Significant others, teacher expertise and education reform

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In the Pathways to Expertise project, funded by Charles Darwin University and undertaken with the Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training (NT DEET), 14 expert teachers’ accounts of their careers were investigated. Grounded theory analysis of this interview data, obtained in 2002, suggests that three factors are important and related: the strength of the teachers’ relationships with significant others, the achievement of systemic reform agendas and the development of expertise. Relationships with significant others appear to achieve three outcomes, by (1) profoundly influencing the directionality of each teacher’s career path, (2) scaffolding the timely development of leadership skills, and (3) confirming the systemic value placed on education reforms enacted by teachers.

Introduction

This paper summarises the findings of a research project, Pathways to Expertise, undertaken in late 2002 with cross-institutional support from Charles Darwin University and the Northern Territory’s Department of Employment, Education and Training (NT DEET). With a focus on teacher expertise and associated career pathways, this qualitative pilot study chronicled the career stories of 14 highly regarded local educators who had been nominated as experts.

Since limited Australian research has been published in this area, the Pathways to Expertise study investigated how teachers see their career pathways, their identities as expert teachers and any links between them. Pathways to Expertise (in press) contains an edited collection of narratives that informed the research reported here.

The project design foregrounded teachers’ voices, partly to counter their reportedly limited representation in education research (Abrahão, 2002; Carlgren et al., 1994), and partly because the celebratory dimension of professional development research (Connell, 2002) inspired the Pathways team to focus on teacher achievements. When the study was conducted, education reform agendas in the region were another source of motivation.
The study was set against a backdrop of various notable challenges in Northern Territory education, some of which occur elsewhere, including teacher shortages, rapid systemic change, an ageing workforce, a comparatively mobile teacher population, and a young, culturally diverse society in which Indigenous people comprise a large, geographically dispersed minority. Two recent reviews (DEET, 2003; Collins, 1999) noted that these challenges must be addressed if quality education is to be sustained. In particular, attracting and retaining talented teachers is critically important.

Some researchers note the existence of staged teaching careers (Harding, McLain & Anderson, 1999; Bryan, 1999; Totaro, 2003). These authors argue that in a quality teaching profession this staging should be factored into teaching standards, performance assessments and quality assurance. However, others claim that such stages, except perhaps promotions, are not salient for individual teachers (Johnson, 2001; Healy, 1999). Recent overseas literature treats teacher career pathways as a cyclic progression combining personal and professional experiences (Lynn, 2002). Healy (1999) characterised teacher careers as the interaction between personal life choices and structured employment conditions, with varying kinds of commitment evident at different points in the life span.

In a qualitative research design similar to this study, Brazilian researcher Maria Abrahão (2002) analysed a set of expert teacher biographies, arguing that individual teacher identities were an overlooked or understated catalyst for educational reform. In explaining what distinguished the teachers from their contemporaries, Abrahão noted that how these expert teachers manoeuvred within changing, often adverse social contexts related to both their personal development and achievement of important social reforms in education. Abrahão's descriptive categories of factors that explain the nature and development of teacher expertise in the Brazilian context were, as it turned out, similar to those identified in the Pathways to Expertise study. Whereas Abrahão accepted the overlapping categories as evidence of the complex nature of each teacher's career, the Pathways study applied grounded theory to move the analysis beyond a conceptual description and closer to an explanation of how the categories relate.

METHOD

Three members of the research team worked as teacher educators at Charles Darwin University. They also co-opted an executive teacher who helped with NT DEET ethics clearances, identified the 14 participants, and acted as a critical friend when reviewing, editing and publishing the book.

Teachers with five or more years teaching experience, three males and eleven females, participated in the study. All were selected because of their professional reputations as successful, talented educators.

Once ethical approval procedures were completed, the research team developed a semi-structured interview protocol containing eleven discussion prompts for use during interviews:
1. What do you think has been the most significant change during your career?

2. Were there any points when you thought through your career options?

3. To what extent, if any, have others influenced your career

4. What motivated you to take up new positions?

5. What personal characteristics do you think are necessary for your present position?

6. What advice, based on your own experiences, do you have for others beginning a career in education?

7. To what extent, if any, has performance management or appraisal influenced your career?

8. What have been the greatest challenges in your career?

9. Where do you think you will be in five years time?

10. If I was to write a story about the path your career has taken, what would be the most important points to include?

11. What personal qualities, if any, led to your success?

Thirteen participants each took part in a one-hour, face-to-face interview. Another opted to send a written response rather than be interviewed.

The task of data collection was shared equitably amongst members of the research team. Times and places for interviews were negotiated with participants. Members of the research team assumed that their varying familiarity with the participants did not threaten the credibility of eventual research outcomes (Duckett and Fryer, 1998).

Each audio-recorded interview was developed into an approved, typed transcript through a back-and-forth editing process between the interviewer-researcher and participant. This concluded once participants authorised the use of their transcripts in the research. Each member of the research team received a copy of all fourteen transcripts. These became the Pathways dataset.

Grounded theory methods allowed constructions of 'career pathway' and 'expertise' to emerge from the data rather than from the customary preliminary review of related research literature. Thus, participants' data could be used in the development of a theory, avoiding artificial forcing of it into potentially ill-fitting theoretical frameworks (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Key categories and their properties (Babchuk, 1996) were identified through a process known as constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Key categories were considered those that featured across seven or more transcripts, that re-occurred within individual stories, and that were underpinned by inter-researcher agreement.
Validity of the qualitative research findings (Creswell and Miller, 2000) was achieved through rich descriptive analysis, by working up from the data to theorise about teachers' relationships with significant others, and through repeated checks for coding accuracy. Even though references to other studies are interwoven in the finished report presented here, access to them occurred after analysis was completed, thereby providing a gauge on the extent to which similar findings have been reported elsewhere.

RESULTS

Congruence was observed between accounts of teachers' cultivation and management of relationships with significant others over time, their descriptions of career achievements and references to developing expertise. Six related findings are summarised below:

1. The family was the most stable group with whom Pathways teachers cultivated and managed long-term relationships, influencing their perceptions of career direction, form and value;

2. Colleagues exerted reciprocal influence on career choices through sharing agendas and matching skill profiles with education change activities;

3. However, the core drivers of motivation to change and improve were perceived by the Pathways teachers to be self-generated characteristics;

4. Outside family, relationships with significant others varied in duration;

5. Teachers' relationships with significant others directed the development of their expertise and the achievement of desirable systemic or professional change; and,

6. The ability to cultivate and manage productive relationships with significant others inside the system was associated with leadership.

CAREER PATHWAYS AND PHASES OF CAREER

A 'teaching career' referred to past and current events, circumstances and relationships that characterised each participant's occupational life as a qualified teacher within one or more education systems. For individuals, a 'career pathway' referred to the most salient events, circumstances and relationships encountered during their professional lives. Careers were mostly described as sequential, uni-directional phases of varying length; for example, early careers lasted anywhere from seven to 15 years, or four to six years with prior work history.

Early career teachers started in classrooms before moving to system-wide or school-based responsibilities. Half undertook post-graduate study. Most improved school environments. When making career decisions they considered family members' goals and circumstances.

Mid-career was a lengthy, demanding and productive period during which most became leaders, heading up various systemic or community-wide change initiatives. This
phase lasted up to 20 years, less where mature-age pre-service training, career breaks or retirement occurred. Interviewees typically recalled experiences of 'bigger picture' systemic environments; challenging work settings and role assignments; competitive job selection; occasional failures, struggles and rejections; support from family and mentors; learning from team work and professional networking; and 'taps on the shoulder' or 'friendly nudges' from colleagues when opportunities arose.

When interviewed, three of the four late-career teachers were assigned complex and wide-scale roles such as leading system-wide professional development programs, managing a departmental branch or a large and challenging rural school. The late-career phase began approximately 30-35 years after they first qualified as teachers. On retirement they all planned to balance personal wellbeing and use of their professional expertise. The fourth late career teacher had previously retired from full time employment within the education system. She coached young Indigenous children in English literacy at an urban primary school on a consultancy basis.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH SIGNIFICANT OTHERS AND DIRECTIONALITY OF CAREERS

Mutual support steered participants' career paths onto successful trajectories. What most strongly promoted teachers' resilience, their commitment to ongoing professional development and the desire to improve education were the relationships they cultivated with significant others. Known also as 'interpersonal intelligence' (Vasta, Haith and Miller, 1999), this special ability was the most defining self-reported characteristic of the Pathways teachers. In addition to family members, significant others were colleagues who collaborated in education change activities. As two educators noted:

... I like working with people. So I have probably had a lot of opportunities to actually do different things ... I think I have built up a lot of networks ... sure I have worked hard and I have a good work ethic, but a lot of it too is like people I know and the opportunities that have presented through knowing people knowing me as well.

... I moved through the system... by being someone on the ground that people could trust. I started picking up senior positions very quickly...

Influences on career choices were thus not entirely external, as teachers personally influenced the contexts in which they interacted.

Teachers employed introspection and retrospection to tap into memories that reinforced a sense of self as autonomous. For some, this enabled the benefits of a relationship with a significant other to endure despite separation imposed by the passages of time and distance:

...I guess that goes back to at Uni where one of my lecturers who was very respected went back into school for six months every two years. That was his personal belief and what he did. So I'm just going back into the school now, initially just for 10 weeks...
or death:

... My darling Mum, in particular, was incredibly supportive and encouraging. She was very proud of my successes. She passed away in August, 2001 and I can still feel her presence when I am bracing to tackle a new challenge.

Of the three principal groups of 'significant others' identified—family, people within the system and those outside it—the most stable, with whom Pathways teachers sustained career-defining relationships, was the family. Support went both ways, from participant to family and vice versa. All transcripts referred to family support.

For early career participants, parents were most important:

... My parents were very happy with my choice to go on to university and become a teacher. My family has always been very supportive ...

whereas children and partners were more salient for mid-career teachers:

... my girls went to Humpty Doo Primary School... I did go home and discuss it with my husband. My oldest girl left me a note on my pillow saying, "Please don't go. What will I do without you if you are not at school?" Which was just appalling to me because they weren't clingy kids or they were never at the staff room or anything like that but there was obviously a security blanket in the fact that their mother was there and I thought, "Well, that is it, I gotta go." So I went to be head teacher of Middle Point.

Two of the four late-career participants considered children's interests; for example, one educator urged parent-teachers to postpone the professional promotions trail until their children were old enough to be independent:

... it's quite important to be clear where the line is between your own life, your family's needs and your school life ... that's important, maintaining that balance... if you've elected to have children then you have to make sure that you're fair to them. And I did elect to have children.

Significant others motivated participants to combine their talents:

... I was in a course with NTU [University] ... [with] a number of mature aged students ... and really high fliers, so it was a very motivating experience ... I had a very strong administrative background and I wanted to pursue it and I have been lucky enough to combine both.

Other colleagues scaffolded participants' professional development early in their career, encouraging them to remain resourceful, even though initiatives sometimes failed:

... I travelled and camped out all week with people in the bush and taught sitting on a piece of tarpaulin and basically you had to be your own resource and you had to be honourable in your teaching ... and certainly, the bush kids had very different needs ... I had some great teachers that I learned from and who were willing to let you take risks.
and support you when they didn’t work. I think that’s a very important part of a young teacher’s career as well ... I was lucky that I had those people.

Participants discovered through taking on early challenging roles that their teaching skills often transferred across settings:

... I was approached by the local TAFE who knew I had teaching qualifications to teach a 12-hour course in Office skills ... I did my usual trick – which is say yes and then madly work out how on earth I was actually going to do this. I was about 2 weeks ahead of the students and I learnt a lot.

Frequently, participants received leadership guidance from teaching partners and senior mentors:

... a superintendent came out and wanted to know what I was doing the following year. I said, “Oh, I’m going to be early childhood senior teacher”. She said, “But what new innovations are you going to have?”... I was really shocked, “No, everything is going really well.” ... She said, “I would really like you to apply for head teacher of Middle Point Primary”...

By mid career, selection panels served as an authoritative source of significant others' opinions for some:

... Obviously I have applied for a number of promotional positions and have gained a lot of them ... For me personally the process of going for jobs ... can be a very valuable learning experience. It forces you to reflect on yourself and on where your achievements have been and to explain them to people. It forces you to talk with people who might be referees for you, talk with people who can give you feedback on successful and unsuccessful applications.

Significant others could be trusted to provide honest appraisals of a participant’s readiness to take on a challenging new role:

... I sought the advice of a principal colleague whose opinion I respected and she bluntly told me I wouldn’t be considered as I hadn’t been a senior teacher in an NT school ... she was right, at that time ...

Relationships with significant others presented opportunities to take on new pathways, or to integrate different ones:

... N [the regional Superintendent] continued to play a really big role in my life ... I really had got a handle on...school action plans and really believed in their worth and value ... I was asked by the late D, who was probably the Dep. Sec at the time, would I go off line to go around the countryside talking to ICPA and school councils and principals about the value of action plans for school improvement. I was really chuffed ... thought like, “Wow,” and I rang my good friend N [the regional Superintendent] up and said, “What do you reckon?” and she said, “Are you mad? You are not the
substantive holder of Berry Springs and if you go off doing this do you really think that school community will want you back?" Like are you fair dinkum about doing a good job at Berry Springs or what is it that you are doing here? So I turned that down and I was there for three years but ... I did do some action plan stuff on weekends with the person who was appointed to run the project and I also got more and more involved in Commonwealth submission writing.

Participants prioritised the wellbeing and safety of others, exercising a strong care ethic, a personal characteristic highly valued by every Pathways participant. For example, wet season floods in the late 1990s traumatised the Northern Territory township of Katherine. During the crisis, one participant who worked there as a school principal revealed her identity as a caring leader:

... I think where I got things right was before we even started worrying too much about the condition of the school at the first staff meeting we went around in a circle and said ok, how did you get on and what do you need and how can we work it because the staff morale and staff wellbeing had to come first before we could worry about the school.

The responsibility to share expertise with a new generation of interested, capable colleagues was emphasised:

... Because that happened to me, where I wished the feedback and perceptions from others had been said years earlier so I could have worked on it, I am currently trying to put regular, constructive feedback into practice with people I supervise.

The support of mentors and family was critical to these Pathways teachers’ mid career resilience. When a mentor wasn’t available, self-promotion was one alternative career strategy that drew some participants closer to a change activity and the pool of significant others connected to it:

... So a girlfriend and I, (she was assistant principal at one of the high schools) approached one of the General Managers and said, "How about you allow us to do a work-place exchange?" We initiated it and he said, "Not a problem but you can only do it, if you do it for 12 months." ... We talked him into allowing us to try it for 6 months ... [but] we both agreed that it was too short ... we extended it for the year.

The majority of participants described their broadening networks as mechanisms that kept the direction of their professional development strategically aligned with interesting systemic change activities.

The four late career teachers transformed their identities by integrating personal and systemic goals within their domains of expertise. As in earlier phases, the intention was 'to make a difference', but now there was talk of it fitting in with a commitment to personal wellbeing.

For two in late career, children were mostly grown up and professional reputations had been established. In or out of the system these participants saw their role as supporting vulnerable learners and classroom teachers, while needing to keep a balance:
... In some ways my private life has controlled and vice versa my career. I think it’s quite important to be clear where the line is between your own life, your family’s needs and your school life ... that’s important, maintaining that balance.

Some Pathways participants elaborated on their relationships and activities with others outside the education system, such as those in professional and community contexts:

... I became an assistant at the library. I think I was earning about $30 for a morning’s work and was paying $24 in childcare, which left me just enough for a cup of coffee and a magazine. But I figured it didn’t interfere with my tutoring after school, I was meeting people – locals and tourists, and it was something different and I really enjoyed my time there. We built up a toy library of the bigger toys and games that people won’t buy but could use. We developed a Kakadu Collection which was really much more convenient for students and tourists – not to mention me - with it all together. We also developed a closer relationship with the local childcare centre doing some storytelling and pre-literacy activities – Mums who were at home with under-fives came along as well. Guess a teacher will always manage to get a class together!

Apart from family members and inspirational teachers encountered during childhood, adolescence or early career, others outside the system also facilitated later personal transformation:

... one of the major changes for me as a supervisor of pre-service teachers was the change to the third year practicum. When it became an eight-week prac I just loved it. It allowed you to develop a stronger relationship with the pre-service teacher. The last three students I had I’m still very close friends with and they consider me a mentor.

It was noticeable that for the majority of Pathways participants, significant others were mostly considered to be those working within the same education system, and less so in universities, professional associations or other related fields. Nonetheless, some participants advised newer graduates to seek future career paths in and out of education:

... The culture when I grew up was you picked your career pathway and you stayed there...the culture for anyone starting today is they should have a number of different career paths ... because of the changing nature of what a career is.

Some participants had previously explored career alternatives:

... So I went around to places like the hospitals, mental institutes etc that had art facilities to teach art work. This was great ...there were a lot of openings for teaching art rather than being in a traditional education system.
RELATIONSHIPS WITH SIGNIFICANT OTHERS
AND FORMATION OF TEACHER LEADER IDENTITIES

Despite some Pathways teachers pointing out the transferability of skills and advocating that more teachers try diverse career pathways, one participant reflected how prior relevant experience gained across a range of education sectors was sometimes insufficient in a promotion application:

... it's often the case that the school would rather have someone they know than someone they don't. And so if one of those applicants meets that criteria but not as well as someone else, yet they know that person, then they're really going to work in favour of choosing that familiar person ...

Participants' evaluations of gaps that they could fill tended to motivate them to undertake formal study early in their teaching careers. By mid-career, nearly all had undertaken further training or obtained formal qualifications. However, this did not necessarily guarantee that their achievements would be recognised within the department as evidence of ability to lead change or provide sufficient edge in competitive job selection:

... I thought my Masters would be one of the things in educational administration. Now that's important for some panels and not for others ...

For most, learning on the job was seen by mid career to play an arguably bigger role in developing and validating teacher leader expertise. The social nature of on the job learning was most evident when participants reflected on their professional development or when they considered taking on specialised roles. One explained that applying for new positions prompted him to ask significant others before and during interviews whether his professional profile suited the role he sought:

... the whole process can be a very valuable learning experience ... each time I think I've learned a great deal about what I'm able to do, what to value about myself, what other people value about me, the position in terms of what those people feel is needed for the position and the way that I can fulfil that position.

Accurately identifying their social standing in the system when looking to move on, or up, was therefore important to participants. It helped shape personal identities as leaders. In their research, Roland and Foxx (2003) related this ability to self-esteem.

VALIDATION OF TEACHER EXPERTISE AND ACHIEVEMENT OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE OUTCOMES

A disposition for professional transformation was seen by all participants to be a self-generated personal characteristic. In leadership positions, each participant placed their own unique stamp on systemic change activities: for example, one improved staff morale in her school, while another told how she completed a sensitive, detailed evaluation of newly combined sections in the department in readiness for a further restructure, without alienating the staff involved.
Acknowledgement of an individual's personal transformation from teacher to teacher leader was most evident where Pathways teachers welcomed opportunities for promotion and participated in education reform at progressively more senior levels of management. These challenging steps were often prompted by nudges from significant others at home or work. In the anecdote below, two significant innovations simultaneously implemented by a participant throughout a school required sustained effort from all staff. Eventually the participant succeeded in leading the changes sought by successfully cultivating collective agency (Bandura, 2001) amongst the staff:

... I was focusing too much on one particular project to the detriment of the rest of the school. The rest of the senior staff had to say, hello, wake up dear what are doing here, are you just into TV or are you running the whole school? So I got a timely wake up call and I am really pleased they had the confidence to say... get on with it, which they did.

Working this way ensured consistency between systemic expectations, the participant's goals and the quality of change outcomes achieved by the participant and his or her colleagues.

The ability to cultivate and manage productive relationships with significant others emerged as the most defining feature of leadership. Most teachers had managed productive relationships at home and work since their early careers through personal commitment to continuous learning and a mutual commitment with colleagues to social improvement on a progressively wider, more complex scale. These commitments often led to sustained, testing conditions in mid-career but the relationships generated heightened levels of resilience, encouraging participants, as they changed, to find or create professional niches offering the best fit between organisational opportunities and their own changing professional goals.

However, the early career memories of one Indigenous teacher, the oldest person interviewed in the Pathways study, were quite different. They described a career path where initially significant others inside the system did not feature:

... They never called on me for anything in particular. I just did my own thing and got all my resources myself.

Graduating as a primary teacher roughly thirty years ago, she taught for 13 years then retired. After another thirteen years the teacher accepted an invitation to re-enter teaching as a part-time literacy consultant working with Aboriginal children in a local school.

Qualified Indigenous teachers have never been commonplace in the Northern Territory education system, but why did the patterns of support in her early career story differ from those revealed in other transcripts? Although this teacher recalled that from early in her career her professional identity influenced her sense of efficacy more than her Aboriginality, it wasn't necessarily the case for those around her:
... in the Catholic church [when] I went down south to study. I was about to go and help take the procession in the Church. And the woman that was going to be with me, she saw me. Looked me up and down and sat down again. And I went forward and I continued doing what I was asked to do. So, especially Aboriginal people at that time, it was very hard.

Years later, a relative working in the education system recommended the now-retired woman for a consultancy position. The brief was to implement the recommendations of the Learning Lessons review (1999). She was pleased to be offered the position and to accept it. The initiative matched her personal identity as a professional teacher with valued reforms that she would help implement. Importantly, colleagues who remembered working with this teacher acknowledged that she would be ideal for the new position:

... I have the advantages because my hair is white and I am a grandmother and they do respect older people. That was the first thing that was mentioned to me ... You'd be ideal for it because you've got the hair ... and then your experienced and your age and all this ... I'm a great grandmother and I said well you know ... they do respect grandparents. So I said yes ... I'll be only too pleased to teach there.

The late-career teacher struggled to recall details of her early teaching in urban schools, and it wasn't clear why. However her career story further reinforced the importance of relationships with family and colleagues for the personal and public expression of teachers' identities as professional innovators and valued change agents.

**DISCUSSION**

Prideaux (2002) noted that an Australian-centred approach was needed in local careers literature. The Pathways findings contribute to teacher careers research: they inject a personalised dimension to prevailing national discourses about teaching careers. System-centric descriptions of teacher' career pathways are readily available. By contrast, the Pathways narratives provided a closer study of the subjective and inter-personal dimensions of teaching careers. The impending establishment of a Northern Territory Teacher Registration Board is an opportunity to preserve local teachers' stories about their professional development and contributions to education change. It is difficult to know how well the Pathways findings generalise without further research, but some other implications are worth considering. These are discussed briefly below.

Expert teachers are a useful source of professional wisdom, especially for novice teachers (Bucci, 2002). They reportedly display detailed and accurate pedagogical recall (Allen, 1997). Berliner's earlier research also indicated that teacher experts showed effective time management, achievement-oriented approaches, and decisive articulation of how to establish collaborative working relationships (Brandt, 1986). The Pathways analysis suggested a similar set of personal qualities, additional to a strong sense of autonomy and self-esteem.
Bandura’s social cognitive theory explains the dynamism of individual self-determination in terms similar to what individual Pathways teachers described:

Human agency is characterized by the temporal extension of agency through intentionality and forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflectivity about one’s capabilities, quality of functioning, and the meaning and purpose of one’s life pursuits. Personal agency operates within a broad network of sociostructural influences. In these agentic transactions, people are producers as well as products of social systems. Social cognitive theory distinguishes among three modes of agency: direct personal agency, proxy agency that relies on others to act on one’s behest to secure desired outcomes, and collective agency exercised through socially coordinative and interdependent effort. (Bandura, 2001)

Further, Bandura’s recent review linking self-development and social change resonates with Pathways teachers’ stories of personal transformation and systemic reform.

Relationships with family and select colleagues influence the trajectories of individual career paths and how social change agendas are tackled (Itzhaky and York, 2003). A network of significant others contributes to personal efficacy during testing times (Verhofstadt-Deveve, 2003). Newer graduates who find themselves moving rapidly through the teaching ranks into a mid-career phase over coming years (ACER Media Release, 22 October 2003) will benefit from planning their cultivation and management of relationships with significant others. The support of families and mentors will be crucial for the development of these teachers’ individual and collective resilience as they lead change activities. Experiences with family and colleagues are now factored into the design of early-career professional development courses for doctors at the University of Chicago for the same reasons (Rubin et. al., 1999).

This study progressed the aim of producing ‘voiced’ teacher research (Smythe et. al. 2004). However, three modifications to the design would improve its quality in any future replications. Member checks of the completed analysis would enhance validity. Future data collection protocols need to ensure that the approved teacher interview is only used for research, and not also for a public domain publication. Finally, making both the title and interview protocol more open-ended would empower future participants to relate career stories from their own theoretical frames.

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