



Exploring the secret garden of further education professional development: reflecting on the researcher's honesties and opening the honesty box

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Exploring the secret garden of further education professional development: reflecting on the researcher's honesties and opening the honesty box

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ABSTRACT

This article engages in an examination of reflecting upon a researcher's honesties within the context of conducting an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The purpose of this article is to outline how a researcher's reflexivity and awareness of emotions is central to IPA research which investigates Further Education practitioners' lived experiences of the Advanced Teacher Status (ATS), and its potential impact upon practitioners' professional identity and agency.

KEYWORDS

Advanced Teacher Status; Chartered Teacher Status; Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis; reflexivity; honesty; Further Education

Motivation for the research

In 2020, I achieved Advanced Teacher Status (ATS) awarded by the Society of Education and Training (SET). ATS was launched in 2017 and is a 14-month self-guided Further Education (FE) professional formation programme underpinned by the FE Professional Standards.

My motivation for the research stems from my personal experience with ATS, a journey that felt like continuously entering a secret garden, a garden which was only ever visited by myself, my mentor and my learners throughout the whole ATS process which included a quality improvement research project, lesson observations, coaching and mentoring staff and reflective accounts of the ATS process.

Upon completing ATS, my achievement received no recognition, neither monetary nor professional recognition from my institution. In fact, since qualifying as an advanced teacher, I have not received the opportunity to share my ATS process or the impact of the ATS upon my professional identity and agency during interviews or whilst applying for freelance contracts. This led me to reflect upon whether other ATS holders shared a similar journey and if ATS is recognised both by FE institutions and the wider sector.

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Professional formation in Further Education

The historical context and Government interest in Further Education (FE) practitioners' requirements to engage in continuous professional development (CPD) has been one which has seen significant shifts in the professional development of FE practitioners over the last 30 years. As far back as 1972, the Department of Education and Science, James Report (1972, p.1) highlighted that, 'for too long, the colleges of education have been treated as junior partners in the system of higher education, in relation to teachers' professional development'. Furthermore, the Department of Education and Science, James Report (1972, p. 5) stated, 'teachers have suffered from inadequate opportunities to improve their knowledge and professional skill' and recommended that all FE practitioners receive opportunities to extend their knowledge by obtaining a degree or an advanced professional qualification. Interestingly, the Department of Education and Science, James Report (1972) only refers to professional qualifications and makes no references to professional formations but does refer to the importance of FE practitioners receiving the opportunity to research as part of an FE practitioner's professional development (Department of Education and Science, James Report, 1972), something which forms part of the ATS professional formation in the form of a quality improvement plan.

Following the recommendations from the Department of Education and Science, James Report (1972) for FE practitioners to receive the opportunity to develop and obtain a degree or advanced professional qualification, colleges increased their provision of staff development. The PICKUP Report (1986) reported the increase in this provision noting that by the mid 1980s over 100 FE institutions were utilising and providing staff development opportunities through the Department of Education and Science (DES). During this period funding for staff development was distributed through Local Education Authorities and governed by the DES.

A momentous change for FE professional development stems from legislation, the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) which marked a significant transformation of the FE sector. This Further and Higher Education Act (1992) effectively removed FE colleges from LEA control and FE institutions became responsible for the professional development of their staff. Hamilton Broad (2015, 18) believes that the Government, at the time, took a 'laissez-faire' approach to the professional development of the FE practitioner, believing that colleges began to adopt a 'whole college approach' to staff development, offering little bespoke professional development and opportunities to gain degrees or advanced professional qualifications took place as outlined as a recommendation in the Department of Education and Science, James Report (1972).

A resurgence of interest in the professional development of FE practitioners took place in the 21st Century with the Further Education Teachers' Qualifications (England) Regulations (2001) which required all FE practitioners to hold qualified teacher and learning status (QTLS). In contrast, to primary and secondary teachers, the FE sector had previously never had this as a requirement to teach within the lifelong learning sector.

In 2004, the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) aimed to improve the professional development of FE practitioners and launched the Equipping our Teachers for the Future policy (2004). This policy was instrumental in reforming FE professional development and so from 2007, all trainers and teachers entering FE were required to be registered with the Institute for Learning (IFL). IFL was a mandatory professional body for all practitioners in FE, adult and work-based learning and training in the UK. Its aim was to raise the professional status of FE practitioners and support the sector's professional development needs. This was a radical move for the FE sector and all FE practitioners were required to evidence their Continuous Professional Development (CPD), demonstrating their licence to practice. The licence to practice was deemed to be a demonstration of FE practitioners' professional status.

The FE workforce regulations were withdrawn in 2007. This was followed by the removal of the legal requirement for all teacher and trainers in the FE sector to work towards a qualification for teaching and learning status in September 2013. The Independent Review of Professionalism in FE, the Lingfield Report (2012), supported this move, and a new suite of education and training professional qualifications were launched ranging from Level 3 to 5 in Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector. Moreover, IFL was replaced with a voluntary membership body, The Society of Education and Training (SET) who introduced professional formations for the FE sector. Still to this present day, SET provides a range of CPD opportunities and professional formations such as Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) introduced in 2008 and Advanced Teacher Status (ATS) in 2017. Professional formations are not qualifications awarded by examination boards, but a recognition of a professionals' skills, knowledge and pedagogical approaches to their professional practice, with QTLS and ATS being endorsed by SET.

Advanced Teacher Status

SET launched ATS in 2017. ATS is a 14-month self-guided professional formation programme which is underpinned by the FE Professional Standards. Entry requirements have changed from 2017 to the present day, from the mandatory requirement of the FE professional to hold

QTLS status to meeting specific eligibility such as relevant teaching qualifications and experience, the ability to demonstrate impact as well as being a member of SET.

ATS is a 14-month self-guided professional formation programme which involves several modules. These include researching and conducting a quality improvement plan, evidencing coaching and mentoring and a reflective log of professional development.

In 2019, SET collaborated with the Chartered College of Teaching and all ATS holders are now awarded Chartered Teacher Status (CTeach) in addition to ATS post nominals. The Chartered College of Teaching claim CTeach 'is the highest nationally recognised accreditation pathway that will further support your career-long development and recognises mastery in your practice at different levels' (Chartered College of Teaching 2019, 1). It is this very claim and my ATS journey that sparked my motivation to investigate FE practitioners' lived experiences of the Advanced Teacher Status professional formation and the impact upon their professional identity and agency.

Methodology

This study was granted ethical approval from the University of Worcester prior to the commencement of the research. Recruitment occurred via email from FE practitioners who work 8 hours or more in the FE sector and hold ATS professional status. All participants received a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) which explained the aims and objectives of the research. The PIS also outlined the use of semi-structured interviews, how data would be gathered and stored, alongside the right to withdraw. Concerned with the interpreting the lived experiences of FE practitioners who hold ATS, a qualitative approach was utilised, specifically IPA as opposed to a narrative enquiry.

Narrative research has similarities to IPA as both approaches focus on individuals' experiences. However, narrative research, 'begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals' (Cresswell 2017, 54). Additionally, narrative research elicits and analyses stories to gain insights into social, cultural, and individual contexts. In contrast, IPA focuses on in-depth explorations of individuals' lived experiences, seeking to interpret how individuals make sense of the meanings of their experience.

Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou (2005, 1) claim 'Unlike many qualitative frameworks, narrative research offers no automatic starting or finishing point and clear accounts of how to analyse the data, as found for instance in grounded theory and in Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis'. Conversely, IPA analysis adopts a comprehensive analytic process which delves into the detailed reflections of how research participants might

perceive and make sense of an experience (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022). In contrast, Squire, Andrew, and Tamboukou (2005) claim that researchers applying a narrative analysis identify how participants create stories and narratives from their personal experience. This process involves a dual layer of interpretation with participants using the narrative to interpret their experience and then the researcher interprets the construction of the narrative. Whilst as a qualitative researcher, I acknowledged the dual layer of interpretation in narrative analysis, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022) argue that IPA offers a more analytical process of interpretation that explicitly focuses on how participants make sense of an experience and therefore a narrative approach to this research was considered less useful.

Applying a phenomenological approach to this research allowed me to examine in detail the lived experiences and reflections of FE practitioners' ATS process. Husserl (1931) describes this process as a series of reductions, each reduction offering a different reflective lens, perspective, thinking or reasoning towards the phenomenon (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022). Husserl (1931) refers to this process as individuals describing the 'house', the experience. However, Husserl (1931) believes this is the first stage of describing an experience and purports that the IPA researcher should be more concerned with close examination of an individual's account and reflections of the phenomenon, something which Husserl refers to as the 'houseness'. This term is used to describe the subjective, intricate and personal experiences and reflections of the 'house', the experience. Regarding this research the 'house' is the ATS process, and the 'houseness' are the personal reflections of each FE practitioner's experiences of the ATS. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) believe Husserl's work (Husserl 1931) supports IPA researchers to be reflexive and view the process as essential for investigating lived experiences. Therefore, adopting a phenomenological approach to this research was best suited to clarify the foundations of knowledge, the knowledge being the FE practitioners' reflections of their ATS process

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 FE practitioners with ATS professional status, all of whom are currently employed within the FE sector. All participants were given prior access to the Participation Information Form (PIS) and consented to being interviewed for 1 hour.

This phenomenological approach enabled the collection of first-person, lived experiences of the Advanced Teacher Status process (Langdridge 2007). My role as a researcher was to gather detailed information about the ATS experience and its possible impact upon the FE practitioners' professional identity and professional agency.

Using semi-structured interviews, I facilitated individual discussions with each participant, posing specific semi-structured questions around designated topics, such as professional identity and professional agency, whilst also having the freedom to delve deeper into the lived experiences by probing and following up points raised to ensure clarity and accuracy (Thomas 2009).

Interview questions

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1. Please tell me a little about yourself and your role within Further Education?
 2. Tell me what made you decide to undertake the Advanced Teacher Status professional formation?
 3. What aspects of the ATS do you feel had the most impact upon you and why?
 4. What do you understand by the term professional identity?
 5. Having obtained the ATS, tell me what impact you feel the ATS has had upon your professional identity? Could you share any specific examples?
 6. What do you understand by the term professional agency?
 7. Do you feel the ATS has had any impact upon your professional agency? Could you share any examples?
 8. SET claims that the ATS professional formation demonstrates that as a FE professional you have a mastery of skills, do you agree and if so, what do you feel these are?
 9. Having obtained ATS, you need to revalidate this professional formation every three years. Please tell me your thoughts about this process.
 10. Do you feel the ATS is fully understood by the FE and wider education sector?
 11. Is there anything else about the ATS process and its impact upon you as an FE professional you would like to share?
-

In designing the semi-structured interview, initially, I aimed to approach the interview questions strategically. However, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) led me to consider how the design of the research questions needed to give me the freedom to go ‘sideways’, which often happened during each interview as each participant’s journey was unique and emotional. Whilst I had set out with a clear IPA focus investigating the personal and lived experiences of ATS holders, I was naive to how capturing the nuances of FE practitioners’ reflections, motivations, disappointments, and insights of the ATS would affect my emotions.

The lived experience (interview), I have just shared has led me to doodle and then draw a sunflower. I pencilled the words, “turn your face to the sun”. In my journal. I have just grappled with my emotions triggered by a participant’s reflections. I am struggling with so many emotions from anger and disappointment to joy. I believe these emotions have been bubbling for a while and stem from my own ATS experience. I feel they have been reignited and are erupting having listened to one of my research participant’s lived experience of the ATS process and its impact upon their professional identity and agency. I am not sure what to do next, how to address these emotions, so I have chosen to log them in my reflective journal and taking time to appreciate my honesty.

This is an extract from my reflective journal in the early stages of interviewing participants and analysing data in an IPA investigating FE practitioners’ lived experiences of the ATS professional formation process. The semi-structured interviews explore the reflective

accounts, feelings, and perceptions of FE practitioners who hold ATS and its potential impact upon their professional identity and agency. As a methodology, IPA seeks to study an experience, investigating individuals' lived experiences, this experience being the ATS (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022). My curiosity to investigate the ATS process stems from my own professional formation journey, whereby neither my senior management team or my colleagues showed interest in understanding the requirements of the ATS or the potential impact the ATS process had upon my professional identity and agency. I was left alone in the secret garden of FE professional formation; I shared my experiences with no-one.

At the very early stages of the data analysis process, I instantly recognised my emotions. I felt overwhelmed by data and the intricacies of the lived experiences shared. Mallon and Elliott (2019), 2) claim, 'there has been considerable hesitancy in literature to overtly acknowledge the vulnerability of researchers within the research process'. Recognising and appreciating your emotions as a researcher requires honesty. Savin-Baden and Fisher (Savin-Baden and Fisher 2002, 192) suggest in developing our honesties as researchers we need to take a critical and reflexive stance, voice our mistakes and appreciate that 'honesties is a moral category'.

Appreciating and developing my honesties commenced as soon as I submitted my proposal for my research. However, I was naïve to the rush of emotions I would feel once ethical approval was granted and my first interview underway. It became apparent during my first interview that whilst I felt a part of the participant's lived experience of the ATS, I exited the interview with suppressed emotions. Instantly, I began to reflect and turned to my reflective journal. As a methodology, IPA aims to make sense of a phenomenon but there needs to be reflexivity. Goldspink and Engward (2009, p.291) define reflexivity as aiding 'the dual perspective of being inside and outside the research by informing one's self-awareness'. To support the journey of self-awareness, the IPA researcher needs to continually be reflexive and spend time developing their honesties as they become 'involved in other people's stories' as this 'necessitates an interaction between their words about their lived experience and our own words' (Engward and Goldspink 2020, 4). Moreover, Mitchell, Boettcher-Shead, Duque and Lashewiez (Mitchell et al. 2018, 673) purport 'reflexive practice can be some of the most challenging and important work in qualitative research'. Reflexivity became an integral part of my research and using a reflective journal the interaction between the participants words and the development of my honesties began.

Opening the honesty box

In the initial stages of data analysis, I immediately became aware of my emotions and the initial feeling of being overwhelmed by the amount of data and the complexities of the shared lived experiences. Mallon and Elliott (2019), 2) claim, ‘there has been considerable hesitancy in literature to overtly acknowledge the vulnerability of researchers within the research process, but there has been substantive interest in the emotional impact of the work on the researcher’. Bloor et al. (2010) state ‘how we may not be aware at the outset of the research of the vulnerabilities with ourselves that may be touched by our engagement in our work’. Mallon and Elliott (2019), 3) support this claim stating how emotionality is a ‘central tenet of the qualitative research process’.

The process of deep introspection and self-awareness of my emotions was aided by my reflective journal, devoting pages to scribing and developing my honesties. I dedicated a page in my reflective journal to my honesty box. I drew a box after each interview and spent time scribing my emotions. One of my honesty box reflective journal extracts:

I have drawn a box; this is my honesty box. I feel it is going to be filled with emotions. I have just finished an interview, and I must admit I am emotionally drained. I have looked at the initial notes I have made, and I am trying not to feel overwhelmed by the generosity of the participants. The participant has shared so much of their ATS journey with me and for that I am so grateful. However, it is the negative emotions that seem to be spilling over the edge of my honesty box. Time to book a supervisory meeting I think.

Savin-Baden and Fisher (2002, 192) suggest honesty is grounded in truth and as researchers, ‘we need to develop our honesties and situate ourselves in relation to data’. To date, I continually spend time with my honesty box, taking time to pause, contemplate and reflect upon what it means to be an honest researcher. Savin-Baden and Fisher (2002, 192) consider, ‘honesties, as a concept, which allows us to acknowledge not only the cyclical nature of “truths” but also that the nature of honesties is defined by people and contexts. The notion of honesties also helps us to avoid the prejudice for similarity and against difference in data interpretation’. However, continuous reflexivity involves, “turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognise and take responsibility for one’s own situatedness within the research’ (Berger 2015, 220).

Reflexivity and honesty

As reflexivity is a continuous process throughout the research process, Dodgson (2019, 221) claims ‘the majority of the content about the researchers’ reflexivity belongs in the data collection and data analysis sections’.

Table 1. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022) seven steps of IPA data analysis with the inclusion of Goldspink and Engward (2019) sub-step 3b.

1. Reading and re-reading.
2. Exploratory Noting.
3. Constructing experiential statements.
3b. <i>Attend to the reflexive echoes.</i>
4. Searching for connections across experiential statements.
5. Naming the personal experiential themes and consolidating and organising them into a table.
6. Continuing the individual analysis of other cases.
7. Working with personal experiential themes to develop group experiential themes across cases.

Dodgson (2019, 221) believes, ‘it is here the burden of parsimony conflicts with complexity of explaining the authors’ reflexive process. A series of analytical steps were applied to the data analysis process as set out by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022) but reference was also made to the addition of stage 3b ‘attend to the reflexive echoes’ as purported by Goldspink and Engward (2019).

Table 1 shows the seven steps of IPA data analysis (Smith, Flower and Larkin, 2022). In this paper, I concentrate upon how stages 1 to 3 (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022) and step 3b (Goldspink and Engward 2019) within the data analysis amplified my reflexivity and honesties.

Data analysis and honesty

Step 1: Reading and re-reading the data

At stage 1, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022) suggest that the researcher immerses themselves in the data and in doing so, I recall feeling overwhelmed by the process and honestly feeling exhausted. Instantly, from reading and re-reading the participants’ transcripts, my emotions were heightened, and I recognised how frustrated I felt after each interview. I turned to my reflective journal and wrote the following after my first two interviews with FE practitioners.

There is so much of what the participants are sharing with me that has left me scratching my head, feeling emotive and wondering who I can talk to, where I can publish my work, so that all of us FE professionals can open the gate of our secret garden of professional development. I feel frustrated, angry and disappointed and jealous all at the same time. It seems that everyone’s lived experiences are different and yet the same. How can this be?

This extract led me to commence step 2 of the data analysis process, creating explanatory notes.

Step 2: Exploratory noting

In step 2, I re-read each transcript with the aim to produce more detailed notes and commentary (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022). It became clear that some interviews were more detailed than others and that developing exploratory notes, ‘which have a clear phenomenological focus and stay close to the participants meaning’ was important’ (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2022, 79). However, I found myself once more distracted by the data and the words I highlighted in the transcripts. I found myself scribing more and more in my reflective journal. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022) highlight the importance of exploring the notes for linguistic content, for example the language used by the participant, in addition to interrogating the data, to seek answers to questions posed by the researcher. This process required much self-reflection, and I found myself feeling swamped with emotions. At this point in the data analysis process, I recognised I needed to pause and note in my research journal how the emerging interpretations aligned to my own personal experience of the ATS process, reflecting upon my emotional reactions. The extract I penned,

I am feeling swamped. Schon (Schön 1983) asks us to reflect but be wary of reflecting from the high ground but to reflect in the lowlands, I do believe. I think I recall this from previous lectures at Uni. Well, I can honestly say I am in the swamp! It's dark and muddy and a little bit lonely here in the swamp, surrounded by others' lived experiences. I must spend time considering why I feel so "bogged down", not only with data, but with how frustrated I feel' However, I also feel joy and I must admit jealous from some of the participants' responses. So, what now? I think I need to sit a while longer in the swamp and tell myself the high ground is not the place to be.

Step 3: Constructing experiential statements

At stage 3, Goldspink and Engward (2019) argue that Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) series of steps should have a stage 3b, termed as attending to the reflexive echoes. Goldspink and Engward (2019, 292) argue, the inclusion of sub step 3b, attend to the echoes, strives to deliberately highlight the reflexive dimensions of an IPA by enabling the researchers to clearly position themselves as the data analysis moves from descriptive observations into deeper interpretive work. Working with the exploratory notes from the transcripts, I sought to construct experiential statements. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2022), 86) define experiential statements as statements that ‘relate directly to the participants’ experiences, or to the experience of making sense of the things that happened to them’. However, it is at this step that, ‘the echoes from the data stay rumbling’ (Goldspink and Engward 2019, 295). In my reflective journal, I argue that there were echoes but my data never simply echoes – it roars!

An extract from my reflective journal.

Having undertaken step 1 and 2 of the data analysis, I have begun to construct experiential statements. At this point, I feel I needed to spend time with my journal. I want to express my emotions of gratitude for Goldspink and Engward (2019) proposed step 3b. However, I also want to capture how the echoes from the data do not rumble but roar. They are loud and stand proud within each transcript. I think what I am trying to say is that I need to be honest and courageous in sharing my findings, to contribute to new knowledge. One thing that is becoming evident, is the more I reflect, the more my honesty box is opened, the more I need to appreciate who I am as a researcher and an individual and an ATS holder.

This journal extract led me to reflect upon Gadamer (2013) who acknowledges the importance of what is seen, felt and heard by the researcher during the research process, heightening the importance of our honesties and emotions and continually reflecting upon who we are as individuals and researchers. However, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009, 145) also highlight that there needs to be a fine balance of reflexivity and that too much reflection can deter from ‘the object of inquiry to the thing itself’. In concurrence, Finlay and Finlay (2022, 532) highlight how, ‘the researcher treads a cliff edge where it is all too easy to fall into an infinitive regress of excessive self-analysis at the expense of focusing on the participants’. In seeking a balance of reflexivity, further research by Engward and Goldspink (2020) refers to your research participants as lodgers, lodgers who reside with you, who occupy your space and take up residency in your research. To counterbalance the need for reflexivity whilst concentrating on the lodgers (your participants), I sought solace using my reflective journal drawing, doodling and scribing extracts to express my honesties. In addition, my supervisory sessions continued to be an outlet for developing my honesties. Engward and Goldspink (2020, 45) remind us of that this type of ‘analytical interaction illuminates the researcher’s awareness’ and ‘in this sense, reflexivity is an ethically driven method’. My supervisory meetings opened my scotomas, sought out the blind spots in my analysis and opened up conversations about my honesties. Moreover, reflecting upon my role as a researcher, I continued to press the pause button, took time to contemplate and refocus on my research aims and objectives, whilst the data and my participants’ voices continued to not echo in my head but roar!

The roaring data

The analytical process continues. The transcripts analysed shed light on some of the emerging findings from FE professionals who have achieved ATS. Through reflective conversations the lived experience of some of the participants have roared and sparked my emotions.

During semi-structured interviews, when participants were asked, ‘Do you feel the FE sector and in fact the wider education sector understand what ATS is?’ Participants replied:

I think there is a lack of understanding of what it is, and that is reflected in the numbers of FE professionals that have ATS. In fact, to put ATS after your name, who knows what it means? There is a bigger question of people’s understanding of Society of Education and Training and Education Training Foundation as well.

ETF might know what ATS is, but my colleagues did not Having the C Teach status was a big advantage Everyone understands Chartered Teacher Status.

For me when I talk to other people outside of education, they understand I am chartered, but they do not understand what ATS is.

No, in fact, I have never seen a job advert that is looking for ATS.

I think my organisation understands ATS. It needs to be recognised sector wide and a recognition of pay

No.

Moreover, when participants were asked about the positives and negatives of the ATS professional formation, their responses included:

ATS got me into research. ATS helped me to support my team, my colleagues and my stakeholders. The positives also were the respect I was given by my colleagues and organisation.

I have had no amendments of my job title. I’m at the same level as other senior tutors despite having ATS.

No pay increase.’ There is also a lack of publication following the ATS. There is a lack of wide understanding of the ATS process.

ATS was a way to push myself.

I think it formalised what I do.

ATS gives you the opportunity to fine tune your skills.

Teaching is a craft, and you can plateau. ATS is a vehicle that allows you to give your attention to that craft gain, whatever that craft is, coaching, or teaching.

To date, the data collected reaffirms that FE practitioners with ATS status feel they have a place in the secret garden, where their professional development is not widely recognised within the FE sector. Initial data analysis reveals several emerging personal and group experiential themes, including a lack of understanding of ATS both within the FE sector and a call for greater parity across the wider education sector. Additionally, there seems to be limited professional progression for ATS holders and CTeach (Chartered

Teacher) post-nominals are valued alongside ATS, but it is unclear whether these post-nominals are understood and recognised by FE institutions.

Listening to and transcribing the lived experiences of the research participants has been revealing and emotionally stirring. The analytical process surfaced a range of emotions within me as an IPA researcher. Capturing personal experiential statements where participants shared their thoughts on the lack of understanding and recognition of ATS was challenging to listen to. It was difficult not to feel a sense of despair and frustration. However, an essential part of my reflexive journey has been to carve out a reflexive space where I could explore my emotions honestly, where I could spend time reflecting upon my honesties and own positionality as I develop a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. This reflexive practice supported me to hear the 'roars' and to ensure my emotions do not overshadow the participants' lived experiences but instead deepen my understanding, empathy, commitment and honesties to accurately represent their perspectives of the ATS.

Implications for the FE practitioner and the FE sector

Initial immersion in analysing of data from semi-structured interviews from FE practitioners that hold ATS in response to the research question: *How has the Advanced Teacher Status process potentially impacted upon a Further Education professionals' identity and professional agency?* reveals that there are emerging group experiential themes which indicate the lack of organisational and wider FE sector understanding of the ATS process. Many of the participants shed light on how they enjoyed undertaking a quality improvement plan and researching, reflecting upon their professional identity from teacher to teacher-researcher. However, participants were perplexed by the lack of recognition or importance placed upon research and the lack of opportunities to undertake scholarly activity.

This study also uncovered an unexpected result, when the participants reflected upon the process of revalidation of their ATS. The Society of Education and Training register all ATS holders and stipulate that ATS holders must revalidate their professional formation every 3 years. The revalidation involves producing a reflective account of how the FE professional has upheld their mastery of skills. The ATS holder must also be a fully paid member of SET. Without these requirements being met, SET view the FE professional as not possessing ATS.

Most of the participants stated that they would revalidate their ATS, but when probed why, most revealed that they would undertake the process for their professional identity only and questioned why

organisations and the wider sector do not stipulate the need for ATS on job advertisements or offer monetary rewards and further career progression.

My study has the potential to contribute to a comprehensive review of professional formation within the FE sector. A review which could see a significant transformation of the professional formation offer from the Society of Education and Training by addressing the gaps in the ATS professional formations and working with all stakeholders to address the lack of recognition current ATS holders possess.

Conclusion

In conclusion, learning to be reflexive and to take time for deep reflection on your positionality as a researcher, while developing honesty and becoming aware of your emotions throughout the research process, is a gradual journey. This process takes deep introspection, moments of feeling bogged down in the swamp and a commitment to reflecting upon your emotions as a researcher. During the initial stages of data analysis, I recognised the importance of reflexivity and honesty and using my journal I cultivated my sense of honesty. In these moments of reflective journaling, there were brief silences before the data ‘roared’ again, allowing room for the participants’ voices to emerge.

Researchers using IPA must take time to engage with their own ‘echoes’ or ‘roars’. They need time to create a space for silence and reflection, staying there long enough to contemplate their emotions, to spend time with their honesty box, before stepping back into their role as researchers.

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Annie Pendrey began her career as an NNEB, working in both Early Years and the Primary sector before progressing into teaching in both FE and HE. Presently, Annie is a freelance educational consultant and an established author. Her books include ‘The Little Book of Reflection’, ‘Reflection and Reflective Spaces in the Early Years’ and ‘Being, Belonging and Thriving as an Early Years Practitioner’

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