



Equifinality in Career Pathways

A Journey from Classroom to Academia

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Keywords

Equifinality, autobiographic self-understanding, work ethics, career transition, primary teaching vs. higher education teaching experiences

Abstract

There are diverse pathways to becoming an academic, yet personal histories of successful academics who have taken non-traditional routes often remain undocumented. This qualitative and autobiographical study is guided by the theories of equifinality and career construction (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Toya, 2020; Savickas, 2005), aiming at filling this gap by documenting a personal journey from classroom teaching to academia. The study findings reveal that career pathways are marked by significant milestones, challenges and strategic decision-making processes that shape the career trajectory. The results underscore the validity of equifinality in academic career development and active role individuals play in constructing their career narratives. It is recommended that institutions and policymakers in higher learning institutions should recognize and value non-traditional career paths as valuable assets within individuals' career development.

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1. Introduction

The transition from primary school teaching to academia represents a significant and complex shift in the educational landscape, highlighting the diverse pathways that can lead to successful academic careers. This phenomenon underscores the importance of understanding and recognizing non-traditional routes in academic career development. The concept of equifinality, which posits that multiple routes can lead to similar outcomes (Toya, 2020; Carozza, Akarca & Astle, 2023; Schneider & Iverson, 2023), provides a valuable theoretical framework for examining these varied experiences and qualifications.

While there is a growing body of literature recognizing diverse career trajectories within education (e.g., Garrett, 2024; White & Smith, 2022; Duta, Wielgoszewska & Iannelli, 2021 in the UK; Ramnund-Mansingh & Seedat-Khan, 2020 in South Africa; Ampaire, Kagoda & Namugenyi, 2024 and Nabawanuka, 2023 in Uganda; Nduta, 2020 in Kenya; Dachi, 2018 and Tarimo & Swai, 2024 in Tanzania), the field remains divided. Some scholars argue for the superiority of traditional academic pathways (Johnson & Lee, 2022), while others advocate for the value of diverse experiences in enriching academic perspectives (Martinez & Brown, 2023). This debate highlights a significant gap in the literature regarding the specific pathways educators follow to enter higher education roles, particularly those transitioning from primary education.

Most studies tend to focus on traditional routes, often neglecting the rich variety of experiences that shape individual journeys. Even recent research, such as Tarimo & Swai's (2024) study in Tanzania, primarily highlights factors facilitating female academicians' career development in public universities, overlooking the issue of equifinality. This research aims to address this gap by exploring a personal career path, emphasizing how unique experiences inform transitions to academia.

The objectives of this study are:

- To narrate a personal journey from primary school teaching to academia

- To recount the lessons learned while navigating this career transition

By examining this pathway through a personal narrative, framed by the theories of equifinality (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Toya, 2020) and Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005), the research seeks to provide insights that can inform professional development programs and institutional policies. This study contributes to the field of education by offering a comprehensive, lived understanding of career transitions in education, underscoring the importance of recognizing and supporting diverse pathways.

The novelty of this research lies in its unique combination of personal narrative with theoretical frameworks, providing a rich, in-depth account of a non-traditional pathway to academia. It addresses the scarcity of documented personal histories from successful academics who have taken non-traditional routes, offering inspiration and practical insights for aspiring scholars from diverse backgrounds.

Through this lens of personal narrative, this study offers a unique perspective on the complexities of navigating educational career paths, potentially reshaping how we conceptualize and support career transitions in education. It challenges existing paradigms and contributes to a more inclusive understanding of academic career development, with implications for policy, practice, and future research in higher education.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical framework

This study is underpinned by two interconnected theories that provide a robust foundation for understanding the complex transition from primary school teaching to academia: equifinality and Career Construction Theory.

Equifinality, originating from systems theory, posits that similar outcomes can be achieved through diverse pathways (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Toya, 2020). This concept is central to our research as it acknowledges the value of varied experiences in shaping academic careers, challenging the notion of a

single, predetermined path to academia. In the context of this study, equifinality supports the exploration of diverse routes educators take from primary school teaching to academic roles, recognizing that multiple pathways can lead to successful careers in higher education.

Career Construction Theory, developed by Savickas (2005), views career development as a process of personal meaning-making rather than a series of predefined stages (Tokar, Savickas & Kaut, 2020; Munley, 2021; Akün, Işık & Savickas, 2023; McCullough & Hedelin, 2024). It emphasizes the role of adaptability, identity, and life themes in shaping career choices and transitions. This theory helps explain how educators construct meaning from their varied experiences and how these constructions influence their transition to academia. Career Construction Theory provides a framework for understanding the personal and professional adaptations required in this career shift, highlighting how individuals actively construct their career narratives and make decisions based on their evolving self-concept and changing circumstances.

The integration of these two theories allows for a nuanced exploration of the diverse pathways educators take to transition into academia. Equifinality provides the broad conceptual framework for acknowledging multiple valid career paths, while Career Construction Theory offers insight into the individual's process of navigating and making meaning of these paths. Together, they create a comprehensive lens through which to examine the personal journey from classroom teaching to academia, considering both the variety of possible routes and the individual's active role in constructing their career narrative.

Pathways from teaching to academia

The transition from teaching to academia is a complex journey characterized by diverse pathways and experiences. This literature review focuses on two key aspects: the pathways from teaching to academia and the lessons learned during career transitions. The journey from teaching to academia is influenced by various factors, both personal and institutional. Tarimo & Swai (2024) explored the career development of female academics in Tanzania's

public universities, highlighting commitment and motivation as key influences on women's academic growth. This study underscores the importance of personal drive in navigating academic careers, particularly for underrepresented groups. Heffernan (2021) emphasized the crucial role of academic networks in career progression, asserting that successful careers in academia are deeply intertwined with networking abilities. This finding suggests that the path to academia is not solely based on individual merit but also on social capital and connections. Bojica et al. (2023) examined the effects of international academic mobility on career progression in EU countries. Their findings indicate that mobility can significantly impact academic career trajectories, although the effects vary across different contexts. This study highlights the potential benefits of diverse experiences in shaping academic careers, but also points to the complexities of navigating international academic landscapes. However, these pathways are not without challenges. Arday (2021) shed light on the additional barriers and complexities experienced by Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Doctoral Students pursuing academic careers. This research underscores the importance of considering diversity and inclusion in understanding and facilitating pathways to academia, suggesting that the journey may be more arduous for certain groups.

Lessons learned during career transitions

The transition to academia is often accompanied by significant challenges and learning experiences. Hollywood et al. (2020) revealed that many early career academics feel overwhelmed initially, highlighting the importance of support systems and mentorship in navigating the early stages of an academic career. This finding suggests that the transition is not just about acquiring new skills, but also about adapting to a new professional culture and expectations. Various systemic issues can impact career transitions. In South Africa, inadequate career guidance has been identified as a significant challenge (Erasmus, 2020). Other obstacles include the consideration of impact factors during promotion (Ibegbulam, Uzoagba, & Igbo, 2017), lack of clear promotion procedures (Mwashila, 2018), and insufficient resources for research coupled with heavy workloads (Khan & Siriwardhane, 2021).

These studies highlight the institutional and structural challenges that can impede smooth career transitions. Yaqub et al. (2020) pointed out the lack of systematic and comprehensive training needs analysis and weak interaction between institutions seeking training and those providing it. This gap in professional development support suggests that many academics may be underprepared for their new roles, potentially impacting their career progression. The concept of work-life balance in academia was critically examined by Rosa (2022), highlighting the complexities and pressures faced by academics in managing their professional and personal lives. This research underscores the importance of considering broader institutional and societal factors in understanding career transitions and development in academia. Cardel et al. (2020) focused on the specific challenges faced by women in faculty, proposing strategies to promote equity in academia. Their work emphasizes the need for systemic changes to support career development for underrepresented groups in higher education, suggesting that the lessons learned during career transitions may differ significantly based on gender and other demographic factors. Based on literature reviewed, while existing research provides valuable insights into the pathways to academia and the lessons learned during career transitions, there remains a significant gap in the literature. There is a lack of in-depth personal narratives that provide a holistic view of the transition from teaching to academia, particularly in diverse global contexts. Future research could benefit from longitudinal studies and comprehensive individual accounts that capture the nuances of this complex career transition, considering factors such as gender, ethnicity, institutional support, and personal motivations.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, autoethnographic approach to explore the personal journey from primary school teaching to academia. Autoethnography, as defined by Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), is a research method that uses personal experience to describe and analyze cultural experiences. This method is particularly suitable for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the researcher's own career transition,

providing rich, contextual data that illuminates the complexities of navigating educational career paths.

Data collection will primarily involve introspective techniques, including personal narrative writing, reflective journaling, and the examination of personal artifacts such as career documents, correspondence, and professional development records. These methods have been used to construct a detailed account of the researcher's career trajectory, highlighting key decision points, challenges, and influential factors. To enhance the validity and reliability of the autoethnographic data, the study also incorporates elements of triangulation. These include reviewing relevant institutional documents, policies, and literature related to career transitions in education to contextualize the personal narrative within broader educational and social frameworks.

The data analysis will follow a thematic approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involves multiple readings of the collected data, coding for recurring themes and patterns, and synthesizing these codes into broader themes that address the research objectives. Particular attention paid to identifying critical incidents that shaped the career transition, personal and professional growth experiences, and the interplay between individual agency and institutional structures. Throughout the analysis, the researcher maintained a reflexive stance, acknowledging and examining personal biases and assumptions that may influence the interpretation of experiences. This reflexivity will be explicitly addressed in the final narrative to ensure transparency and enhance the credibility of the findings.

4. Data Presentation and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study, focusing on the personal journey from primary school teaching to academia and the lessons learned during this transition. The data is analyzed through the lenses of equifinality (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Toya, 2020) and Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005), providing a theoretical framework for understanding the complex nature of this career transition. The discussion is

structured around two main objectives, each supported by themes derived from the narrative analysis

Narration of my personal journey from primary school teaching to academia

The journey from primary school teaching to academia is a complex and multifaceted process, characterized by several key themes and experiences. This section explores the personal narrative of this transition, highlighting the interplay between individual choices, educational pursuits, and career development. The narrative is analysed through the lenses of equifinality and Career Construction Theory, revealing insights into the non-traditional pathways to academic success. The following subthemes and codes emerged from this personal journey, providing a framework for understanding the transition:

- *Educational progression:* My journey from primary school teaching to academia began with seven years of primary education, followed by secondary education and teacher training. This initial foundation laid the groundwork for future academic pursuits. The progression continued with the pursuit of a diploma in education, followed by undergraduate and master's degrees. Each educational step represented a strategic move towards academic career development, culminating in the pursuit of a PhD. This educational trajectory aligns with the concept of equifinality (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Toya, 2020), demonstrating that similar outcomes can be reached through diverse pathways.
- *Career transitions:* The transition from primary school teaching to academia marked a significant milestone in my career journey. This shift was achieved through successfully passing an interview for a position in higher education, representing not just a change in job role but a transformation of professional identity. The subsequent promotion to Senior Lecturer further illustrates the evolution of my academic career. These transitions support research on the evolution of professional identity through career changes (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2022) and exemplify Career Construction Theory's emphasis on adaptability and

ongoing identity formation in response to changing professional circumstances (Savickas, 2005).

- *Challenges and resilience:* Despite initial academic challenges, I persevered, working as a primary school teacher while simultaneously pursuing further education through evening classes. This persistence not only reflects equifinality but also aligns with the findings of Hollywood et al. (2020), who highlighted the overwhelming nature of early academic careers and the importance of resilience. The ability to overcome obstacles and balance professional responsibilities with educational pursuits demonstrates the resilience required in navigating non-traditional pathways to academia.
- *Strategic career development:* The strategic pursuit of higher education while maintaining professional responsibilities demonstrates the adaptability and personal meaning-making emphasized by Career Construction Theory (Tokar, Savickas & Kaut, 2020; Munley, 2021; Akün, Işık & Savickas, 2023; McCullough & Hedelin, 2024). Each educational and career decision represents an intentional choice in shaping my career, aligning with the theory's view of individuals as active agents in their career development. This strategic approach to career development underscores the importance of continuous learning and professional growth in academic careers.
- *Professional identity transformation:* The journey from primary school teacher to academic involved a significant transformation of professional identity. This evolution supports research on the dynamic nature of professional identity in education (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2022). The transition to higher education and subsequent advancement to Senior Lecturer illustrates the continuous professional development central to academic careers, as noted by (Smith & Gillespie, 2023). This transformation exemplifies the adaptability and ongoing identity formation emphasized in Career Construction Theory.
- *Theoretical alignment:* The overall journey exemplifies the concept of equifinality, demonstrating that successful academic careers can be

achieved through non-traditional routes. It also aligns with Career Construction Theory's emphasis on individuals as active agents in constructing meaningful career narratives. The strategic pursuit of education, career transitions, and professional identity evolution all reflect the core principles of these theories, providing a theoretical framework for understanding non-traditional pathways to academic success. My journey from primary school teaching to academia exemplifies the concept of equifinality (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Toya, 2020), demonstrating that successful academic careers can be achieved through non-traditional routes. This aligns with equifinality's core principle that similar outcomes can be reached through diverse pathways. The path began with seven years of primary education, followed by secondary education and teacher training. Despite initial academic challenges, I persevered, working as a primary school teacher while simultaneously pursuing further education through evening classes. This persistence not only reflects equifinality but also aligns with the findings of Hollywood et al. (2020), who highlighted the overwhelming nature of early academic careers and the importance of resilience. The journey continued with the pursuit of a diploma in education, followed by undergraduate and master's degrees. This progression reflects the active engagement in constructing a meaningful career narrative, as described in Savickas's (2005) Career Construction Theory. The strategic pursuit of higher education while maintaining professional responsibilities demonstrates the adaptability and personal meaning-making emphasized by this theory (Tokar, Savickas & Kaut, 2020; Munley, 2021; Akün, Işık & Savickas, 2023; McCullough & Hedelin, 2024). Each educational step represents an intentional choice in shaping my career, aligning with Career Construction Theory's view of individuals as active agents in their career development. The transition from primary school teaching to academia marked a significant milestone, achieved through successfully passing an interview for a position in higher education. This shift not only represents a change in job role but also a transformation of professional identity, supporting research on the evolution of professional identity through career

transitions (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). The subsequent pursuit of a PhD and promotion to Senior Lecturer further illustrate the continuous professional development central to academic careers, as noted by Day & Sachs (2004). These transitions exemplify Career Construction Theory's emphasis on adaptability and ongoing identity formation in response to changing professional circumstances.

The lessons learned while navigating career transition

The career transition from primary school teaching to academia offered several valuable lessons, each reflecting aspects of equifinality and Career Construction Theory.

- *Persistence and resilience:* The transition from primary school teaching to academia underscored the critical importance of persistence and resilience. Overcoming initial academic setbacks and balancing full-time employment with further studies demanded exceptional time management skills and dedication. This experience aligns with recent research on teacher resilience (Beltman, 2021; Mullen et al., 2021), which identifies resilience as a combination of individual characteristics and a supportive working environment, particularly crucial in early career stages. Wang et al. (2024) recently emphasized the importance of teacher well-being in fostering professional growth in China, further supporting this finding. The non-linear nature of this journey, with its challenges and detours, exemplifies equifinality's assertion that multiple paths can lead to the same outcome.
- *Diversification of knowledge and skills:* A crucial lesson was the importance of diversifying knowledge and skills. The pursuit of additional qualifications in leadership, law, and corporate governance after becoming a Senior Lecturer demonstrated a commitment to broadening expertise beyond the primary field. This aligns with Yaqub et al.'s (2020) findings on the need for comprehensive training and development in academia, as well as the evolving nature of academic roles highlighted by Cardel et al. (2020). From the perspective of Career Construction Theory, this diversification represents an adaptive response

to the changing demands of an academic career, illustrating the theory's emphasis on continuous personal and professional development.

- *Strategic career planning*: strategic career planning emerged as a vital lesson, reflecting Career Construction Theory's concept of individuals as active agents in their career development. The ability to identify and seize opportunities for advancement, such as applying for university while pursuing a diploma and seeking out scholarship opportunities, proved crucial. This strategic approach to career development exemplifies the intentional career construction emphasized by Savickas (2005).
- *Adaptability and flexibility*: Adaptability and flexibility were key lessons learned throughout the journey, aligning with both equifinality and Career Construction Theory. Navigating different educational contexts – from public to private schools, evening classes, and higher education institutions – enhanced adaptability to various learning and teaching environments. This experience supports Bojica et al.'s (2023) research on the effects of diverse experiences in shaping academic careers and demonstrates the flexibility required in constructing a personalized career path.
- *Value of formal qualifications*: The journey underscored the value of formal qualifications as career catalysts. Each educational pursuit, from the initial teaching qualification to the PhD, facilitated entry and advancement in academia. This aligns with the emphasis on continuous professional development in education careers (Smith & Gillespie, 2023) and highlights the ongoing importance of formal learning in career growth. From the perspective of Career Construction Theory, these qualifications represent tools used to actively shape professional identity and career trajectory.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the personal journey from primary school teaching to academia, examining the career pathway through the lens of

equifinality and career construction theory. The main result reveals that successful transitions to academic careers can be achieved through non-traditional routes, highlighting the importance of persistence, continuous learning, and adaptive strategies in navigating complex career paths.

This study contributes to the limited body of personal narratives in academic career development literature, offering a unique perspective on the transition from classroom teaching to higher education. It is among the few articles that explicitly apply the theory of equifinality to academic career pathways, providing a rich, in-depth account of a non-linear career progression.

The practical implications of this study suggest that aspiring academics, particularly those transitioning from primary education, should embrace diverse educational and professional experiences as valuable stepping stones. The results emphasize the importance of strategic career planning, resilience in face of challenges, and the pursuit of continuous professional development. Furthermore, the findings suggest that institutions and policymakers should recognize and value non-traditional career paths in academia, potentially broadening their recruitment and promotion criteria.

These results build on the theory of equifinality, demonstrating that there are indeed different ways to reach the same destination in academic careers. The study showcases how diverse experiences, from primary school teaching to various educational pursuits, can converge into a successful academic career, reinforcing the validity of equifinality in career development contexts.

One of the limitations of this study is its reliance on personal narration, which may introduce subjectivity and potential bias. However, the availability of credentials to cross-check the narration adds a layer of validity to the account. Additionally, while the study provides deep insights into one individual's journey, its generalizability to broader populations may be limited.

For future research, it would be valuable to conduct comparative studies of multiple non-traditional pathways to academia, potentially across different disciplines and geographical contexts. Longitudinal studies tracking career transitions over extended periods could provide further insights into the long-term impacts of non-linear career paths. Additionally, research exploring

the institutional perspectives on hiring and promoting academics with non-traditional backgrounds could offer valuable insights for policy development in higher education. In conclusion, this study underscores the complexity and diversity of academic career pathways, challenging traditional notions of linear career progression. It highlights the potential for individuals from diverse professional backgrounds to successfully transition into academia, given the right combination of persistence, adaptability, and strategic career development. As the landscape of higher education continues to evolve, recognizing and valuing these non-traditional pathways may become increasingly important in fostering a diverse and dynamic academic workforce.

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7. Short Biography

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