

A Sidetrack to Autoethnography. Enriching a Reading Research Collective

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Abstract: As a group of academics working for the first time together on a collective project on children and young people's reading engagement, we discovered the value of reflexive conversations on the nature of our individual roles as literacy educators and our roles as collaborative researchers. As the project progressed, we developed this paper from conversations that drifted into self-reflection on our own experiences as readers, teachers and researchers. Rather than viewing these conversations as digression, we decided to embrace wholeheartedly the possibility that they would enrich our research and progress our goals as a group. This was an opportunity to pause and venture into a less familiar research arena. In the process, as individuals, we revealed more of ourselves as collaborative researchers interacting in this new space which enriched our collective undertaking as well as our individual projects within different reading communities.

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1. Introduction

In this article we describe a sidetrack we took as a group of researchers at a large urban university in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Having come together for a specific purpose and as a newly formed group within a previously established research group, we embarked on a project to explore reading in educational settings. In this article we outline what happened, what we did and ultimately, the learning we experienced as we took a sidetrack to attend to personal and professional experiences related to the topic we were researching. [1]

An associate professor at our university in Aotearoa, New Zealand invited any lecturers in our School of Education to join her in a research project investigating children's and young people's engagement in reading. Six academics responded to the invitation; two from the Early Childhood Department, three from primary

teaching and one from secondary teaching. In our initial meeting, we found that we were connected by our interest in reading and the teaching of reading, but that we were each grappling in different ways with the current political context for reading instruction that was shaping policy and practices. [2]

All members of the research team had previous experience as teachers and educational leaders in their respective sectors. However, as academics, our research traditions varied methodologically. [3]

Lisa, a New Zealander was born in Tamaki Makaurau, Auckland and worked as a teacher, professional learning facilitator and in leadership roles in schools, polytechnics and a range of adult and community settings. In her research, Lisa uses a critical ethnographic base and is focused on working-class and vocational education. She has an interest in adult literacy but is also drawn to reading pedagogy due to her English teaching background. [4]

Ross, from California, completed his master's degree on parental involvement in reading for 5-12-year-olds. He enjoyed a twenty-four-year career in primary schools as a teacher, literacy specialist, and principal before entering academia twenty-one years ago. Although he is the eldest member of the team, he considers himself a continuously developing researcher, having led two small research teams prior to joining this project. In his previous research, he focused on mindfulness for teachers and young learners, often using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Finding ways to engage young learners in reading for pleasure drives his current research. [5]

Ruth is an associate professor and the research team leader. She was born in London, England, and has lived in New Zealand most of her life. Ruth taught art and art history in a secondary school before entering academia. She led her first research contract in 1999 and is an established researcher/academic who applies a broadly socially critical theoretical perspective to systemic reform of schools. Although her initial interests in literacy focus on policy, Ruth has been exploring the value of reading for pleasure and how we can link with community organizations to promote reading. [6]

Rebecca, also born in Tamaki Makaurau, Auckland, has worked in the early childhood sector for over twenty years and in the academic arena for seven years. Rebecca is a mid-career researcher using critical and philosophical paradigms with a focus on visual and lens-based methodologies. Rebecca's work is centred on student teacher/teacher wellbeing. As a research assistant on several projects, Rebecca joined this project, having been a member of a variety of research teams. Her interest is in multimodal literacy for young children. [7]

Born in the South Island of New Zealand, John was a teacher and educational leader in primary schools and had worked previously with Ross on a research team inquiring into effective school/university partnerships. He has been a lecturer since 2016 teaching a range of courses, many of which have a focus on literacy education, his research passion. John developed a model of self-

regulated reading comprehension where he described the lived experience of young people. John and his colleagues have produced several reports and articles. [8]

Jayne was born in Dover, England, taught across all year levels, and was a school leader for 15 years. Jayne and John worked on previous research teams together. Jayne has been an academic for twenty years and an active researcher for fifteen years utilising inclusive, participatory paradigms including working with parents supporting children's reading development. She is a member of several cross-institutional teams in literacy, health learning and quilt making. [9]

Parisa, another early childhood educator, had eighteen years' experience in the sector prior to embarking on an academic career, where she led and co-led several research teams. Parisa was born in Iran. In her research she has used quantitative and qualitative approaches looking at broad patterns in social interactions. She also has an interest in the cultural, relational, and contextual experiences of the communities she engages with. In the tertiary sector, Parisa has been a program leader and practicum director and has lectured on a range of education courses. Parisa's involvement in early education reading focuses on how family, particularly fathers, and community influence reading. [10]

Among the seven of us, though all immersed in qualitative research paradigms, one focused on phenomenology, one on artistic approaches, one on ethnography, one had a strong community research base, and two researchers used school and practice-based approaches. Our initial research project involved collaborations with teachers, school librarians, and students from early childhood education, primary and intermediate schools, and secondary schools. We were interested in children's reading experiences inside and outside the classroom and the ways in which teachers could and did support reading practices. Our work involved classroom observations and the interviewing of teachers, students, literacy coordinators, parents and librarians with the goal of highlighting reading-rich practices and children and adolescents' understandings and preferences in reading. During many of the interviews, the participants drew pictures to initiate their responses to questions. [11]

Our individual case studies were singularly coherent, and it was not always easy to see a collective coherence even though we were all focused on two key research questions:

- How do students engage in reading inside and outside of educational settings?
- What affects and is affected by these engagements? [12]

During our meetings to analyse the data, we became increasingly aware of our varying research and teaching backgrounds as well as our different personal reading experiences. We noticed that each researcher had approached the project differently, and it became evident that we needed to take time to better

understand each other as well as our varying sectors and backgrounds in order to move the research forward. We realised that, as we took the time to try to understand different views around the table, we were crossing into a different form of research which could be understood as post-qualitative (ABERASTURI-APRAIZ, CORREA GOROSPE & MARTINEZ-ARBELAIZ, 2020), relying on autoethnography. [13]

In the next section, we provide a basis for the autoethnographic study we undertook and identify some of the key researchers and authors whose work we consulted. In Section 3 we provide further detail about how we engaged in autoethnography and what we learned. We draw some conclusions about our study in Section 4 that may resonate with other research teams. [14]

2. Autoethnography

As researchers and teacher educators working in the literacy arena, we acknowledge the value of interrogating our personal experiences as readers and teachers. GOODSON and CHOI (2008) suggested that educational researchers recognize the personal life of teachers as being crucially linked to their teaching. Conversations that focused on our experiences evolved into a reflexive process which became a sidetrack to the original study but eventually contributed to the study itself and the evolution of our research team's culture. [15]

Furthermore, while working together as a research community, we found it impossible to separate our individual educator identities from our collaborative efforts. We thought our conversations aligned closely with identity work (ELLIS & BOCHNER, 2000), and we were motivated by the idea that reflecting on our own backgrounds (SANCHO & HERNÁNDEZ-HERNÁNDEZ, 2013) and sharing personal accounts of our experiences as readers and researchers could support our research goals, i.e. that autoethnographic accounts could help us recognize our similarities and differences, and that this process would strengthen our collective understanding (CHANG, NGUNJIRI & HERNANDEZ, 2012). It was also clear that by sharing these accounts with each other, we would be in a position to recognise the value that each individual brought to the larger group (SANCHO & HERNÁNDEZ-HERNÁNDEZ, 2013), which would enhance the overall goals of the collaborative project. [16]

We chose to use reflection and collaborative conversations as a way to extend our research and deepen our relationships. RYAN and MOONEY (2018) described autoethnography as "one of the few research methods that give us a precious scholarly space in which to connect with such introspective conversations" (p.228). [17]

We used this approach to challenge the notion of the researcher as a detached observer and instead positioned ourselves within the research context (ANTELIZ, MULLIGAN & DANAHER, 2022). As HERMAN and ADAMS (2025) noted, "this kind of research recognises and celebrates the epistemic potential of personal experience" (p.2). We employed autoethnography to provide a way to see the

world differently (ELLIS, ADAMS & BOCHNER, 2010). Importantly, we saw that our experiences informed our beliefs which in turn influenced our approaches to research. While this made our individual work unique, it also caused some areas of consternation as collaborators. [18]

We created a platform through our research process to reflect on our past reading, teaching and research experiences—both positive and challenging—and to articulate our hopes for future readers. Through this, we expressed our beliefs, memories and aspirations as readers and reading researchers. Inspired by O'HARA's (2018) emphasis on reflective and relational inquiry, we adopted a biographical mode of engagement. In our discussions, we focused on how we relate to reading and research and how these practices shaped our academic work and community engagement. This collaborative effort supported deeper individual reflection and created a space for collective knowledge construction. [19]

The reflexive nature of our work shifted how we related to each other and to the research itself (PITARD, 2017). We explored emotional dimensions and engaged in conversations that extended beyond the data (TRAHAR, 2009). CHANG et al. (2012) reminded us that multiple voices add richness to research not found when working in isolation, and the approach we present here foregrounds researcher voices, as we explored our varied beliefs, experiences, and understandings of reading. [20]

3. Engaging in Collaborative Autoethnography

In this section, we describe our autoethnographic process of the questions we asked ourselves, how we prepared for our discussions, and the collective reflexive process. In Section 3.1, we outline our approach. In Sections 3.2-3.4, we discuss the themes that emerged from the group analysis of our accounts: Reading as an emotional expression, boundary crossing, and love and commitment. The idea of love and commitment is not often discussed by researchers yet in our discussions it came to the fore, associated with reading, teaching, and teaching reading. [21]

3.1 The approach

Following a process informed by CHANG et al. (2012) we started with a piece of self-writing using the following prompts:

- What brings you to this work?
- What affects and is affected by your work?
- What are your hopes for this research? [22]

Following this initial piece of writing, but prior to meeting, we added another prompt.

- Tell the story of a reading experience you have had that continues to resonate for you. It might include people, places, books, feelings. [23]

In this process, we tried to elicit a more personal response because we noted that it was easy to avoid the personal voice by presenting our academic voices. We alternately use "reflection" on these questions and "accounts" of our answers to refer to our responses to the questions. We read our accounts aloud to the group and asked each other probing questions to extend our thinking (ibid.). We recorded the discussion to capture some of the key ideas. We started to see patterns and common themes to which we could each contribute. In pairs, we selected one of the common themes to explore across the recordings and the individual written accounts. Each pair presented its theme to the group with related anecdotes from the data for further discussion. Following the discussion, each pair developed a written summary of its theme. Those written summaries are presented below and include reflections on the autoethnographic experience. [24]

3.2 Reading as an emotional expression

Through writing and sharing our personal reflections, we strengthened our professional connection to each other and our commitment, through work and research, to a future where the love and enjoyment of reading is readily available and understood to be a vital component of a fulfilled life. This utopian vision is one we discussed as something to aspire to despite our recognition of the inherent idealism. We observed how our reflections preserve formative memories. [25]

Rebecca noted how each of us expressed emotions in our accounts of our reading experiences—"felt in the body and mind". She noted that emotions covered every phase of our lives from early childhood to adulthood. In her writing, Lisa wondered, "How might an internal world be supported and valued, when the very public world of social media dominates?" Perhaps sharing responses to reading and writing is one way to achieve that. Parisa revealed her emotions when she wrote about her early reading life, "Books were my safe haven, my playground, and my quiet joy". Jayne wrote about the "struggle of learning to read" and later finding joy in books and being part of a community of readers. Lisa discussed the enduring memory of the emotional impact of a favourite fairy tale. John discussed the joy of finding people like himself and a familiar environment in a book. Ross and Rebecca wrote about the delight they experienced from observing each others' enjoyment in reading. Ruth suggested that emotions influence how different communities engage with the written word. [26]

Our accounts conveyed emotions shared between people, and between people and written texts, which echoed the words of JOHNSON (2019) that "[r]eading ... is always about connections between people and objects and histories and futures" (p.9). John wrote about being read to and reading with his parents. Jayne wrote about items and books as touchstones that link family history and about the power of story to bind people together. Rebecca discussed the inspiration gained from a shared reading session with a group of young children. Ross recalled a time when, as a deputy principal at a primary school, he developed "whole school reading" and where reading together became a cause of connection for teachers, non-teaching staff and students, with "big smiles on everyone's faces". [27]

In this study, we found an emotional resonance and note that this is considered by KELES (2022) and LE ROUX (2017) to sit within evocative autoethnography, with its focus on "personal stories, vulnerability of the self, and emotional resonance with the readers" (p.2029), as opposed to the other end of the continuum of analytic autoethnography, which has a more traditional application to data gathering and analysis. Our free form writing and discussions that generated the data of this autoethnography hopefully connect to readers in a way that stirs an emotional response, that evokes feelings and memories (BOCHNER & ELLIS, 2016; ELLIS, 2007; LE ROUX, 2017). We found that reading provided a sanctuary in our lives, we discussed the joy of finding a shared favourite book or author, and we relived the struggles of our own journey, or others' journeys, to become confident readers. As readers, we discussed the idea that hope burgeons when we include the enjoyment of reading as an aspect of the discourses of literacy learning. [28]

3.3 Boundary crossing

In our journeys as readers, educators and lifelong (although sometimes interrupted) learners, reading has been more than developing a skill. Parisa likened our reading experiences to a crossing, a negotiation, a reconnection. Our accounts and discussions showed that we experienced reading as a way to navigate cultures, languages, and self-understandings. Our reflections uncovered how we used reading to bridge our past and present, between self and society, and between constraint and imagination. For Parisa, migration shaped her literacy landscape. English became the "dominant language of survival and academia". Reading in English was not a choice for Parisa—it was a necessity, and it became functional, transactional, and burdened with academic weight. As Parisa noted, "reading was always associated with studying, exams, and performance—never with pleasure". This focus on proficiency reveals how the pleasure or enjoyment in reading can be diminished, and yet how much proficiency in comprehending a text shapes the sense of belonging and connection to a place/environment. [29]

Yet there were moments where this practical script was shattered. John highlighted the experience of reading about lands/places, "I remember the first time I read the book, *X Marks the Spot* by Joan de Hamel,—and realised that this was not only a good story, but that it happened in places I knew about personally". These experiences were more than literary recognition; they were geographically and emotionally grounding—an almost physical sensation of transportation, from distant and imagined landscapes to home; for John, it marked the first time he interpreted the text as coming from within rather than from elsewhere. [30]

As a research group, we discussed how the physical landscapes of memories were mirrored in the stories we encountered. For a moment, we experienced a sense of belonging through the stories on the page. Within the accounts we shared, there were stories of migration and location change, and reading played

a role in the way those changes unfolded, both in terms of coping with or understanding places and change. [31]

We read not just to understand the world, but to locate ourselves within it. Parisa's and John's experiences reflected the way stories informed and extended our understanding of the world, and how books could reinforce the familiar. Reading books did not just provide escape, it helped us to see ourselves and to track a way forward; reading helped us make sense of the world and provided opportunities for us to imagine different versions of ourselves. In reading about others, we found ourselves. Sometimes, the resonance we experienced through reading was immediate—a story set in a familiar geography. At other times, we sought deliberate dissonance, reading the unfamiliar to stretch our understanding of difference. [32]

The act of reading is not neutral, it is deeply cultural, emotional, and often exclusionary. For many of us the early stories we encountered came from England or from fantastical realms that were not connected to our immediate worlds. Through reading we crossed boundaries almost as a form of escape as well as a place for learning. The characters were foreign, their idioms strange. Their landscapes are distant. And yet, for John "... that difference is itself meaningful and related to the context I inhabit". [33]

As well as a relationship with real and imagined places, we used reading to navigate life's crossroads. Ross said, "When my colleagues report to us that very few college students read for pleasure, my heart sinks," but that rather than becoming dispirited, acknowledging the important role reading has played in his own life provides a sense of hope, where he is "compelled to carry on with this work". For all of us, the important role a joy of reading has played in our own lives and a desire to see that for others has brought us to the work we are doing now. [34]

Rebecca remembered when young children in an early childhood education setting read to her: "As several children took their turn at being the teacher I was privileged to hear the stories they read and created from the books we often shared". Rebecca discussed the importance of stories in her life and the impact stories had on her professional life, providing opportunities to cross boundaries real and in the imagination. [35]

We shaped our reading identities through personal and professional experiences. We explored new crossroads, negotiated new adventures and reconnected with each other, our past, our present, and our future. We are readers shaped by loss and recovery, by displacement and belonging. Parisa stated: "My work is shaped by my linguistic and cultural history, and by the many identities I hold—as a reader, a writer, a language learner, an immigrant, and an educator." [36]

Now, as educators, we seek to create a learning environment where young readers can see themselves—not just in characters, but in the very act of reading. We aim to create opportunities for reading to become a space of possibility, where pleasure is not a privilege, but a right. As Parisa proclaims her

heartfelt commitment, "I hope my work contributes to reimagining reading as a lived, joyful, multilingual practice". [37]

3.4 Love and commitment

Our research team described how it drew joy and insight from reading, and this became a basis for the members' work as teachers and researchers. For teachers, their life stories and work are irrevocably bound together (GOODSON & CHOI, 2008). Their lives echo their love for and commitment to teaching. In this autoethnographic study, links between personal experiences and educational work abounded. [38]

As teaching is an act of love (DARDER, 2011), so love was evident in the accounts provided. ZEMBYLAS (2017) implored educators to consider

"... love as a transformational concept that enables critical educators to do two things: to rethink in general the connections between love, education, and transformation, and their practical implications for pedagogies; and second, to challenge some taken for granted binaries (e.g., personal versus political) that deny the importance of love in transforming education" (p.32). [39]

Our accounts showed different expressions of commitment and love. Love was seen as involving a promise, responsibilities and dedication—a concept that is familiar to many educators. We documented how in our conversations we connected to a collective sense of commitment and our discussions highlighted the enrichment in our lives as a result of reading books; we observed in turn our desire to provide an opportunity for that in the lives of others. As a group, we spoke about what reading has given us: Lisa commented on "eyes into another world", Rebecca recorded "a flourishing", Parisa reminded us of reading as "a way to see multiple perspectives". Several of us spoke of "joy" and an "unlocking of treasures". There were discussions about our commitment to students, to the development of readers as observers and inquirers in the world, and to reading as an opportunity to grow. We noted our combined and marked positivity for the future. [40]

Within our accounts and reflections, we articulated the commitment required to be an educator. Working alongside marginalised students to promote their success within a schooling system in frequent reform requires commitment to the educational pursuits of equity. We discussed the commitment we have to ensure that all children have the opportunity for those special experiences that come with reading. There was a commitment to reading, not as part of a political/economic agenda, but, as a personal, emotional, and social experience. This was tangible. As educators, we recognised the commitment to create and be creative in promoting the joy of reading for all children and young people. [41]

The belief that written language and the ability to read empowers individuals (FREIRE, 1990 [1968]) was evident in our accounts. Throughout our conversations during this research, we could track references to FREIRE's call to

action. We see reading as a means for individuals to not only understand text but to see nuance in meaning and to work with others to negotiate meaning. As researchers, we expressed our concern that the experience of reading as a pleasurable activity is being seen as less important than the accuracy of reading as a transactional experience. [42]

Our commitment to supporting effective reading instruction includes a focus on enhancing the experiences of struggling readers. Jayne recalled her own personal experience as a struggling reader where "[c]hildren and young people often feel the fear and shame of not being able to read". Struggling readers then become a statistic in the agenda to evidence reading achievement through testing. [43]

As policy-based discussions intensify around the teaching of reading using decodable texts designed for phonics teaching and the mandating of teachers to follow a specific path for readers, we highlighted the evidence according to a meta-analysis of twelve studies (BOWERS, 2020) where the authors suggested that this did not always help a child to read. There are multiple facets to teaching the process of reading which is not an innate skill (TURNER, 1995), and that bigger picture of reading for pleasure, building a social connection, and gaining knowledge and insight to thrive, provides an important counter point. We described how reading fostered "memories", "joy" and "connection"; our stories spoke to the idea of reading as an emotional experience. [44]

As a group of educators, we acknowledge the slow work of being fully engaged in a text, the commitment needed to select, persevere and gain meaning from text. As reading researchers we highlight the point shared by Parisa which highlights her passion to promote a reading culture in early learning services and to "question systems that overlook the personal and emotional dimensions of reading". Rebecca calls upon us to "empower children and young people to engage with written, aural, and visual information", not only to be informed but to be critical analysts of that information and a full participant in society. [45]

In our research group, we circled back to the idea that teaching reading and promoting the joy of reading in schools is not about one way or another, but is best when it combines a structured approach to reading with critical literacy, includes cultural connection and ultimately, acknowledges the personal and provides pleasure. This kind of teaching can be undertaken through a range of evidence-based pedagogical perspectives (SOUSA, 2005) and a teacher's own commitment to the joy and love of reading and teaching. [46]

4. Discussion

In sharing with each other our writing and discussions, we were able to strengthen the real time relationships in our research group. Our vulnerability and listening without judgement catalysed a new type of relationship where personal and professional merged in the interweaving of stories with memories of early reading, formative teaching moments and anecdotes associated with hope, joy, family and freedom. Through our collaborative autoethnographic approach, we generated insights that would not have emerged by individual reflection alone. Each member of the group contributed meaningfully in collective writing, listening and dialogue, creating a process grounded in shared inquiry and mutual respect. [47]

Our autoethnographic work became a form of community building and sense-making, allowing us to interrogate our backgrounds and beliefs while we explored the reading experiences of others in educational settings. This sidetrack experience, during the analysis phase of our original research project, gave rise to our ability to highlight the meaning beyond the data. We recognised that our beliefs and experiences shaped our individual and collective interpretations. By engaging in autoethnographic conversations, we merged our research enterprise with our personal experiences and engaged with the topic and each other on a more personal level. [48]

But this was not easy. There was some discomfort involved in not being quite sure where our research would take us. We had to confront the uncertainties that this presented and face our vulnerabilities. However, doing this deepened our engagement with the research project and enriched our interactions. We opened new spaces for learning and reflection. [49]

ANTELIZ et al. (2022) suggested that autoethnography and educational research can sit comfortably together. Indeed, guided by ANTELIZ et al., we used autoethnography as a way to provide opportunities for members of the group to add to, develop or expand the identity of the research group. We explored the multiplicity of voices in the group, investigated our motivations and positions in relation to reading and research and built a collaborative group of belonging and community. By incorporating our personal voices within the formal environment of a research project, we transitioned to a post-qualitative space beyond the formal search for truth (ABERASTURI-APRAIZ et al., 2020) and challenged the safe and known boundaries of research. [50]

We managed to bring a new sort of life to our research group, one where we found commonalities—not in uniformity, but through identifying shared values, concerns, and questions. This helped build a group with a collective sense of belonging and scholarly connection, strengthening our identity as researchers. We acknowledged that conducting research around reading at this time was challenging. As noted earlier, within Aotearoa, New Zealand and indeed internationally, the topic of literacy and reading is high on the political agenda and featured regularly in our conversations. The idea that (auto)ethnographers seek

to promote social change (HERMANN & ADAMS, 2025) resonated with us as readers, researchers and educators. [51]

We challenge the idea that teaching reading is a utilitarian exercise to deliver workers for the economy. The experience of reading, we decided, gave us an opportunity to "try on ideas", to explore the world and to shape our attitudes and beliefs. We were able to talk about the aspects of our work that are often hidden, including notions of love and commitment, belonging, boundaries and transitions. Our collective view is one in which we hope young readers are empowered and able to thrive, are free to explore the vastness of the written word and the transformative power that stories hold. Through this study, we envisioned a hopeful future based on our own positive and formative reading experiences of the past. [52]

This research experience supported a "deeper understanding of 'society' and 'self'" (CHANG et al, 2012, p.23), particularly relevant as literacy education in Aotearoa, New Zealand shifts toward structured literacy approaches. While resources for structured literacy instruction proliferate, those that promote reading for enjoyment are less visible. We believe that the promotion of reading beyond literacy instruction can challenge reductive and formulaic teaching models just as autoethnographic inquiry can challenge the notion of research as a tool for producing definitive answers. We suggest that our individual and collective experiences in this research group were testament to this. [53]

As qualitative researchers looking to explore human experience beyond the instrumental, we found, through our sidetrack, a basis for genuine inquiry. As a research group, we created a new dimension in our research work. We found a place for love and commitment, belonging to a research community, and a place for the emotional experiences related to learning and reading. We made the private political and the political private. This small autoethnographic project alongside a broader collaboration allowed us to look beyond the initial goals of our research and understand our larger research work in a new way. What we found was a way to understand each other better, humanize our work and refresh ourselves as educators and researchers. [54]

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