

“The Journey, Not the Arrival”: A Phenomenological Exploration of Educator Travel

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the phenomenon of educator travel through the lenses of sociocultural and place attachment theories. I begin this exploration with the practice of epoche, examining the history of my own professional travel experiences and my position as an educator traveler. I then consider both challenges and transformations educators may experience through the sociocultural aspects of identity, agency, and power. I also consider attachments to place that may be established or reconfigured before, during, and after the journey. This paper is a precursor for future phenomenological research through which I will consider educators’ stories of challenge and transformation and their use of place-based and travel literacy practices as they embark on professional journeys.

INTRODUCTION

What interests me is the waking in the morning, the progress from the familiar to the slightly odd, to the rather strange, to the totally foreign, and finally to the outlandish. The journey, not the arrival, matters; the voyage, not the landing. (Theroux, 1979, p.5)

The concept of travel has long held images of challenge, preparation, and adventure. For some people, embarking on a journey has been a common occurrence throughout their lives. For others, it may be a distant dream and a long hoped-for experience. After the COVID-19 pandemic brought journeys to a halt, the slow resumption of travel was fraught with additional safety and health concerns beyond the logistics of preparing for and embarking upon a travel experience.

With new health and safety precautions in place, travel has again become possible. People are embarking on journeys for both personal and professional reasons. While some challenges of travel have abated, many of the challenges that were present even before the pandemic remain. As my own professional journeys have resumed, I have an appreciation of the transformations travel continues to afford me. Yet I am acutely aware of challenges faced by many educators as they consider the possibility of embarking on a journey, whether they are resuming a habit of travel or planning their first professional excursion.

In this paper, I explore the phenomenon of educator travel through the lenses of sociocultural and place attachment theories. I also consider place-based and travel literacy practices that educators may employ as they examine the impact of their travel experiences. As an educator myself, I am infinitely interested in considering every aspect of the voyages taken by educators and the transformations that occur throughout the journey. I begin this exploration with a reflection upon my own professional travel experiences.

EPOCHE: MY JOURNEYS

The seeds of inspiration for this paper began in 2006 following my first professional

travel experience to Nashville, Tennessee for a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Convention. At that time, I had been an educator in rural public schools for 23 years but had never traveled outside of my home state for a professional conference or learning experience. As a self-proclaimed life-long learner, I had earned my Master of Science degree in Curriculum and Instruction in 1994. Throughout my teaching career, I had participated in professional growth/learning/development opportunities offered by my school district and state in addition to pursuing my academic degree. But it was not until I became part of the National Writing Project in 2005 and embarked on my Ph.D. journey in 2006 that I began to view professional development opportunities outside my local school district as potential, possible, and even necessary experiences. From the outset of my first journey to NCTE in 2006, I began to experience the wonder and transformative nature of professional travel. I earned my Ph.D. in 2011, entered the world of higher education as an assistant professor in 2013, and to this day continue to appreciate with wonder the transformations travel experiences afford me.

The impetus for this paper has been simmering since that first professional travel experience in 2006. In the ensuing years, I have attended 20 domestic out-of-state professional conferences and three international out-of-country conferences. I have returned from each travel experience enriched, exhausted, and most certainly transformed. Yet in the reality of returning home, these transformations, for the most part, went unexamined. Still, there remained an awareness bubbling just below the surface of my consciousness that I was in some way changed. Eventually, I began to reflect upon each experience and the cumulative impact of my travels on both my personal and professional life. Ensuing conversations with colleagues in education included their own reflections on similar transformations after travel experiences. As a teacher educator, I also sought to bring meaningful travel experiences and opportunities to my students in higher education. I hoped to encourage them to embark on journeys that would support their professional growth and transform their identities as educators. Thus, I began to consider the phenomenon of educator travel and to explore the challenges and transformations experienced by educators when they travel.

THE PHENOMENON OF EDUCATOR TRAVEL

Phenomenology

Leilani Barnett Kesner (2005) asserts, “Travel, then, is not just a pleasant exercise for teachers with wanderlust. It is a responsibility!” (p. 26) When we consider the phenomenon of educator travel, we must first recognize there are elements of movement and rest present in every person’s life. When educators travel, they move forward on a journey, leaving the “rest” and the “taken-for-grantedness” of their homeplace, to move and extend the boundaries of their lived experiences. When they return to their homeplace, there may then be elements of rest and reflection that restore them for future travel experiences (Seamon, 2021).

I began this phenomenological exploration with the practice of epoche in the introduction, considering a brief history of my own journeys and my positionality with regard to educator travel. As I reflected upon the phenomenon of my own professional travel experiences, I

found myself revisiting my fundamental beliefs about reality and knowledge that are the foundations for all my methodological choices when I conduct research. As Manzo & de Carvalho (2021) note, this revisiting is important because a researcher's views of reality and valid knowledge influence how they study the phenomenon they seek to understand. My choice of phenomenology as a method of inquiry to explore educator travel was inspired by my previous work in educational research. Johnson & Christensen (2008) state that phenomenology is a description of one or more individuals' consciousness and experience of a phenomenon. A phenomenological qualitative inquiry can be described as a study conducted to obtain a view into participants' life-worlds and to understand the personal meanings they construct from their lived experiences. (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Schram, 2006) As I explore the phenomenon of educator travel, this approach not only allows subjectivity but also affords me as researcher the reflexivity to closely examine my own positionality. This calls for self-awareness of and thoughtful reflection upon my own experiences throughout the inquiry as I seek to further explore the phenomenon of educator travel. (Manzo & de Carvalho, 2021).

A phenomenological exploration of educator travel will also involve a consideration of place not only as a physical environment disassociated from the people in that environment, but as “the *indivisible, normally unnoticed phenomenon of person-or-people-experiencing-place*” (Seamon, 2021, p. 30). Thus, it seems relevant to examine this phenomenon through the lenses of sociocultural and place attachment theories and to consider both challenges and transformations inherent with travel experiences.

Sociocultural Theory

Applying the lens of sociocultural theory to the phenomenon of educator travel allows an exploration of the intersection of social, cultural, historical, mental, physical, and political aspects of educator's sensemaking, interaction, and learning (Lewis, Enciso, and Moje, 2007). Through this lens, I consider issues of identity, agency, and power that produce knowledge of, and may shed light upon, educator travel as a social and cultural practice. Identity, agency, and power are complex issues. For this exploration, I offer the following reflexive descriptions.

Identity: Identity can be described as an internal state of being. While stable, this can also be socially and linguistically fluid, taking into account different positions individuals may assume, enact, or perform in various settings within social, economic, and historical relationships (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Author, 2018). Identities are formed when individuals participate in these settings and may be reconfigured in reaction to circumstances or experiences. When educators travel, they may find their identities shift as they encounter new places, cultures, and people.

Agency: Agency may be described as the strategic making and remaking of selves, identities, activities, and relationships within structures of power. It is a way of positioning or repositioning oneself in order to allow for new ways of being and new identity development (Lewis, et.al., 2007; Author, 2018). Power circulates and as power structures change, different degrees of agency may resist structural constraints and, in some cases, lead to transformative practices (Author, 2011). As educators travel, they move from the

familiar to the unfamiliar and may find themselves in circumstances that require them to consider and reconsider their perceptions and assumptions prior to travel.

Power: In this exploration, I consider power that is produced and enacted through discourses, relationships, activities, place, and time by individuals as they compete for resources and identities. As I apply a sociocultural lens to the phenomenon of educator travel, my thinking is influenced by Foucault's theories of power as "productive" and a result of interactions, relationships, and experiences rather than something that is possessed by some and desired and resisted by others (Foucault, 2004). The experience of travel may be a construct of power and may have implications for how educators conceptualize their identity and agency.

PLACE ATTACHMENT THEORY

Place attachment has been defined as the emotional bonds between people and a particular place or environment (Seamon, 2014). Place attachments can also be described as emotional bonds to places that form and change over time. The degree of these bonds or attachments may vary (Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2021). As I began to consider the application of a place attachment theoretical lens to my exploration of the phenomenon of educator travel, I discovered that scholars of place attachment theory "borrow freely across disciplines to support a specific construct in their place attachment research" and that "the progression of ideas around place has ebbed and flowed" (Williams & Miller, 2021, p. 14). I am specifically interested in stretching the place attachment concepts of place interaction and place identity as educators become "affectively involved with the regularity and familiarity of actions and encounters that contribute to who one is and who [their] life routinely is in relationship with place" (Seamon, 2021, p. 39). These place attachment concepts align with sociocultural concepts of identity, agency, and power.

As I explore the application of place attachment to the phenomenon of educator travel, I consider the sociocultural aspect of a person's identity construction as they interact with others during the journey (Di Masso, Dixon, & Durrheim, 2021). I also consider the role memory plays in place attachment, not only as nostalgia but as a creative process that allows travelers to make connections between local and geographically distant locations (Rishbeth, 2021). This process also allows them to reflect upon transformations that may occur in their identities and their degree of agency.

I believe place attachment theory can be applied to the phenomenon of educator travel because it is a multifaceted, multidisciplinary concept. If I consider educators' emotion bonding with meaningful spaces and the need to make connections with community and local entities, I believe these concepts can be stretched to include places beyond the local (Mihaylov, Perkins, & Stedman, 2021).

EDUCATOR TRAVEL: CHALLENGES AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Travel experiences can lead to transformative education and learning, but there are challenges inherent with each aspect of the experience. Undertaking a journey can have dual aspects of inward and outward endeavors. Inwardly, educators must mentally and emotionally prepare to travel, learning about their destination and preparing to navigate the journey.

Outwardly, they must acquire needed documents, secure tickets, make reservations, and collect the necessary items they will need throughout their journey and upon arrival. Some may have spent most of their lives in specific locations, developed complex and emotional connections to these places (Fullilove, 2021), and they must prepare for adjustments necessitated by moving from one place to another. An educator's experience of being 'placed,' 'displaced,' and then 'replaced' during travel can cause shifts in both personal and professional identity (Powell, 2014; Sinor & Kaufman, 2007). The act of travel 'displaces' the educator from their current 'place.' Displacement can be defined as a rupture of the geographic and the social in ways that cause people to remake emotional connections, including those we know as 'place attachments' (Fullilove, 2021). Once educators embark on a journey away from their homes, their classrooms, and their communities, they may find themselves making new relationships and forging new connections to new places.

In considering relationships to place, Devine-Wright, et al (2020) describe three dialectics that are useful to ponder in exploring the phenomenon of educator travel: emplacement-displacement, inside-outside, and fixity-flow. The first dialectic, emplacement-displacement, refers to people as embodied beings, embedded in place. As humans, we live an emplaced existence where we are connected to locations and identities. At the same time, being emplaced in one space may also involve becoming displaced from another space. When educators embark on a journey from their homeplace or current location, they leave the familiar and are displaced to another location for a brief or extended time. Depending on the length of stay, they may become 'emplaced' in their new location or in their new roles for a time, only to be 'displaced' when they return home to become 'replaced.'

The second dialectic, inside-outside, refers to the connection or relationship between the inside and outside of a place. Prior to embarking on the journey, travelers are 'outside' of their destinations. Once the journey begins, they may encounter a series of different places in different locations (airports, hotels, cities, conference centers, historical sites). Each stop along the journey affords the traveler an opportunity to be 'inside' a new or different place and make new connections based on their experiences while there. As they move along, the fluidity of the journey affords many inside-outside opportunities to prepare for, engage with, and reflect upon new places, encounters, and memories.

The third dialectic, fixity-flow, describes the productive tension between the static and mobile, the fixed and the changing, the stable and the unstable aspects of people's experiences of place. This dialectic assumes that the bonds between people and place are always changing based on life events and lived experiences. The act of travel itself is a mix of "fixity-flow," stability and instability, as people dream about, prepare for, engage in, and return from a journey.

With these dialectics in mind, I consider both the challenges and transformations that may be part of educators' travel experiences.

EDUCATOR TRAVEL: CHALLENGES

Once an educator makes the choice to embark on a journey, there are many challenges beyond making the decision. The first two challenges may be to acquire funding for the journey and to secure professional leave. Educators who work in public school settings are subject

to school budgets which may have fixed amounts allocated for professional development. In recent years school funding deficits have presented difficult financial challenges for districts across the nation. After presenting at a national professional conference, I was approached by an educator who taught in an urban school district. As they thanked me for the presentation, they tearfully shared how much attending this conference meant to them. This teacher's spouse "gave" the conference experience to them each year for their anniversary and birthday gifts. This teacher was not granted the benefits often associated with professional leave from a school district. While they were allowed to be absent from their classroom to attend the conference, they received no funding for travel, lodging, or registration fees. This educator was on full pay deduct for the days they were at the conference and also had to reimburse the district the money to pay for the substitute teacher who covered the class while they were gone. Other teachers, after that same presentation, shared they were not granted professional leave but had to use their personal days to attend the conference.

Even if the educator is fortunate enough to be granted professional leave and funding for a journey, preparing the classroom for their absence is no small feat. If the educator is traveling during the school year, plans must be made for a substitute or guest teacher. Students must be informed and prepared for appropriate learning experiences and behaviors during the educator's absence. Once the educator returns to the classroom, they may have copious amounts of grading and following up with students and parents. Reintegrating into the classroom requires as much thought and effort as the initial preparation for the journey.

Another challenge for educators, as for all travelers, is preparing the home for their absence. If the educator is a parent or has caregiving responsibilities, there are many plans to be made to ensure things run smoothly in their absence. The logistics of transportation for children to and from school or day care, enlisting care for elderly relatives, ensuring groceries have been purchased, meals planned, and medications refilled can be daunting tasks. Once family members are squared away, then the educator can face the business of planning and packing for the journey.

EDUCATOR TRAVEL: TRANSFORMATIONS

Alun David Morgan (2010) explored the connections between "travel or journeying (actual physical movement through space over time) and transformation ('inner' psychological development or growth)" p. 247. The longstanding need for human travel to meet basic needs leads to, or is driven by, phenomenological or experiential characteristics, including the subjective such as satisfaction, challenge, danger, reward, surprise, new encounters, shifting viewpoints, etc. Morgan goes on to note that the field of "education" is relevant when understood in a broad and lifelong sense, considering the inner process of learning and the outer or external place or places where this learning takes place.

Morrell & O'Conner (2002) offer a rough working definition of transformative learning:

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our

relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race, and gender; our body-awareness, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy (p. xvii).

When educators travel, their daily routines and sense of place may be disrupted. As they disengage or are displaced from their usual home or work environments in order to be placed in a new setting, a mindset of openness paves the way for transformational experiences. There is an aspect of seeking to every journey, either a seeking of escape or a seeking of encounter. Regardless of the initial purpose or endeavor, the experience of travel can lead to both. Travel experiences may lead to transformations that foster the development of a global sense of place that allows travelers to hold onto an appreciation of one place (either a home place or travel destination) while also seeing the value and richness of the other. As educator travelers experience transformations throughout their journeys, place-based and travel literacy practices can support their reflection upon and processing of their encounters with new places.

Place-based Literacy Practices

Place-based literacies are literacy practices such as reading and writing that have a central concept of place. The concept of place may refer to a location or to a person's sense of self or being (Author, Wertzberger, & Wiafe, 2021; Payne, Author, Goodson, & Goodson, 2018). When educators journey to a new geographic location or a new "place," they may also find themselves in a new, inner place as well. As they experience an overall new sense of place, engaging in literacy practices may allow them to focus and reflect upon all they are experiencing; new sights, sounds, flavors, customs, and cultures. As they read and write about their new locations and experiences, their reflections form a story.

Rishbeth (2021) asserts that at the heart of any attachment is a story. As educators reflect upon possible shifts in attachments to place; as they become displaced, emplaced, and replaced throughout their journey; they are composing a story about their experiences.

It may be a story of a moment, a day, a year. Or, more commonly, the stories are ones that emerge gradually, take shape, backtrack, repeat in parts, tail away, reappear. People bring their own stories about places they love and places they hate and then they tell their own stories about these self-same places, each a story of an intersection of site, time, and human experience (Rishbeth, 2021, p. 127).

These stories may be composed through literacy practices of reflective journaling, audio recording, video recording, music composition, painting, or photography. Such practices allow educators to articulate their connections with people and places during the journeys and in the in-between spaces between places. These avenues of story-making provide opportunities for educator travelers to record memories not just for purposes of nostalgia but also as touch points for reflection on transformations. As educators engage in these practices, they may discover an openness in their thinking or perceptions that did not previously exist, or that they were not aware of prior to their journey.

In these practices educators are situated as the experts. They are the researchers of their

own transformations, examining their identities and agentic shifts in identities that may have occurred. In these practices, the power lies within educators themselves. They are involved in reflective work that is meaningful and situated within their current lived experiences.

TRAVEL LITERACIES

I note the distinction between ‘travel writing’ and ‘travel literacies.’ *Travel writing* has been described as writing that consists of mostly factual, first-person prose accounts of the author or narrator’s travels. Studies in travel writing focus on composition of these narratives that may include print, auditory, and video productions. These studies often consider the human interactions between the traveler and their place (Youngs, 2013; Korte, 2000). In this phenomenological exploration of educator travel I describe *travel literacies* as literacy practices and skills that equip travelers for each stage of the journey. These practices may, indeed, include travel writing as described above, but may be more expansive in scope. They may include reading and preliminary research utilizing print and digital resources, conversations with experienced travelers, and inquiries to professional organizations as educators anticipate and prepare for travel, embark on the journey, experience new places, collaborate with fellow travelers, record reflections, synthesize thoughts, and then return and reintegrate into their local or home environment.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological exploration began with the assumption that the physical act of travel can contribute to identity development and professional growth. Lewicka (2021) notes that “mobility has become a part of a lifestyle and of a professional career for people with options and resources” (p. 63). Whether the mobility involves a transnational journey, an excursion across the country, or a day trip in one’s local community, the act of traveling from one place to another can afford educators new experiences that may influence identity and cause transformations in ways of being and ways of seeing. A journey may cause changes in their views of their homeplace or situation and may lead to an increase or decrease in attachment when comparing their home place with the places they have visited. The inspiration and impetus for this paper began with reflection upon my own professional travel experiences. This exploration of the phenomenon of educator travel, through the lenses of sociocultural and place attachment theories, considered both the challenges and transformations educators may experience as they prepare for, embark upon, and return from a professional journey. Like Theroux (1974), I remain infinitely interested in all that happens at every stage of an educator’s voyage. This paper is a precursor for future phenomenological research that seeks to understand educators’ experiences as they embark on professional journeys and to bring to the forefront of consideration their own stories of challenge and transformation.

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