

Teaching in the Real World:
Autoethnography Meets Meta-Autoethnography from a Practicing Teacher's Perspective

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Abstract

In “Who are You,” I narrate seven vignettes of my lived experiences from childhood through the beginning of my Ph. D. I examine how they directly relate to the relationships I build with my students as a teacher in an urban public high school. I deconstruct how my experiences push me to break standard professional teacher boundaries in order to support and advocate for my students. I discuss the realities of my lived experiences and the impact they have had on me personally, educationally, and professionally. I explain my choice for using narrative vignettes tied to the Lewis Carroll novels *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* and their connection with my adolescent and professional experiences. I explain my choice of autoethnography as my method and how I have come to terms with the vulnerability necessary to successfully use this genre of qualitative research while learning about the difficulties and benefits of the method.

In “Where Soul Meets Body,” I reflect on occurred during those experiences, and how they shaped the person and the teacher I am today. I reflect on the collapse of family, the effects of divorce on my actions, the seeking of solace and emotional repair, the effects of abusive relationships, the changes in my identity, the rebuilding of my identity, and the impact of my lived experiences on my teaching pedagogy. I reflect on the need for transparency and vulnerability in teaching. I explore how the acceptance and realization of my lived experiences has a deep impact on personal pedagogy, practices, and meaningful relationships with students,

specifically in an urban school setting. I explore how my personal experiences intertwine with my students' personal experiences and how all teachers need to acknowledge the importance of transparency and vulnerability in their pedagogy.

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General Audience Abstract

In “Who are You,” I narrate seven stories from my life. I begin with my childhood and continue through the beginning of my Ph. D. I look at how they directly relate to the relationships I build with my students as a teacher in a public high school. I take apart how my experiences help me to support and advocate for my students. I discuss how my experiences influenced me personally, educationally, and professionally. I write about why I chose to use stories and why I used the Lewis Carroll novels *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* to connect them with my adolescent and professional experiences. I explain why I chose to use a research method that is completely a reflection of myself. I also discuss how I have come to terms with being vulnerable necessary to successfully when writing about oneself.

In “Where Soul Meets Body,” I look at what occurred during those experiences, and how they shaped the person and the teacher I am today. I reflect on how my family changed and how my parent's divorce caused a change in my personality and actions. I also look at how I began to look for relationships I thought I had lost due to my parent's divorce. I explore abusive relationships and how I was able to heal from those relationships. I talk about the need for teachers to be open with who they are as teachers. I write about how my life often is similar to what my students experience and how it is helpful if all teachers include self-reflection as part of their teaching practice. urban school setting.

Dedications

There are many people who deserve a dedication for the completion of this manuscript.

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Introduction

I have been teaching for twelve years. The first five years of my career, I simply thought of myself as a teacher. I went to my classroom, met my students, and presented them with information from textbooks relating to literature. I taught them how to write a “standard” five paragraph essay on topics that I now know had little resonance to their lives. I knew my students by name and face, but I did not know about their lives. It was an element of teaching about which I was completely ignorant. I did not understand how who I was as a person had a direct impact on how I taught students. I realize after my own journey of self-exploration, that every part of my life is integrated with my pedagogy and teaching practices. This realization did not happen until I was invited to get an endorsement in English as a Second Language (ESL), which turned into a master’s degree, and eventually, a doctoral degree.

In both programs I learned just how much who I am as a person outside the classroom, who I was in my past, and who I am now shape how I teach. I learned to meet students where they are in their lives (Freire, 1970) and bring their needs into my teaching to make it relevant and meaningful. I learned how to examine my lived experiences and write about them through autoethnography. I learned about the vulnerability it takes to bring up one’s past, to make it meaningful for others, and to be critical of the self (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 2004; Tilley-Lubbs, 2017). I found that writing can be not only a method of catharsis, as it is in the first article of this manuscript, but it is also a method of questioning how and why life events transpired. However, each event I have written about is contextual and not generalizable, though it may resonate with others (Richardson, R., & St. Pierre, E.A, 2018).

This dissertation contains two separate, yet connected, manuscripts. The first, “Who Are You” (Arnold, 2020), was my way of examining my lived experiences and how they shaped me

as a person and teacher. It is my cathartic work—my autoethnography—in which I had to make myself vulnerable and look at my position as a teacher because of my experiences. It was a way for me to acknowledge the underlying baggage I carry with me into the classroom and the impact it may have on my students. In order to do this, I had to find a way to situate my experiences. I chose a metaphor—Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. The characters and events in those stories provided me with a concrete framework for the experiences I wanted to explore.

The second manuscript is a meta-autoethnography (Ellis, 2016, Tilley-Lubbs, 2017), where I revisit the vignettes I wrote in the first manuscript. In the second manuscript, I chose to include lyrics from songs that helped me return to each experience and examine it through a different lens. The lyrics are not the focus of the paper, but they were a way for me to reconnect to what may have actually occurred, how I really felt, and how my view has changed since writing “Who Are You,” as well as how I can now more comfortably bring myself and experiences to my teaching and my students. As I reflected on my experiences, I came to have a deeper compassion for the lives of my students and how their lives intertwine with what and how I teach. Although these manuscripts are firmly contextualized in my own experiences, I hope that they may present the opportunity for other educators to reflect on who they are in the classroom and what their own experiences bring to their teaching and relationships with students.

“Who Are You?”

An Exploration of Lived Experiences Through the Lens of Alice in Wonderland

Abstract

In this paper, the author narrates seven vignettes of her lived experiences from childhood through the beginning of a Ph.D. and how they directly relate to the relationships she builds with her students as a teacher in an urban public high school. She deconstructs how her experiences push her to break standard professional teacher boundaries in order to support and advocate for her students. She discusses the realities of these lived experiences and the impact they have on her personally, educationally, and professionally. She explains her choice for using narrative vignettes tied to the Lewis Carroll novels *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* and how they connect with her adolescent and current professional experiences. She explains her choice of autoethnography as her method and how she comes to terms with the vulnerability necessary to successfully use this genre of qualitative research while learning the difficulties and benefits of the method.

Keywords: autoethnography, teacher vulnerability, student relationships, boundaries, reverence in education.

Exordium

I work in an urban public school district. It is not an easy task. My students encounter and experience myriad traumas, including displacement, unexpected independence, abuse of all kinds, exclusion, and disappointment. I am a classroom teacher. Though I have been working towards a Ph.D., it is not my intention to leave the classroom. Yes, I could teach at the university level, become a contributing member of the academy and potentially change the way pre-service teachers are prepared for the real work in the field. However, I prefer to build relationships with students. I am not afraid to be transparent and vulnerable. These are the attributes I find build trust, and help the students who experience trauma become successful, not just for graduation, but in finding their self-worth. This is not a generalization, as it does not always work. I sometimes fail at student relationships and at teaching, but when I am successful, it is fulfilling.

Teachers are inundated with performing other tasks: testing, preparing students for tests, focusing on prescribed curriculum, and so on. These tasks often have no relevance to the lives of students who are in their classrooms. These are issues that the transparent, vulnerable, and reverent teacher must look past in order to become effective. Often this requires us, as teachers, to look at and examine ourselves in a critical light, to remember trauma we have encountered, and to use it to help perpetuate the benefits of education (Rudd & Garrison, 2012).

I write for those who know the benefits of incorporating self-reflection into their practice, but also for those who may be leery of expressing their real-life experiences for the sake of their students. It is for those who may be daunted by the potential judgment from an administrator, colleague, or potential employer. I must come to the classroom just as I am, with all my baggage intact, and on occasion, I must be willing to open it up and reveal the contents.

I present this paper in a series of vignettes, situations that occurred at liminal moments in my life, that have shaped who I have become as a person, as a teacher, and as an activist for students. Not all of my contents are socially acceptable, but the readers of this paper, whoever they may be, need to know that many of the undesirable events occurred over twenty years ago, and these events had no impact on my educational career or as a productive and professional member of society. They do not define who I am now, they helped me become who I am now. Teachers ought not believe they must appear perfect beings of morality. Often, facing their ugly truths may allow them to become the best educators they can be.

Why the Alice in Wonderland Metaphor? An Introduction

Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice in Wonderland* after telling his tale on a boat ride to entertain the Dean of Oxford's three daughters. When he wrote it, he used Alice, the name of one daughter. The book was published in 1865, but the adventures of Alice, the main character, reflect in abstract detail the of my early life and how I came to be the type of educator I am. Alice faced the unreal, uncertain, and unlikeliest of experiences. She found herself in a strange land, without trustworthy friends, trying to keep herself safe, and find her way home. I too, encountered such events, and just like Alice, I found myself on the other side of the looking glass.

Alice's chief navigator in the tale is the White Rabbit, though I don't believe it is his intention to lead Alice through Wonderland. He is simply the first character to see and speak to her. She sees him in her own reality and watches him scurry down a rabbit hole, into which she falls quickly, landing her in Wonderland. The White Rabbit is a guide, a composite of many characters who help me through my journey, including my inner instincts. She meets the Red Queen, a tyrannical yet charming and seemingly helpful ruler, who eventually puts Alice on trial

for making her angry. The Red Queen cuts off the heads of her playing cards who paint her roses red, as they accidentally plant white ones. She also imparts cruelty on dodo birds to play the part of her croquet mallets. She represents the abusive relationship of my late high school years and the emotional damage it caused. Alice also meets the Cheshire Cat, a cunning yet manipulative ally, who in the end, is watching out for her best interests. Jason is the Cheshire Cat. In addition to these three main characters, Alice also encounters The Garden of Live Flowers, symbolic of a new beginning. She meets The Lion and the Unicorn, my personal battle with school bureaucracy, and Humpty Dumpty, the part of myself that breaks into pieces, yet realizes I can put myself back together. The Jabberwock, The Bandersnatch, and The Jubjub Bird are my demons. They exist throughout my experiences. The last integral character Alice encounters is the Caterpillar. He is the catalyst of my journey because he asks the first question and sparks my journey.

In this paper, I re-examine my lived experiences, how I came to be who I am, and why I chose to pursue a Ph.D. The experiences I explore were often difficult and placed me in a position of vulnerability that was uncomfortable and deeply personal (Tilley-Lubbs, 2017). There were experiences that I never wanted to revisit, but in order to get to the reason of why they were important to include, I needed a bridge from my life to the page. Just as Alice found herself in precarious situations that were difficult to navigate, I did too. What I thought would be a small door leading to an easy path to follow turned into an adventure, often dark, but often light too. I had to acknowledge aspects of myself and my life I was not proud of, and which continue to haunt me. I am no longer fearful of the consequences of my experiences. I own them because I learned from them. My actions may have had the potential to prevent me from teaching, but luckily there was no physical or legal trace of missteps, only emotional. I examine my life and why I dedicated

myself to teaching in an era of the Lion and the Unicorn, two mythical creatures in Alice in Wonderland who fight publicly over bread, which I interpret as fighting over the best teaching methods (Carroll, 1960). I begin to realize that unlike Humpty Dumpty, who falls and breaks into pieces, unable to be reassembled even by a king's army, over time, I can put my pieces back together. I can find my way back to the looking glass house and perhaps one day answer the Caterpillar's question, "Who are You?"

Many new teachers I have encountered question why they teach in urban schools. The stress is grueling and the environment changes teachers. Some days even I tell myself I need an attitude adjustment. However, if they can find the strength to embrace and share their vulnerable selves, they can become reverent, despite the tumult they encounter. Perhaps what I share can provide them with the courage to re-examine themselves.

How Will I Navigate the Winding Path to the Looking Glass?

I choose to do autoethnography as my methodology because it allows me to examine people and experiences, including my own. The examination of my lived experiences brings emotions, understanding, and resonance that I do not get when I look at numbers and graphs. I plan to use this research to dismember, deconstruct, understand, and quell my Jaberwock, Jubjub Bird, and Bandersnatch—the demons and bits of destruction Alice encounters and overcomes. In my educational journey, they represent the inequity I see in the public school system where I work. They stand in the way of Alice's return to the other side of the looking glass. In my career, they stand in the way of an education beyond passing a test. However, Alice is triumphant, and realizes by the end of the tale that she is already seeing herself on the other side of the looking glass, as I hope I am doing in the world of education through the journey of my own education.

The lived experiences of my students are one of the reasons I keep teaching and keep pushing. I can't change what they must go through, but I can be supportive. I am able to be supportive because of my own lived experiences.

He Asked the Most Difficult Question

"Who are *you*?" said the Caterpillar.

"I-I hardly know, Sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then" (Carroll, 1960, p. 49).

I hardly know who I am right now. I do know that I lost myself for a long time. I lost the person my parents raised and the person I aspired to be. When I realized this, I began a journey, decided on only by me. My first step was making the decision to get a college education. I believed that having a true purpose, or any purpose at all, would help me find myself again. The person whom I felt was worthy, good, and honest had disappeared in Wonderland and I desperately needed to find her.

I eventually decided to become a teacher. It wasn't my initial choice. For a period of time, I truly believed I could simply run off to New York and be a Broadway actress. During the same period, I flunked out of community college. My parents did not push me to continue. They knew before I did that it simply was not the right time, and if the right time ever arrived, I would take the opportunity, which I eventually did. There were several reasons why I chose teaching, but at this junction in my career, those points may be moot. It is more important for me to investigate why I keep teaching.

Initially, I received an invitation to pursue an endorsement to teach ESL—an invitation that came at the perfect time in my teaching career. I was unhappy and disheartened due to the seemingly indignant behavior of my students, the constant focus on testing, the three-hour post

observation conferences, and the requirement to teach exactly what I was told and when. It didn't make sense to me. I was a highly qualified teacher. I was a professional. I understood that supervision in any career is required, but no matter how I tried to express that what I was doing in the classroom wasn't reaching my students, what I said fell on deaf ears.

At this time, I was a fourth-year teacher. I was in the danger zone of becoming one of the teachers who during their fifth year would choose to change professions. I worked toward a master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in teaching ESL and Multicultural Education. That, in retrospect was the easy part. Then, there was another invitation, to be in the Ph.D. program. I jumped right down the rabbit hole, chasing the White Rabbit and the other side of the looking glass, thinking it would bring the credibility to interact with authorities and challenge the obstacles that I thought stood in the way of my students' success.

For five and a half years I have been on my Wonderland journey to get my Ph.D. and I still can't tell the Caterpillar who I am. The obstacles I believed stood in my way are not who or what I thought them to be, nor are they whom I have to battle on the other side of my looking glass. I have come to realize that many of those battles-and obstacles aren't mine to fight or overcome. Even if I take up the challenge, I more often than not lose. I need to examine myself to find the reason I keep teaching, and to find why it brings me gratification and redemption. I need to reflect on what compels me to work with students in a difficult, inequitable school system.

I am often asked, "Why do you want a Ph.D.?" My response is both personal and professional. Initially it was a goal I set for myself, before I flunked out of community college. I said, "I want a Ph.D. before I'm forty." I was 39 in the Spring of 2020 and I aimed to reach my goal before my fortieth birthday, but life does not always go as planned. Meeting this goal is just

one more tool I have to show my students that no matter the current or previous circumstances of their lives, they can achieve almost anything they want. As a teacher, I want to know and demonstrate that I have the ability to work in an ever-changing, quickly diversifying school system. Currently, the school where I work is considered urban, though I expect that the school community in all of education has changed. As difficult, distressing, and anxiety-producing as the process is, I set a goal, I stated the goal and put it out in the universe. I can achieve it.

Meeting the Jabberwocky

“Beware the Jabberwock my son! / The jaws that bite, the claws that catch! / Beware the Jubjub bird and shun / The furious Bandersnatch!” (Carroll, 1960, p. 137).

I am the Jabberwock, the Jubjub bird and the Bandersnatch. The Jabberwok is my own personal demon who stands resolute in defeating and disarming public education before I look at the consequences and gather my armor and research. The Jubjub bird represents my isolation and discontent, yet it is the part of me that lives in constant determination to make a difference for my students. The Bandersnatch is the wild animal who stole the parts of me that I hold dear. It takes many forms and reveals itself repeatedly in my life. It may have been the most detrimental of the three demons, yet it may also be the most redemptive reason I continue to teach.

I must deal with and dismember each of these parts of me to answer the Caterpillar’s question. Each is a memory, some suppressed for years, that I have come to realize has a direct impact on who I am as a person, and a teacher, and why I am so committed to my work. My memories are not static, and I can only describe them as I remember (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Dillard, 2011; Ellis, 2007; Poulos, 2008). I could check them against the memories of others involved, but I have no desire to come in contact with some of the people who were involved in

creating them, and sadly some are no longer here. So, my memories are presented through my personal lens, as faulty as it may be at times.

Family Stability and Collapse

I always supposed my tea party started out just like any other. To me it was normal, and I was only slightly unaware there was any other way to live. I knew that other people did not have as much capital as I did emotionally or materially, but I never knew the extent of their lack of the basic needs of life. Upon reflection, my early life was idyllic.

“Swingin”

“And we were swingin’, Yes, the Beef is swingin’, I can’t believe we’re out her in back yard on this swing, just a swingin’” (Anderson, 1983, track 10). These are the words I heard as my father pushed me on the swing set in the back yard. In my memory the wind blows across my face and the smell of spring or fall wafts in the air. I can’t really remember how old I was, but I was still young enough to feel that was one of the most wonderful ways to spend time with my dad. In front of me were three vast back yards, mine with a sour green apple tree, a maple tree, and a pool for my sixth birthday. Of course, it wasn’t just for me, but I had asked, and my parents made it happen. They always seemed to “make it happen.” There were no fences, nothing to hold me back, and I never had to ask permission to enter someone else’s yard.

Cool Sheets, Breezes, and Roses

My mother is hanging sheets on the clothesline and I am “helping.” Actually, I am watching and playing. I run through the sheets, cool, crisp, and damp. They smell of fabric softener. I run my hands and face across the fabric like I’m going through a maze. On the other side I find the rose bush that belongs to Jon, our neighbor. I stop and smell the roses; they are

sweet, the petals crimson and so, so soft. These are my earliest and most vivid memories of my parents. The joy I experience in them extends to other areas of my upbringing.

My Formative Years

I grew up in a middle-class neighborhood, which in my memory was homogenously white. My grandparents lived one house down. My neighbors on either side allowed me to claim their back yards as my own personal playground. Both of my parents worked, so for the first five years of my life, a woman who lived in the neighborhood took care of me. Even though my grandparents were so close, when I was young, they were still of working age. The woman who watched me, Mommy Darlene, had three boys, all older than me, and I was treated like the daughter she never had. I went to church on Sundays with my grandparents, sang in the choir, and played with other children in the neighborhood during my formative years. I was well supported. My parents were not strict, but they made sure I knew right from wrong. They didn't hover; they allowed me to make my own decisions as long as I was in no danger of serious harm. I recall conversations with my mother in recent years, her explanation of giving me options and leading me make the best choices. I never felt forced to do anything; I had the autonomy to be myself, a trait which now, I think, puts me on the edge of danger in my approach to providing equity to my students. I find that I forge ahead circumventing the conventional steps of the hierarchy of power to get what they need to be successful. I must admit that often I have done so without asking them what it is they feel will best help them succeed (Tilley-Lubbs, 2009). I question if in doing so, I am applying what I have come to understand as ethos, or my personal way of life shaped by my upbringing, and imposing my view onto my classroom without taking into consideration what my students' experiences of ethos have been (Quinn & Garrison, 2004).

Realization: Change in Practice

In the past two years, as I have dealt with tumultuous change in my school, I have done my best daily to understand that most of my students come from and live in a different world than the one in which I grew up and the one I inhabit now. I hear complaints of what the government is doing to us and that we have no say in the outcome. I cannot say if we do or not. I find that I push politics to the side unless they relate directly to my everyday pedagogy. However, within this change, I find that I often reach out to my students for their opinions concerning the practices of the school and my choices of teaching style in the classroom. I listen to their suggestions and if they are within reason, school appropriate, and meet the requirements of the task at hand, I allow them the opportunity to make their own decisions. I do find myself on occasion using the methods employed by my parents. “Here are your options. Which do you think is the best?” Through this change in practice, I’ve discovered a new level of respect from them, but I find I also have more respect for them. They appreciate that I value their opinions and I’m not simply another teacher giving them busy work. I explain my reasoning for the assignment and how it can be applied to the “real world.” I don’t know yet if this approach is actually working or if I am romanticizing a practice of collaboration. I am simply taking what I have and trying to apply it to where my students are and what they need (Freire, 1970).

Understanding the Path I Started On**An Uneasy Tea Party**

“Brandy, I need to tell you something, I’ve decided to leave your father. I’m going to stay in the house until you graduate. Since we have to be separated to get a divorce, I’ll sleep in the living room while I’m still here. I want things to be as normal as possible for your little sister.”

I don't recall any reaction to this statement. I don't remember what room of my house we were in or what day of the week it was. I am certain I was almost seventeen, so it must have been sometime in the spring. I had a car, and I was to graduate the next year, 1999. But as for an emotional attachment, I didn't have one. Though my parents told me every day that they loved me, we weren't close anymore. I didn't tell my parents everything, so is it possible this is why I wasn't hurt by the decision of my parents to separate, or maybe I immediately put it away to hide my anger. At the time, my parents were only one of three pairs among my friends who were still together. Perhaps I really was angry. Maybe I thought it would be a passing situation and I wouldn't have to deal with it at all. I was too busy with my friends and the latest T.V. series to care about anyone else. I didn't even care about my sister, six years younger than I, who wouldn't have the stable support I had. I think I took on a "so be it" attitude, and simply went on with my daily life as a self-absorbed, narrow-minded teenager, living only for what I would do after school, thinking about what I would wear that night, or wondering if I was going to get away with forging my mother's signature for being late to school. As far as I knew, my younger sister was oblivious to the situation until the day my mother actually left. Daily life went on as usual. I went to school, then color guard practice, and I hung out with my boyfriend and listened to depressed teenage angst music. My curfew was lenient, and again, my parents rarely asked questions other than "How was your day?" That was if I got home before they were in bed.

What I Didn't and Don't Want to Admit as Truth

I don't know why they didn't ask how I felt about the situation. Did I do a good job of appearing happy and letting them see I was okay? My parents were together in a sense because they lived in the same house. My sister and I didn't have to split weeks between them, but the emotional damage was still there (Tagliareni, 2016). I know it was there because I knew the

truth, or at least I thought I did. I believed my mother was having an affair. She denies it to this day. She swears she had no intimate relationship until she had officially divorced my father, but the change in her persona presented a different story. She was distant, less involved in our lives, and focused on work. Since I was older and was busy living my own life, maybe I figured, “She’s an adult. She can do what she wants.”

It appeared to me that my father held out hope for what seemed like forever. He continued to go to work, make dinner, and come home every day, but he seemed to become somber and was less involved in my life. He didn’t smile as much, and no matter what my mother told him, I wondered if he thought what I believed about my mother as well. He waited in my childhood home until my little sister decided she wanted to change schools and my mother sold our house essentially without his consent as he later told me. I felt like my sister was his favorite. I felt and saw it in the attention he gave her, and it hurt. He never missed a football or softball game she was in. I was like an afterthought. Perhaps that was because he didn’t approve of my choices, but I had to make my own way. My mother had left, and my father was raising my sister. I had to make my own road, which became rocky (Horton & Freire, 1990).

I see this dynamic in my students. I see that they hurt, because it shows on their faces even though they play the part that they are okay. I did that, and they don’t know. I don’t have to explain it to them, and rarely do they ask. Part of my pedagogy is to read between the lines and listen as intently as possible. They have a Bandersnatch too, and sometimes I can see it and quell it for a moment.

As an adult, I now realize the atmosphere of my happy home had changed and become mechanical. Work for my parents and school and social life for my sister and me was the daily routine. Sunday dinner, for the most part, remained a staple, but we didn’t talk about what was

truly happening. I didn't want to deal with it. I wanted it to disappear, to unravel. What I feared discussing the most was the man my mother had lunch with so often. Again, we didn't talk about that, but I wonder if my father ever knew, or even knows now (Poulos, 2008). However, this is the point when I began to behave a little differently, perhaps even in a deviant manner. I began experimenting with questionable substances, drinking, and pushing the limits of curfew. I know from eavesdropping on student conversations as I walk through the halls at school or taking attendance at the beginning of class that none of these are out of the ordinary for many teenagers, but I don't know why my students do these things. I didn't want my parents' divorce to happen, so I didn't acknowledge it and found other ways and other things on which to focus my attention (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). If I am honest with myself, vulnerable and transparent, (Tilley-Lubbs, 2016), my parents' divorce was the catalyst for my descent down several rabbit holes to several different types of tea parties.

Refusing to Face Reality

Tea Party with the Red Queen

In my life, the Red Queen (Carrol, 1960) was a boy with blue hair working in a diner.

New Year's Eve, when I was fifteen, brought the privilege of going downtown with my friends to a punk show, an exciting event, chaperoned by the older sisters of my friends. That's the night I met the Red Queen. He was older, charming, and sweet. He had a job and a car, and he talked to me. He wasn't my first boyfriend but would eventually become my first serious relationship. He also became the beginning of the decline in my academics.

I was a great student until the beginning of my junior year, but suddenly, being around and the Red Queen was much more important than school. As for school, I continued to do well overall. I didn't miss classes, and I continued with my appropriate extracurricular activities. I

was no longer an A-B student, but I wasn't failing. But sometime after meeting the boy who I naively believed to be "the one," school just wasn't that important to me. My teachers didn't approach me. My decline in academics wasn't severe enough to warrant intervention, though I do recall being stopped one morning as I entered the main corridor from the student parking lot. I was walking as fast as I could across the white tiles toward the double staircase leading to the second floor. I saw my chemistry teacher on hall duty and hoped I could avoid eye-contact and just get to class.

"Running a little late this morning?" she said.

"Yeah, I overslept." I responded in a curt, yet nervous manner.

"You might want to think about not smoking. It's a nasty and unhealthy habit and hard to break."

I stood, staring at her stunned, my insides quivering with shame. How did she know? I had finished my cigarette 15 minutes ago and doused myself in Victoria Secret Vanilla spray and lotion. Did it linger that long? I worried the entire week she was going to call my parents, but she never did. She was just giving me a nod that she knew I was getting into some unsavory behaviors. It wasn't my near failing grade in her class she was concerned with, but my new-found destructive behavior. I wish I had listened to her.

Experience Into Practice

I never judge my students for what they do, but like my teacher, I try to warn them of the damage their behaviors can have on them and potentially on their futures. I know what it is like to be disengaged with school and preoccupied with friends, boys or girls, experimentation (legal or not), though I also know the end game of these preoccupations. I wish I could be totally honest with them. I wish I could let them know that when I talk to them about the importance of

avoiding certain crowds and activities and that I am speaking from personal experience.

However, I know that is a dangerous and “unprofessional” approach to teaching. Perhaps when I am at the age when I can retire, I will be able to reach them better. I’ve noticed my colleagues who are in their last few years of teaching become much more honest with their students. Why is there such a stigma attached to being a real person in the high school classroom? In higher education it is often the revealing self-truths of the professors that have a lasting impact and form realizations and understanding. In a graduate course for my Masters’ degree, I had a professor tell me about the real-life consequences of alcoholism, not on the alcoholic, but those around him or her. Abusive or not, the impact is real, exhausting, and sometimes debilitating. It was comforting to know that even at such an advanced position in life, they have undergone trials similar to my own. It helps to know that we all fall and can pick up the pieces and put them back together even if it takes years (King, 2000).

As long as I maintained a C average, my parents didn’t say much to me. As I noted earlier, they gave me the autonomy to make my own decisions as long as I wasn’t in danger of personal harm. Reflecting on this, I wish I had told them more at the time, because I was absolutely in danger of personal harm, though not of my own will. The Red Queen’s abuse dominated the relationship, though being young and “in love,” I didn’t realize the numbing, emotional damage, or the severe precariousness of the situation. Though we didn’t talk about what was really going on in my life (Poulos, 2008), I painted the roses red, and he and my parents were satisfied with that (Carroll, 1960).

At first the Red Queen remained charming and cordial. He introduced me to minor illicit behaviors but made them seem safe. My naivete allowed me to trust him, though my innocence washed off quickly just like the paint on the white roses. Even though I knew our relationship

was not healthy, I craved the attention. My mother was working late, my father was at a game for my sister, and I was left to my own devices. The effects of divorce have different impacts of children, even those who are old enough to know right from, wrong, and I somehow needed to make sense of what was going on with my once seemingly idyllic life (Tagliareni, 2016).

Off with My Head

In a small, one-bedroom, low income apartment complex, on the second floor, I stand in the kitchenette.

“If you leave me, I’ll kill myself,” he screams at me, holding a long wooden handled kitchen knife.

I yell back, “I just want to go home. It’s late and I have to go to school tomorrow.”

“Swear, swear you won’t leave me!”

For the sake of my sanity, fear of harm and increasing exhaustion at this repetitive fight, I comply.

“I swear, I won’t leave you, but I’m going home now. I’ll call you tomorrow. I love you.”

The last three words are a lie. They have been for two years. At seventeen, I can’t understand why I don’t have the courage to simply walk away. The arguments are constant and increasingly violent. I feel obligated. I don’t want the guilt of someone’s life on my conscience, so I continue to stay with the Red Queen despite my own personal misery and fear. I often feel like one of the dodo birds Alice’s Red Queen used in her croquet match, plucked up from a bag, straightened out, head down and forced to obey her every command, my head repeatedly hitting a hard, round ball (Carroll, 1960). I am the definition of insanity. I am doing the same thing day in and day out expecting a different result. I am still in desperate need of an escape, uplifting or demeaning.

Not a month later, I stand in the same apartment, moving quickly for the door. I have had enough. I have to get out. I have to find the path that will lead me back home.

“If you leave, I’m gonna kill the rabbit.”

“NO!! Please, don’t hurt him!”

He promptly retrieves my black pet rabbit from his bedroom, holding him by his ears, storms out the door and holds him over the railing.

“I swear I’ll drop him if you leave!”

“Please, don’t hurt him, don’t drop him, it’s not his fault! I’ll stay, I promise, I’ll stay.”

“If you pull this s--- again, the rabbit is dead.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

Through gasps and sobs I mutter, “I love you, I’m sorry.”

I finally get to leave. Again, the last words are a lie and as I drive home, I ponder, “What do I have to be sorry for?” I do everything he asks of me. Everything. So much so, I don’t even know who I am anymore. I know I don’t deserve this, but I just can’t seem to get away. The Red Queen is mad, both emotionally and mentally. I know this isn’t healthy, but I am in a pool of quicksand.

I Know What It’s Like

I see this type of behavior repeatedly in the relationships of my students: males dominating their girlfriends by demanding the words “I love you.” I see the girls crying because they feel they have done something wrong. Again, I don’t judge. I stayed with a boy who threatened to kill my pet. I wonder if this is when I lost my maternal instinct to actually have children of my own. Is it a possible fear of losing them to another abusive relationship? With this knowledge, I break the teachers’ professional code of and tell pieces of my story with the Red

Queen. I don't do this to scare my students, just to warn them of the possibilities. It's their decision how to proceed. I'm not their mother or father, but I hope that I'm someone they can confide in, and if the need arises, I will intervene. The lived experiences I have go on every day in the classroom, in the hallways and behind the closed doors of wherever these couples perpetuate their relationships. But with my experience, and my attitude that once a student is my student, they remain so forever, I rebelliously do what I feel is necessary.

Enough Is Enough

It's late afternoon in May 1999. I've graduated from high school. We are at my parent's house. Crumpled piles of clothes litter my bedroom, and there is not a flat surface to be found. I don't recall what the argument is about this time. I never really know what they are about. He is the Red Queen after all, and the smallest discontent means "off with my head" (Carroll, 1960). Perhaps I am attempting to rationally discuss a break-up. Maybe I suggest we could still be friends, or maybe we should simply be rid of each other all together. We are at my house, so I can get some clothes and check on the rabbit, which at this point has moved into my bedroom and nearly destroyed my carpet. I wish my father would come home early today.

In a flash, my mattress is ripped from my bed, and I am on the floor under it. I struggle, kick, and scream for what seems like an eternity. The bedroom door is locked and suddenly there is a knock. My mother is home. Finally, I can breathe, and the mattress is rapidly returned to the bedframe.

"What are you two doing?"

"Nothing, just goofing around, everything is fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The Red Queen promptly leaves as I heave a sigh of relief. Two weeks later, after I have successfully avoided him, I call and arrange to meet him at his mother's house where he has relocated. I take the few items I have that belong to him: a couple of CDs, and t-shirts. The time apart has quelled his anger. We part, yet I am upset? I suppose the first real relationship, no matter how tumultuous, leaves a watermark never to be removed.

Why did I stay? Was abuse a better alternative than facing my own anger towards my idyllic life that was crumbling around me, the same as my parents' marriage? I mostly consulted my friends, who adamantly disliked the Red Queen and often said I should leave. But leaving was the hardest part. I had been emotionally stripped down and he at the time seemed the only stability I had. I wasn't the independent girl I was when I first met him. I was dependent, afraid and in a different way emotionless (Dolgoft, 2017; Martsolf, Draucker, Denarz & Lea, 2011).

Possibilities of a New Beginning?

An Exciting Tea Party

Later on, the day I leave the Red Queen, I call Jason, a boy who hangs around with some of the same people the Red Queen does. I had officially met him when the Red Queen went by Jason's apartment to see his roommate. I didn't want to be there, so had I sat in Jason's room and listened to music.

I had seen him before at a show I went to with the Red Queen. Jason was singing and playing guitar in the band. They knew each other, a fact unknown to me. Secretly, I liked him before I actually met him. I first spent any real time with him on one of the Red Queen's adventures for the herbs the Caterpillar probably put in his hookah. I wasn't interested and didn't know the person he was going to see. We had climbed the rickety, wooden, side staircase to a small, three-room apartment. I was standing in the hallway, out of place, wanting no part of the

transaction taking place. The air was stale, and I don't know what to do. Music came from a room to the left. There was a boy sitting on a blue and green plaid couch. I peeked in. I don't remember how he greeted me, or if he invited me into the room, but I was sitting on the neatly made bed, he was on the couch, and we talked—about what, I don't remember. The room was clean, he was nice, and his voice unique and soothing. When the Red Queen was finished with his business, we left. I wanted to stay. I wanted to stay forever. He was a distraction from my parents, from the Red Queen, from myself.

I pick up my clear, colored wire phone, sit on the floor, slowly dial the number, and wait. I'm not crying yet, but my hands shake, and my heart pounds. Maybe I should hang up.

“Hi.”

“Hey, what are you doing?”

“Getting ready to play a show.”

“Can I come over? I'm having a bad day, the Red Qu-.”

“Yeah, I know what happened today.”

I am slightly amazed at how quickly word traveled in Jason's army of friends. I couldn't even tell him what had happened.

“Sure, you can come over.”

I don't know why Jason let me come over. Maybe he felt sorry for me, or maybe he just wanted a ride to the show. I found out many years later that the Red Queen would visit him at work and talk about me. What he said was less than flattering. I had been a simple-minded pawn in his game. He was constantly unfaithful and bragged about it. I'm glad I didn't know at the time, though it may have made leaving much easier. Furthermore, Jason's friends adamantly discouraged my presence; they, too, had experienced the irrational violence of the Red Queen.

They didn't want me hanging around because the Red Queen posed a threat to all of them with his irrational temper and actions.

Jason didn't know about the abuse for a long time, and when I finally found the courage to tell him, his fury matched that of the Red Queen's, but it wasn't toward me. I found that comforting. He cared. It was a feeling I hadn't experienced for a long time.

Jason was like the Cheshire Cat. His smile drew me in, and his eyes commanded attention. Wherever he was, something was happening, and if it wasn't, he created an event. Being around him simply made me happy. However, he made one thing explicitly clear.

"I don't want a girlfriend. I just got out of a relationship and it's not what I need right now."

"I'm totally fine with that. My parents are getting a divorce, and you know about the Red Queen, and to be honest, I don't ever want to get married."

"I don't care if you hang out. I like hanging out with you."

I had enrolled in the local community college right after high school. I didn't have a plan, but the expectation was that I would get a college education. My parents paid for two semesters for me to take painting, drawing, photography and English courses. I was an average student for the first semester, scraping by with mostly C's. Jason was supportive of my education and liked my artwork, which is something we still share. However, he was also good at persuasion. He could talk me out of class with the smallest suggestion going to a show, a friend's house, or a bar with him. It never occurred to me to follow my good sense and go to class or tell him I'd see him later. I had been accustomed for so long having some type of companion to fill the void of love and attention I thought I had lost from my parents, and Jason gave me that attention. He included

me in his life and was interested in what I was doing, where I was going, when I would be home, and if I was actually okay. I needed that.

“Eat Me” and Grow Larger

I enjoyed my drawing class. My professor showed up in jeans and a tie-dyed t-shirt and regaled us with stories of the early 80’s, encouraging us to find ourselves in our art and in suggestively other avenues that were legally questionable; avenues that I had already explored earlier in my life. He pushed us to look deeply at ourselves, to try to express our souls on the page. It was messy. My hands and nails were always black with the remains of the charcoal I used for my work. At the time, I was messy, and smearing the soft black medium across a clean white page helped me make sense of myself (Lamott, 1994). It was the only class I earned an A in, amazingly, since I was chronically late or absent. This was also the first class where I was provided the opportunity to explore a world beyond the confines of the little city where I grew up. We went on a trip to New York and were treated like responsible adults, enjoying the freedom to choose how to explore the art in the city.

Off to the Big Apple

The window of the hotel is open, a hot breeze blows through the city as we settle into our hotel room. I play a mixed CD Jason recorded for my trip that included The Velvet Underground’s “Sweet Jane.” His first lessons for me were about music. Learning what he liked and why he thought it was revolutionary and important was important to me. I think I wanted to impress him, perhaps make up for the way I no longer seemed to impress my father. I completely agreed to take his lessons, and it became a secret game between us for me to learn who the bands and songs were.

“Click, roll, click, roll.” Amy, a close friend and classmate snaps black and white photos of me and “Jane” on a manual Nikon camera.

Amy and I decide the best way for us to experience the city is to have some local street kids show us around. She is older than I am. I am still naïve despite my experiences with the Red Queen. I still have trust in people, even complete strangers. I experience the city and its art through a kaleidoscope of psychedelic color, texture, and senses I hadn’t known existed, an experience I only have once, but twenty-plus years later I still see the air breathe in purple, blue, and red. At the time, it seems sensible, yet again, I identify it as another experiment to alleviate my trauma through “interesting” experiences. Though New York is amazing, I miss Jason. I use the payphone near our hotel to see if I could come by when we get back. My excuse was to return his pillow, a pillow he sent with me so I won’t forget him. It is a significant symbol of commitment to me. His gesture said, “I’ll miss you, be careful, I want to see you again.”

Our bus pulls in, I get in my car, I drop Amy off, and I head to his house. I had called when we arrived home, but no answer.

I know he is home. I see the yellow light through his window. I circle the block slowly three or four times and I call, and call, and call. There is no answer. I think, “He’s mad at me. What did I do?” I go “home” to my dad’s house and nervously, jealously try to sleep. I call the next day.

“I didn’t know she was going to show up!”

“Well you could have at least answered the phone. You said I could come by when I got back. I missed you.”

Those were the first true words of emotion I had spoken to him.

“She was drunk, and I couldn’t let her leave.”

At least he feels responsibility for other people, I hoped for me too.

For the next two weeks or so, I would claim to stay the night at Amy's when I was actually staying at what was deemed the "clubhouse;" a garbage laden, dish-less, crash-pad for five twenty-something boys, in a part of town where a respectable young white girl would not set foot alone, but I did. I ventured into Jason's world of garage bands, band practice, late nights, and bars that would serve me just because I was with him. At the time I was about 19. He had a charisma that drew me in, and I didn't care what we did. I was absolutely infatuated, so much so that I flunked my second semester of community college. How do you fail art class?

I decided at the end of my second semester that college wasn't for me. Again, I was more interested in hanging out than going to class. My parents didn't protest my decision, but they warned me not to ask for anymore help with school. I didn't blame them. Why should they waste more money on an endeavor I wasn't vested in.

Though I did not realize at that time, my infatuation with being around Jason was about to turn into my next abusive relationship. It was not because of him, but because of my desire to be with and around him. He was the guy who made things happen. If he was around, things were bound to be interesting. I followed like a puppy, eager to learn and please, but he fought our relationship. Now I realize he was trying to shield me from things he knew would be damaging to my family, my friends, and possibly my life.

Back to Building Relationships and Breaching Protocol

I listen to some of my students protest going to college. They don't need it, or they are seemingly too enamored with their current relationships to think about their futures. It took me five years after flunking out of community college to realize that education, in all its forms, is valuable. However, in today's society, a piece of paper, certificate, degree, endorsement, means

the difference between having what you want, and trying to get what you need. This is what I share with my students. I have no shame in telling them I failed art class because I was more interested in spending time with my boyfriend, nor do I have any shame in telling them the difficulties that decision has caused me. As a teenager, I thought I was invincible. I see that mindset in many of my students, male and female. They typically want to be athletes or famous. When I ask the girls how they will become famous, they say, “I just will.” In an odd grown-up perspective, I get to explain to them the realities of working two jobs to try and pay rent. However, in the school where I work now, I think many of them see this, as they are charged with the care of younger siblings so that one or both parents can work. They are often on their own due to divorce, and the relationships they find themselves in serve the same purpose as mine did—to fill a void. I don’t mind breaking the private barrier of my personal life if it offers perspective. Again, I don’t know if they accept it, but I tell them where I started and where I ended up because I didn’t prepare myself for the reality of being an adult.

The Dark Dangerous Rabbit Hole

It is difficult for me to map time in this part of my life. It’s about three months after Jason and I began hanging out on a regular basis. I remember it just as Alice fell down the rabbit hole chasing the White Rabbit. Things are hanging from the walls, attempting to grab ahold of something, my senses, like her dress occasionally slowing down my fall. I kept falling, faster and faster until I hit bottom with a thud (Carroll, 1960).

The house is bare and dark. A naked mattress is in the bedroom, with a side table and lamp. There are no pictures on the wall. There are dishes in the sink. The living room is empty. Several afternoons Jason has had “other things to do.” I’m about to find out what they were.

“You can’t do it the way I do.”

“Okay,” I say, trusting his judgment.

“You sure you want to do this?”

Of course, I did. If Jason was doing it, I wanted too also. I had apparently lost all of my senses, upbringing, and cares. I knew it was an escape. I took the medicine just as Alice took the unmarked bottle of liquid she found in the White Rabbit’s house while looking for his kid gloves. Immediately I grew bigger, but I wasn’t stuck uncomfortably in a house (Carroll, 1960). I was on top of the world, no cares, no anger, all my emotions about my repressed personal problems—gone. I sit in the dark, bare living room, and drift into a dream.

“I want to do it like you do.”

“No. I told you that.”

“Please, I want to know what it’s like.”

“Fine.”

Hanna, a girl Jason has known since high school is with us. Suddenly, a rush and I’m in another dream, a much more vivid dream. This ritual for Jason and me continues for several months. Not daily, but a weekend getaway. Timelines again escape me, two weeks, maybe, three. He asks me to be his date to his mother’s wedding. We still both refused to become involved, though I know we were closer than most buddies. Elated, he wants to introduce me, I agree, and dress nicely for our date. We engage in our ritual before going to my grandparents’ house for pictures. Irony at its finest—church wedding, dopey guests, I wonder if they suspected. As we dance in the room where the green and blue plaid couch still sits, I utter, “I think I could love you.” He replies, “I think I could love you too.”

It was a curious way to begin a relationship. Adding the word “think” in my first “I love you” still gave me some space to run if I wanted or needed to. Protective of me, he removes us

from the never-ending stacks of playing cards we saw every other day or so, we disengage with the cards who were painting our roses red and put our deck back in order. It felt good to be normal again.

The Un-Birthday at Our Sixth Month Tea Party

We had retrieved our senses for four months, but we deserved a celebration. He takes the pin prick first, then me. He always insisted on testing the “eat me” cookie or cake before me. It’s different. As Alice might say, “I don’t ever think I’ll get the hang of this.” Apparently, I hadn’t. There is a bright light, a man and a woman on either side of me, my favorite red shirt cut down the middle.

“Can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“Who did this to you?”

I don’t respond. I’m taken up the stairs. Jason sits at an unfamiliar kitchen table, the kind from a diner. Outside into the dark, I’m put into an ambulance. Eventually I wake again. It’s cold, and I get my cell phone.

“Amy?”

“Yes?”

“Can you come pick me up?”

“What’s wrong? Where are you?”

“The hospital, something bad happened.”

I make it home courtesy of a ride from Amy’s mother. My parents know nothing about the incident. I’m petrified, my mother has been out of the house for a couple of months. It’s late and we don’t talk about things (Poulos, 2008).

My hands are trembling. My whole body is trembling. The phone call was terrifying. No longer in school, I'm a waitress. I made ends meet doing that, and Jason and I thought "the incident" had passed.

I'm at work, and my manager tells me I have an urgent phone call. The police had picked up Jason. By some miracle, he was allowed a second call to his grandfather, who talked about everything, but never "the incident."

"Hello?" I heard Jason's voice on the other end of the line.

"Either you take yourself downtown, or they will come and get you."

I quit my job and went downtown.

The room is cold. It's late and there is no one to talk to. Luckily, I'm alone. Luckily the authorities are nice. I don't look like a criminal, similar to how Alice didn't look like a criminal at her trial. I get to make a phone call.

"Mom?"

"Brandy, what's wrong!?"

"Mom, I need a ride."

"Okay, where are you?"

"I'm downtown. Please, just come get me. I'll explain, I promise."

My parents, both of them, arrive. My mother knows people, and though the magistrate believes I'm shaking due to withdrawal, I'm simply terrified. I am supposed to be a good girl, not a girl being picked up from a place my parents would never expect to find me. I'm released without question. Just in case, my mother gets me a good lawyer, ironically the one who had settled the divorce.

"She'll do it again," he tells her.

He was wrong. I walked away. I wandered down the winding path, with Jason in tow because my parents, despite hating him, knew what he meant to me. We both walked away without penalty other than counseling. Two years in a pool of tears we created new selves (Carroll, 1960). We walked away into “The Garden of Live Flowers” (Carroll, 1960, p. 139). Jason soon realized he actually must get away. If we stayed on this winding path, self-destruction would soon follow.

“Cheshire-Puss,...Would you tell me please which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the cat.

“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the cat. (Carroll, 1960, p.64)

“I’m moving. I’m going to North Carolina. If you want to come with me, get your stuff together. I did. It was the best decision I had made up to that point in my life, to follow the persuasive, unpredictable, yet reliable Cheshire Cat. I didn’t realize at the time, but there were other people in my life who also would have been reliable, non-judgmental, and supportive. It has taken years for me to understand that forgiveness is given more often than one knows. This is one of the most important pieces of advice I give my students. They are often distrustful at first, but when I am transparent about my own life, they realize I am on their side, and that support and sanctuary are at hand.

The Reality of Being an Adult

I’m Late, I’m Late!!

The alarm jars me awake at 5:15 am as I roll off the air mattress that has been my bed for two months. I throw on jeans from the floor, a black tee-shirt, and a bandana. I have to be at work at 6:00 am, and as usual, I’m running late. I arrive just in time after my bike ride across

Chapel Hill, uphill, downhill, up again. July is not the best month for riding a bike to work, but I had no car and little money, so off to work I went. I boiled chickens, picked them, burned my arms because I was too short and the enormous steel pots weighed ten pounds empty. Add six whole chickens and boiling water...for me it was not the ideal job. I was a woman in a man's domain, or so it seemed. Another opportunity presented itself at the local co-op. I could walk to work, and the pay was better, but 6:00 AM was still a rough hour for me to stick to. I still worked in the kitchen, but I got to wait on customers too. This is when I first realized, I truly was late. The people I served were my age, in college and condescending toward a "lowly server." This did not sit well with me.

Midsummer, 2004, 4:30 pm

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi, Sweetheart."

"Are you busy?"

"No, just signing reports. What do you need?"

"Oh, nothing really. I just wanted to let you know that I'm going back to school."

"Really....?"

"Yeah, I'm going to go to Durham Tech. I'm really sick of being treated like I'm less intelligent than the kids that come into the co-op and the restaurant. I feel like they look at me and treat me like I'm not as good as them or I'm stupid because of what I do. It's demeaning, and I don't want to feel like that anymore. I enjoy what I do, but I also don't like getting up at 5:00 am and biking across town to get burned by boiling pots of chicken, nor do I want to continue to serve the college students at the co-op."

"That's great! When do you start?"

“In August if I get everything in order. I’ll need your and Dad’s tax information to get financial aid. I don’t know what I want to study, but anything will be better than this.”

It had been three years since I had been in school. I had forgone any preparation for my SAT’s and spent the night before playing video games. I hadn’t made any real plans for college or a tangible career. I thought I would run off to New York and become a Broadway performer, so why did I need to go to college? The feeling of degradation was the true answer. Maybe I just wasn’t ready when I finished high school. Maybe the emotional damage I drowned in “fun” and deviant distraction was necessary for me to realize “I’m never sure what I’m going to be from one minute to another. However, I [had] to get back to my right size” (Carroll, 1960, p. 57). It was important for me to prove not only to myself, but also to my parents that I hadn’t failed. I had simply fallen down a dark dangerous rabbit hole, one that took me years to find and come out the other side because I had chosen to repress and forget what got me there in the first place in order to make some sense of my identity (Dillard, 2011). I had to be ready to face my fears; I had to be ready to make my own way and change my thinking. In my mind, I had a deep need to be good, at what I didn’t know, but I knew I had to be good, both morally and in the part I played in the world (Clark, 1999; Horton & Freire, 1990).

“I Think I’ll go Down the Other Way” (Carroll, 1960, p.149)

Going down the other way took a long time. Jason and I spent ten years in “The Garden of Live Flowers” (Carroll, 1960), but like the flowers, we lived. Happiness, friendship, fun, and love flourished, and in my personal adventure, a sense of pride and accomplishment grew.

Why Take This Path?

“Today we are going to do peer editing on your analysis responses to Clare.”

At this point in time I was completely in love with my British Literature class. I had taken a three-year hiatus and was thriving in school. However, the day we attempted peer editing; my heart sank. At the time it had nothing to do with building relationships with students, and I had no intention of becoming a teacher. I was simply a student in the class. When I received my edited paper with only two commas and a spelling mistake marked, I was alarmed. The paper I returned to the recent high school graduate was laden with corrections. I do not intend to brag, but I was distraught at the inability of students at the college level, community or otherwise, to write a complete sentence. That was the day I decided I would become a teacher and “save the world.” I wonder if all teachers believe that at some point?

Accomplishing a Goal

May 15, 2009: Undergraduate Graduation

I had made it. I had trudged through homesickness, depression, anxiety, fear, and frustration. I successfully transferred from a local community college where I became a slight overachiever, becoming a Student Senator and the President of the Science Club, even though English was my passion. I finally had come to feel a sense of accomplishment and goodness within me. Five years? It had taken me five years to let go of my failures and disappointments.

By the time I reached graduation from a state university, I had been nudged to examine who I was in the world.

“What type of high school did you go to?”

“What do you mean?”

“What was it like?”

“Rural, white, normal.”

“Well, you’ll be doing your student teaching in a school that is nothing like what you’re accustomed to.”

I had completed internships and observation assignments at many types of schools, but I was placed for six months at one of the most diverse schools in the area. They had a strict dress code due to gangs, and I had several of those students in my class, into which I was thrown with a “sink or swim” method. I had a class of seniors.

“If you don’t take them on from day one, they won’t take you seriously,” Mrs. M., my supervising teacher informs me.

“Okay.”

This approach terrifies me. What do I do? I have no idea how to run a classroom. Internships and observations don’t really give the experience necessary to build relationships that will make students want to learn or believe anything you have to say. I did have one thing in my corner. I was actually much older than the average student teacher, and my life experiences provided me a no-nonsense attitude. I was courageous enough to let my students in on some of my experiences while remaining professional.

“I’ll be here if you need me,” replies Mrs. M., “but you are going to be on your own for the most part.”

The method she employed was the best I could have experienced. I was in charge of everything: lessons, parent contact, discipline, and building relationships. She was never the “don’t smile until December type of teacher.” She encouraged me to be real with my students, and I was. I still am, which is, again, why I expect one day I will find myself in a “pool of tears.” If I want students to understand why I care, not just about their education but about their lives, they must know that I am truthful. I have opinions that they or their parents can disagree with,

but I also have experiences that they are going through and that may help them view the world through a different lens. I experienced a year's worth of teaching in six months. It was better than any methods class I had attended. It's rather jarring when a student tells you he or she won't be in class for a week because they will be in jail. But I didn't judge. I can't judge. I always have to remember where I came from and the road I had to walk to come out of the dark dangerous rabbit hole (Horton, 1998; Quinn & Garrison, 2004)

The Realization of My Reality

Me as the Cheshire Cat

“-----so long as I get *somewhere*,” (Carroll, 1960, p.64).

I *am* somewhere. I'm in a classroom, five out of seven days a week, using my lived experiences to reach my students. I *do care* where I go, or rather what I achieve. I want to achieve reverence in my teaching (Rudd & Garrison, 2012). I want to become transparent in who I am as a teacher. I have learned this is the way to earn trust in my students, colleagues, and supervisors. In order to achieve this goal properly, I must deconstruct myself, intensely look at where I came from and who I have become because of my experiences. This is a realization I have only recently discovered. The Cheshire Cat is right. It all depends on where I want to go. More and more, I find I don't want to go anywhere. I am an educator—a public-school educator—who has the capacity to genuinely reach students who encounter trauma in any manner like those in my past. My journey becomes “curiouser and curiouser” (Carroll, 1960, p.26). I do expect I will find myself in the messiness and dark winding paths of life again, though it won't be due to careless decisions and deviant self-destructive behavior (Carroll, 1960, p.26). Perhaps it will be my insistent nature to do what is right for the students I teach. Perhaps it will be because I cross the line and let them in to see who I actually am, including the experiences

that have shaped my beliefs about teaching and the fact that I do understand them, or at least I think I do.

The Cheshire Cat cannot tell me which direction to go. He cannot lead me to a personal path of redemption, or good practice as a teacher, or even give me a hint as to why I continue to teach. Only I can do that.

[I] Reflect into [My] Looking Glass Soul and the Mirror is My Only Friend (Sonic Youth, 1995)

I may be *somewhere*, but I am nowhere near going through the looking glass. I can see it, but I cannot yet touch it. I may never get to the other side. Guilt of disappointment in myself and to others is an emotion I can't let go of easily. I feel that I am still in Wonderland, navigating many encounters with strange creatures and experiences. But as the White Rabbit said, "Oh dear! Oh, dear! I shall be too late!" (Carroll, 1960, p.19). This is not my intent. I shall not be too late. I will dismember my Jaberwock, Jubjub bird, and Bandersnatch, perhaps forever. I will continue to face my memories and discover how they have an impact on my pedagogy, and on my daily life. Simply obtaining a Ph.D. will not fulfill this goal. However, it is a goal I set, and a goal I will reach. It will be an achievement that will benefit my students and potentially my colleagues. When and if I ever do reach the looking glass house, I hope that I will find myself content and renewed, able to teach with honesty, reverence, transparency, and love. Though to embark on this new journey, and accomplish these goals, I need to have a plan. I need to have a method.

Autoethnography as Methodology

Autoethnography is a methodology melding multiple types of qualitative research, including "ethnography, autobiography and critical pedagogy" (Tilley-Lubbs, G.A. & McCloud, J, 2012; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016, p.1; Tilley-Lubbs, 2017). This methodology allows me to

investigate, through narrative vignettes, my personal position in relation to the social context in which I live and work, specifically public education (Tilley-Lubbs, 2018). I thought that I had been doing autoethnography for some time, but what I have realized is that I have only been skirting the edge of what it really means. I have written autoethnography (Douglas, K. & Careless, D, 2013). However, when I reflect on my writing, the deep examination is severely lacking. I have rarely deconstructed, made sense of, or explained how my experiences have an impact on my teaching. I have not thoroughly looked at my teaching from an insider-outsider perspective (Ellis, 2004; Reed-Danahay, 1997). This method requires a level of vulnerability, reflexivity, and transparency that I thought I was embracing, but the truth is I was too uncomfortable to reveal and analyze the secrets and lived experiences that made me who I am (Boechner & Ellis, 2016; Egeli, C, 2017; Ellis, 2004;). It is only recently that I have come to realize that in order to get at the crux of why I teach in the classroom and have no desire to leave a position in an extremely diverse public-school environment, I must be truly vulnerable. Perhaps it's simply that I wasn't ready to face my experiences (Poulos, 2019), and now I need to embrace the fall, like Alice, helplessly into Wonderland, and use my experiences to enhance my practice as a teacher. I do not disregard the challenges this rebel attitude may hold for me, but as mentioned earlier, my experiences are my past and have only helped to shape me into a reflexive and reverent teacher. I may encounter risk with my employers and judgment from my colleagues, but those are events I am comfortable with. I own my past, even if it is not flattering. It is only a part of me. It does not define who I have become.

Realizing My Power and Privilege

I am part of the dominant culture. I always have been, even if my actions have shown differently. I am white and middle-class. I never noticed or understood the privilege and power I

hold, nor did I think I used them. Even when I was in my darkest times and participating in deviant behaviors, I still held power and privilege. Due to my social position, skin color, and albeit less than perfect home-life I was able to maintain my power and privilege. I didn't realize how much these parts of my identity had an impact on my teaching.

However, when I began my post-undergraduate education and was exposed to critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), I experienced a shift. Everything that I am, have been through, have been privileged to have and to know, is with me in my classroom every day and I must always be cognizant of those aspects of myself, especially because the students I teach are in general members of marginalized society. Autoethnography allows me to explore and deconstruct those parts of myself that weave their way into my praxis and to be wary of how they have an impact on my students and their success, in school or in life. This methodology grants me the vulnerability and transparency to risk being a reverent teacher (Freire, 1970; Kelly, 2004; Liston, 2004; Quinn, 2012; Rudd & Garrison, 2012).

History and Development of Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a research method in which the researchers place themselves within the research as not only as observers, but as a participants, to better understand how they are situated in a particular social context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Ellis, 2013; Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013; Reed-Danahay, 1997). As a research method autoethnography still is considered non-traditional. It is a qualitative method far from widely accepted quantitative styles that rely on numerical data to answer research questions, as it is often the assumption that numbers provide concrete proof of a phenomenon or situation. However, currently, in lieu of having to constantly defend autoethnography as a valid research method, it is celebrated and embraced in multiple fields of research (Ellis, 2013).

David Hayano coined the term in 1979 when anthropologists began studying themselves in their own culture to better understand how they were participants within the research (Ellis & Bochner 2000; Ellis, 2004; Holt, 2003; Patton, 2018). The practice of including the researcher as a participant developed from ethnography, or the study of the other (Mayan, 2009). Researchers began examining their own positions in their own cultures, while simultaneously examining the cultures themselves. It is the inclusion of the self that moves ethnography to autoethnography (Patton, 2018). Ellis and Bochner (2000), define autoethnography as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple levels of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural (p.739). By this definition, the researcher is able to use personal experiences to connect with and analyze a particular phenomenon or personal life changing experience (Ellis, 2004). However, Ellis and Bochner (2000), also assert that due to the many applications of autoethnography in the social sciences, giving the term a “precise definition and application [is] difficult” (p.739). At this juncture in qualitative research, the method is becoming more widely accepted as a valid research method and is accepted in many scholarly journals though it does not stand without criticism or skepticism.

Purposes of the Method

“Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.3). With autoethnography, the researcher is also able to bring meaning to the interpretation and become part of the conversation. It allows personal experiences to broaden both researchers’ and readers’ understandings of realities (Chang, 2013).

The researcher’s voice in traditional ethnography is not included in the findings. Their perspective does not have an impact on the results, they are simply reporting. However, by

including themselves in the discourse throughout the research, they are able to challenge the notion of “silent authorship” (Holt, 2003). Moreover, the inclusion of personal experience has the potential to resonate with readers allowing them the opportunity to make personal connections with the research and apply it to their own social position. Autoethnographers need to create an environment that is comfortable for all participants. (Ellis and Bochner, 2000)

Autoethnography lends itself to multiple interpretations wherein, the reader has the opportunity to connect emotionally, intellectually, or morally, and thus, they become a coparticipant (Richardson, 2000).

Approaches

Autoethnography encompasses a myriad of approaches and methods. Ellis and Bochner (2000) attempt to narrow the multitude of methodological names by providing several “widely accepted approaches” (p. 740). They begin with “reflexive ethnographies,” where the focus is on a culture or subculture, yet the focus is on self-other interaction. “Complete-member researchers” investigate cultures of which they are already a participant: “Literary autoethnographies” can be likened to an autobiography rather than a study for the purpose of social science. “Reflexive ethnographies” use the researcher’s personal experiences to expand the culture being researched and show how the researcher changed as a result of the research experience. They also include “evocative personal narratives,” where the researchers themselves are the phenomenon, and the research intertwines personal and academic aspects of their lives to attain an understanding of a specific lived experience. The methods of autoethnography need not be explicitly for a greater social change; they can be applied to specifically situated phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

However, the approach categories noted by Ellis and Bochner (2011) do not begin to cover the extent to which autoethnography can be presented. Short stories, plays, essays, fiction, poetry, and performance arts are all acceptable methods that make the research or scholarship accessible to a wider audience. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) state that to “do ethnography” the researcher must write about “epiphanies” created by identifying with a culture, but they cannot simply express the experience. I write about liminal moments that shape who I have become as an educator. It is often necessary to analyze it in order to be accepted by the “social sciences publishing conventions” (np.). Carolyn Ellis (2004) writes about experiences in her personal life and uses what she calls a “systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try and understand an experience [she’s] lived through...[to] understand a way of life” (Ellis, 2000, p. 737). In order for the research to be meaningful to the reader, the researcher must also be able to create a “rich, thick, description” of the experience. (Creswell, 2000)

Evaluation

There is not one definite criteria list for evaluating autoethnography. However, two authorities on ethnography and autoethnography give a comprehensive approach for evaluation and validity. Richardson (2000) suggests five key criteria for evaluation of ethnographic research, including autoethnography. Her criteria are concerned with the contribution the work makes to a greater understanding of a social aspect, with the ability of the text to invite alternate interpretation, with the author’s transparency in positioning, exposure, and accountability, with the impact the work has on the reader and with the work’s presentation of an actual lived experience (p.937).

Ellis and Bochner (2000), who are steeped specifically in autoethnography, have a slightly different approach. Ellis presents her criteria in an anecdote and emphasizes the focus is

on the experience of engagement with the research, both for the researcher and participant. She places emphasis on the aspect of honesty and reality. Is the experience one the researcher could actually have? Is there a transformation, or a learning experience? Ellis also addresses the issue of validity and notes that validity can be judged by improvement made in the reader or the researcher (p. 751).

Ethics

Though Lapadat (2017) identifies multiple ethical challenges exist in doing autoethnography connected to relational ethics—“researcher vulnerability; the problems of existing within a bureaucratic framework designed to accommodate value-free ethics; degree of rigor; a risk of leaning toward self-indulgence, superficiality, and sensationalism; and restriction of scope”—only two seem to fit actual ethical challenges (p. 593). However, “relational ethics” (Ells, 2007), which entail the potential emotional, personal, and public damage writing about the self can cause is itself a prominent ethical challenge. The remaining challenges are more aptly placed in criticisms.

When writing about deeply emotional experiences, it is inevitable that the researcher write about others involved in the experience. Though the others in a personal narrative style work may give consent, it is difficult to know what the repercussions will be once the work is published. Careful use of anonymity on behalf of the other, or the participant is the best way to combat this particular issue. Furthermore, obtaining consent along with diligence in the anonymity of persons when able is paramount. However, this is still a blurred line. If readers of the research know the researcher personally, they will potentially know the others in connection to the experience. There is also the question of situations where consent cannot be given, such as

the case with Carolyn Ellis in her article “There Are Survivors”: Telling a Story About Sudden Death” (1993).

Researcher vulnerability is another ethical challenge. Autoethnographers expose their selves for the sake of research and engaging in dialogue with others who may have had similar experiences. As their research often uses personal experience, Jones, Adams and Ellis (2013) warn of the possibility of stigmatization (p.24), which could cause issues for the researcher’s future endeavors or current situation since vulnerability may also open up the researcher to judgment and rejection. I am ready to face those potential obstacles. Anderson and Glass-Coffin (2013) express concern that autoethnography can often solicit painful memories of lived experiences that have the potential for participants to consider reestablishing negative behavior or create constant fear of an experience. However, this vulnerability is also a valuable experience, either for personal therapy or to offer opportunities for growth in themselves or others.

How Do I Deal with Ethics?

When I began writing, I had concerns about the potential repercussions for my professional career and for my family. I did not want them to relive painful parts of their lives as I had experienced them. However, I told them what I was going to write and that it was specifically about my experience. Initially, I did not want my family to read what I had written, but I have since read to them the parts where they are included. Professional risk is also a possibility, though I have secured a trusted leader in my school division to read and comment on the parts that may be detrimental. Again, I own my past and I feel it can contribute to the difficulties teachers and students face, if only to start a conversation about what teachers bring with them into their classrooms.

How Alice Became My Metaphor

It was difficult for me to find a way to express my experience with a soft edge without completely exposing myself or my family to risk. My background is in the School of Humanities. I majored in English and I understand literature. This led me to use *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* as a metaphor for my experiences. The liminal moments I experienced; often connect in some way with the experiences of Alice. She is lost, confused, questioned, disheartened, angry, dependent, yet, also independent. She challenges what she believes to be unjust and comes through troubling situations with resilience. I find these qualities in my liminal moments.

Critique

Autoethnography as a research method is, in contrast to Lapadat's (2017) opinion that it takes specialized training, accessible to most people. Due to the fact it is a non-traditional method, it is stigmatized. The general population is familiar with anthropology, as it is rooted in history, and discussed even at the high school level. As autoethnography stems from this method of research, it would be simple to explain the linear transition ethnography to autoethnography. People know themselves, and they know the culture or cultures in which they interact. They are constantly observing and unconsciously reflecting on their lived experiences and the effect those experiences have on themselves and others, though they may not have ever thought to write about them. It is not a common thought that what one experiences could have an impact on others, or society, or make changes for the better.

Every day, I hear stories of lived experiences from my colleagues. I am an educator, a high school teacher. I am a participant researcher in the culture I research. For most of my colleagues, reflection is ongoing, although they don't realize it. It happens through dialogue, and

in autoethnography, the point is to create meaningful dialogue that can be useful and for the better (Ellis, 2000). Autoethnography as a research method seeks to create socially-just change. In that respect, it is the perfect method for educators. We learn from each other's lived experiences. We exchange reflections, and work to create change related to the inequities and dysfunction we experience in the education system. We are constantly analyzing our situation in our culture and our interaction with it and other participants. However, what we express to one another in our everyday dialogues, seldom escapes the walls of our school, our culture.

Choosing My Method

When I first began my Master's program to pursue an ESL endorsement, I was introduced to critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), and through reading about his experiences, listening to his interviews, and exploring his collaboration with others in order to provide a space where they were able to learn how to advocate for themselves, I thought it a perfect avenue to deal with my unrest with the public school system and the perception of the EL students. I learned that I played a more prominent role in the classroom than I had previously thought. My lived experiences have a direct impact my treatment and perception of my students. I learned about power, privilege, and my tendency to ignore that it existed. Now that I know, I see it every day in my pedagogy and practice with my students. I hope that it is positive, but only through further investigation of my daily interaction will I be able to come to a tentative conclusion. Self-research is, I am discovering, a never-ending process. I will not simply be able to get to the other side of the looking glass and leave Wonderland, I will have to learn to navigate and embrace the liminality of being an educator.

Conclusion

In future research, I will discuss how I plan to use meta-autoethnography (Ellis, 2016; Tilley-Lubbs, 2017) to tie my vignettes together and organize them into a series of liminal moments to interpret the effect they had on me at the time they occurred and how they intersect with my life now. I analyzed my experiences through a literary lens, and I will use a meta-autoethnographic lens to question my contribution to the field of teacher education as I revisit my vignettes. I hope to gain an understanding of how to prepare current and prospective teachers in my school district, to be open to the opportunity for dialogue with students and colleagues about how their personal lived experiences make a difference in how they teach, while retaining a sense of personal and professional protection.

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**Where Soul Meets Body: Meta-Autoethnography of Liminal Moments and Their Impact
on Life and Teaching**

Abstract

In this paper, I reflect on previously written vignettes through a different lens. I delve deeper into what may have actually occurred during those experiences and how they shaped the person and the teacher I am today. I reflect on the collapse of family, the effects of divorce on my actions, seeking solace and emotional repair, abusive relationships, change in identity, rebuilding identity, and the impact of lived experiences in teacher pedagogy. I reflect on the need for transparency and vulnerability in teaching. I explore how the acceptance and realization of one's lived experiences has a deep impact on personal pedagogy, practice, and meaningful relationships with students, specifically in an urban school setting. I explore how my personal experiences intertwine with my students and all teachers need to acknowledge the importance of transparency and vulnerability in their pedagogy.

Introduction

In “Who Are You?”, an autoethnographic piece where I discussed how my personal lived, experiences influence how I teach in a “specifically situated story” (Ellis, 2009). In writing that piece, I presented several vignettes reflecting on how specific experiences in my life had an impact on me as a person and as a teacher. Prior to writing the piece, I wasn’t fully aware of how deep an impact those experiences had on me as an adult and educator. It was difficult to allow myself to be vulnerable enough to tell those vignettes that included abuse, self-destructive behavior, and traumatic events experiences I had long kept hidden out of fear of what others may have thought (Poulos, 2008). Exposing myself and my lived experiences was difficult and challenging, but I feel strongly that what I had to say in “Who are You?” was, important for my personal and professional growth. It put me in a vulnerable place that was difficult and often frightening to explore (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). However, I found the motivation to put away my fear of what others may think of my experiences and embraced my vulnerability and put them on paper for others to use as they so choose. I chose to write them because they are part of who I am in the classroom. “Teachers are called to the profession by a desire to serve and derive a sense of personal accomplishment and meaning from their work” (Intrator, 2012). Accepting and exposing my own vulnerability helps me to build meaningful relationships with my students, which brings meaning to my work.

My beliefs and pedagogy in education are built from my personal experiences, which in turn help me to notice changes in my students and empathize with them. This is a practice I have found that, when appropriately approached, has the possibility to reach those students who are most struggling, but may be afraid, as I once was, to voice their experience for fear of judgment, ridicule, or consequences.

Life is a series of events, a gathering of things and ideas, of experiences, growth, sacrifice, pain, hope, and loss. In these collective parts exist liminal moments that in part create a soul, the essence of who a person is, if one so chooses to describe his or her inner self in that way. Experiences that the body and mind go through may eventually meet and give a new perspective on a lived experience, a brief moment in time that has both an immediate and latent effect (Ellis, 2009). It took me years to realize my liminal moments, or that I had experienced any, and I'm certain that I will never recognize them all. However, those that I have been able to identify and analyze have a direct impact on my life as a guide and as a teacher. They explain my position as a teacher, and how understanding those liminal moments help me to build relationships with my students, in hopes that I can be the best educator for them (Ellis, 2009; Garrison, 2010).

I don't work with scarless students. I am not without scars. Why should they be left out of my pedagogy? Why should I hide who I really am? Why should I keep hidden the experiences and realizations that built my soul and pedagogy as they are now? The stories I revisit through meta-autoethnography (Ellis, 2016, Tilley-Lubbs, 2017) needed to be told. I needed them to be told, even if just for my own sanity to continue coming into my own and realizing my place in education. It was a difficult process as (Ellis, 2004) states, "there are stories that must be told" (p. 32). Luckily, I work in a division that is accepting of personal flaws as long as they don't or won't have an impact on a teacher's ability to do his or her job effectively, and although those types of questions are never asked in interviews, I don't have any trepidation about revealing them. Now, I am able to reexamine what I experienced and bring deeper meaning and continue to understand how my personal experiences have and will continue to change (Ellis, 2009). Sometimes I am able to be content in how and what I teach, but at the end of each year I reflect

on how I can improve. I reflect on what did or did not work and the use of meta-autoethnography provides this opportunity.

I bricked up my emotions and I shut people out because I was ashamed of some of my experiences. Sophie Tamas (2009) explains in detail the various effects of traumatic relationships, and asserts that they often begin in childhood, that “its breach leads to disconnection, alienation, and the loss of a sense of self ...”(Tamas, 2009, p.?). However, I felt I could hide without anyone knowing the truth of my emotional turmoil. Tamas also discusses the loss of self-identity, shame, doubt, and guilt (p. 45), not to mention the “clinging to others” (p. 45). These are all trauma related experiences I have encountered, and ones I often notice in my students.

The bureaucracy of the public education system prevents me from being completely transparent with my students as there is an expectation of professionalism. It is a system that prevents teachers from fostering meaningful relationships with students removing an element of love that can improve the educational environment (Martin, 2004). However, I can let them know I understand some of their struggles. I can let them know I have experienced grief, frustration, insecurity, injustice, and loss in my own life.

Leaving Alice in Wonderland

“When the men on the chessboard/Get up and tell you where to go/And the White Knight is talking backwards/And the Red Queen's "off with her head!"/Remember what the dormouse said:/"Feed your head. Feed your head. Feed your head" (Slick, G. 1967, track 10)

At one time, I was Alice, lost in Wonderland, trying to find her way home and I believe parts of her will always exist in my life's journey, but now as I have rebuilt my identity, I see

parts of myself as the White Knight. I am not able to save anyone, nor is there anything chivalrous about my actions, nor can I deny or be blind to the fact that I have privilege in a social and cultural aspect, but I have learned how to accept it, not as a shameful part of my identity, but simply who I am. I do have the ability to jump other pieces and navigate my own chessboard without having men tell me where to go. It took a long time to get to this place in my life. I disregarded logic and encountered multiple iterations of the Red Queen's "off with her head." The Red Queen is the name I gave to the man in an abusive relationship, whose name I preferred not to include in "Who Are You?" I chose that name because when I first met him, he seemed charming and a safe haven from the confusion of family instability I was experiencing in my life. However, the relationship became abusive and I relate it to the way The Red Queen (Carroll, 1960) treated Alice when she was put on trial for angering The Red Queen. Eventually, I remembered what the dormouse said, or rather I simply remembered the dormouse is me. Parts of me are the dormouse who in Wonderland pops in every so often with a word of advice or caution. Sometimes the best way forward is to go back once again and examine these experiences as they apply to my current practice and pedagogy. How has my view changed? How have I changed? I chose to use meta-autoethnography to reexamine my experiences as it provides a way for me to further understand who I am (Ellis, 2009). Writing "Who Are You" was a cathartic experience. It was a difficult journey but allowed me to understand how my early lived experiences have shaped who I am today. I am able to step back and re-evaluate what I lived through and how my perspective has changed over time (Ellis, 2009; Poulos, 2019). Even through a different lens, my memories are not static (Ellis, 2009, Poulos, 2019, Tilley-Lubbs, 2017). They may not be what I originally remembered or what actually transpired, but they are

mine and I carry them with me into my classroom, into my pedagogy and into the way I build relationships with students (Poulos, 2008, Garrison, 2010, Liston & Garrison, 2004).

How Can I Re-examine and Why?

The first exploration of my liminal moments relevant to my pedagogy I presented as a literary autoethnographic metaphor (Adams, Jones, Ellis, 2015; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 2009, Ellis, 2006), but there was a piece of those experiences that built the essence of who I am as person, and I walled up what was missing. I did not include the music that shaped my experience. I do not intend to use music as a straightforward metaphor for re-examination, as it is not always relevant to the purpose of this paper. The lyrics I chose simply have a deep connection to the vignettes I am re-examining (Ellis, 2009). In writing this paper, I hope that the inclusion of personal experiences as an educator and how they intertwine with my pedagogy will resonate with current and future educators who perhaps may realize the importance of their own experiences in the lives of their students.

Music has meaning and strong emotional attachment for me. Music has played an integral part of my life. I remember it as a child, but I don't think what was played shaped who I am. I simply remember that it was always playing, and it was mostly comforting, though sometimes terrifying. Again, in some years I may find that also to be a false lens. However, it has been a haven for keeping, realizing, and dealing with my feelings. Music is my way of stitching my wounds back together so that I can move forward (Lamott, 2013), so that I can forget for a while. I can hide something, so I don't have to talk about it, celebrate it, let go of it, connect to it, or reconnect with it. This is not a practice that I would advise for a high school student, as eventually hiding emotions becomes a nearly impossible burden and at some point, in education, we as teachers must take up the charge of teaching the whole student. We are no longer simply

the providers of knowledge. On any given day, we may teach mind, body, and soul. Perhaps whatever a teacher's personal outlet for coping with and examining their own personal experiences should become part of their pedagogy in building meaningful relationships with their students. This is why I have chosen to include a lyrical twist in this meta-autoethnography. With my students, I try to creatively approach their struggles about other ways to cope, journal, talk to someone, focus their efforts on looking toward their future (Garrison, 2010).

Album 1: Turmoil of Growing Up with the Experience of Divorce

Track 1: Childhood

I remember my early childhood as idyllic. I didn't want for anything. I remember afternoons with my father and helping my mother with laundry. I remember the joy I found in their company and in how they provided for me even when they probably couldn't. They always seemed to make things happen.

I did not romanticize this vignette. Although memories are fluid and change over time, I do know this part of my childhood was real (Poulos, 2008). I did romanticize the events after my younger sister was born. I was six. I think this is when I felt less important. My father still loved me, but my sister became his favorite. This realization makes me feel ill. Like many other parts of my life, I hid my true feelings. I remember trying to be the best big sister, the best student, the best daughter, but when things went wrong, scuffles between my sister and me, straight forward attacks due to immaturity, or my difficulties in school because I didn't understand math everything felt as if it was my fault. I was never told to be strong for my sister, but I was. I didn't know any other way to be the best of anything.

Track 2: Divorce

When my mother told me she had decided to leave my father, I didn't think it was real. I positioned myself in such a way that I didn't have an emotional attachment to this conversation, or the situation, but I did. I was angry, though in my ability to put on a brave face, I didn't say anything. I felt her actions were selfish. We didn't have the perfect life, but we didn't want for anything. My parents always seemed to make things happen, without my sister or me knowing the struggle. Now I wonder if my mother was searching for someone to fix her in the way I was. I wonder if she felt inadequate in some way, so much so that she needed to leave. In the past few years, I recall conversations when she talked about being the first child in her family. She felt that there was the expectation that she was to be the best, the first, the strongest. Her parents did not go through a divorce, but I can see now how the pressure to be the model child has had an impact on her. Was this why she felt inadequate? As for me, I believe I was simply broken by a life I thought would never change. I wonder if some of my students feel the same.

I didn't talk about my parent's divorce with my friends. It was one more event that I kept inside, hidden and unacknowledged at the time. I realize now that I was angry. Why did my life have to be interrupted? I was proud to be a child whose parents weren't divorced. That was taken from me and it left a scar. I imagine my father waiting patiently for my mother to return to our home. I hear Trace Atkins sing "Every light in the house is on / Just in case you ever do get tired of being gone / Every light in the house is on" (Robbins, K., 1996, track 3), and it still makes me sad and angry that she left. I didn't try and fix the situation; it wasn't mine to fix, nor did it affect my direct well-being, but it did affect how I moved forward in life. In some ways, it broke my independent spirit, and belief that I was good enough.

Track 3: Reflections

I allowed my parents' divorce to change my personality. I stopped trusting people. I thought the situation had broken my independent spirit. I felt that I had lost the stability and support that had for so long allowed me to be independent. However, I was the one who chose to disregard and deflect my emotions. Because this is the method I chose to deal with my parents' divorce, I once again had a void to fill and would do anything to fill it. I strayed. I put distance between my family and me, a distance that grew faster than I knew. As I view that experience now, I was running and eventually I was on the outside of my family and didn't know how to get back in. I was displaced, and so was my love, so I went in search of a way to receive, to give, and to belong (Behar, 1996, Ellis, 2009).

I vowed never to get married or have children. I did eventually get married, but the no children vow has remained. Carolyn Ellis (2009) talks about the dogs she and her husband Art have had together, and how some people say that it is a form of "displaced love" for the children she never had (p. 214). When my parents divorced, I went in search of something or someone to replace that familial comfort. I wonder, if in teaching, I have a type of displaced love in how I work with my students. Are they the ones who have finally helped me fill the void of what I feel my parents' divorce took from me? I tell them I will always be there for them, even after they leave high school. They ask me if I have children and I always respond, "Absolutely not! I have a hundred students a year to be my children." I put my time, energy, and devotion into the success of my students. Some of them even call me "Mom." In my mind, my students are a different type of family, one that I try my best to keep together.

Many of my students have their lives interrupted by difficult situations. The longer I teach, the more I encounter students who come from divorced parents, interrupted living

conditions, and traumatic events that are not mine to discuss (Tilley-Lubbs, 2017). My personal experience is different from theirs, but I can still empathize.

Album 2: Full of Rage and Fear

Track 1: Seeking Solace

Two years after I entered high school, I met The Red Queen. I had experienced so much tumult in such a brief period of time that I was willing to embrace anyone who I thought could comfort me in my quiet despair? I was unable to see the good or the bad. I simply saw the attention that I craved, no matter the consequences. I was a mix of inseparable emotions. I was also young, impressionable, and seeking the ability to trust again. The Red Queen was not the first boy I looked to for attention, but he was the most charming in the beginning and the most devastating in the end. How did I not recognize the abuse? Perhaps it was because I had never actually seen it. My parents, even throughout their divorce were not publicly abusive to each other or to me or to my sister. I wonder if that perception was a dream too. Did I romanticize the whole experience?

Track 2: Survival

The initial abuse from the Red Queen (Carroll, 1960), was verbal, though still I thought, “you look like the perfect fit” (Mann, A., 1999. track 9). I did not notice as I do now, I always blamed myself. I questioned my actions. Had I done something to upset him? Was he having a bad day and I happened to be the outlet he needed at the moment? Now, it seems as though his anger was as deep as mine, though I never knew why. I suppose I never thought to ask. Perhaps I should have. That would have kept me in the position of trying to help or fix a situation that was completely broken from the beginning.

“Perhaps the presence of pain, in the end felt more comforting to [me] than the fearsome emptiness of existential freedom” from the Red Queen (Behar, 1996). I only ever let him see me

cry three times. I played house to pacify him and probably to pacify me as well. My parents did not have the perfect relationship, and I carried the burden, keeping my feelings silent. I wonder if I kept trying to make our relationship work in hopes that it would fix what was happening with my parents. I felt that if I left, I would have one more void to fill, and I was fearful of the emptiness I might encounter.

When the relationship finally came to an end, when he had threatened my life with the guilt of taking his own, with the threat of killing my rabbit to make me stay with him, with an attempt to suffocate me with a mattress, I realized, “it’s not going to stop ‘til you wise up” (Mann A., 1999, track 9). I was the one who had to wise up, and I did. I found the courage to leave, but only because I had found someone else to take on molding me. Why is it that for so long, I believed I needed someone to show me what my life should be? Why didn’t I realize I was perfectly capable of molding myself? I reverted into myself. I buried my brokenness deep inside. I was angry at The Red Queen (Carroll, 1960). I was angry at myself for being so blind, so small and so reliant upon someone who had so little regard for me. I missed myself, I was now a “murder of one,” but “I could look outside my window and [The Red Queen] didn’t have to know” (Durits, A. Bryson, M.M., 1993, track 3, 5:44). I realized I was free to do as I wished with my life, though I was also disappointed that I had wasted so much of it on a fruitless endeavor.

“I need more/Nothing seems to satisfy/I said/ I don’t want it/ I just need it/ To breathe, to feel/ to know that I’m alive” (Jones, A., Maynard, K.K., Carey, D., D’Amour P. 1996, track 1)

I no longer felt alive, I simply felt numb. It was not so much that I had an undeniable dilemma, I just didn’t know how to remove myself from the situation. I found myself in a corner, in a spotlight, and I had finally lost my religion (Stipe, M., Berry, B., Buck, P., Mills, M., 1991, track 2). Where I thought I had found solace, “I found a hurt, lost and blinded fool,” I spent every

waking hour trying to keep an eye on him, and I just couldn't do it. Life is bigger, it was bigger than [him] and he was not me (Stipe, M., Berry, B., Buck, P., Mills, M., 1991, track 2). I had let myself become overshadowed and controlled by what others, mainly males thought of me.

Track 3: Stepping Away

I found the strength, though I thought it was courage at the time to leave. I had never needed courage; I needed a backbone to be independent of anyone else. The approximate time I did leave, coincided with the official split of my parents. I wonder if that was coincidence or irony, or if I simply saw that what I had been holding onto in my parents had undoubtedly broken, so why waste more time trying to mend the unmendable relationship.

I wonder if it was watching my mother leave that encouraged me to leave as well? I wonder if when I relate this story in various contexts, it gives my students with whom I have established solid relationships the courage to begin becoming their own people.

Track 4: Reflection

After leaving the Red Queen (Carroll, 1960), I still was not me. I was proud that I had finally walked away. At that moment, I could have begun to rebuild myself as I saw fit, to look toward the future and a little to the past. But I didn't. I again searched for someone to fix what had been broken within me. Someone to rely on and to learn from. Obviously, I had not learned much. I see this in my students. This is a story I am mostly transparent about when warranted. I teach young girls and women who seek the comfort of older boys and sometimes find themselves in situations difficult to leave, either out of fear or out of an unfortunately early family situation. They often face fear, the rejection of their parents, parent, or guardian as the result of decisions they make. Their trust is not easy to gain. If I know them well enough to have gained their trust, I ask the difficult questions and discuss the consequences and options they can consider. I don't tell

them what they should do. I simply direct them to the appropriate resources they have. This is where we as educators have the opportunity to teach the whole student, mind, body and spirit. We have the privileged position, not to be taken lightly, to connect with a student and help them work through the unknown. Not only in these situations do we create lasting relationships with the students, but we can help build a community out of our own experiences. They do not need to be exactly the same, but all human experience has something akin to a theme, something that we all share, and in this we have the chance to meet our students where they are and help them to discover that they can build and create their own selves without relying on others to fix them.

Album 3: Recovery, Part 1

Track 1: The Good Guy

I gave myself little time between relationships. Though the Red Queen was gone, and I felt a freedom from the ties of an abusive relationship, I moved directly into another relationship. I met Jason, “a melody softly soaring through my atmosphere” (Death Cab for Cutie, 2007). As I look back at this part of my life, I realize I was never able to detach myself from a male-centered relationship. I have no explanation for this, only questions. Is it because for six years of my life I was the only child on in my family nucleus? It was just my father and me for six years, just my grandfather and me, or just my uncles and me. I realize now even my childhood friends were mostly male. I also wonder if, with the birth of my sister, I felt additional loss of identity, with yet another close companion removed from my life, another small piece of stability gone. Is this why I personally went looking for male companions to fill my void of loss and give me a sense of identity? I see this behavior in my female students and sometimes my male students; however, I rarely know their reasons. If they were to offer that insight, I would listen and perhaps be able to empathize even though I do not know the true reason for my own behavior. This is another

opportunity to incorporate my willingness to be transparent into my pedagogy. It is another opportunity for me build a relationship with a student who may need encouragement and redirection to find themselves without the dependency of other people. This is another opportunity for educators to be reverent teachers, to teach the whole person, not just the student. The conversations that can come from these interactions are often the ones that give a student a purpose to change direction, to keep marching on to achieve their own goals that have been stifled by other people or dismissed altogether. It is also another moment of liminality, where I have realized and grown, yet I am still floating between concrete realities. Though there is risk, in order to reassure and build or keep relationships for students who are overlooked or marginalized, it is a risk worth taking.

Track 2: Flunked Out, F*ed Up and Fed Up**

When I started my relationship with Jason, neither of us really wanted something serious. I wanted another distraction and he fit. I flunked out of community college during this time because I was so infatuated with his life. To me it was “just like a dream” (Thompson, P, Williams, B., Tolhurst, I., Gallup, S. Smith, R. 1987. track 9); it was fun, and I felt safe. I found someone I could trust. What I didn’t realize was that by staying with him, by yet again putting someone before myself, I was heading for disaster—one that could have possibly ended my life. I wanted so much to please him, to be the center of his world, to be what he desired, to receive all his attention. He was good at making me believe I possessed those characteristics, and I did for years.

At first it was innocent fun, band practice, bars, harmless illicit dabbling, but eventually the harmless became harmful. I felt happy, though I don’t think it was simply the newfound companionship in Jason and his friends. The illicit dabbling which became harmful had a numbing

effect I was not aware of. I think that in urban education, students often find themselves in similar situations and as a result, lose themselves in a dream much as I did.

Track 3: Shock of Reality

She's coming over/we'll go out walking/make the call on the way/She's in the
Phonebooth now/I'm looking in/there comes the smile on her face/I love my drug
Buddy (Dando, E. 1992. track 5)

Jason was simply my drug buddy, and since I trusted him, I thought whatever it was he was doing, I should be doing too. This adventure of calling, waiting, smiling, and running into the arms of a drug induced unreality didn't last long, six months at the most, but at the end of those six months, I was first on the floor, and eventually behind bars, and so was Jason. I suppose that's what I get for trying to please others and not please myself, blindly following, and ignoring the screaming in my head. He still didn't leave, nor did I. We both got lucky and lived out a hellish two-year probation together, with no permanent legal ramifications left behind. If teachers could be completely transparent and use their experiences as teachable moments, I believe some students I work with would have a more positive outlook on their futures.

After this whirlwind delusion, Jason and I were actually a couple and still are to this day. I wonder if surviving death and destruction solidified us? However, I still had much to learn about myself because I had been detached for so long. Jason decided it was best to leave the state, to remove himself from temptation. He knew there was "hope in [his] past, I "walked back to my place/tired of getting high/guess I [didn't] want to die" (The Dando, E. 1992. track 5), so I followed "I [could] not guess what [we'd] discover/when we [turned] the dirt with our palms cupped like shovels/but I [knew] our filthy hands [could] wash one another's" (Gibbard, B., 2005. Track 2),

and by following, a melody softly started to soar through my atmosphere. Eventually I grew up and came to my senses.

Track 4: Reflections

My decision to follow others and their decisions became clear while I was with Jason. I believed once again I had found someone who could fix me and help me to find the essence of myself I believed I had lost. Jason never treated me maliciously. I was still intent on pleasing someone else, I forgot who I wanted to be. I searched each day for comfort, happiness, and adventure. I was still hiding, trying to rid myself of emotions I didn't want to acknowledge. In my years of teaching, I see some of my students living this way, in survival mode (Tilley-Lubbs, 2011). My parents thought I was doing what was expected until they walked me out of the city jail, a memory that still brings nausea and disappointment in myself. My illicit dabbling had finally caught up with me and I had no one to call but my parents. I had to take responsibility for my actions. But I was forgiven, and it is a chapter of my life that we don't talk about, though for me it seems to be there all the time (Poulos, 2019). Perhaps that's why I don't question students' absences or far-fetched stories. Though I wasn't in school when it happened, I well might have been. I can't leave my scars and disappointments out of my practice. That's the eros, that's the believing in them and teaching them as a whole person, not just a repository for information (Garrison & Liston, 2004).

Album 4: Recovery, Part 2

Track 1: New Beginnings

I want to live where soul meets body/and let the sun wrap its arms around me/ and
And bathe my skin in water cool and cleansing/and feel...feel what it's like to be
new (Gibbard, B. 2005. track 16)

This is what North Carolina felt like to me. It was warm, a new beginning, a place only a few people knew me, so I could become new and renewed. Though I had followed Jason, he took no responsibility for “saving” me. In fact, he gave me space to heal and grow. Everything was new, exciting, simply different. It was not always exciting. Growing up to be a responsible citizen and take care of myself quickly was not easy. Getting a decent job without an education, which I chose to forgo, was almost impossible. However, there was a calm in my life that I had not experienced before. There was no abuse, there was no questioning, there were no prying eyes into my life to be fearful of. Life there was honest, and that brought a bit of peace that I had missed for a long time. Eventually, I became personally unsettled, unsatisfied, and anxious to find hope in my own past.

Track 2: Moving My Students: Moments in Practice

The conversations that revolve around students and their performance, engagement, and success are often, in my experience negative.

“So and So doesn’t seem to care about school. He or she comes to class but doesn’t do the work. I don’t know how to get through to him or her.”

My initial inner response is “Do you even know his or her name?” I have found that knowing a student’s name is possibly the most integral part of building a relationship. If I don’t know their names, how are they to trust me, to let me share my scars and be their guide or safe space? I still ask myself, “Is this a task I want to take on? Is this a position I want to be in? Is this more emotional trauma I want to find a place to store, to hide, to revisit?” No, it is not. However, it’s part of my pedagogy. Students can’t learn without love (Liston, 2012). What I didn’t receive in my relationship with *The Red Queen* (Carroll, 1960)—a sense of worth, a sense of belonging, of making a difference, and sometimes even a respectable name—I can attempt to provide for my

students, at least the respectable name, a sense of worth, and a place of belonging. I can provide them with a safe space to unhinge and explore emotions, not push them into themselves and try to hide them. I don't want them to feel "no one gets to come in" (Durits, A. Bryson, M.M., 1993, track 3). It is a lonely way to exist, and if chosen, often dangerous to the lens put on life. It can, as I now realize, cause a distance, a void that is constantly needing to be filled by one vice or another. Though I may have been hardened with anger, I was hardened at the age of my youngest students. I understand some of their losses, and I offer them empathy when I can. Would my life have turned out differently? I wonder how my experience navigating my emotions would have been different if my high school French teacher had pushed the issue of my deviant behavior a little further? What if she had called my parents when she noticed I started coming to school late and smelling of cigarettes? Would I have stayed in the abusive relationship I was living in and hiding at the time?

I find that in my practice, I am more considerate and understanding of what my students are experiencing. I now understand that they are dealing with emotions they don't yet understand, from where they come or how to express them. It took me over twenty years to come to terms with the experiences of my youth. I can't expect them to understand the depth of what they are experiencing or the long-term effect it will have. I can simply be there as transparent and supportive as possible.

Track 3: When I Found My Purpose

When I decided to return to school it was another truly liminal moment. I realized I was wasting my time. I had more to offer than being a server or cashier. At one point in my life I had bigger aspirations, though they were not grounded in reality. However, I did not want what had become my reality either. In three years, I had gained more life experience than I thought I should

have, to the extent of realizing that although it is possible, it is difficult to be successful without some type of education. When I talk with my students, when I build relationships with them, especially those who are struggling or disheartened in some way, I can be completely honest with them on this point. I openly admit to them that it is a struggle to look to the future when you are in a dark, unhappy, discouraged place, because I have been there. Of course, I don't explain the precise details of my experience, but an honest conversation about possibilities is often a good place to start. That's how I teach, from an honest perspective. I also use this in the reflection of my teaching. If I am not honest and vulnerable with myself, I cannot be that way with my students, making my endeavor as a teacher a moot career choice. Like Jason and North Carolina, can I be a "melody softly soaring through the atmosphere?" (Gibbard, B. 2005. track 16). Is this what my purpose for continuing to work in public education is?

Track 4: What Would Happen

I wonder if I stopped teaching and building relationships to help students be successful, if I stopped advocating for their needs, if I stopped being reverent and incorporating eros into my pedagogy (Liston & Garrison, 2004), if I would revert back into the dark spaces I once lived through. I realize they may be different iterations of my experiences, but I wonder if it would happen, because as "they say we may be through with the past but the past ain't through with us" (Magnolia, 1999) and "it's not what you thought when you first began it" (Mann, 1996). I don't believe anyone's life is what they actually imagine it to be, especially for an educator, and no matter how I try or wish my lived experiences could vanish, I carry them with me every day with every student. I know how I use them now, but I wonder how that will change over the course of my career. Will I ever become that teacher who is brave enough to be completely vulnerable for the sake of her students?

There are different kinds of teachers: aloof, strict, soft, understanding, dedicated, undecided, unprepared and they all have an impact. I wonder if it is possible to create a world of reverent and vulnerable teachers from pulling them out from their own inside. What would public education look like if teachers began to expose, even if just to themselves, their scars that they carry into the classroom and begin tying their own knots to heal their vulnerable experiences? Would this allow them to create relationships that benefit students, or would it drive them away?

B Side: Why Bother with Your Own Lived Experiences?

It's difficult to deconstruct yourself. I found the process to be the most challenging experiences of my life to date, but it helped me understand who I am as an educator and why I continue to navigate the bureaucracy of the public school system. The exploration and reflection of my lived experiences helped me to understand why I wanted to and continue to teach, why the relationships I build with my students are so important to me. Partially, it is selfish. I am rewarded when I meet students where they are and provide them with the tools to advocate for themselves and to be who they want without worrying about the views of others (Freire, 1970). I have also found that by deconstructing myself and looking at my life's experiences I have come to realize that I don't need anyone to fix me. I did that on my own. Students need to know that they don't need to be fixed, that their mistakes are not the whole of their being and if they do find that something needs to be "fixed" they can most likely do it on their own. In order for that to happen, teachers must be willing to admit that they too have made mistakes. They too have veered off the path and perhaps lost themselves. They are just as imperfect as their students.

Undergraduate teacher education programs only vaguely touch on the topic of student trauma, be it abuse, drug interaction, loss of identity, or divorce. The program I graduated from made sure that my teaching and observing experiences were completely different from the type of

schooling I experienced, though little was included in the way of diversity or trauma. This is a serious area that needs to be addressed, especially for future educators and veteran teachers in urban schools. I am fortunate that through my graduate studies and hands-on teaching experiences, I have learned how these situations affect a student's learning and desire to make their own path. Educators need to be made aware early that these situations can have an adverse impact on a student's ability to learn. What we were before we became educators needs to be a part of our daily pedagogy, it is how we form relationships, meet students where they are and provide them the tools to empower themselves no matter the situation. We need to become the "melody softly soaring through [their] atmosphere (Gibbard, B., 2005, track 16).

A teacher's transparency and vulnerability of self may be one of the most important lessons to be learned in teacher education, but unfortunately it is not a focus. Without these elements, and without acknowledging who we are and what we bring into the classroom, we will always struggle to build meaningful relationships with students, those who we can see struggle outwardly, but also those who, like me, hide their trauma, difficulties, and displacement. Being an educator is a dangerous business. A professor in my doctoral studies, Jim Garrison, often said something to the effect of, "Being a teacher ain't no joke, people. You have the power to mess with people's lives," and he is right. We do. But the outcome is in our approach. If we teach with transparency, and embrace our vulnerability as humans, and our students can see that in our pedagogy, that we are there to teach the whole student, not just the curriculum on the page or the requirements from the state, we are able to form a community of learning, of love and compassion. If we are willing to deconstruct ourselves, look at how our lived experiences shape who we are as teachers and take the risk to be "real" for the sake of our students, even in light of rules and regulations, education can be transformative.

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