and defended my proposal. I was ready, right? To a certain degree, yes, I was ready. I had received approval from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), drafted interview protocols and consent forms, secured housing, airline tickets, and funding; logistically, I was ready. But was I ready to be a researcher, to introduce myself and be known as a researcher? Would I feel comfortable and confident in this new role? No.

Advising Meeting: One week before the program begins

Carrie: So, tell me about how recruitment went? Did you get enough volunteers?

Laura: Well...I may have taken twice as many as we had originally talked about. There are 12 now.

Carrie: Twelve?

Laura: Yep, but here's the thing: when I was looking at the list of volunteers, I had just no sense of how to make cuts having never met them. I could only go off what they told me in their emails. Some people wrote 6 paragraphs about themselves; some wrote

- a couple of sentences. But I realized that I couldn't justify selecting any one of them over another.
- Carrie: Well, remember that we talked about the possibility of people dropping out of the study.
- Laura: Yeah, so I guess taking 12 is my safety net. But, I'm not going to lie, I'm a little worried about the added time and money involved with a larger group.

Research Memo: Day 3

Am I really ready to do this level of research? This project is already—three days in—bigger than I ever imagined. Will the data really be rich enough to draw conclusions? What if I'm just playing the part of researcher without actually being one?

Research Memo: Day 6

"I know what you mean."

"I've been there."

"It was the same for me."

These phrases kept coming up as I transcribed an interview today. Katherine—a pseudonym she and I chose—was expressing concerns about adjusting culturally and socially to her cohort, her school, and her homestay. And I kept repeating these same three phrases, but I don't know if it really was the same way for me. I think I just committed a cardinal research sin.

I know what I was trying to do; I was trying to build 정 [jeong]²; I was trying to relate to and reassure her. But...how did my attempts to reassure her affect the rest of the interview? How did it affect her experiences in the program and expectations for the year ahead? **Will my little white lies haunt me (or her) moving forward?**

Research Memo: Day 15

I think yesterday's dinner was the most natural conversation and interaction that I've had with my participants so far. I didn't feel like an outsider looking in. And it only took two weeks! Yay!

But wait...it's only a six-week program, so we are a third of the way through the program and I'm only now really bonding with them in a meaningful way. Yay?

Research Memo: Day 19

Now I understand why my committee wanted me to keep the number of participants to a minimum. Why did I take all 12? Why has no one stopped coming to the dinners? Having to do twice the amount of transcription really

² 정 [jeong] is a Korean word that, without an exact equivalent in the English language, has often been described as the love and connection formed within a community; when 정 [jeong] is shared among individuals, it evokes shared feelings of empathy and compassion.

sucks! Wait...should the researcher being wishing participants would drop out?
Probably not. Fail!

Research Memo: Day 26

Some of the participants were joking over dinner. “Laura, what if you did all this work and find nothing?” Funny, except not. What if that’s the case?
**What if nothing of interest comes of all this work? How will I know?
And...then what do I do?**

I’ve never understood why people talk about the voice in one’s head that second guesses decisions and doubts one’s abilities as “little.” Mine is not a little voice. It’s shrill; it’s deafening; it’s constant. Throughout the summer, I wrote memos that recorded, questioned, and worried over every detail. I was afraid I had spent the last year building a very carefully crafted house of cards, and with one misstep, everything would come crumbling down. From bonding with participants, to facilitating discussions over dinner, to keeping up with transcription, to asking the “right” questions in an interview, I worried about it all. However, what I saw as weakness—a compulsive confessing of potentially fatal flaws—as a researcher, Peshkin (2000) saw as an asset, writing, “to be forthcoming and honest about how we work as researchers is to develop a reflective awareness that, I believe, contributes to enhancing the quality of our interpretive acts” (p. 9).

Self-doubt is just one of the myriad threats novice researchers encounter in the field (Bell, 1998; emerald & Carpenter, 2015); however, it is at the root of many researchers’ sense of vulnerability. Feelings of being out of one’s depth (Dunn, 1991; Velardo & Elliott, 2018), worries of being unable to meet (un)realistic standards of quality and rigor (McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek, & Hopwood, 2009), and anxiety over the thought of having to publicly defend one’s ideas, not just during the practicum, but again throughout the dissertation, process (Hall & Burns, 2009) all stem from doctoral students’ feelings of researcher-self-doubt.

Bell (1998) encouraged all researchers to accept self-doubt as a natural part of the process, writing:

The researcher is fallible and vulnerable within the research context. Of course, we can try to cover up this vulnerability with the garb of our profession, but this instantly diminishes us as experiential creatures sharing the understanding of our existence with others. (p. 184)

Yet, it is easier said than done. While I appreciate the push Peshkin, Bell, and many others are making to reframe researchers’ doubts as assets, when my doubts seep into all aspects of the research process, running the gamut from interviews to relationships to analysis, it is difficult to welcome them with open arms and an open mind. I may have acted like a researcher, but I believe it was just that: an act.

Confession: I am more than a researcher

Although my practicum focused on the identity negotiations of 12 PSTs and cultivating those relationships took time and attention, there were many other relationships to consider. Just as it takes a village to raise a child, the same is true for preparing teachers. There was a team of six program coordinators planning and facilitating the day-to-day programming, the director and a slew of office staff working from the Seoul office, and an English camp staff of

seven former ESL teachers, not to mention the approximately 60 other PSTs who were not participating in the study, but also active in the summer program. Each of these nearly 100 individuals positioned me and my work differently, and attending to these myriad relationships wasn't easy.

Yes, I was more than a researcher in this space. My first teaching job after finishing a master's degree in education was with the very same binational commission that sponsored the teacher preparation program in 2017. Not only had I participated in this program nine years ago, I then proceeded to work for the program as a program coordinator for another three years. I was a researcher, yes, but I was also an experienced ESL teacher, an alumnus of the program, a former coordinator, and a well-known face in the Seoul office. Simply put, my identity was complicated, and it was never more evident than in my relationships with the program coordinators and office staff.

Research Memo: Day 3

"Help them, Laura. They [program coordinators] are young and do not know their job." These were the director's words to me this evening. My immediate thought: "Well shit!" Here's my biggest concern: if I spend too much time working with and supporting the coordinators (as she is requesting), will the participants come to view me as a coordinator? And if so, how will that affect their level of trust in me and their willingness to be open and honest with me over dinner? Will they view me as too closely tied to the coordinators and/or the Office and somehow filter or shield themselves?

Research Memo: Day 10

Point of concern: I still don't know where I stand with some of the coordinators. I almost get a territorial vibe from one in particular. She hesitates when I walk into the office. If we are the only two in the office and she must leave...even to simply use the restroom...she asks me to leave as well—as if I am somehow not to be trusted in the office alone. Does she feel as though I am stepping on her toes—or maybe the collective toes of the coordinator team by being here? I hate office politics, but I will keep trying to build 정 [jeong]; I'm not giving up!

Research Memo: Day 12

I got a text this morning from the lead coordinator. It said: "We are finished with the morning meeting; can I talk to you?" My mind immediately went to "Did I do something wrong?"

We met.

I didn't.

Research Memo: Day 25

Isn't there a saying about not biting the hand that feeds you? Hazel and I were talking the other day about the "moral qualms" (her term) related to the program. She and a few others were asking if they are really qualified to be

teaching? If they are doing a disservice to their students? If they are somehow participating in colonizing behavior by teaching English in South Korea?

These are powerful and important questions to consider, and I'm encouraging them to think/talk/write more about them, but how would my relationship with the director—a woman who has been so supportive of me both professionally and personally over the years—be affected if I wrote critically of the program? Would she read that as a betrayal?

Throughout the summer, I worked tirelessly to build and maintain positive, trusting relationships with participants, program coordinators, and others in the space. I was open and honest about my prior history with the program and wrote reflective memos about the ways in which my identity may have been impacting these relationships (Gunasekara, 2007). However, the struggle was real.

Understanding that the ways in which I was working to position myself were different than how others were positioning me was an emotional and humbling experience (emerald & Carpenter, 2015; Taylor, Klein, & Abrams, 2014). The director wanted me to be a source of guidance and support for her team of first-time coordinators, but the team wanted desperately to prove themselves capable of running the program independently. The tension that I was feeling and reflecting on in the first few weeks of the program was due, at least in part, to the ongoing power relations (Ballamingie & Johnson, 2011) and identity negotiations (emerald & Carpenter, 2015; Giampapa, 2011) as we tried to meet on common ground. We looked for ways of building trust, knowing that with a more trusting relationship, we could offer each other honest, critical, and supportive feedback (Taylor et al., 2014).

Acting as a researcher while doubting my every move and juggling often uncomfortable and complicated relationships with members of the coordinator team was emotionally draining, and the constant drain began to take its toll.

Lesson Learned: I am not a superhero, and that's okay.

I am not a superhero, and while you might think that goes without saying, it didn't stop me from trying to be one throughout the six-week program. I went into the summer planning to attend every workshop, participate in all optional programming, and establish strong relationships with every PST whether or not they were choosing to participate in the study. I believed, and to a certain extent still believe, ~~an ethnographer's~~ *my* job was to become a member of participants' community by fully and continuously immersing myself in the culture (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). But at what point does a researcher who is fully immersed in her study finally succumb to the ebbing tide, lose sight of the shore, and drown?

Research Memo: Day 9

I am starting to realize how out of balance my life is as a researcher. Every day is filled with endless hours of transcribing, reading, taking fieldnotes, and connecting with the PSTs. I'm worried that I am dropping the ball in other aspects of my professional and personal life in order to be a good researcher. I haven't checked my work email in four days even though I am supposed to be coauthoring a piece with two colleagues, submitting conference proposals, and who knows what else. I'm not sleeping as much as I should, and I haven't talked to my family in at least a week. Do all (ethnographic) researchers struggle in this way? How do I know that I am not missing some crucial data opportunity

or identity-changing revelation if I step away from the program (even for an evening) to catch my breath?

Research Memo: Day 11

I wrote myself a note yesterday giving myself permission to take a break: “Be kind to yourself! Everyone needs to take breaks. It’s called self-care, and you suck at it!” Last week’s note was similar: “You’re not a superhero, so stop trying to be.” Now that I think about it; they aren’t necessarily the kindest, most uplifting messages.

Research Memo: Day 19

I may not practice self-care, but that doesn’t mean I don’t care for my participants. Case in point: there’s a bug going around the program site this week; lots of people are sick. So, tonight’s dinner was 죽 [juk; rice porridge], the Korean equivalent of chicken noodle soup.

Research Memo: Day 37

You know the problem with taking a weekend off? The work piles up. I can tell it’s August; all things University-related have started to ramp up. And the time change is killing me! I work all day with the PSTs. But then as everyone here goes to bed, everyone at the University is just waking up and heading into work. They want to meet; they want responses to the e-mails they sent last night while I was sleeping; they need feedback on documents ASAP. How do I juggle it all?

Looking back on the practicum experience and even further back to my courses leading up to it, what I’ve come to understand is that while I was well-versed in the need for and ways of minimizing risk for my participants, no one told me that I too would be at risk (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018; Velardo & Elliott, 2018). I was working increasingly longer days, losing sleep, and not taking breaks all out of this irrational fear that felt all-too-rational; if I didn’t spend every waking minute with my participants, I was not a “good” researcher. But what is a good researcher? Is my sleep-deprived, emotionally-exhausted self a better researcher simply because I spend more time with my participants? Probably not. Of course not!

Data collection was an emotionally draining experience for me, but I’m not alone in this. Nutov and Hazzan (2011)—a doctoral candidate and their dissertation chair, respectively—decided to take this question head on. Writing about the emotional labor of doing qualitative research, Nutov and Hazzan (2011) identified five forms of emotional labor doctoral students experience while engaged in doctoral studies: (1) selecting a topic, (2) choosing a research paradigm, and maintaining relationships with (3) one’s supervisor, (4) colleagues and fellow doctoral students, and (5) non-academic relationships. My labor focused mostly—at least during data collection—on maintaining relationships. Ultimately, I chose to sacrifice practicing self-care in order to labor harder at those relationships, a phenomenon that Kumar and Cavallaro (2018) note as an all-too-common occurrence among doctoral students and novice researchers.

Discussion

As Richardson (2001) wrote, “How different it feels when it is you and your world that you are writing about; how humbling and demanding” (p. 38). This story was mine. And while some may relate to my experiences, I recognize that others may not. Just as no two individuals will tell the same story, no individual will tell the same story twice. Identities are funny like that. Researcher identities are ever-shifting and subject to constant negotiation (Gunasekara, 2007; Norton & Early, 2011); the researcher I am today is not the researcher I was in the summer of 2017, nor is it the researcher whom I will be in six months or six years. Many a metaphor come to mind. A cat chasing the beam of a laser pointer. The ever-elusive pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. One’s inability to step in the same river twice.

My negotiations of an emerging researcher identity during the summer of 2017 were necessary, but, at times, painful. Since that first summer nearly three years ago, I have extended the practicum into a two-year dissertation project in the form of an (auto)ethnographic case study featuring 7 of the original 12 teachers; I am also on the job market and hoping to take on the role of assistant professor soon. I am comforted knowing that this look back at my most vulnerable moments will only ease the journey forward (Kluge, 2001). Brown (2012) once wrote:

Vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional. Our only choice is a question of engagement. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose: the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection. (p. 2)

I shared this story to engage in conversation with my vulnerability, to acknowledge it, but to also look beyond it, to look towards the horizon and ask myself “what lies ahead?”

However, autoethnographic research is not meant to only benefit the writer (Ellis, 2004; Hayler, 2012). It has an obligation to contribute to a positive change within one’s community or culture (Starr, 2010). Thus I share my experiences as a first-time researcher with my reader as a way of calling attention to—to naming—the underlying vulnerabilities of practicum research experiences for doctoral students (emerald & Carpenter, 2015; Norton & Early, 2011), and to challenge research supervisors and doctoral course instructors to find ways of making visible the ongoing internal negotiations inherent within researcher identity negotiation (Hall & Burns, 2009; McAlpine et al., 2009; Stallings, 1995).

According to Dunn (1991), “the qualitative researcher is usually not prepared to deal with the stress, deep personal involvement, role conflicts, discomfort, and the physical/mental effort that arises from such research” (p. 388). However, by cultivating reflective practices and engaging in meta-cognitive dialogue regarding their experiences (Peredaryenko, & Krauss, 2013; Velardo & Elliott, 2018), doctoral students may find the “courage and clarity of purpose” (Brown, 2012) necessary in order to, first, embrace their vulnerability and, then, continue in their emerging scholarship.

With this in mind, I now share a moment from the interactive interview (Ellis et al., 1997) among myself and four fellow doctoral students who were also engaged in practicum study during the spring of 2018.

Interactive interview: Spring 2018

- Laura: Have there been moments when you're like "I don't know what I'm doing"? Where is that doubt coming from? Or...are you all pros, and I'm just the one sitting here thinking "I don't know what I'm doing?"
- Beth: Every time I do an observation, I'm like, "I have no clue if this is going to work." When I follow my observation protocol that I made, I have no idea if it's going to produce or show anything at all, let alone the things that I'm interested in understanding. And I've modified it as I've gone, and I've been careful to keep track of the changes and my reasons for making them, but it still feels like a crapshoot every time. I don't know if anyone else has felt that way.
- Stephanie: Oh, I totally felt like that. For the first month, I was asking myself if this was what I was supposed to be doing? And worse: "Am I actually going to find anything?"
- Dawn: I hear you! As I was writing my proposal, I had that same feeling. I don't know if this is going to work the way that I want it to. But, for me, the way that I've been able to feel okay with feeling like an imposter is just acknowledging that I am playing a role. I think we just have to trust the process and go with it.
- Beth: Yeah, I suppose that's kind of the whole point to a practicum, right? It's to give us the opportunity to try some of these things out, so that some troubleshooting can happen before the stakes get higher.
- Qiqi: Like a dissertation?
- Beth: Yes, exactly!

Conclusion

So there you have it, Reader. The practicum research experience for me was one of uncertainty, self-doubt, and insecurity, but I got through it. I emerged on the other side a more confident researcher, and while I do not doubt that there will be many more uphill battles as I make my way through the dissertation, I am learning to, as Dawn said, "trust the process and go with it."

I began this autoethnography by sharing the first memo, so it is only fitting that I end it with the final memo written during the data collection phase of my practicum.

Research Memo: Day 40

As I write this last memo, I'm sitting at the Incheon airport waiting for my flight to board.

I am thinking back on what stands out to me about this summer. I am thinking of the 12 teachers who welcomed me into their conversations. I wonder how their first year of teaching, first year of living in South Korea, first year (for some) of living away from home will go. I worry because so many of them

say they are not ready. Their doubts and insecurities are ones that I understand all too well.

Adam put it this way, “I’m a baby bird whose mother is about to shove his ass out this nest.” When another participant (I forget who) asked what will happen next, Adam said, “Oh, I’ll fall for sure, but I think I’ll land on my feet. And, hey, if I can’t fly right away, at least I can walk, right?”

I can’t think of a better way to summarize my experiences as a baby researcher this summer. It wasn’t easy, and I didn’t fly, but I found a way...

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Author Note

Laura M. Kennedy is a doctoral candidate in the Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education program at Michigan State University. Her work explores professional identity negotiations through collaborative, (auto)ethnographic, and case study methodologies with novice teachers and researchers. Considering this piece specifically names and explores the vulnerability Laura experienced as a first-time researcher, it should come as no surprise for her (nor her reader) that writing this “author” bio has proven to be incredibly difficult. It boils down to this: Owning a profession for the first time is an inherently vulnerable act. Laura’s work asks how best we can support one another in persevering. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: kenne420@msu.edu.

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