A Public Education:

The Lived Experiences of One Educator

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Approved April 2016 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2016

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a visual and narrative-based autoethnography that narrates the lived educational experiences of the author from preschool through doctoral studies. The text portrays a story that explores issues of power, identity, and pedagogy in education. Told in narrative form, this project utilizes visual data, thematic coding, layering, and writing as a method of inquiry to investigate and more fully understand injustices found in the American education system. Findings show how the author's identities of student, teacher, and researcher influence and impact one another, and lead to the development of a future vision of self.

By examining the author's roles as a student, teacher, and researcher this study centers on conflicts and inconsistencies that arise at the intersections of self, community, institutions, and society. Included in the narrative's analysis are issues related to positionality, visions of success, empowerment, resistance, neoliberalism, colonialism, psychological distance, and ideological purpose in teaching. The narrative concludes with the development of a personal vision of purposeful, empowering, liberating, and transformative pedagogy.

This study contributes its voice to conversations about inequity and inequality in education by asking the reader to examine conflicts, ask new questions, and critically engage with the dialogic text.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project in honor of all the phenomenal educators I have had the privilege of working with in my lifetime. You inspire and motivate me. Thank you for all the times I left your presence dazed with a mind quake – a new dimension opened in my mind, new thoughts swirling in sudden and exciting comprehensions. Thank you for all the times you challenged and believed in me. Thank you for all the times you showed me care and kindness – understanding that a teacher's medium is the development of hearts as well as minds.

To those whose love, support, patience, and confidence helped bring this narrative to fruition, my most genuine thanks:

Melinda Hollis Thomas

My first graduate school friend! Your generosity, calm, and guidance truly kept me sane throughout this process. Thank you for our friendship and for giving me an example of brilliance to aspire to one day.

Mary and Frank Streff

My parents and first teachers. You have been my loudest cheerleaders throughout my life and never wavered in your belief in me. Thank you for all of your pep talks, support, and all-important free babysitting. I could not have done this, or any of it, without you.

Danny Mazza, Joey Mazza, and the baby in my belly

My husband, son, and unborn child. You are my reason. I love you!

My Students

Both past and future. Your names, faces, and stories are the impetus behind this project.

You deserve only the best.

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Introduction: A Brief Orientation to this Project

This is a story about my life as a student and as a teacher.

I want to tell this story for several reasons. The first reason is self-serving and I am not ashamed to admit it. I want to better understand myself as a student and teacher. The vast majority of my life has played out within the walls of some educational institution, and my identity is tightly bound to the roles of pupil and pedagogue. My thoughts and actions both inside the classroom and out are bound and liberated by these identities, and I believe that careful self-examination will lead me to personal growth.

Another reason I tell this story is to become a better teacher. Teaching is a profession of continuous change where each day, lesson, student, and school holds unique challenges and opportunities. The dynamic and demanding nature of the classroom often left little time for deep consideration of my role or the development of a comprehensive teaching philosophy. In telling this story, I hope to become a better educator for my future students and to heuristically strengthen the ideological foundations of my chosen profession.

The third reason I tell this story is to explore the social, political, pedagogical, and cultural elements that make up my lived experiences. This story is the product of a larger social, institutional, historical, and political landscape. In sharing this narrative, I hope to unpack how I have navigated within this larger framework and how these forces have impacted my praxis.

Finally, I wish to create something that is both revealing and beautiful. After twenty-eight years as a student, teacher, or both, my mind is brimming with memories that range from humorous to heartbreaking. The social contexts of these experiences span different

countries, decades, and educational systems. I find that in the tangled knot of my unexamined recollection, I am not exactly sure what I've experienced. These reminiscences could be untied in any number of ways, but I yearn to depict them in a way that values the expressive, emotional, and aesthetic nature of life. In order to accomplish these goals, I turn to narrative-based research practices to find meaning in the complex social, political, and pedagogical forces of my life.

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"To write about the self is to write about social experience... If culture circulates through all of us, then how can autoethnography not connect to a world beyond itself?"
(Ellis, 2004, p. 34).

Narrative based research, the process of writing and analyzing stories to explore the meaning of human actions, is known by many names: narrative ethnography, autoethnography, performative writing, lyrical sociology, autobiography, narrative heuristics, polyphonic accounts, qualitative inquiry, narrative inquiry, etc. These many approaches reflect the versatility of this method to address the research objectives of a wide range of academic disciplines. In undertaking a study focused on my lived educational experiences I turn to autoethnography as my narrative approach, as other educators have done before me (Ashton-Warner, 1963; hooks, 2003; Kozol, 1991; Palmer, 1993; Pinar; 2004; Rose, 1989; Tompkins, 1996). Reed-Danahay (1997) defines autoethnography as "research (graphy) that connects the personal (auto) to the cultural (ethnos), placing the self within a social context" (p. 145). This cultural self-study can take on many forms, including: conventional social

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science prose (Anderson, 2006; Duncan, 2004; Moreira, 2008; Wall, 2006), Creative Analytic Process ethnography (Richardson, 2000a; Richardson & Pierre, 2005), layered accounts (Holman Jones, 2005; Rambo, 2005; Ronai, 2003), evocative performances (Smith & Hodkinson, 2005; Spry, 2001), and radical democratic politics (Holman Jones, 2005). Ellis and Bochner (2000) observe that the range in forms of autoethnography stems from varying "emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)" and that "[d]ifferent exemplars of autoethnography fall at different places along the continuum of each of these three areas" (p. 740).

In this autoethnographic narrative project I focus the examination on my educational experiences as student, teacher, and researcher within the cultural context of the U.S. education system in order "to raise significant questions about prevailing policy and practice that enrich an ongoing conversation" (Barone, 2007, p. 466). As a justice-minded scholar, I am interested in how people are influenced, constrained and liberated by culture. As a social scientist, I am interested in making idiographic research that builds understanding around the unique lived experiences of individuals. As an educator, I am interested in deepening my interpretation of educational matters from both an individual and institutional level. And with this particular study, I focus my examination on my own life in order to pore over these three specific questions:

- What do my educational experiences reveal about my identity as a student, teacher, and researcher?

- What do my educational experiences reveal about power-relations in education and society?

- What do my educational experiences reveal about pedagogy?

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In examining these questions I utilize narrative-based autoethnography for three reasons. First, autoethnographic narrative is ideal for focusing on exploring the life of an individual and describing a detailed analysis of culture (Creswell, 2007). As a method, narrative inquiry is used for understanding human interactions and exploring how people think, act, and know (Goodall, 2008). Autoethnography concentrates these understandings by making an intimate, sustained examination of the individual; the author. Second, autoethnography prioritizes experiential data rather than relegating it to a colorful side note as other quantitative-leaning methods tend to do. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that "narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience" (p. 18) because humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Third, autoethnographic narrative allows for the consideration of the aesthetic in social science research. Visual narratives, poems, and rich descriptions are encouraged in order to build robust representations and develop meanings. One of the great triumphs of autoethnographic narrative writing is that it liberates researchers from abstract, impersonal writings and is often more comprehensible, or better able to connect with a broader audience than traditional social science prose (Gergen & Gergen, 2002; Goodall, 2008; Nash, 2004). Given my desire to create a text for the general audience of justice-minded educators, producing a work that was concrete, personal, and understandable drove my decision to use a narrative-based format.

What My Project Is and What It Isn't

Embedded in the examination of my individual experiences as a student, educator, and researcher are a set of theoretical and epistemological assumptions. I agree with Polkinghorne's (1992) assessment that

> the human realm is fragmented and disparate… knowledge of this realm is a human construction without a sure foundation. Yet this knowledge has not led to a retreat into a disparaging skepticism; rather, it has led to an openness to diverse approaches for serving people in distress… The critical terminology of the epistemology of practice has shifted from metaphors of correctness to those of utility. (p. 162)

Guided by this principal, this research is more concerned with answering the question "it is useful or illuminating?" than "is it right?" (Reason & Rowan, 1981). In this autoethnographic narrative I am concerned with the question of whether or not the text effectively communicates analysis and what readers do with this knowledge (Bochner, 2002). In this view, the focus of generalizability moves from the respondents to the readers (Ellis, 2004). By recounting my lived educational experiences in narrative form, I attempt to put my lived experiences to use by encouraging meaning making in the reader and practical development in myself.

This autoethnographic inquiry is inspired by an epistemology "of ambiguity that seeks out and celebrates meanings that are partial, tentative, incomplete, sometimes contradictory, and originating from multiple vantage points" (Barone, 2001, pp. 152-153). This framework favors local structures, rather than large abstract social structures and therefore values local narratives over larger ones. Rather than attempting to produce summative research with absolute "Truths" that depict reality as it is (or as it was), this

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formative research aims to enhance the meaning of my lived experiences in an age that is complex, non-linear, subjective, unique, plural, and constantly in flux (Anyon, 1994). Rambo (2007) explains that "autoethnography is reflexive, personal, and emotional and often serves as cultural critique, posing more questions than it answers. It is a moment in an open, ongoing, dialogue with oneself and an audience" (p. 364). Or explained another way, "rather than believing in the presence of an external, unconstructed truth, researchers on this end of the continuum embrace narrative truth, which means that the experiences they depict become believable, lifelike, and possible" (Ellis, 2004, p. 30). By creating a narrative which allows the reader to enter my own subjective interpretation of reality, I acknowledge that my understanding and presentation of events, circumstances, people, and places is open to discussion from both myself and the reader. I believe that this subjective nature of autoethnography is one of its strengths, where the aim is to produce partial knowledge and increased understanding (Barone, 2001; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Stemming from the belief that research is not a sterile act and that narrative inquiry is always partial, local and situational, Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) argue that "there is no such thing as 'getting it [writing] right,' only 'getting it' differently contoured and nuanced" (p. 962). Barone and Eisner (2012) argue that research like this attempts to "persuade the percipients of the work (including the artist herself) to revisit the world from a different direction, seeing it through fresh eyes, and thereby calling into question a singular, orthodox point of view" (p. 16). Richardson (2000a) acknowledges that the process and product of narrative inquiry are deeply intertwined and both reflect the subjectivity of the researcher because "the product cannot be separated from the producer, the mode of production or the method of knowing" (p. 962).

Narrative research leaves space for readers to "live their own experience of the phenomenon by reading [a] text and interpreting it through the filter of their own stocks of knowledge" (Ronai, 1997, p. 419). While more conventional research is designed to argue or lead readers to specific, generalizable findings, this work presents truth claims as unfinished and open for interpretation. This rejection of master narratives counteracts the idea of a "complete" or fully resolved autoethnography. There will be no "ending" or grand conclusion in my analysis of issues of power, identity, and pedagogy in this study. Instead, the text I have produced conveys an acceptable-to-me-at-the-moment portrayal and theoretical understanding of these issues. By choosing to employ the detailed style of nonfiction in this autoethnographic narrative, I strove to create something which is informative as well as persuasive in its arguments about cultural attitudes, interpretations, opinions, and actions (Anderson, 1987). Through the acts of writing and reflecting upon what has been written, I endeavored to think through the consequences, values, and moral dilemmas stemming from my experiences. In presenting my thinking and analytic process, I hope to evoke readers' responses, raise significant questions, open up the possibility for dialogue, collaboration, and relationship, and promote social justice and equality (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Bochner, 2002).

Furthermore, because the text exists in a dynamic, complex and subjective world, "my intended meaning at the time of producing this… will have changed with the passage of time, if I am asked to explain what it means" (Ronai, 1994, p. 399).

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The story and discussion that follows are products of my autoethnographic inquiry into power, identity, and pedagogy in the American education system.

Part one is a collection of personal narratives based on my lived experiences as a student, teacher, and researcher in education. This narrative combines written and visual vignettes into a layered account (Ronai, 1991) in order to produce an aesthetically visual product alongside critical interpretation (Pink, 2001). It is written with the intention of providing the reader with an evocative telling (Ellis, 2004) that encourages meaning making, emotional connection, and raises significant questions about American public education. Through my story telling I attempt to confront the inconsistencies, conflicts, and discrepancies found in my lived experiences and my interpretations of these happenings, while allowing the narrative to sit in an unresolved state.

In sticking with my goal of capturing the nebulous feeling of these experiences, the narrative is not written in chronological order. Rather it has been layered in such a way that the individual vignettes build upon or play off one another, as another manner of sense-making. As an organizational mechanism, changes in different temporal, spatial, or attitudinal realms are denoted through the use of three asterisks. A timeline of experiences is also provided for reference in the Appendix section. Capturing the complex and compound aspects of my roles as both researcher and researched, the voice and tone of each vignette vacillates between abstract theoretical thinking, introspection, emotional experience, images, dreams, and statistics. In order to protect the identities of people, places, and organizations included in this narrative, I have omitted identifying information or created pseudonyms, changed identifying characteristics, and if needed, employed fictionalization as a method to

"get to the truth of… experience without risking revealing the identity of a specific character or place" (Ellis, 2004, p. 125).

Part two is a theoretical and methodological discussion about using autoethnographic narrative inquiry as a research method for this study. I revisit the guiding research questions, present project goals, discuss parameters for project evaluation, explain style and content choices, and consider ethical issues related to autoethnography. Next, I go on to present how methods were implemented by describing the project's research design, a three phase cyclical model of (1) data collection and creation, (2) data management, and (3) analysis. Finally, I end with a summary of findings and discussion of project limitations.

Ultimately, my goal with this project is to gain better insights about the injustices found in the American education system and to better understand my own positionality as a teacher, student, and researcher within this system.

And so, with these considerations, my story about schooling begins…

Part 1: A Personal Narrative about Schooling

Figure 1. Kindergarten portrait of author, 1990.

Prologue

I am an educator. At nine years old my father came home with a green classroom-sized chalkboard in the back of his truck, and my heart leapt with excitement. I promptly lined up a dozen of my favorite stuffed animals, dolls, and unamused younger brother, opened my first box of chalk, and, unknowingly, began a life-long endeavor.

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My earliest memories of school are based in fear, competition, and rebellion:

Fear

The unfamiliar pressure of a nearly empty backpack on my shoulders

The sashay of my first-day-of-school dress and the pinch of sparkly new jelly sandals as we

walk together

The reassuring hold of my mother's hand as we wait for the big yellow school bus to arrive

There's Johnny walking to the corner with his mother and father too

The adults make small talk

Johnny and I stare nervously at one another

We know each other from Preschool, but hang close to our parents

Waiting feels like forever

More kids arrive, BIG kids

I didn't know this many children lived nearby

I hear the screech of tires and distinct rumble of the bus engine as it comes around the

corner

My heart is pounding

The bus hisses to a stop, kids start piling on

Mom and Dad give me hugs and tell me to have a good day

I get in the line and focus on climbing the large bus stairs

The driver directs me and the other Kindergartener's to sit in front

The door closes and I see my parents waving out the window

Off we go to the first day of school

I am nervous and fearful

Competition

"No! That's *not* Arizona." Lyle adamantly yanks the state-shaped puzzle piece from my hand and I topple over. "This is Arizona!" he asserts, holding a rectangle shaped state up.

I yank my piece back, "Yes it is!" and slam the puzzle piece into place on the map. He is wrong and I know it. "This is *Arizona*," I say dramatically while holding the piece in his face. "That is Colorado. Go ask the teacher!" Lyle angrily kicks the puzzle off the table and walks away. I am irritated and smug. He was wrong, I was right, and now he knows it.

I am smarter than him.

Rebellion

It is lunch time at preschool. Thirty three-year-olds sit (as much as their constantly moving bodies will allow them to sit) around a long bench waiting for their food. The room is loud with chatter and the walls are bright with primary colors. On one side of the table a hungry child picks up his fork and spoon, one in each hand, and exclaims, "We want food!" The children around him immediately join his call to action, grabbing their silverware in fists and chant along, "We want food!" The tune ripples down the table until all the children are protesting their hungry bellies and this incessant need to "wait" and "be patient" with a

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raucous pounding of fists and exuberant noise. I am three, loving every second of this rebellious act, and experiencing the exhilarating power of organized disobedience for the first time.

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Jarell brings me a gift. It is a Mexican wooden carved hedgehog with a sort of cackling laugh painted in bright colors on its face. He says, "I got this for you Mrs. Mazza. Thank you for being my teacher. My Grandma wanted me to give you this too." It is a card that he hands to me before he runs towards his older brother who is waiting to walk home. It reads:
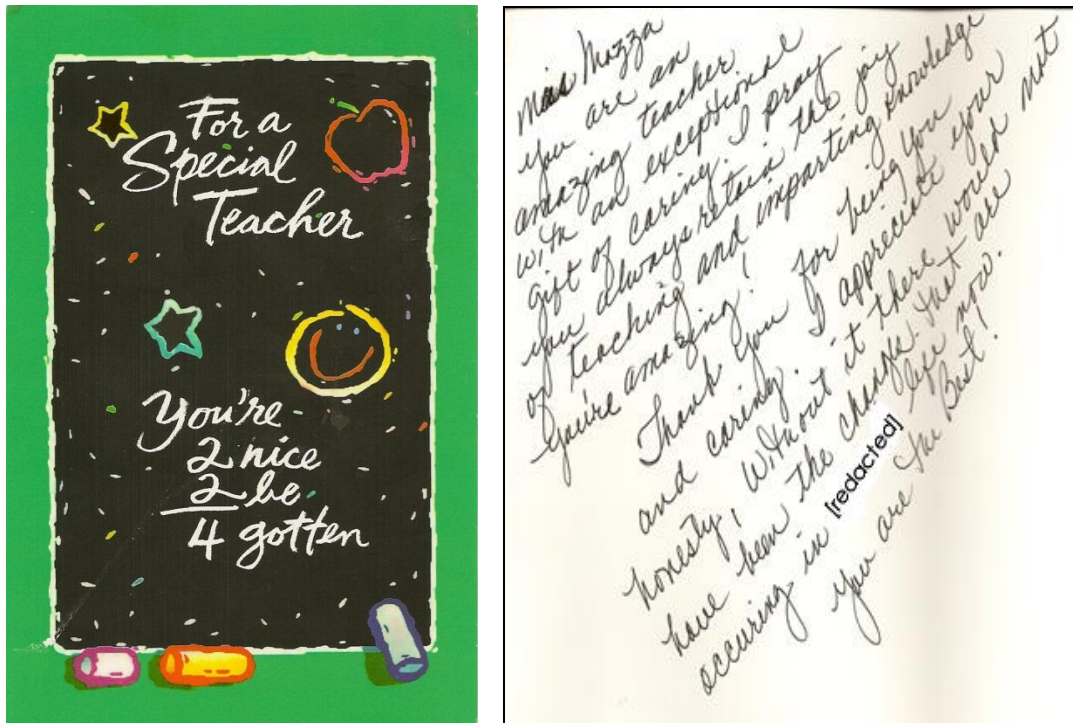
Figure 2. Front and back of thank you card.

This card, coming from this family, a family who has seen more than their share of struggle and loss, means more to me than any other student love note. It validates my efforts to develop into a caring and knowledgeable educator. It confirms that her grandsons are starting to take down their emotional defenses, buy into our happy classroom community, and enjoy school. If grandma, a woman with a reputation for going head to head with teachers and administrators when things aren't up to her scrupulous standards, can see it, then her words are enough validation for me. I am making a difference. It feels wonderful.

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University Instructor

Relieved to locate an open table with shade to momentarily escape the sweltering Arizona heat, I power up my laptop and gaze at the scene around me. A teenager with blaring headphones whizzes by on a skateboard as an art student struggles to carry an easel, canvas, and art supplies across the portico, presumably to their next class. The loud click-clack of heels on pavement and boisterous chatter of a group of mostly blonde sorority pledges reverberates as they make their way to some Greek event. The smell of french fries and hamburgers wafts from the tables of nearby coeds seated around me. Excitement, youth, potential, activity, and vitality spring from the world around me. This buzzing feeling of aliveness is the one that I treasure most about the being on a university campus.

My university email fully loaded, I quickly scan through the spam, to the email I have been waiting for: a reply from an undergraduate student who I am worried about. With only a month into my first semester as a university instructor, I am baffled as to how a seemingly

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conscientious and invested student would suddenly stop showing up for class with such a

strict attendance requirement. Feeling worried about him, but still negotiating my new role as

"university instructor," I sent Isaac an email coolly detailing course policies, explaining that

he would need to attend every remaining class this semester in order to avoid negatively

impacting his participation grade. The email I receive back brings my high and mighty

professor behind right back down to earth. He writes:
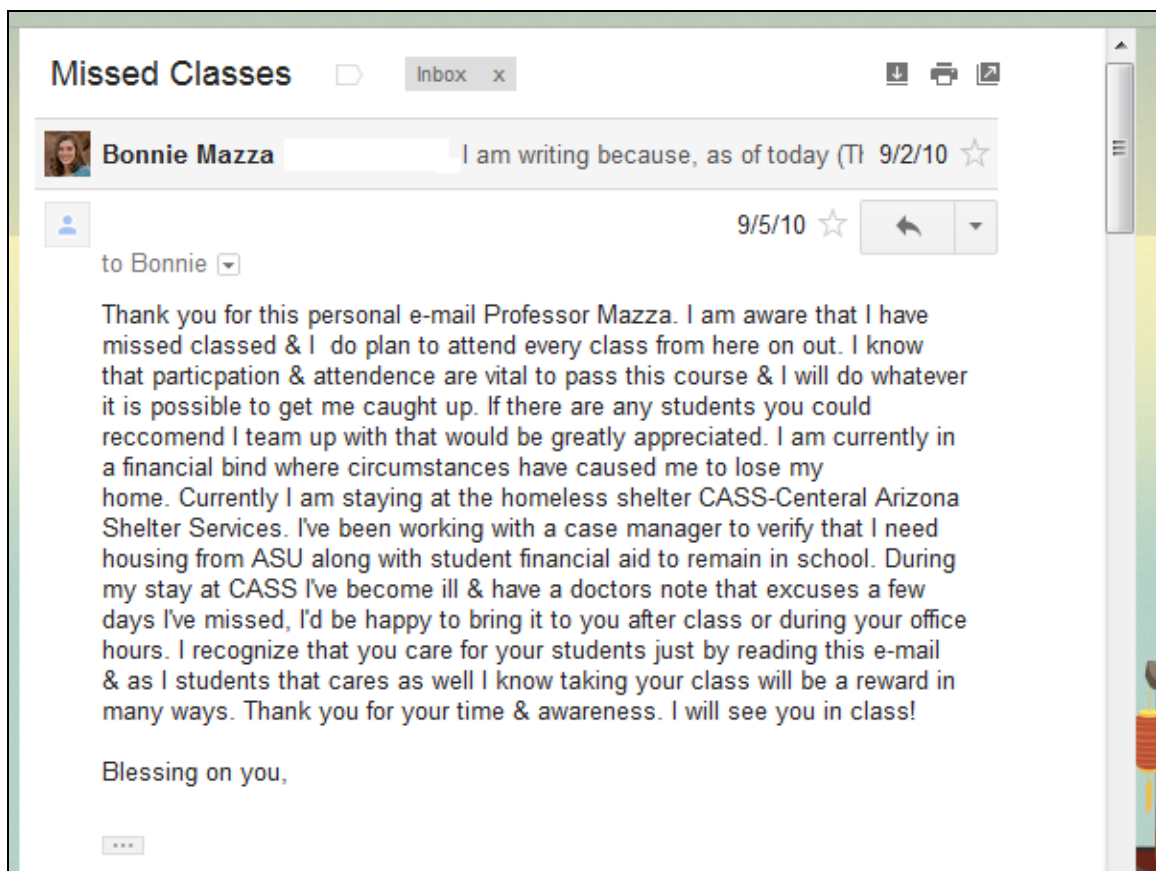
Figure 3. Computer screenshot of email from Isaac.

Homeless. Another student who was homeless. Only this time at the university.

My heart starts aching. This was not the response I had expected. In fact, this possibility had never crossed my mind. A homeless college student? Where was his family? Was he in some kind of trouble? How was he paying for his college tuition? Wasn't college supposed to be a time of gilded self-discovery and carefree personal growth? All these questions reveal more about my own reality than anything about Isaac.

Looking up from my computer to the blue sky above, I recount what I know about Issac. His black skin and tall stature certainly stick out in the sea of mostly white, female education majors that typically take the "Understanding the Culturally Diverse Child" education course. However it is his eager and thoughtful participation in class discussions that truly sets him apart. His skilled oratory abilities have quickly convinced me of a desire to learn and prove he is not afraid to ask questions or challenge others. As an undecided freshman at ASU, my class is one of his first. During our first day introductions, he mentioned that he was raised in Phoenix, has deep ties to a local black church, and is an activist for civil rights. I am pleased to have him in the class and hope his enthusiasm encourages other students to open up as well. But then he stopped coming to class.

In drafting my email reply, written in a far more caring tone, I sympathize with his situation, encourage him that he can still be successful in my class, and direct him to the notes and lectures he has missed. I hit send and stare at my computer screen. A feeling of despondency comes over me. Was what I wrote enough? What more should I do to help him? Should I look into what other services ASU might offer struggling students? Maybe that would be overstepping my bounds? I've had this unsettling, anguished feeling before – the first time I was confronted with a students' homelessness four years prior.

Figure 4. TFA Corps Members on the bus returning from a day of summer school teaching.

Figure 5. TFA identification card for Summer 2007.

My First Day of Solo Teaching: Summer 2007

My heart is racing and my palms are sweating. I am pulsing with adrenaline and nervous energy despite very little sleep. As I pile onto the yellow school bus with the other anxious and exhausted corps members, the thought sears through my mind again: I am going to teach today. As the bus leaves the manicured university parking lot and winds its way through downtown Atlanta into a rundown and weary neighborhood, I feel the awesome weight of responsibility. Today I am responsible for teaching a room full of children a math lesson they will need to pass their end of summer exam. An exam that will determine whether or not they will move on to the next grade. Today will be the only day we will cover simplification of simple fractions, and I have to get it right.

Every young teacher arrives at this moment: the first day of leading a class by themselves. However the training and preparedness leading up this moment is as varied as the teachers who do this work. My qualifications to teach this group of fifth grade Atlanta Public School students include my recently earned college degree, acceptance into Teach for America (TFA), and two weeks (so far) of haphazard training at Teach for America's Summer Institute.

I do not feel ready. Not because of the material I am going to teach (*I* know how to reduce a fraction, so it can't be that hard to teach it, right?), or because I've never worked with students (I've tutored for years and even taught internationally with a nonprofit NGO), but because of the horror stories I have heard, read, and watched over the years. I've internalized the narrative of the white, savior teacher (shown in movies like *Dangerous Minds*

or *Music of the Heart*) and am scared and intimidated to be teaching *these* kids. Poor, urban, minority kids from the rough inner-city who have failed fifth grade and are required to be in summer school. But I would never say this aloud; admit to this dark, prejudiced thought.

Although I have met my students and interacted with them for an entire week before today, it was always with other Corps Members (CMs), TFA teachers in training. And always with only two or three kids in a small group and under the quiet supervision of a district-contracted teacher. This thought calms me a little. Mrs. Hamilton will still be there today watching from the back. If things go terribly wrong she will be there to intervene. Oh God! What if she has to intervene? Or what if someone from TFA comes in to observe and I am bombing? As per usual, I am far too concerned with the approval of my "superiors" than I should be.

I *should* be focusing on how I will connect with these kids. Kids who I view as so very different from me. Kids who, like myself, have suspiciously eyed me over the past week trying to figure out our dynamic. Instead I am terrified about how I am supposed to control them. I've been shown video after video of what an orderly classroom should look like by TFA, but still haven't a clue on how to make this happen. Anxiety swirls around my head during the daily TFA morning meeting and first training session of the day. I keep glancing at the classroom clock modeling the bad behaviors I hope to avoid with my own students. Only 5 minutes until this session ends and it's my time to go teach! My stomach leaps.

As I walk into the classroom, Jeff, one of my three teaching team members, is finishing up his language lesson, which has also been his first solo lesson ever. I can see that one student is sitting in the "time-out" desk for some unknown offense and my pulse quickens. I wonder what happened? The rest of the students are either staring vacantly as

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Jeff explains context clues, or are scribbling on their worksheets. "Tonight for homework finish this worksheet front and back," Jeff begins handing out the assignment. This is my cue to transition to math and I quickly jot out our lesson objective on the chalkboard: "Students Will Be Able To Reduce Simple Fractions."

Mrs. Hamilton tells Curtis to return to his normal seat from the time-out desk. I take a deep breath and turn toward the class to begin my lesson. I see eight disinterested faces, one girl with her head on her desk, and Curtis slowly swaggering back to his seat. Undiscouraged I begin my carefully prepared opening speech, lesson plan clutched tightly in my hand like a shield, "Good morning class! Once again, my name is Ms. Streff and today I am going to be your math teacher. We are going to learn about fractions…" and audible groan rumbles through the room "and how to simplify them."

Unexpectedly, a hand goes up in the middle of the room. It is Deja, a usually quiet student. "Where are you from? Mr. Stevens and Ms. Tran told us about themselves before they started teaching." A few students chime in with "yeahs" and perk up in their seats.

Flustered, I glance at the clock to see I am already starting ten minutes behind schedule. "Ok. I am from Phoenix, Arizona, the desert. I've lived there my whole life."

"Do you have brothers or sisters?" Jamarcus asks from the other side of the room, his arms crossed on his chest.

"Uh… yeah, I have one brother, a younger brother."

"What about dogs? Do you have any dogs?" A small giggle is beginning to build around the room. Realizing that they are purposefully wasting time, I nervously glance at Mrs. Hamilton in the back of the room and attempt to forge ahead.

"No, I don't have any dogs. Ok guys, we need to focus on our math lesson today. I have a worksheet to pass out." I turn and bend down to get the worksheet from my satchel and hear the distinct metal rattle of a desk chair on cheap linoleum tile as it is pushed back.

Still bent over, I see Curtis stand up and point at me. He enthusiastically shouts, "Big booty hoe!" holding the "o" sound for a while so that it builds and echoes around the room.

My eyes bulge and there is an excruciating second of silence as I straighten back up. The class loses it.

Students are laughing wildly. Jamarcus actually falls out of his chair as he clutches his stomach in rip-roaring laughter. I am horrified and mute.

In a flash, Mrs. Hamilton is up from her desk and by Curtis's side. Her presence is powerful and quiet falls over the rest of the classroom. She commands him to move, and he continues to chuckle madly and protests as she ushers him out of the room and into the hall. As they move out of earshot a dozen faces swing towards me, dumbly clutching my worksheets. I hear a few soft nervous giggles.

This moment feels like a thousand as I realize I am the lone "adult" and need to be in charge. I quickly walk to the nearest desk and begin passing out the worksheets. My voice shakes as I say, "We are going to start with the idea of a fraction. Can someone tell me what a fraction is? Kiara?"

Kiara stares for a moment and then says, "It's like a piece of something."

"Good. Ok, so if you look at example one…"

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I am defeated as I leave the classroom. My cinematic fears had come true. What on earth am I doing? Who am I to teach? I have no idea what I am doing, despite Teach for America's insistence that with some perseverance, urgency, and their training I will "change lives." Did Curtis really just yell "big booty hoe" at me as I bent down in front of the class? If I wasn't so close to tears I would laugh at the ridiculousness of it. The kid has gall!

I know I have failed miserably at trying to get the math lesson across to the students. In between giggles and my awkward stumbling, it was clear that most of them were lacking the basic knowledge about fractions to even attempt simplifying. When Ms. Hamilton returned to the classroom without Curtis (who I'm assuming was now in the Principal's office), it was nearly time to stop in order to let my next teaching partner start her reading lesson (good luck with that!). The transition could not have been more welcome.

My debriefing with Ms. Hamilton would take place tomorrow afternoon, but in the meantime I am supposed to prepare tomorrow's math lesson – the one that builds on the skills the students supposedly learned today. I put my head in my hands. I have no idea where to begin. How am I supposed to teach these kids?

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These kids. Who were *these kids*? How dare a kid act this way towards a teacher! How could Curtis possibly behave this way? I would *never* have done this to *my* teachers. I am lying in the dormitory bunk bed TFA has provided for CMs during our summer training, with my head spinning. I couldn't even imagine talking to a teacher like that. (Nevermind that I also never had to attend summer school for failing, or did anything to merit a referral in all 13

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years of my K-12 schooling. Nor that I had never had a reason to question the system of power and control played out in classrooms all over America). How am I supposed to control a kid like him? How am I supposed to get through to him? All he wanted to do was be the class clown.

My indignation building, I barely consider how my identity, my actions, my incompetence, or the larger systemic framework had contributed to the day's unnerving (yet humorous) events. The next day, Mrs. Hamilton explains that while at the Principal's office Curtis reluctantly revealed that he was currently homeless and sneaking into a camper trailer each night for a place to sleep. Besides being a guaranteed way to eat breakfast and lunch, Summer School also meant Curtis could sit in the comfort of air-conditioning during the sweltering Atlanta summer. These were his reasons for attending each day. His father had left town to find work a few weeks ago and Curtis had been doing a decent job of hiding his situation from the adults around him. His classroom outburst had been an unintentional call for help. Once his situation was discovered, authorities were contacted and Curtis stopped coming to summer school.

This news was all too disheartening to take in. My anger dissipated and I felt nothing but sadness, pity, and compassion for my student. A much better question started bubbling in my mind: Who was *I* to teach these kids? And how on earth did Curtis, an eleven year old kid, get to this terrible place?

Having graduated with a degree in psychology, my knowledge and skills were designed for research and development theory – not teaching. My own terrible incompetence and lack of teaching qualifications were overlooked by Atlanta Public Schools because of Teach for America's influence and endorsement. It hadn't occurred to me to

deeply consider the grave injustice myself and the other novice (if you could even call us that) teachers were doing in being permitted to teach these students. Ms. Hamilton, a seasoned teacher who was raised in this community with years of professional experience and cultural competency was relegated to taking notes in the back of the classroom while she watched her students learn very little from a bunch of affluent, (mostly) white, baby-faced outsiders. How did she feel about the damage we were doing by being permitted to "teach" students who needed solid instruction, understanding, and support most of all? I never thought to ask her.

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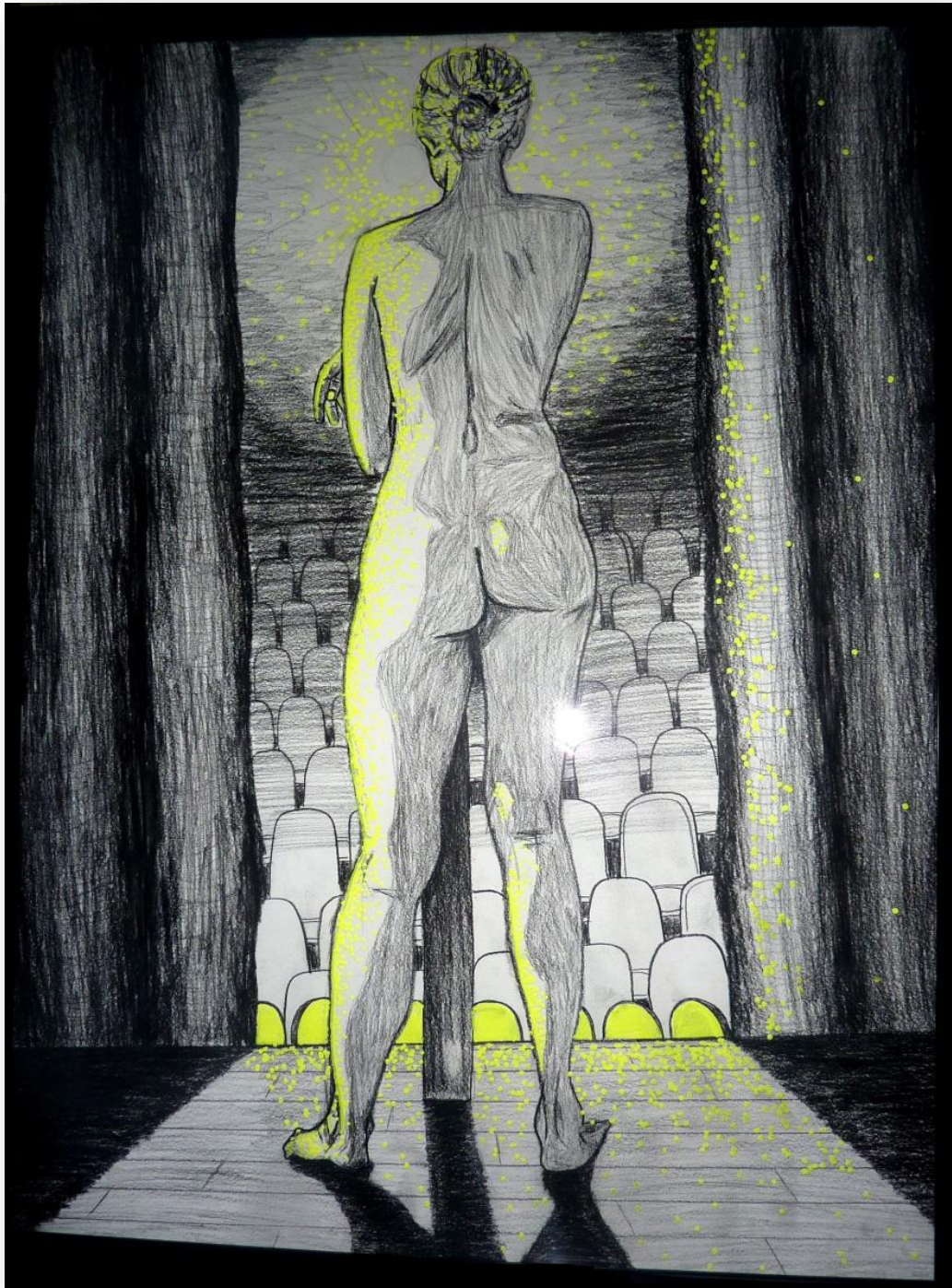
Figure 6. "On Stage", 2005, charcoal on paper (created by author as undergraduate).

Chapter 1: Student

Comparison is the Thief of Joy

       The lives of students like Curtis revealed a harsh and unloving world that I could not imagine as a young adult, let alone as a child. How different my life as a student had been in the fifth grade.

       My childhood was a wonderland. My mother coached my softball team and was the leader of my Girl Scout troop. My father built tree forts, taught us to use power tools, and drove us to car shows in his numerous classic cars. High school sweethearts who married at twenty, my parents filled our home with love, safety, comfort, structure, and guidance. I wanted for little, and was given incredible experiences and opportunities. Our well-kept suburban home had a giant backyard that was the envy of all my friends. My bedroom (no need to share with my brother), was complete with a warm comfortable princess bed, numerous toys, books, music, clothes, and an extensive glass doll collection to entertain myself. I had rollerblades and a bicycle, which I rode to school each day or to visit nearby friends. Our neighborhood was quiet and safe, with my biggest complaint being that I wish there had been more kids my age near us. I lived in this same home my entire life and attended an excellent public school with the same kids since Kindergarten (or in some cases Preschool). This stability and uninterrupted prosperity had great impact on my development: I grew into a confident, healthy, and "well-adjusted" girl who loved to learn, read, write, and try new things. *This* was my privileged reality in the fifth grade and throughout my childhood. How different it was from Curtis'.

<center>***</center>

Growing up I had the good fortune to attend the Paradise Valley School District in Phoenix, a public school district with an excellent reputation, stable community, and ample resources. I had the sort of teachers and administrators that poured themselves into their profession. Many had spent decades teaching and had built a truly loving and welcoming environment at my elementary school. We went on out-of-state field trips, hosted world renowned speakers who shared their stories of struggle and triumph (I still have signed copies from authors like Ruby Bridges, Shel Silverstein, and a WWII holocaust survivor who read their books aloud at our school), held school-wide award ceremonies where we sang our school song and were recognized for our achievements, had thriving extracurriculars including art, computers, music, library, band, and physical education, put on school wide performances, competed in state-wide competitions, and earned top notch ratings as a school (A+++++ hung proudly outside our school office, and extra + added for each year we earned the mark from the '90s Arizona school grading system). My school felt safe and I liked being there. It was bright, colorful, and full of the happy sounds and sights of a thriving community of students. I felt ownership of my school, having attended with the same kids for seven or more years. When it came time to move from sixth grade to middle school, I felt sad to leave such a wonderful learning environment behind, and as a commemorative gesture my parents (along with many others) bought bricks engraved with our names to be added to the entranceway, a figurative gesture of how much Liberty had helped build us into a young people.

<center>28</center>

Liberty Elementary School Song:

(Chorus) Liberty, Liberty, Super School!

Fun and friendship is our rule

Visit us and we'll know you

Be impressed with Liberty school

Sun shines bright what a beautiful sight

Students glow like rays of light

Smiling faces at each turn

A special place to live and learn

(Repeat Chorus) Liberty, Liberty, Super School!

Fun and friendship is our rule

Visit us and we'll know you

Be impressed with Liberty school!

I always did well in school, although I never tested into any gifted programs. My enthusiastic questions and undeterred participation in class inevitably solidified my spot as one of the teacher's favorites. Always eager to please, I made friends easily and won the affection of teachers, administrators and lunch ladies alike. Versatility, competitiveness, and a tomboy spirit meant that I excelled in art class, P.E., and writing. A few of my art pieces won prizes at the State Fair, I was one of the few girls you could find playing flag football with the boys at recess, and, by special invitation, myself and three other blossoming authors were

given private writing lessons after hours at our teacher's home. I was accustomed to succeeding at most things I tried. In thirteen years of schooling, I received poor behavioral marks on one report card and was so ashamed as my fifth grade teacher explained to my parents my recent change in attitude that I decided I was done trying to fit in with the "cool kids." They worked too hard to impress each other anyway. I was, by most accounts, a model student. So much so that I was presented the "Humanitarian Award" at the end of seventh grade and the "Best Girl" award in eighth grade.

HUMANITARIAN AWARDS TROPHY

The famous writer Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once wrote, "Give what you have. To some one, it may be better than you dare to think."

Our next award, the Humanitarian Trophy, was planned by the staff of Sunrise Middle School to recognize student who have given selflessly.

Our recipient of this year's trophy has shown, through her acts of kindness, what it is to give. She is always there to lend a helping hand, to give words of encouragement and to listen to problems. She never expects anything in return for her good intentions and graciously smiles as her charity unknowingly effects those around her. Her thoughtfulness and genuine understanding of the human spirit is an inspiration to all of us.

On behalf of the A.C.E.S. team, it is my sincere privilege to ward this year's Humanitarian Trophy

to

Bonnie Streff

Figure 7. Framed speech delivered by teacher when receiving Humanitarian Award, 1998.

I worked hard at what interested me and actively sought opportunities. Inspired by reading Little Women cover to cover (my twelve year old self would like to you inform you that this book is over 600 pages), I decided I would write my first novel in the summer between sixth grade and middle school. With fifty pages written, I brought my draft to my English teacher and was told it reminded her of the *Clan of the Cave Bear* series (better praise could not have been given). I was the Editor-in-Chief of our middle school yearbook, sang the National Anthem acapella at our choir performance, and played a leading role in the drama club's musical. I was in mostly advanced classes and joined the National Junior Honor Society. My identity as an achievement junkie had begun.

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High school did nothing but accelerate this inclination. My high school was one of the finest public schools in the state academically, athletically, and artistically. We had won national championships, a burgeoning drama program, a multitude of clubs and activities, and plentiful AP, advanced and gifted programs available for students. I attended National Honor Society meetings, spent countless hours after school as Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper, worked as a stagehand for school performances, attended scholarly conferences out of state, pole-vaulted my way into a school record and district championship, volunteered as a Spanish tutor, earned a full ride scholarship to all three in-state universities, and worked four different jobs ranging from grocery store clerk to hot air balloon assistant. I made lasting relationships including a strong circle of wonderful friends who I hold close to this day. And, most importantly, I fell in love with an upperclassman, who today I call my

husband. I loved being in high school and high school, it seemed, loved having me there. My status as a hard-working, Type-A, status-obsessed, over-achiever was solidified.

The American education system worked for me. Surely it worked for most students.

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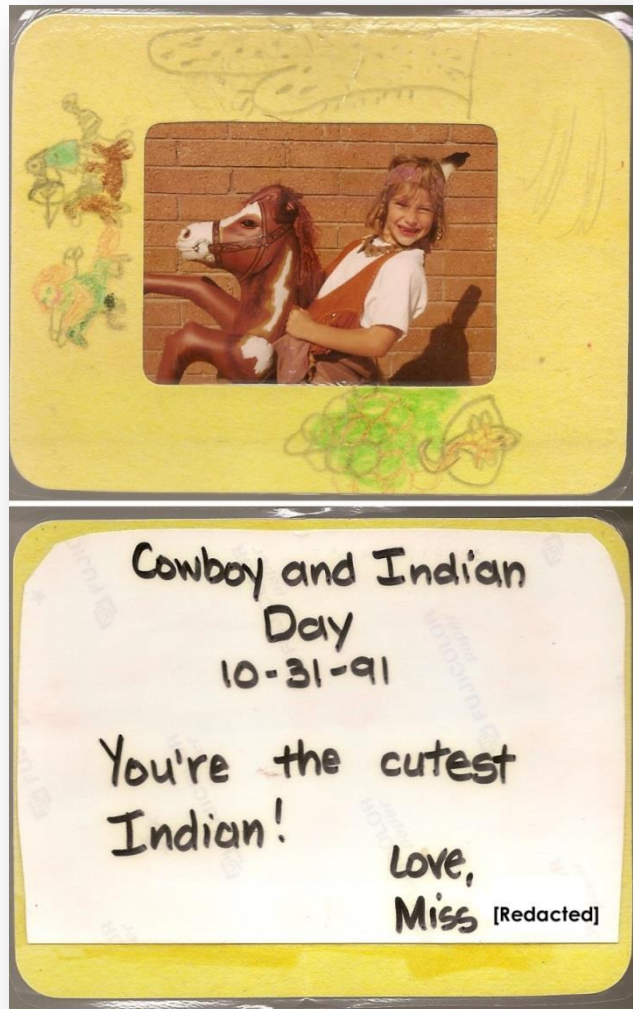
Figure 8. Picture from first grade classroom celebration of Social Studies Unit, 1991.

Figure 9. Singing on stage during an Elementary School Holiday performance.
Photo credit: Mary Streff.

Figure 10. Working in Fifth grade classroom (fourth from left), 1996.
Photo credit: Mary Streff.

Figure 11. High school softball portrait, 2000.

Figure 12. High school track and field portrait, 2001.

Figure 13. Posing in cap and gown before heading to high school graduation ceremony, 2003.
Photo credit: Mary Streff.

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I could not be more eager to begin my first year as a college freshman, and so as a

senior took community college courses to get credits ahead of time. Another example of her

continued support and backing, my mother (who hadn't attended college) enrolled and took

these classes alongside me and we teasingly competed for the best grades in English and Philosophy together (she beat me in English!). I graduated from high school towards the top of my class and became one of the first in my large extended family to attend university.

I started university in a blissful high of independence and quickly realized what a good education I had received – while other college freshman were struggling to transition to college level curriculum, I felt over-prepared for most of the introductory courses and was on the Dean's list my first year. I remained undecided for my first two years, flirting with the ideas of majoring in Spanish, Education, or Art, but finally decided on Psychology (with a double minor) because it fascinated me. As was my custom, I dove into the opportunities presented to me over the next four years – maintaining my academic scholarship, earning free room and board as a Resident Assistant in the dorms, teaching HIV/AIDS education in rural Tanzania, conducting, presenting, and winning research awards, painting a community mural with my upper level art class for NASA to commemorate the partnership between UA and the Phoenix Mars Mission Lander (Poulson, 2006), studying in Guatemala for a semester, and graduating magna cum laude from the Honors College.
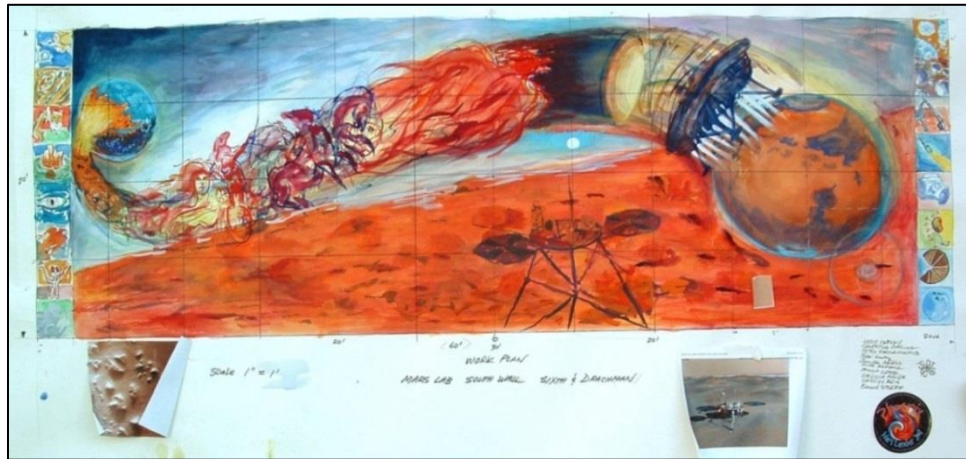
Figures 14 - 16. Progression of Phoenix Mars Mission Lander mural from idea to completion, 2006. Photo credit, Figure 16: Nick Streff.

Figure 17. Close up of cap at University of Arizona graduation ceremony, 2006.
Photo credit: Mary Streff.

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I realize now how many of these endeavors fall under "the things, affluent white people are supposed to do" category. Study abroad experience? Check. Volunteer experience? Check. General confusion about life direction upon graduation? Check. I had just barreled head first down a 19 year journey from pre-school to college graduation checking prescribed boxes as I went, becoming as marketable and "successful" a person as possible to arrive at this moment: It was my senior year and I had a stellar resume, but no answer to the question, "What do you want to do when you graduate?" Enter Teach for America.

The discussion is starting to get heated. Even after four years of teaching this college course, it still amazes me that we arrive at this point in the conversation so quickly. It is day three of discussing race and ethnicity in education, and I am beginning to edge on the idea of white privilege by challenging colorblindness. Strongly held beliefs are beginning to show. A freshman education major raises her hand, frustration etched on her face.

"So you're saying that colorblindness is bad? Racism is bad!" I hear a former version of myself in her emotional declaration.

I move closer to where she is seated but address the entire class in my response "You're right. Racism is bad. But acknowledging race doesn't make a person racist. Just like acknowledging gender doesn't make a person a sexist. Being a woman is a part of your identity, right?" I pause for her head nod. "And I'm guessing it's an important part of how you think about yourself and interact with the world. The same may be true of your future students and their racial identities. We live in a culture that subliminally promotes colorblindness but at the same time systematically oppresses people on the basis of race and ethnicity. I'm arguing that by choosing to ignore racial differences, we disregard the individuality of our students, invalidate racist experiences, and accept the larger societal injustices that harm our society. If we ignore race then we can't tackle discriminatory injustices."

"But how are you supposed to acknowledge differences without offending someone? Or by relying on stereotypes?" a non-education major in the back pipes up.

"Every situation will call for a different response, but I believe one of the most important ways to avoid stereotyping is to build meaningful relationships with your students by learning about them and their community. Teaching is a constant journey of discovery, and that includes teachers learning alongside their students. The truth is, in Arizona 80% of public school teachers are white (U.S. Department of Education, 2012), while less than half of Arizona's students are (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). This discrepancy is reflected in this classroom as well" I gesture to the majority of white, female education majors in the classroom. "It's our job as educators, no matter what our background, to understand ourselves, our students, and the context in which we teach and live. This means confronting some nasty and possibly painful truths about race in America."

I've come to the point in my presentation where I will try to convince the undergrads who are skeptical that institutional racism exists, and bore the few students who have personally lived the details of my talk with unpleasant facts they already know. I power through charts and graphs demonstrating gross racial inequalities in income, homeownership, educational achievement, school segregation, discipline practices in schools, life expectancy, etc.

"So what are you saying? That I'm supposed to be nice to the homeless guy on the city bus who's drunk and making everyone uncomfortable because he's black?" This comment is from way out of left field, but I've heard similar remarks from defensive or disbelieving students before.

"No. I'm asking you to consider what personal biases you may or may not harbor, and consider the ways in which our society is set up to the benefit of some and the detriment of others. I'm not saying that the elimination of colorblindness means the world is going to

hold hands and sing kumbaya." I can feel many of the white students' prickling at the idea that their lives are somehow easier or better because of their whiteness. "I'm also not saying that just because you are white means you are guaranteed a life a luxury. Many white families struggle with poverty generation after generation. In fact, in raw numbers more white people are impoverished in this country than any other racial group, because there are more white people overall" (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2012). There is an uncomfortable quiet as I scan the room.

Isaac's hand goes up, "I just want to say," he makes deliberate eye contact with the last student to speak, "that there is a lot of misunderstanding and hate around homelessness. I haven't told anyone in here this but I am going to share it now. This semester has been really tough for me. I was homeless for almost two months, but none of you knew it. I was living in a shelter and working the whole time to better myself. There are tons of programs available to people who are struggling, and one of them I took advantage of gave me a business suit to go on job interviews. So, every time you saw me dressed in a suit in this class, that's when I was homeless. I was living in the shelter, taking the city bus, and looking for a job. You wouldn't know it just by looking at me. And most of the homeless people I know are like that - good people, families, moms with kids, just trying to make it. We're not all lazy drunks or drug addicts."

He finishes speaking and the classroom is silent. He has rocked everyone's world, including my own with his brave admission. I let the uncomfortable silence sit for a moment before I walk over to my computer and see that we have only a few minutes left. I gather myself up, "I want to thank *everyone* for their honest and open participation today. Talking about this stuff isn't easy, especially when we've been told not to do it our entire lives.

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Thank you Isaac for that powerful testament, I am really grateful that you felt able to open up and share with all of us.

"I think we've all been given a lot to think about for next class, so we're going to end with a quick writing assignment. I want you to jot down some ideas to answer the question: How are you privileged?"

<center>***</center>

"Every citizen of this nation, white or colored, is born into a racist society that attempts to socialize us from the moment of our birth to accept the tenets of white supremacy"
(hooks, 2003, p. 56).

Just an Upper Middle Class White Girl Enjoying the Advantages of Inequity

It's difficult to admit personal gains from an oppressive and unjust society. Yet, much of the prosperity in my life is due to whole generations of my ancestors having the scales weighted in their favor.

I now understand that this overlooked racial and cultural history is a major contributing factor to who I am today. One branch of my family tree arrived in North America from Europe before the United States existed. On my grandfather's side we fought in nearly every American war from the Revolution to World War II. Half of my great-grandparents immigrated to the United States from Europe near the turn of the 20th century. They came from countries like Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and Luxembourg, and mixed through marriage in the United States. Most worked as immigrant farmers, in Ohio or Illinois, and raised their children (my grandparents) in impoverished

conditions. None completed schooling of any significance, and their native languages died

out between themselves and their offspring. My grandparents were able to attain varying

degrees of education (4th grade through sophomore year of high school) and my grandfathers

moved their families up the economic ladder by enlisting in the army and acquiring skills and

advantages (afforded by the G.I. Bill) which allowed them to obtain specialized jobs

(mechanic and laundry-shop owner) in the "big city." This shift from rural to urban living

meant more opportunities, but also new economic challenges. Eventually both grandparents
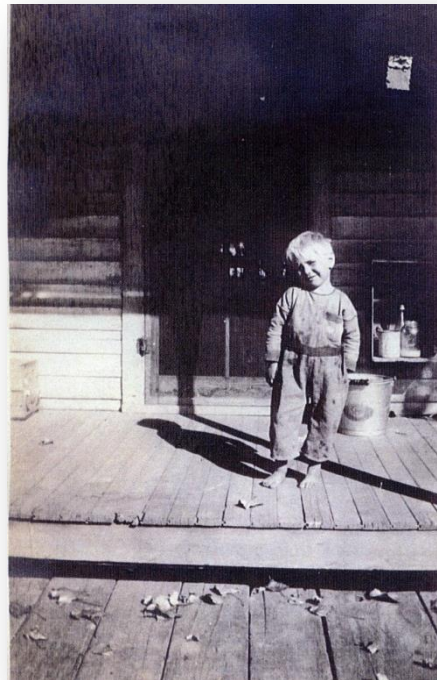
Figures 18 - 19. Ancestors on homestead farms in Ohio and Illinois, early 1900s.

moved their families to the growing Southwestern city of Phoenix in the 1960s and were able to attain "the American dream" by purchasing homes and providing a steady quality of life for their children.

My father and mother graduated from public high school and worked, as a mechanic and hair stylist, for years before my father took ownership of a specialized antique auto parts retail store. Again, he was able to move up the economic scale, purchasing a larger home in the suburbs of Phoenix in a great school district. Growing up, it was the expectation that I would attend college, despite only a few members of my very large family doing the same (I have over 70 first cousins). My pursuit of a graduate degree has made me somewhat of an oddity as most of my family doesn't really understand what or why I am doing it. I am frequently asked, "Are you working Bonnie?" To which I reply, "Sort of, I am finishing my PhD." Unsure head nods generally follow.

I now recognize that the enormous social and financial gains that were attained from one generation to the next are due in large part to the hard-work and luck of my ancestors (a meritocratic view), but also to the unstated advantages and privileges afforded to them because of their whiteness (McIntosh, 1992; Rothenberg, 2008). Had it been that our family had originated from Central America, Africa, or Asia, I am unsure that our social mobility would have occurred in the same fashion or timeframe. Would laws have allowed my great-grandparents to marry people from other countries or of different ethnicities? Would my grandparents have been able to receive the financial benefits of the G.I. Bill and advantageous mortgage practices of the day? Would my father have been able to make the leap from blue-collar laborer to business owner in an industry so monopolized by wealthy, white males? Would I have gone to college, if my parents had not strategically bought a

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home in an exceptional public school district? Would my personal goals and expectations be shaped differently, if had I been born to a different race or class? Things could easily have been very different, and I am beginning to recognize how white privilege has impacted my life and will continue to do so for my children.

This is not to say that my life has been without struggle, or that my whiteness has protected me from other forms of discrimination. However, in recognizing how little bigotry has negatively impacted my life, I must also acknowledge that I have personally benefited from the oppression and exploitation of others. In choosing antiracism, this admission goes beyond the trappings of do-good liberal white guilt, where the uncomfortable cognitive dissonance is recognized, feared, and then pushed aside. It has profoundly shaped how I view and interact with the world.

Segrest (1985) shares that "for white women doing anti-racist work, one of our chief challenges is to find ways of overcoming our feelings of self-hatred and despair brought about by an increased knowledge of our white heritage" (p. 53). She posits that humor and laughter are ways of overcoming our fear of making mistakes. hooks (2003) furthers this argument affirming that "a commitment to antiracism does not mean [white people] never make mistakes, that they never buy into race privilege, or that they never enact in daily life racial domination. This could always happen on an unconscious level. What it does mean is that when they make a mistake they are able to face it and make a needed repair" (hooks, 2003, p. 61). Choosing antiracism and a love of justice means undergoing a radical transformation in thought and action, and consistently living by the meaning of this choice (hooks, 2003). I made this choice early in my life, and my experiences working, living, and interacting with diverse peoples have only strengthened my commitment. I try to approach

each day with humility and gratitude, consciously seek diverse relationships, and choose to do work that develops a compassionate awareness of others. By studying, teaching, and researching injustice I seek to find small ways to struggle against oppression, even in my contradictory role as an upper middle class woman benefitting from that very same inequity. It's a complex actuality that is not easily resolved.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

"Mr. Miller?" My balding, white, middle aged Pre-Algebra teacher looked up from his stack of papers, red pen in hand. "I was wondering if I could talk to you about this quiz." Only a month into my freshman year of high school and I was worried about my grade. For the first time in my life I had been placed into a lower track math class, and yet, I held C-paper in my hand. I couldn't believe I was doing so poorly. Why didn't this stuff make sense to me?

"Come on in Bonnie," he said capping his pen and pushing back in his chair. The door echoed as it slammed behind me in the nearly empty classroom. Also a coach of the boys' soccer team, a few of his pet players were lounging in the corner together. I had decided to visit him during lunch hour to get some extra help and see if I could earn a few more points by explaining my reasoning on the quiz.

I rambled nervously, as I approached his desk, "It's just that I don't know what I am missing here – when you explained it in class it made sense, but…"

"Bonnie it doesn't matter."

"What?" his voice cutting me off took me by surprise.

"Bonnie, it doesn't matter what you got on that quiz." He looked me up and down and gestured towards me with an open hand, "You're dressed nice, you look nice. You're gonna be just fine in life. It doesn't matter if you understand math or not."

A blank stare.

"Uh…" I had no idea how to respond. Did he just tell me I didn't need to do well in his class? Was he hitting on me?! I was immediately aware of the upperclassmen soccer players listening from the corner with dumbass grins spreading across their pimply teenage faces.

"Look. I can go over the quiz with you but it's really just a small part of your grade. Don't blow it out of proportion." He leaned forward and took the quiz in his hands. I stood there frozen wishing desperately to leave before I started to cry. His long eye scan had left me feeling objectified and exposed. "Tell me why you got a half point off on this one," he said pointing a question.

I glanced at the problem, from my spot several feet away, not wanting to get any closer, "I didn't use the right formula."

"Right." Mr. Miller scribbled a plus one in the margin, "and this one?" his deep voice rose into a taunting, joking inflection.

"I didn't divide to the tenths place."

"See? Simple mistakes. Just think a *little* harder next time. Can you do that?" He chuckled and shuffled the quiz into the piles of paper on his desk.

The soft "ok" that escaped my lips felt like a betrayal. Tears burned. Fully humiliated, I turned and jetted out of the classroom, feeling eyes on my back as I went.

Making a bee-line for the girls restroom, thoughts bombarded my head as I sought refuge in a stall. What the hell just happened? He thinks I am an idiot. How could he talk to me that way? He looked me up and down and said I *look nice* so I don't need to know math?

I had never been confronted with such blatant and inappropriate sexism in my life, especially not from a grown man, and had no idea what to do. There had always been snide remarks from boys on the playground about how girls are weak, which enraged my tomboy heart (one of the reasons I relished in proving them wrong), but I'd never experienced machismo like this. How was I supposed to sit in his class and listen to him teach tomorrow and the next day knowing that he didn't think I needed to learn? That I was a just a blonde-haired bimbo who should rely on my looks to get me through life?

Beyond railing to my girlfriends about what had happened, I resigned myself to find help elsewhere and just sit uncomfortably in his class. My disquiet increased as I began to notice his casual, unnecessary touching of female students. To an innocent eye it would seem that he was trying to direct attention to a particular problem by lightly touching a girl's shoulder or thigh and then pointing a particular spot on a page, but I realized this physical contact was not something he did with his male students. The extra attention he gave the "attractive" females in his class also began to gross me out. Didn't anyone else see what a pervert this guy was? No. Instead the boys in the class (especially the jocks) bought into his gruff-mannered chauvinism and saw him as one of their own. And the pretty girls seemed to like the extra attention they were given. The thought never crossed my mind to go to the administration, and so I sat in his class and learned very little – setting me on a track to struggle in math over the next four years, all while internalizing that "I just wasn't that good at math," and becoming the stereotype he had declared me to be.

It wasn't until graduate school that I fully realized how well I understood mathematics, despite a lingering aversion. I considered myself a confident, capable modern woman, yet I had bought into a lie (against my will) that had shaped and changed my opportunities in college and beyond. I had avoided majors that were heavily math based because I didn't want to do poorly. I had foregone great opportunities to be a part of science investigations as a research assistant because I was intimidated by the calculations. What a shame. What a dick.

***

Art students unpack their sketching supplies in the dark lit studio

"How does this terrible man have tenure?"

All the women whisper

"He is a woman-hater through and through"

"I've never heard of any girl getting an A in any of his classes"

"How can this be? Wouldn't the college do something about this?"

"Not enough complaints"

The female model disrobes, her naked flesh shining under the spotlight

Sketchbooks open, charcoal scratches at paper

"He never has anything constructive to say about my work"

"He talks in indecipherable platitudes"

"I hate this class"

The professor walks over to the naked woman and hands her a staff to hold

She takes it in her hand

He arranges some random objects at her feet brusquely

She shifts her stance a little while he is close to her

He turns on the radio and walks out of the classroom, off to who knows where

"That's probably how he sees all of us all the time"

"As female bodies, as objects"

She whispers at her easel next to me

"You've seen how he fawns over his favorite male artists?"

"I just want to get my C and move on with my life"

"Someone should say something"

"But I'm not going to"

"Maybe next semester will be better"

The naked woman stands motionless, her eyes closed

Twenty eyes stare at her body,

Recording and scrutinizing every curve and intimate line

The naked woman's only motion is the soft rise of her chest as she silently breathes,

And she silently waits

***

I had experienced bad teaching in the past, but Professor Milner was on a whole
other level. He was a misogynist and not afraid to show it. Being a female student in his Life
Drawing art class was like being in a prison. His presence took something that I had always

loved – creating art – and turned it into a chore that had to be withstood. He ruled over each three hour studio class like a disinterested bully; giving us little instruction, zero understanding of how our work would be judged, and frequent displays of microaggressions towards female students.

At first I brushed off his harsh interactions as the poor temper of a sullen and cantankerous old man, but then I would overhear snippets of conversations with male students, "I like how you've captured the curvature and dimensionality with shading. Maybe think about how you can push this space, here, into the background. Keep working at it." He never said anything near as enlightening to me. His methods were maddening. Professor Milner would slowly make his way around the circle of standing easels, silently scrutinizing each student's work, usually saying nothing before moving on. His gaze on my sketchbook, my hand, and my work felt foul. I was directionless in a class that I knew would be graded entirely subjectively.

During breaks, he would chatter with the male students about art, philosophy, and politics. Being the approval-seeking junkie that I am, I would attempt to insert myself into these conversations, only to be brushed off or ignored coldly by him. For the first time in my educational history, my tendency to share and participate in discussions and art critiques began to feel like a drawback, as many of my comments were met with opposition or contempt by the professor. I would rerun these exchanges later in my mind, wondering what I had done or said to merit such a negative response, but came up empty handed. His positive evaluation of my male peers and their work was disguised as professorial expertise, but the other female artists and I were not fooled: he held some sort of irrational disdain for us.

I began to shrink into the background of his class, no longer raising my hand or offering my voice. His habit of setting up a model and then disappearing for long periods of time became a welcome reprieve. While I absolutely relished the opportunity to creatively study the form, diversity, and beauty of the human body, I felt increasingly disempowered by attending his class. This culminated in the final critique of the semester where he displayed our final pieces, publicly critiqued them, and then, in red marker, wrote a letter grade *onto the art itself*. Curiously, the only works deemed "A" level were done by male students. He was visibly gleeful as he informed us that "Very little art is good art. Most of you have been told your whole life that you and your art are special. I am here to let you know that very few people have true talent, and very few of you will make it the art world. By judging you as I would my peers, I am doing a favor."

I attempted to hide my eye roll as I pondered: *How many students has this man talked out of their art career aspirations? What kind of shadow has he cast in his students' lives? Was this moment his reason for teaching?*

Watching him slash the letter "C" in red ink onto every single one of my drawings was demoralizing and degrading. I had worked for hours conceptualizing and executing these pieces both inside and outside of class, and could not believe there wasn't one piece that merited a higher grade. Unable to passively accept his unfair evaluation, I met him after class to try and argue for my work. He was unamused, and after a brief, heated exchange he made it clear that no amount of discussion was going to alter the quality of my work. His public assessment was final. I left his class dejected and discouraged.

hooks (2003) shares that in her educational experiences, "the professors who prided themselves on their capacity to be objective were most often those who were directly

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affirmed in their caste, class, or status position" (p. 128). As a white, upper middle class, male, Professor Milner held his tenured teaching position with authority and force, affirmed by the power structures around him. He was unbothered by complaints of female students and viewed his grading methods as bold acts in defense of "true" art.

I (regretfully) chose not to complain to the college about his chauvinism, and instead chose to retake the class the next semester with a different professor. This time, I received an "A."
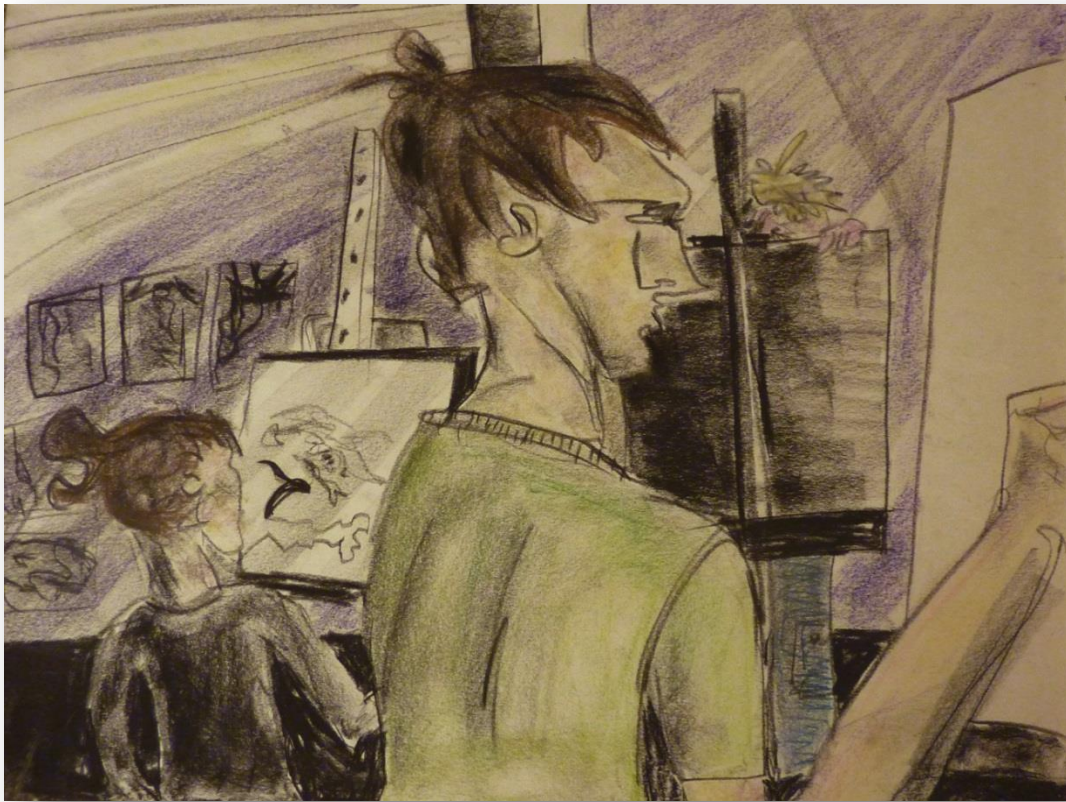
Figure 20. "Warm up Sketching," 2005, chalk on paper (created by author as undergraduate).
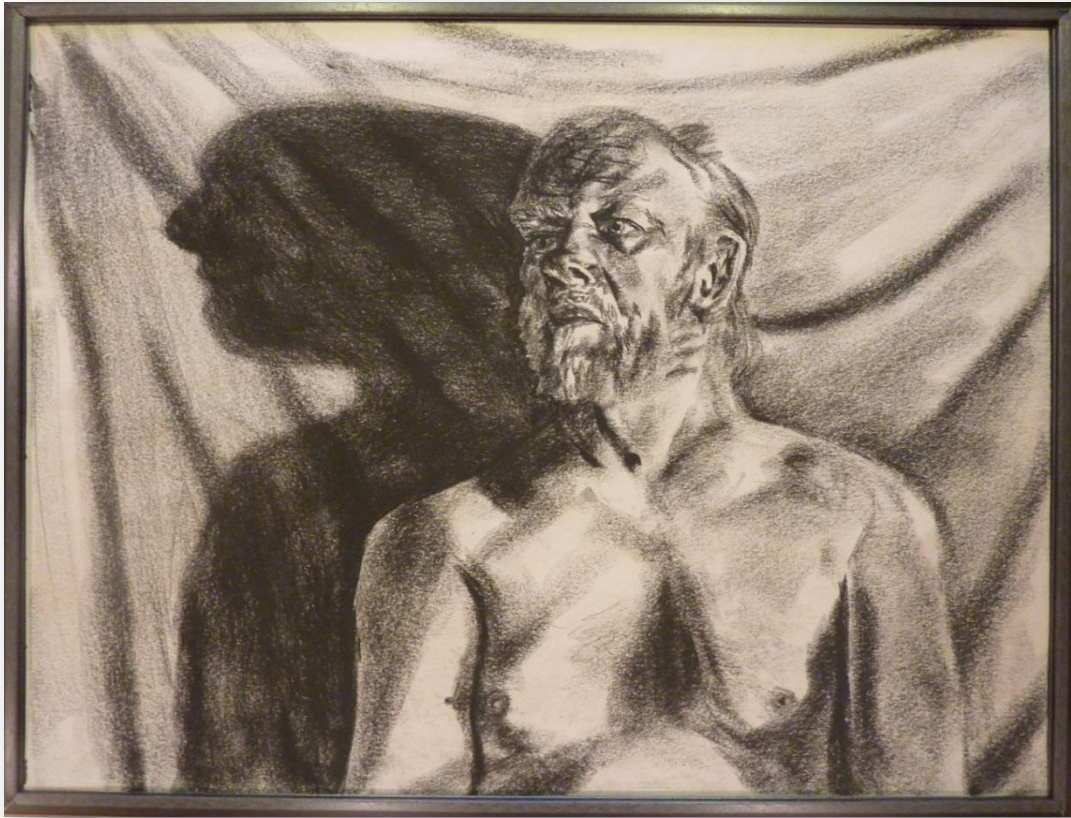
Figure 21. "Casting Shadows," 2005, charcoal on paper (created by author as undergraduate).

Figure 22. "Behind the Curtain," 2005, mixed media (created by author as undergraduate).

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The most impactful teachers in my life have had three things in common: they

treated their students as equals, they charged us with challenging our existing ideas about

core concepts, and they believed in and empowered their students to take their teaching beyond the classroom.

What made my middle school social studies teacher, Mrs. Parker, so great was that she was real with us. She was the first teacher who talked to and treated us like we were young adults, as we most likely transformed before her eyes. She didn't sugar coat it and didn't try to dumb it down. She treated us with respect as individuals and was clear with us about how we should show her respect in return. She discussed with us about real issues of the day – describing unrest throughout the world. She engaged her students about the depravity of dangerous leaders like Sadaam Hussein in Iraq and warned us about America's political adversaries like Boris Yeltsin in Russia. She asked us our opinions and insights, because she genuinely wanted to know what we thought and how we felt. She pushed us to understand that the world was a dangerous place and it was our responsibility to one day mend these inherited problems. She didn't take shit from any of her students, but her toughness was understood as loving.

Mrs. Parker wasn't afraid to tackle the most tedious of lessons: somehow building investment while spending weeks teaching us how to properly summarize, format, and craft notes (I still use her approach to this day). One of her more memorable lesson helped us understand how history and our personal decisions could be framed by Kohlberg's theory of moral development. She had us interview a grandparent about their lives, knowing our time with them was precious and limited. We wrote high school graduation letters to ourselves; pushing our thinking beyond the immediacy of eighth grade to high school graduation and beyond. Receiving this letter from a younger version of myself was one of the most powerful teaching moments I've ever experienced, and this was four years *after* I left her classroom.
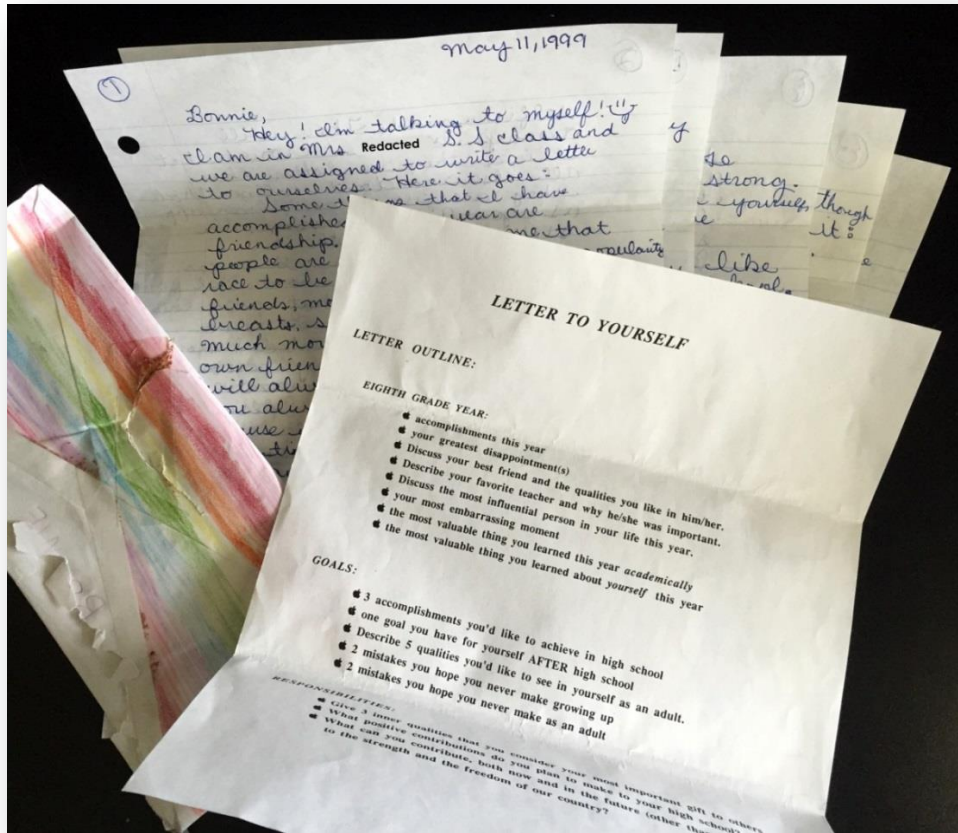
Figure 23. Letter to self, assigned by Mrs. Parker 1999, received in mail 2003.

She saw teaching as a grand responsibility in which she was supplying the next generation of Americans with the tools and critical thinking skills necessary to become its leaders. And she was right. Many of her students have gone on to become powerful pillars our community in Arizona and beyond.

I am grateful that she took a special interest in me; her sincere and generous words and actions made me feel as if I could take on the world. Mrs. Parker was the finest social

studies teacher an eighth grader could ask for and she deeply impacted my life, my

adolescent identity, and my concept of what a good teacher could and should be.

***

Mr. O'Brien, my high school biology teacher, was an expert in his field. He

previously had worked as scientist and conservationist for the National Parks Service, and

always filled his lessons with incredible connections about the use of science in the real

world. Until his class, I had never worked so hard. Mr. O'Brien held seriously high

expectations of his high school Biology students, and I loved every minute of it. He asked us

to conduct actual experiments to solve real problems, chop up and examine the anatomy of

plants, frogs, sheep, pigs, and cats, took us on field trips to investigate biological zones of

Arizona, and had us create college-level presentations about our findings.

He pushed his students to be exceptional, and we rose to the occasion. I saw other

AP and honors students in a new light because of the caliber of work they produced for his

class. I suddenly realized I had to up my game if I wanted to make a grade on the higher end

of his grading curve. I joined a lunchtime biology study group, just to keep up. My love for

science grew, and I started to wonder what a career in science might look like.

Mr. O'Brien played favorites, and I was one of the chosen few. During group work

he would frequently ask me back to his store room, where he kept his numerous science

materials, and sneak me chocolate chip cookies that another student had lovingly baked and

given to him. He would say, "There aren't enough to share with everyone, but I can't

possibly eat them all!" Or he would demonstrate some interesting science principle he knew

I would get a kick out of, because I was geeky like that. Frequently, he would look to me in class when no other hands would go up in response to his questioning because he knew I wasn't afraid to be wrong and would offer my best attempt at answering his questions.

His positive assessment of me and my abilities meant the world, and when it came time to sign up for the next year's science course, I decided to enroll in AP Chemistry with his encouragement. The next year I would visit him and he would sneak me more chocolate chip cookies and talk me through some of the tougher Chemistry concepts. My senior year he wrote letters of reference during the college admission process, and encouraged me to look into science majors saying, "Bonnie, there aren't enough women in the field!" When I told him about my interest in psychology, he said to go for it, reminding me that biology and biochemistry played a huge role in the science of the mind. The "B" I earned in his class was the most meaningful and challenging I ever received.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Not an American Public Education

It was a different kind of history. A history I had never heard before. With America cast as the villain. Dr. Barrera was an FLMN guerilla fighter in the El Salvadoran Civil War who received his doctorate in communist Russia. He was also my history professor during my six-month study abroad experience in Antigua, Guatemala. He said things about Central America like, "If the oligarchy has our countries for sale, and they go to the US, then we have the right to be there – our oil, our fruit, everything is exported and there is nothing left for us here." And, "Nicaragua's revolutions dignified the role of women in the society;

acknowledged that women are not just flowers, that they are part of social processes and play an important and necessary role in changing the society."

Dr. Barrera viewed history from a leftist perspective which valued the minority, the oppressed, and problematized the current status quo. He challenged us, as Americans, to question the current system and our country's ongoing role in the exploitation of Central and South Americans. He took us to a central plaza of San Salvador, El Salvador's capital, where we listened to communist Deputies of the Legislative Assembly give public reports about the legislature to citizens. He walked us carefully through the (still) landmine laden mountains, to former rebel strongholds and battle grounds of the Civil War. He took us to a Civil War museum where we saw, heard, and watched videos of the atrocities. He walked us through la Universidad de El Salvador, where student protests were ongoing as evidenced by graffiti, vandalism, and demonstrations. We read *I, Rigoberta Menchú* a gripping firsthand account detailing the plight of indigenous peoples under the abusive military dictatorship of Guatemala during the 1970s and 80s. It was an experience that reframed my conditioned ideas of democracy.

What should government do? What is its role? What is the citizen's role? What kind of a society do I live in? What would I like it to look like? These were the novel questions that his compelling teaching raised in my mind. Like the mountainside of El Salvador, he had dug up undisturbed soil and buried revolutionary ideas in the recesses of my mind. They lay dormant, waiting for a trigger to set them off and expose their full energetic potential.

Figure 24. Warning sign in El Salvadoran bush reading "STOP DANGER MINES," 2007.

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Mr. and Mrs. Tracey were team-teachers during my time as a Masters student at ASU. Between the two of them, they had over fifty years of experience working in the elementary or middle school setting as teachers and administrators, and they were, quite bluntly, the most inspiring teaching duo I had seen. The dream team. As a course designed to teach Social Studies methods specifically to TFA Corps Members, they would start each class by opening the floor for classroom updates, listening intently to our victories and defeats. They would then take this information and design assignments that did the double-duty of alleviating graduate studies requirements and helping us in our classrooms. They armed us with ideas for classroom organization, management, procedures, planning, and

lesson delivery. I was able to attend their class in the evening, and implement their straightforward and effective suggestions the very next day. Attending their Masters class was a life raft in an experience chock full of far too much busy work, insecurity, and unnecessary demands.

What I appreciated most was their encouragement to take their ideas, modify them for the needs of our classroom, and use them. "There's no need to reinvent the wheel!" was their motto to which I tightly, frantically clung. It was because of their class that my fifth grade students went on any field trips that year at all, visiting several historic downtown museums and monuments. They informed us that ValleyMetro, Phoenix's public transit system, awarded free passes for school field trips, and which museums along its bus routes were free for public schools. This was golden knowledge to a teacher in a Title-1 school.

But more than lifesaving teaching, they offered a safe space for novice teachers to express and confront our pedagogical growing pains. Their compassion, sincerity, and warmth gave me the reassurance to tackle another day. Their obvious passion for teaching, and for the field of education, helped me put my daily struggles into perspective. Their belief in us, and the work we were attempting to accomplish, was motivating. They offered friendship as well as guidance, committing fully to their roles as mentors. They met with me outside of class for dinner and discussions, helping to problem solve and build me up. To me, the Tracey's were a beacon of light in a year of gloom. Their class was a standout in two years of Masters level work, and their supportive relationship has continued to this day.

Chapter 2: Teacher

Figure 25. Teaching summer school in Atlanta, 2007.

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Enter Teach For America

Ever eager to prove my due diligence, I reviewed my printed driving directions,

checked to make sure I looked appropriately "teacher-like" once more in the mirror, and

hopped into my car. My brand new, bright yellow, we're-so-proud-of-you-for-graduating-

college hatchback (thanks mom and dad!). I pulled out of the neat driveway of my suburban,

childhood home and passed the mixed green lawns and tidy desert landscapes of our Scottsdale neighbors. A short, thirty minute drive later I exited the freeway.

The contrast was startling.

I crossed a bridge over the dusty and waterless Salt River and my eyes were greeted by boarded up businesses, graffiti scarred walls, hand-painted signs that read "birria" (a Mexican goat dish), drive-thru liquor stores, and several stray dogs trotting down the sidewalk-less, dirt-lined street. A young girl held the hand of her younger, shirtless brother while they crossed the street towards their destination.

My mind went into panic mode: *Where am I? This looks like Guatemala. How could I have lived here my entire life and never seen this part of Phoenix? What am I getting myself into?* At the time, my eyes did not see the bright and cheery public library, the farm horses grazing peacefully, or the line of people in various work uniforms dutifully waiting to catch the city bus. All I saw was mind-numbing poverty.

My acceptance into Teach for America (TFA) came with a whole host of pre-training readings, activities, and exercises designed to give non-education majors like myself a basic framework for the journey on which we were about to embark. The organization highly encouraged newly accepted Corps Members to visit a school that currently had a relationship with TFA (i.e. was impoverished) in order to observe a classroom. It was my first time visiting the Roosevelt School District, and I had little to compare it with.

Located in South Phoenix, the Roosevelt School District is comprised of 21 Title-1 schools, serving over 12,000 students and 1,400 employees (Roosevelt School District, 2008). Bordered by the Salt River to the north, 40th street to the East, South Mountain to the

south, and 35th Avenue to the west, the Roosevelt District is a mix of undeveloped land, agriculture, homes, businesses, and industry, reflecting the unique history of the urban area. The school district was established in 1912, the same year as Statehood, and one year after the completion of the Roosevelt Dam assured Phoenix a reliable water supply, hydroelectric power, and helped to curb flooding of the Salt River for the agricultural community (Trimble, 2004).

Historically, this area has a long tradition of Latino presence and influence. Mexican agricultural laborers began building neighborhoods and communities south of the Salt River in areas considered less desirable by white landowners because of their propensity to flood. Today, the elementary school district continues to serve a majority (74.1%) of students identifying as Hispanic or Latino, while 16.9% identify as Black or African American, 6.4% identify as White, 1.2% identify as American Indian, and 1.2% of students identifying as having two or more races (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). The area is largely impoverished with an average per capita income of just over $10,000, and only 10.5% of adult residents (25 and older) holding a bachelor degree (U.S Department of Education, 2000). Gang activity and violent crime is a constant struggle for law enforcement (Forghani, 2015). However, this same area also borders one of the world's busiest airports, and with the beautiful desert hiking, biking, and climbing trails of South Mountain, it can boast to having the world's largest municipal park. Furthermore, South Phoenix is a diverse and thriving religious, cultural, and community center. It is one of the few places where you can see a proud caballero replete in boots, belt, cowboy hat, and noble steed share the side walk with an urban youth passionately nodding his head to earphone beats.

I nervously pulled past sad, slumped houses and into the elementary school parking lot. I made sure to lock my car doors, briefly considered getting out my steering wheel lock, and then walked towards the bunker-style school. Unsure which of the windowless rectangles was the school's office, I followed a group of parents and students into a hectic room.

Over a dozen adults were crowded around the counter, so I signed in, found a plastic chair, and sat down. I rehearsed what I would say to Mrs. Hatcher and her students as I introduced myself for the day's observation. I was so excited and anxious to see what a class of fourth graders would look like. In my own little world, I fantasized about the possibility that some of these students would be in my class the following year (I had no idea how accurate this fantasy would become).

My thoughts were interrupted when I heard a parent yell, "un cuerpo!" and it registered that they had shouted "a body" at the secretary. I looked around at all of the flustered parents talking over one another and strained to hear one conversation through all of the layers of Spanish and English. I was confused by what I understood. "Un ladrón… la cafetería… muerte." *A thief, in the cafeteria, dead?*

Not being able to decipher what was happening, and not wanting parents to think I was eavesdropping, I grabbed a children's book that was lying on the chair next to me and opened it up. Inside "Billy's First Doctor Visit" I saw the clumsy artistry of a young child's hand. In pencil they had drawn Billy holding a gun, bullets flying through the air hitting the doctor in the chest, with blood and guts coming out of his back. My eyes bulged and I closed the book.

"Ms. Streff!" the secretary called my name from a list.

As I received a name tag and room directions, a woman with four children angrily shouted, "I'm takin' my kids outta this school!" I quickly exited the office and shut the door behind me. *What is going on?!* The sun was shining and the sky was blue, I took a deep breath and began walking towards Mrs. Hatcher's classroom.

Several lines of rambunctious brown children passed while their teachers, young, white and most likely TFA, anxiously whispered, "Can you believe it?" to each other. I was acutely aware of the color differences between the students and teachers and felt uneasy. I was going to be one of those young white teachers. Nearly all of the students in this school district were Black or Latino. *How would I be seen by my students and their families? Would I be able to relate to students' lives? Would I be accepted into this community, or seen as an outsider?*

I found Mrs. Hatcher's classroom, took a deep breath, and opened the dented metal door. My eyes adjusted to a colorful classroom with neat desks and uniformed children sitting by poster projects. The classroom was as cheerful as it could be without any natural light.

Mrs. Hatcher, a middle-aged African American woman with a kind face, stood up, and introduced me to the classroom, "Students, this is Ms. Streff." Twenty five faces turned toward me. My palms began sweating. "She is going to become a teacher soon, and she wanted to come to our classroom and see how we do things. Let's make her feel welcome." A few over-zealous students waved and exclaimed hello. Mrs. Hatcher motioned for me to find a spot and instructed the class to return their attention to the little girl at the front of the

room. It was clear Mrs. Hatcher had a commanding no-nonsense presence in the lives of her students: they quickly refocused themselves.

My fear melted away from the warmth radiating from the students. The presenter continued her explanation of crickets, and showed off a few that she had caught in a jar to her classmates. As students continued to give presentations, I moved around the room and looked at the posters they had created. The kids eagerly showed me their insect projects and explained what they had done to create them. The esoteric ramblings of race and acceptance disappeared from my mind. These were children. Children full of wonder and joy. No doubt the students in my class would be the same way. I smiled and listened to a boy with glasses excitedly tell me about the lifespan of a wasp.

When it was time for students to go to music class, I stayed behind and checked out the classroom. I stopped at the well-worn classroom library and thumbed through a few of the books, recording some of the titles and authors. *Maybe I should get these for my classroom?* The schoolroom was tidy and efficient: art supplies, a reading area, teacher desk, cubbies, whiteboard, calendar, I mentally noted that there were no computers for students to use.

"What a day you chose to come and observe the school!" Mrs. Hatcher had returned. In the calm of her classroom, I had forgotten the mysterious drama that had unfolded in the office earlier that morning.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You haven't heard yet?"

I shook my head no.

"They found a dead body in the air ducts of the cafeteria." She paused for reaction. "The police have been here since this morning trying to figure out what happened. They think that the man tried to rob the school by crawling through the air ducts, and he got stuck and suffocated over the weekend (Morgan, 2007). When the kids arrived for breakfast this morning, there was a… an odor in the cafeteria, and one of the custodians tried to figure out where it was coming from." My mouth stood agape as she continued. "The news trucks and camera crews were just pulling in when I walked the kids to music. The office is talking about sending all of the students home for the day because so many parents are pulling them out anyway."

I stood stunned and asked, "You mean the kids ate breakfast with the body of a dead person in the ceiling above them?"

Mrs. Hatcher sighed, and nodded her head. "Awful isn't it? I've been teaching in this community for years, and I've seen my share of things, but not this." We stood silent for a bewildered moment, not sure what to say when the telephone rang. After a short exchange Mrs. Hatcher put the phone down. "The kids are going home for the day so the police can search the campus. I need to go get the class from music so they can get their backpacks before they leave."

Mrs. Hatcher walked toward the door, opened it, and stopped before exiting. Looking up at me with a furrowed brow she asked, "How are you supposed to teach a child when the world around them has gone crazy?"

I stared at her and replied dumbly, "I don't know."

She sighed and left the room. The bent metal door swiveled on its hinges and slammed shut leaving me in the classroom alone.

"What have I gotten myself into?" was my only, egocentric thought.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

First Experiences with American Poverty

It was only after I traveled outside the comfort of my protective home bubble that I began to understand how privileged I truly am. During college, I lived and worked in the East African country of Tanzania, teaching about HIV and AIDS to rural populations of adults and children. This experience truly acted as a line of demarcation in my life – everything before it and everything after it looked very different to me. I lived in the poorest of conditions (albeit temporarily) and realized how easily I took for granted my health, safety, comfort, education, equality, and freedom.

I should make clear that by no means do I consider myself an expert on sub-Saharan African society or culture. My experiences are limited to four months of volunteer work as a cultural, linguistic, and racial outsider ('mzungu' in Swahili) in two specific communities in Northern Tanzania. However, without romanticizing the African poverty I witnessed, I also saw how Tanzanian's lives were rich in ways I had never experienced. The rural farming communities I interacted with were people-centered rather than thing-centered, with a symbiotic sense of shared identity and purpose that I had never previously known. Life was hard, but it was hard for everyone. Every day was seen as a gift and the saying "hakuna

matata" really was a Tanzanian motto that was recited by community members frequently, because worrying did no good. Relationships with those around you were what mattered, what was prized. Education was revered as a gift. I saw and understood gratitude on a new level. These revelations were life-changing for me, and made me question much of what I took for granted in my own culture.

It then came as a surprise when I began working as a teacher and saw a new, somehow uglier form of poverty in America, one which felt different from the one I had experienced in Tanzania. The struggles of hunger, safety, and health were also present in America, but the community's response to violence, abuse, and neglect felt somehow different. There was no overarching feeling of "we are in this together" or "don't worry for God will provide." No, these were the mean streets of America where cash was king, brutality a given, and everyone was on their own. Life was hard – end of sentence. Trauma was a daily part of my students' lives, and I could do nothing to help them. Education failed to provide an out, and for many schooling was seen as nothing more than a way for the powerful to subjugate the masses.

At the time it seemed to me that Tanzania experienced a poverty of resources, whereas America suffered from a poverty of will (I now recognize that my original assessment misjudged the complexity and ethical culpability of poverty in either situation, but this belief is what framed my early teaching). That such a wealthy country could allow such atrocities to take place and simply look the other way claiming willful ignorance was revolting. I was no longer able to look the other way. I saw the effects of poverty secondhand through my students' lives every day. And it was heartbreaking.

Figure 26. "The Colonization of Tanzania," 2005, mixed media (created by author as undergraduate).

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Her mother stands before me, speaking quietly:

"Quiero decirle en persona para que entienda. Yesenia tiene problemas con la vejiga . No quiero otro incidente, ella estaría tan avergonzada . ¿Puede ir al baño durante clase sin pedir su permiso? Ella no va a aprovechar."

"I want to tell you in person so you understand. Yesenia has problems with her bladder. I don't want another accident, she would be so embarrassed. Can she use the restroom during class without asking your permission? She won't take advantage."

I am sympathetic:

"No quiero que Yesenia sienta vergüenza tampoco. ¿Ha visto a un doctor?"

"I don't want Yesenia to feel embarrassment either. Has she seen a doctor?"

She shakes her head:

"No señorita. Cuando nos robaron en la casa ella estaba muy asustada. Yesenia y su abuela se escondieron en la bañera mientras que los hombres estaban en la casa y ahora ella tiene mucho miedo de todo y no puede tranquiliarse. Ella tiene miedo de que los hombres van a volver."

"No Miss. When our house was robbed, she was very frightened. Yesenia and her grandmother hid in the bathtub while the men were in the house and now she is afraid of everything and can't relax. She is afraid that they will come back."

I am shocked:

"¡Lo siento mucho! Yo no sabía que esto pasó. ¿Llamó a la policía?"

"I'm so sorry! I didn't know this happened. Did you call the police?"

Her response is guarded:

"No señorita. No queremos hablar con la policía. Los ladrones se llevaron todo lo que tenia valor. No regresarán. Está bien."

"No miss. We don't want to talk to the police. The thieves took everything that has value. They won't be back. It's ok."

I am pained for her and her daughter:

"Entiendo. Si ella necesita usar el baño, no es un problema. Gracias por contarme esto."

"I understand. If she needs to use the bathroom, it's not a problem. Thank you for telling me about this."

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What I understood from this brief, before school exchange was three things: (1) Yesenia had

developed problems controlling her bladder because of the stress she experienced from

hiding while thieves ransacked her home, (2) her family had been robbed, but could not call

the police because it would mean revealing their status as undocumented immigrants, and (3)

the most vulnerable in our society are often the ones who must show the most courage and

bravery to survive. Yesenia and her family were doing just that.

***

Lock Down 1, 2, 3

Gun shots ring out

PAT PAT PAT

1, 2, 3

Far too close to the school

H   F

  A   L

    L   A

      F   H

the kids are on the bus   are standing in line

The bus doors swing close and thunders away

Scared little faces look up at me

"Ok everyone follow me"

We quickly enter the classroom

Frightened children file in

1, 2, 3

I call to one last straggler in the hall

Lock the door and turn off the light, as protocol demands

"Everyone why don't we get out a book and read?"

A fourth grader with panic on his face says

"My sister is on the bus! Where did the bus go? Is she ok?"

Tears down his cheek

1, 2, 3

I break my own rule and give him a hug

"I'm sure she will be fine. The bus just drove away to a safer spot."

I say a silent prayer and hope that everyone is safe

Minutes tick by

1, 2, 3

How many times have we been on lock down this year?

I start to count

1, 2, 3…

***

Omar came to me excited about a "project" he had been working on. "Ms. Streff, can I come in at lunch and show you the movie we made?"

As we popped the CD into my classroom computer, Omar explained what it was. "There's this guy who lives two trailers down from me that's really nice and lets us use his camera and helps us make videos and stuff."

A red warning light went off in my head. "Who do you mean by 'us'?"

"Me and the other boys in our neighborhood." Omar was a foster child who had recently switched homes and schools, becoming my student less than a month before. He was older than the other kids in my class, having been held back somewhere along the way. He was friendly and desperate for attention from adults and eager to impress anyone who would listen. My mind immediately started thinking of all the dark motives a grown man might have for encouraging young boys to play with his video equipment. My mouse hesitated over the "play" icon.

"Omar, what is this video of?"

"We made a scary movie! I did the filming."

Feeling his pressing need for approval I smiled and said, "Ok. Let's see it." The video began with three boys walking down the dirt road of their trailer park laughing. Cut to a Halloween scream mask lurking in the bushes and the boys running. Then a boy in a bathroom screaming with his hands over his face. Next, the same boy lay with his shirt off on the floor with fake blood all over his chest. Next the words "The End" appeared on a blackened screen.

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"Wow! Omar that was really scary! What kind of blood did you use? Where did you film it? How did you do all the editing? It looks like there was some serious time put into this."

Omar was beaming, "We used ketchup. Dave did it for us! He likes hanging out with us and has a computer."

So did you film it at his house?

"Some of it! Did you really like it? We have other movies too."

I wanted to encourage his enthusiasm and creative spirit, but was quite honestly terrified by the pedophile vibe I was getting about this Dave guy. It sounded like he was priming boys for something more. What grown man hangs out with kids like this? I asked Omar if I could keep the video, sent him back to the playground, and immediately called my Principal. This was way out of the scope of my abilities or know-how, but I urgently wanted to protect this child.

Omar was called to the office where our Principal and a police officer came and talked to him about the video and neighbor. He didn't return to class the rest of that day. My Principal said not to worry about it, that it was in their hands now and the less I troubled about it the better. I reluctantly heeded his advice.

Omar seemed unfazed when he returned to class the next day. He didn't mention the video and I didn't ask what had happened. He was gone from my class less than a month later, when he once again switched foster homes for reasons unknown to me.

Two years later, I saw him walking in our school hallway and affectionately greeted him, "Omar! How are you? Where have you been? Are you a student here again?"

He smiled a big toothy grin and informed me that he was now in the next grade up (somehow being put back in with his intended age group), and that he had just gotten out of juvie. This surprised me, but probably shouldn't have as research shows that foster children are arrested and detained at much higher rates than nonfoster youth despite equivalent delinquency charges (Conger & Ross, 2006; Ross & Conger, 2002). I told him I was glad to see that he was well and told him to keep working hard in his classes and stay out of trouble. We parted ways but as I watched him saunter back to class, I worried.

This poor kid had the whole world stacked against him. He truly was one of society's most vulnerable, and I wondered what lay in his future.

<center>***</center>

"I wish you were my mother." This quiet admission catches me off guard. Maria stares down at her dirty and worn sneakers. We are at the front office waiting for the secretary to return with a clean school uniform for her.

"Maria, I know your mother loves you very much." A single tear slides down her face. I can only guess what she is feeling. Today she arrived at school in clothes smelling terribly, and several classmates had made rude comments to her before she came to me. I am guessing her uniform has not been washed in a few weeks. This neglect isn't surprising to me. In the few interactions we have had together, her mother clearly cared very much about her *own* appearance. She dressed in trendy, sexy clothes, with perfect hair and makeup, and long manicured nails. But when she spoke to her daughter there was little love or affection in her voice. She looked at Maria like an unwanted pest that had to be endured.

<center>78</center>

"My Daddy loves me," she says, "I miss him." Maria's father has been in and out of prison her entire life for gang-related charges. "Mom says I won't see him for a long time this time. She has a new boyfriend now." This might explain why her mother has been too preoccupied to do her daughter's laundry.

I give her a hug. "I'm sorry Maria. You know you can come to me if you need anything, right?" She nods her head and takes the clothes from our Secretary, Mrs. Velazquez.

As she walks towards the girl's restroom, the Secretary asks, "Do you want me to have the office send a letter home to mom about the clothes?"

"No, that's ok. I'll do it. Thanks though." I never knew this would be a part of teaching.

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Research has shown just how dire the consequences of childhood trauma can be over the course of a person's lifetime. A medical study done by Felitti et al. (1998) asked over 17,500 adults about their exposure to adverse childhood experiences including abuse or neglect, growing up with a parent who has mental illness, substance dependence, or incarceration, parental separation or divorce, or parental or domestic violence. Researchers found a strong correlation between childhood trauma, or the frequency of repeated stress activating events, and long term health. The more frequent the childhood trauma, the more negatively affected the child's "brain development, the immune system, hormonal systems, and even the way our DNA is read and transcribed" (Harris, 2014).

What makes this study stand out from other literature is that it demonstrated that these traumatic events negatively impacted health well into adulthood despite behavior. Firstly, it helps to explain why childhood stress contributes to high-risk behaviors (such as drinking, smoking, etc.), because repeated stress activation affects brain development:

> It affects areas like the nucleus accumbens, the pleasure and reward center of the brain that is implicated in substance dependence. It inhibits the prefrontal cortex, which is necessary for impulse control and executive function, a critical area for learning. And on MRI scans, we see measurable differences in the amygdala, the brain's fear response center. So there are real neurologic reasons why folks exposed to high doses of adversity are more likely to engage in high-risk behavior, and that's important to know. (Harris, 2014)

However, these findings also show that even in adults who grew up experiencing multiple highly traumatic events but who do *not* engage in high risk behaviors, they are still more likely to develop heart disease or cancer than adults with less traumatic childhoods. Bottom line: the repeated activation of the fight or flight response as a child has a negative, lifelong lasting effect on the brain and body.

As a classroom teacher, I saw how trauma and stress impacted my students' ability to concentrate, to process information, to control their impulses, and to socialize positively with other students. Why should I memorize this spelling list when my brother was just arrested for murder? Why would I do my homework when I don't know whether or not I'm going to eat tonight? These were some of the daily stressors and realities my students lived with. When my students confided in me, I often felt poorly equipped to help them or know how to respond. I did my best to be loving and nonjudgmental, but always felt my efforts

were like a drop in the pan. I desperately wished there was more that I could do. When I

learned about this medical research on the lasting effects of childhood trauma I had a

thought: Wouldn't it be amazing if we could connect this study to the classroom and

integrate it into developing individualized learning for students? To target the best practices

in the classroom for students who are experiencing trauma and meet their needs? To create a

collaboration of family members, teachers, social workers, pediatricians, and others to meet

the needs of these children? What a difference this could make in so many lives.

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Figure 27. Student throwing snowball into mouth of Grand Canyon during field trip, 2010.

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It was our first day of switching students based on ability grouping and I was in charge of working with the lowest reading group. As most of my students filed out, either to the English Language Learner classroom or to the higher reading group, and other fifth grade students filed in, I knew not how woefully unprepared I was. I had 45 minutes to work with these students, but no curriculum to guide me. I didn't know their names or their personalities, or why they were placed in the lowest reading group. With *Charlotte's Web* in hand, a children's book designed for beginners, I hoped a read aloud activity would suffice for the day. Until I had more time to figure out what exactly "reading intervention" meant. How I had been chosen, a first year teacher with only a month of classroom time under my belt, to be in charge of the group needing the most help wasn't clear to me.

The first hand went up about fifteen minutes into our read aloud.

"My tummy hurts. Can I go to the nurse?"

Unsure if this was a day the nurse was on duty (we only had a nurse staffed at our school a few times a week), I questioned the unfamiliar student, "Are you sure it hurts so badly you have to see the nurse?"

"Yes."

I walked over to my desk and found the hall pass, "I hope you feel better." The child took the pass and merrily walked out of the class.

Another five minutes of students reading aloud and it was obvious that this classroom of struggling readers was disinterested and bored stiff. Even though the book was read in many third grade classrooms, as I listened to students stumble, sound out, and skip

over words, I realized it may not have been right for this group. As I selected the next child to begin reading, another hand went up, "I have a headache. Can I go to the nurse?"

"I don't think the nurse will be able to do much for you with a headache. Why don't you get some water and let me know if that helps."

"But it hurts really bad."

Sigh. "Ok," I handed over the second hall pass and off she went.

Three more hands flew into the air. "I have to get my medicine from the front office. I forgot to take it!"

"You take medicine after lunch every day?" I did not know this child's history.

"Yeah. Can I go?" Worried that perhaps the child really did need the mystery medicine immediately, I hand wrote a hall pass. At this point half the hands in the classroom were up and waving.

"I have to go to the bathroom."

"My tummy hurts too. I think I might throw up."

"I need a Band-Aid."

I was beyond exasperated. These kids were playing me like a fiddle. I now had four students out of class and the rest of them asking to do the same. The truth was they all hated reading, but especially reading out loud. Just by being in this classroom with one another they now knew with certainty that they were no good at it - they had been put in here by their teacher because they were bad readers. Most didn't know me and, clearly, didn't feel inspired by my lackluster first attempt as their reading interventionist. I had neglected to foresee resistance of this kind from my students and was flabbergasted as I looked at the sea of hands.

I had just told everyone to put their hands down when the phone rang. It was our front office secretary, "Ms. Streff, I have four of your students up here complaining of headaches and tummy aches, but there is no nurse today. I am sending them with some crackers back to your room. Please don't let any more students wander the halls."

I felt embarrassed and apologized. These kids were testing me to see what kind of a teacher I was. As the classroom door swung open, and four students with big smiles munching on graham crackers came back into the classroom, I realized the answer: I was a push over.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

First Year Blues

Without a doubt, the most miserable I've ever been was during my first year of teaching. Beyond the intense stress of managing a classroom with a revolving door of 30+ students – over half of who were English Language Learners and a quarter labeled with an assortment of special needs including mild mental retardation, hearing impairment, emotional disturbance and selective muteness – I also was simultaneously learning to write lesson plans and fifth grade curriculum. Additionally, because I wasn't a certified teacher, I was only given a provisional teaching license in conjunction with Teach for America, because I was pursuing a Master's degree at ASU in Elementary Education. These classes took place in person once a week and required ample readings and additional work that was completed online. Furthermore, TFA required that Corps Members complete weekly trainings which often took over entire Saturdays (a prime grading and graduate school work

day). In additional to compulsory observations from district personnel, I had regular classroom visits from various levels of TFA staff who were there to observe, evaluate, and "constructively criticize" my teaching, all the while recording my performance and placing these reports in (what I'm assuming) is a master file. For survival, I chose to cling desperately to TFA's behavior management strategies which maligned so sharply with my internal moral compass that implementing them felt like a personal treachery.

My limited instructional framework centered on behaviorist management methods of domineering and manipulating my students, as encouraged by TFA's focus on giving clear directions, narrating student behavior, and giving consequences to noncompliant students (Millen, 2015). This view of learning held that as the teacher I had the knowledge and power (or should), and it was my job to pour information into the empty heads of my students. Order, obedience, and data-driven outcomes demonstrated real learning. What utter nonsense.

I described to my friends and family enjoying teaching, but hating disciplining. I ended up compromising my beliefs about how I should interact with children and replaced my natural inclination toward building loving and child-guided relationships with focusing on efficiency and coercive techniques to control my students. I did this out of fear and ignorance. And I hated every second of it. Four months into my first year of teaching and I found myself more taxed emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually than I had ever been. Upon arriving home each night, I would joylessly shove food into my mouth, hide in the covers of my bed, and unhappily reflect on the day before passing out. More often than I care to admit, I would break into tears recounting the day and questioning how I could possibly finish out the year. The struggles of my students, the pressures and demands of the

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classroom, the administration, Teach for America, my master's program, and what little life I had outside of this was too much for me to handle.

Figure 28. Teaching summer school in Atlanta, 2007.

Supposedly TFA was there as support system for first year Corps Members, giving their first-time teachers an additional layer of support for situations just such as mine. However, I viewed my Placement Director as more of a layer of surveillance for TFA than an actual mentor. It was abundantly clear to me that TFA's intense focus on making strides towards their own goals as an organization was their priority. While they messaged this as wanting to "ensure I was successful in my classroom" I was sure voicing my struggles would have put me on a list that resulted in even tougher scrutiny. I had seen with my own eyes a truly dedicated Corps Member be dismissed by TFA for failing to perform to their standards (failing a teaching licensure exam, despite being able to take it again). So when my Placement Director asked how things were going, I gave her the overly-optimistic description of my classroom. Her own lack of experience (teaching only two years before moving into an advisory position with TFA) and obvious stress in her new role overseeing first year Corps Members didn't make me feel like I could ask her for any real assistance – especially since I didn't know what it was that I needed.

Living with two other first year Corps Members helped put my struggles into perspective. They too were obviously depressed, struggling every day, and working their tails off despite it all. It felt as if we were all participating in a sick game of chicken – if they could keep going, then I could too. Here, again, my unhealthy need to compete becomes evident. There was an expectation in TFA culture of enduring or (framed more positively by TFA), "persevering" through that first year of teaching, which TFA fully expected to be hell (Steudeman, 2015). The message of "you'll be making a difference" switched to "you're making excuses" (Millen, 2015). And excuses were not acceptable.

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We had heard of other Corps Members quitting or leaving their positions, and I often fantasized about getting a "normal job" where I could clock in and out, and live a life with some sort of healthy balance. But my competitive nature and harmful obsession with achievement won out – I couldn't be one of the Corps Members that quit! (I now recognize that many of the Corps Members that chose to step down did so because they had healthier levels of self-respect or were asking deeper questions about our organization and what exactly we were trying to accomplish). I told myself and others that I had to at least finish this first year for my students; it wouldn't be fair to desert them in the middle of the year. In reality, I am certain that any replacement teacher would have been more qualified than I was at that point.

And this was the real reason that this first year was so challenging. I was experiencing a new phenomenon: failing over and over again at something. I was not a good teacher. I had no idea what I was doing and I was making it up as I went along every day. Confidence and charm had seen me through many undertakings in my life, but those skills would not improve a child's sentence fluency, get them to learn their times tables, or teach them how to decode words.

Teach for America seeks Type-A, perfectionist, college graduates at the top of their classes, which leads to a teaching force who has known nothing but success in education. This was certainly my case. I had never experienced failing as a student. Conventional grade-level teaching methods had worked fine for me. So when I tried to replicate my educational experiences in my class, and my students bombed – I didn't know how to adapt. It seemed like no matter how much time and effort I put into lesson planning or creative activities, I was still not able to get these kids to where I was told they should be (by TFA, by the

multitude of standardized tests I administered, by the textbooks I depended on). I was acutely aware that the majority of my students were two or three grade levels behind where they were supposed to be in reading and math. They only had one fifth grade year, and I was blowing it.

Now, when I look back on this first year, I realize that my narrow definition of success (80% classroom average on cumulative assessments) was a disservice to my students. Of course, I wanted them to learn the material covered on exams, but I severely discounted what wasn't measured on assessments… social skills like teamwork, collaboration, kindness, and leadership; organizational skills, the development of self-control, work ethic, and initiative, students' ability to think creatively, problem solve, and develop original thought, and all the little aptitudes, quirks, and personality traits that made each student uniquely, fully, beautifully human. As cliché as it sounds, I grew and learned far more that first year of teaching than any of my students. And the growing pains nearly killed me.

Still, it took me several years to fully let go of the myth that every child should be average. So much emphasis was placed on testing in our district that it was difficult to look past test results.

However, I recognized that by looking at each child as an individual, and building growth goals around their unique starting points, a more satisfying and inclusive view of learning could be adhered to by myself and my students. I began putting students in charge of their learning through the use of individual goal setting and tracking folders, where they could record their progress throughout the year. Students felt like they were working towards a shared goal, instead of being mysteriously told at the end of a quarter how they did. It became an invaluable tool, where students would be the ones explaining and actively

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demonstrating their achievement to their parents during conferences throughout the year. My unorthodox method of having multiple conferences occurring at the same time, with students as the teachers, and myself as an advisor to answer or clarify any outstanding questions, was well received by my administrators. So much so that they attempted to implement the folders and the student-led conferences school wide. Reception of these methods by other teachers was (unsurprisingly) mixed. What had worked for my students in our classroom did not necessarily work in others.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

As part of my status as a first year teacher in the Roosevelt School District, I was paired with a mentor – a veteran teacher whose job it was to guide me through that first challenging year. Upon meeting Mr. Grayton, a white, grumbly middle-aged introvert (who didn't much like children as far as I could tell), he announced that he had seven years until he qualified for his retirement at which point he planned on moving to Spain and opening a restaurant where children would not be welcome. Taken back by his straightforward disdain for his job I must have overcompensated with exuberant naïveté about the school year ahead of us, because he announced without an ounce of irony in his voice, "You won't make it through the year."

Apparently, my enthusiasm had done little to convince him that I had the "stuff" necessary to survive my first year of urban teaching, let alone become the life-changing teacher TFA had assured us all we would become. I brushed off his appraisal, and decided I was on my own. I was right in more ways than I could imagine.

During most of our interactions throughout the year, my school appointed "mentor" became more and more of a caricature to me. So much so that I took to calling him Eeyore behind his back, because he had the uncanny ability of taking any moment and coating it in predictable and thinly-veiled pessimism. A simple "Good morning, how are you Mr. Grayton?" would be answered with a deep sigh and Navy standard answer of "Just another day in paradise," said in such a way that there was zero confusion that being at our school was nowhere near his idea of paradise.

While our relationship started out as one of uncomfortable necessity – I desperately needed help despite being an obvious thorn in his side - I began to realize that this man who had seemingly lost his love for teaching years prior had surprisingly good advice. As a regularly transferred teacher, he had been tossed from one school in the district to another throughout the years, no doubt from personality conflicts with administration. Also, I'm sure that his status as a district union rep for the Arizona Education Association did little to warm up the administrators he worked with over the years. I now understand that his transfer to our school was the product of a phenomenon dubbed "the dance of the lemons" or "the Turkey trot" – a process whereby administrators in the district routinely exchanged teachers they didn't want at their school anymore, because firing them was next to impossible (DeMitchell, 1995). However, despite putting in the absolute minimum effort required, Mr. Grayton knew his stuff and his kids learned.

He warned me to stay away from the politics and gossip circles that formed among staff, "Just keep your head down, do your job, and stay far away from the drama. Protect yourself." I soon learned what he was referencing. Administrators played favorites with teachers and staff – and often judged a teachers' ability simply from their likeability. As a

first year teacher, it was required that I be observed by my administrators multiple times throughout the year – a reasonable requirement, and one that I hoped would improve my teaching. I was eager to get a perspective of my teaching beyond the rubrics and observations of Teach for America. But, by Thanksgiving, I had solidified my spot on the "favorites" list by using my Scottsdale connections to attain numerous donations for the school, including 800 turkeys to be included in the Parent Teacher Association's Thanksgiving Day baskets for the neediest of families at our school. Strangely I was never formally observed again after that point. In fact, I had to sign off on documents saying that I had been observed, debriefed, and done a satisfactory job – but the actual observations never took place.

Like Mr. Grayton advised, I kept my head down and did my job – not participating in staff gossip in the teacher's lounge, and doing my best to avoid confrontation with coworkers. Honestly, I was stretched so thin in that first year I barely had enough time to plan the next lesson let alone perceive the delicacies of workplace politics. Somehow I still managed to get on one veteran teacher's bad side and she felt the need to unceremoniously put me in my place in front of her students as well as mine. My transgression? Having a lively class in the computer lab, while her students worked silently next door in the library. Bursting into the computer lab with a furious look, she informed me that I was a "Teach for America know-it-all" who didn't respect my colleagues and wasn't there for the right reasons. *She* had dedicated her life to teaching, *she* had attained her national board certification and *she* and *her* class deserved more respect. She was sick of me "getting away with things" and ignoring the guidelines everyone else had to follow.

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In that moment, I had no idea what she was talking about, but quickly apologized and told her I would quiet my class down. We had briefly spoken and interacted together perhaps three times before this encounter, so I decided not to take her emotional outburst personally. I barely knew anything about her, and certainly couldn't recall a time when I had offended her or "gotten away with something." What did that even mean? Frazzled, I took Mr. Grayton's advice and decided the best response was humility and deescalation. It was apparent that my status as a TFA teacher was no longer secret (I had consciously decided not to mention this to my colleagues, because I knew there could be backlash), and she had chosen that moment in front of sixty students to air her grievances with the organization through me. I wrote a pandering apology email detailing how lucky our school was to have such a gifted and dedicated teacher, and that I, as a lowly, uninformed first year teacher was eager for guidance from a wise and superior educator (all of this was in fact true, but certainly not from her after my public scolding). At our next staff meeting, she tolerated my presence with cold indifference and we didn't interact much the rest of the year.

This encounter highlighted a larger force impeding my integration into the school and community. After completing my two year commitment with TFA, I chose to stay at my school for a third year – and in this year it was as if doors were suddenly swung open for me. An atmosphere of distrust from coworkers and parents dissipated, as I had proven to be more than just a TFA teacher. I had stayed at *our* school (I could now call it my own) and I was treated as an equal by colleagues who had previously been cold or uninterested in me. One teacher put it this way, while seated around a lunch table in the teacher's lounge at the beginning of my third year, "I wasn't sure if you were one of us, but we're so glad you're back." Her comment was greeted by several head nods from other veteran teachers. I

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suppose their guardedness towards me was well founded, as nearly one third of teachers leave the classroom each year (Hunt & Carroll, 2003), with 80% Teach for America teachers leaving after finishing their two year commitment (Heilig & Jez, 2010). How many times had I daydreamed about quitting during that first year?

The problem with chronic teacher turnover is that it destabilizes and drains schools of their most valuable resource: human capital. The financial costs of attracting, hiring, and training teachers year after year often results in low-income schools hiring inexperienced and less prepared teachers (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003), which was certainly true in my case. The financial and human resources it takes districts to fill in the gaps left by exiting teachers could be used for other programing benefiting students and communities. Instead, each teacher that leaves puts additional strain on these resources. Furthermore, schools with higher turnover also have lower student achievement (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Guin, 2004; Hanushek et al., 1999), as was true at my school. Whether this low achievement is due in part because of teachers leaving, or if teachers leave because of low student achievement, is not as clearly understood (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013), but it is known that a teaching staff that is constantly in flux is disruptive to building school and community cohesion, both which are key for building and maintaining student engagement and achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005).

In my first two years of teaching, I had unknowingly been through a period of hazing/trial/audition and been deemed acceptable by my coworkers. Parents, families, and community members had also warmed up to me. As a third year teacher, I now knew the siblings of former students and parents requested that their younger children be put in my

class. Spanish speaking parents knew that I was bilingual, and started interacting with me more. When I went to the store, students and parents would stop me to say hello. I was invited to students' birthday parties and basketball games. I'm certain that my improved confidence and ability as a third year teacher influenced all of these relationships, but working at a high-needs school meant that we experienced some of the highest teacher turnover rates in the country (Hunt & Carroll, 2003). Staying for three years solidified my status as one of the veterans. I felt like I was a part of South Phoenix; that I had earned some of the community's trust and respect. Acceptance felt good.

I left the next year.

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Figure 29. Students on field trip at the Arizona Mining and Mineral Museum, 2008.

It was the end of a long day, although every day spent teaching seemed like a long day. As I shed my professional clothes, I also shed my teacher persona with a long exhale – it was such a demanding and exhausting act to be 'Teacher-Bonnie' all day. From outside my bedroom door, I heard the loud bang of our third floor apartment door slam and one of my roommates huff, "You will NOT believe the day I have had!"

Curious, I threw on some P.J.s and met my two roommates in the kitchen. Both of my roommates were New Yorkers – one from the Bronx, the other from upstate. Before TFA, neither had been to Arizona. Like me, neither had studied education as an undergrad and both were struggling as much as I was in this first year teaching. We had signed our lease knowing each other for less than a few hours. Our common denominator had been that we were all first year Corps Members teaching in the same school district and we assumed (and were encouraged by TFA) that living together would make this challenging experience more manageable. In this, TFA was right.

"It's almost too ridiculous to believe. Just thinking about it makes me want to laugh." Like Paula, we were all beginning to develop a warped sense of humor after witnessing so much dysfunction and mayhem day after day.

"What happened?" Arlene asked pulling up a kitchen chair and tying up her do-rag. "You know how our district is under review by the Department of Education?" We both nodded our heads. We knew all too well the harsh realities of working at a public school district seriously threatened by a state take-over. Years of chronic underachievement and money mismanagement had led to intense district-wide scrutiny, which extended its way into

our classrooms in the form of added emphasis on testing (DeGrow, 2008). Currently state officials with the Arizona Department of Education were visiting our district's schools and determining whether they ought to intervene by taking over leadership positions, while our district administrators were desperately doing everything in their power to convince state officials that things were on the upswing (Reid, 2008a). At my school this meant strategically targeting borderline low-performing students to raise their test scores enough to ensure we met our minimum state standards. The majority of our grade level meetings, staff trainings, and small group sessions were targeted to push these specific students toward higher reading and math test scores. Unfortunately, this also meant that kids outside of this group - higher and lower achieving students - weren't considered as much of a priority and their needs were often overlooked.

"Well today we had a surprise visit by some state officials and it was a complete shit show. Apparently, some eighth graders thought it would be funny to start a fire in the boys' bathroom." I chuckle – thinking that sounds about right for middle school boys. "And this happened while the officials were there. The only problem was that while smoke and flames were pouring out of the windows – the fire alarm was not sounding. So the Principal went and manually pulled the fire alarm – and THAT didn't work either. So he went over the P.A. system and in a panicked voice yelled, "Everyone exit the building! This is not a drill!"

Arlene and I start callously snickering at how typically chaotic this sounds.

Paula continues, her black mane of Puerto Rican curls framing her face, "You know how my classroom is essentially a prison cell? We don't have any windows and the metal door opens straight outside, so until you open it you don't really know what you're walking into. He didn't say what was happening – only that we had to leave the building in a freaked

out voice, so when we walked outside I didn't know if there was going to be gunfire or who knows what. When I got my class outside it was *anarchy*. We'd only done a fire drill maybe twice this year, and now that it was the real thing half the students were running around unattended in the field, completely apart from their classes. And then the firetrucks and news vans started pulling up." Arlene and I are silent, imagining the scene. Paula cautions us, "It gets worse."

"The entire school is out on the field running amuck as the firemen start dosing the bathroom with water, and *there* are the officials furiously scribbling notes on their clipboards. By the time we finally have most of the kids lined up and accounted for it becomes apparent that we have a big problem. We are not allowed to go back into the buildings, but a bunch of the kids start complaining that they have to go to the bathroom. So what do they do?" Exasperation is building in her voice, "They start peeing in the bushes! We literally had middle schoolers pulling down their pants and going to the bathroom on the playground while the officials were there scrawling notes on their clipboards. What the fuck?" My mouth is gaping. Arlene and I are stunned.

"It sounds like something out of a movie. But it's not. This shit is my life right now." Paula shakes her head in anger. I am astounded and saddened.

"How can they NOT shut down the district after seeing something like that?" I ask.

"Good! Shut it down! Nobody seems to know what they are doing anyway. Our fire alarm didn't work! And our Principal's solution was to yell over the P.A. system. It's unacceptable."

I can't help but agree with what she is saying. Maybe if the Arizona Department of Education took over there would be some sort of real change? Some lasting improvement?

The average tenure of the district's superintendent was four years or less, with numerous interim superintendents and a divisive and power hungry school board arguing bitterly about the merits of its next hire. Maybe if someone at the leadership level looked at our district as more than just a stepping stone to the next "better" job - and committed to implementing policies for the long term – maybe our students would be better off? Maybe the state has the resources and connections to actually make this happen? I really don't know, but it's obvious that we desperately need it. Our kids deserve so much better.

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Figure 30. Students and parent volunteers on field trip to Arizona State capitol, 2008.

Figure 31. Field trip with sixth graders to Arizona State capitol, 2008.

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I had done it

I had survived my first year of teaching

I was half way there

Half way done with my Teach for America commitment

Maybe after a summer of decompressing, I could do it all over again

Maybe

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Welcome Party at Roosevelt School District: Teach like Your Hair's On Fire

The excited buzz of the beginning of the school year vibrated off the school bus walls. Instead of the tiny bodies of students the bus seats were full of the physiques, laughs, and chatter from our school's adult population: the teaching staff. As was tradition, teaching staff from all twenty one schools were gathering at the nearby high school for the beginning of the year pep-rally. The district wide extravaganza was designed to pump up, celebrate, and cheer on the educator community for the year ahead. This year the fervor was especially apparent.

Somehow the Roosevelt School District had pulled it off. Assessment scores had improved and the district's leadership rejoiced as the State Board of Education voted not to take over (Reid, 2008b). During the long winded speeches about Roosevelt's successes by district leadership, I sat utterly bewildered as our district aggressively celebrated its

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mediocrity. Most schools had earned scores on the AZ LEARNS State Accountability system that labeled them as "Performing," the third lowest of six possible rankings (Arizona Department of Education, 2008). Instead of ten failing schools like the year prior, we only had two. Banners had been printed, proudly proclaiming "A Performing School" and as they were distributed to administrators, each school's staff cheered wildly from their seats and waived pom-poms and clackers, competing with one another to see which school could be loudest in their approval of middling. The madness of this performance did not escape me, but I cheered along with the rest of my co-workers as our school was named. "We are average!" was our unspoken war cry. I guess this was better than the alternative.

The jubilation changed gears as the hired guest speaker Rafe Esquith, a celebrity urban teacher of sorts, took center stage and implored each of us, as individual teachers, to break through the cycle of poverty and inspire our students to be more and do more. As a veteran teacher of 30 years, Mr. Esquith, had built a reputation of building tremendous relationships with his students and the community, and was celebrated internationally for his achievements in the Los Angeles Public School District. He spoke about how dedication, determination, and hard work could change to course of students' lives. He also mentioned that his book "Teach like Your Hair's On Fire" was available for purchase.

This emphasis on the importance of individual teachers and our responsibility to our students was not new. It was the same framework that TFA used in its ongoing training with me as a Corps Member (Studeman, 2015). The message was simple: the individual could overcome the system. Meritocracy could triumph over urban decay. If we worked hard enough and cared enough, it was within our locus of control as teachers to save these children from repeating a life of poverty. It was on our shoulders to make the changes that

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would lift them to greater heights. Mr. Esquith had done it with his students, continuing to mentor many well into their college careers. The implication was that we should be able to do it too. Save the children!

However, after a year in the trenches I wasn't buying what they were selling. Of course teachers were important, but so were all the other people in a child's life. I wondered how Mr. Esquith viewed the role of parents, administrators, community, legislators, and institutions in a student's life trajectory. But he wasn't paid to speak about this. He was paid to talk to teachers and charge us with a mission. More than that, I was beginning to question the premise of why I had joined TFA in the first place. The belief that education could be The Great Equalizer. That the path to greater opportunities and upward mobility was found within the four walls of a classroom. This was beginning to seem more and more fanciful, as I began to understand about the unforgiving barriers present in my students' lives. This wasn't to say that I didn't think my students couldn't grow up to do great things and become successful, on the contrary. I knew that they could and would if given the opportunity. But this top-down insistence that it was teachers who were the primary gatekeepers began to grate me the wrong way. What was society's responsibility to its youngest and most needy?

Back at our school site, our administrators laid bare for everyone to see the results of the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS), the standardized test administered by the state of Arizona. It was the first time school staff were seeing our long-anticipated test scores, and as with the district wide meeting, the reveal was done publicly. One by one, our Principal showed us in charted PowerPoint form which grade levels (i.e. teachers) had met their goals and which had not. My students had not. Mr. Grayton's students had. Apparently, experience counted more than unbridled gusto.

I felt disappointed as I looked at the fifth grade PowerPoint slide, feeling the gaze of other staff members. It wasn't completely unexpected that a first year teacher wouldn't deliver the instruction needed to meet academic standards. I knew that my first year of teaching had felt like a complete catastrophe, with me making it up on the fly the majority of the time. But I had truly put everything I had into my teaching and come up short. I had failed my students. It was a tough reality check. I had to do better this year.

<center>***</center>

Figure 32. Field Day Championship trophy, 2010.

You're Hired!

Nervous silence, business suits

Today we are playing dress up

A woman with a clipboard announces who is next, directs us to our tables

This is speed dating for jobs

The Roosevelt School District is hiring, and TFA gets the first round of interviews

I put on my best smile, shake hands, sit

So nice to meet you, yes I'm from Arizona, and yes I speak Spanish

I think my greatest strength is making connections with people

I taught fifth grade in Atlanta, I love kids

No, I'm not married

Uh, no, I don't plan on having children anytime soon

Oh. I can see how teachers leaving on maternity would be tough for you.

Well you don't have to worry about that with me!

You don't have any other questions?

Really? Thanks so much! I can't wait to start!

Did I just get asked if I was going to have kids anytime soon? Is he allowed to ask a potential hire that? Isn't that workplace discrimination? My interview and hiring in 2007 was

just a first glimpse at that the many ways administrators throughout our district would bend the rules to "make it work."

For example, my administrators tolerated the antics of a supposedly well-intentioned educator at our school who held the precarious dual-role as both teacher and Pastor to students at our school. She ran a small church in the community and an after school Christian program that managed to collect and distribute an impressive amount of toy, clothes, school supplies, and bicycle donations each year at Christmas. Not surprisingly, many of the students attended her after-school Christian program for this reason only (attendance always seemed to drop off after the holiday season). Her efforts seemed admirable, until I began seeing the ways in which these two roles inappropriately mixed on campus.

Mrs. Jasso's class and my own were lined up in the hallway on our way to and from recess, and I smiled and greeted her. Her response was a big wave and the wildly ill-timed question of, "Mrs. Mazza, have you accepted Jesus Christ into your heart and life as Lord and Savior?" I just sort of stared at her, as all of her students and my own waited for my response wondering if Mrs. Mazza was a Christian or not.

"Erhm. I think that's a conversation for another time Mrs. Jasso," was all I could muster and continued walking my students to their art class. This was not a solitary incidence. She managed to ask me about my religious affiliation two more times that year in front of students, and each time I ducked out of the bait, trying to be as polite as possible while fully cognizant that she was doing some sort of demonstration for her church-attending students. I finally had a conversation in private with her about how it was not appropriate to ask about my beliefs in front of students, and that, no, I wasn't Christian.

With no students around to witness her conversion attempt, she let it drop and said it wouldn't happen again. This was fine by me; until I witnessed her classroom discipline practices in action.

On a day when I was pulling small groups of students in and out of her class to have their reading fluency tested, I overheard her speaking to a former student of mine, saying, "Is that what Jesus would do, Ronald? I want you to sit there and think about what Jesus would have done and write it down before you can return to your seat." I was floored. This was a student who I know did not attend her church on Sundays, yet here she was using Jesus as a measuring stick for appropriate classroom behavior. I couldn't believe it. I finally raised my concerns when she brought one of my students to tears by refusing to allow him to join an after school study group, because he was going "to slow the other students down." I could not think of a reason she would treat this student so harshly, until I realized he did not attend her church, and most of the other study group students did.

When I met with my Principal, he listened and said, "I've heard some of this from a few other teachers before, Mrs. Mazza. But she does so much for the community; she really isn't hurting anyone. Think about how great her after school program is!" Apparently, bicycles and Christmas presents spoke louder than the separation of church and state.

Figure 33. Mazza Money, used in classroom economy system, 2009-2010.

Another way I saw administrators "make it work" was in their creative usage of funding. Working at a Title 1 public school meant that there were multiple revenue sources flowing from varying levels of government (local, state, federal) and when staffing issues arose (which they usually did), our Principal was able to find a way to shift funds designed for one thing (i.e. janitorial supplies like paper towels) to another (i.e. paying the salary of long term substitutes). If our kids had to drip-dry the rest of the year, so be it. Having adequate staff was a far higher priority. While my full knowledge of our school finances was limited, I know that my ability to fundraise for classroom field trips and after school clubs was something that enhanced my relationship with our administrators. I won a grant for a smartboard in my classroom, had computers donated to my classroom, was able to get brand new sets of children's literature donated through programs like GoFundMe, and went out to buy paper towels when there were none. Curiously, my administrators essentially left me to my own devices, something which I greatly appreciated in my second and third year of teaching.

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One of the more unforgettable interactions with an administrator happened in my second year of teaching. Carly Wallace, a co-teacher and TFA Corps Member, and I were at our district headquarters meeting with an administrator high up on the food chain to discuss a decision about one of our students. Francisco, a truly sweet boy who was eager to please and quiet most of the time had recently been tested for special education services. He had been in my fifth grade classroom the previous year, and after realizing how much he was struggling I had completed paper work to have him evaluated for special education services. This process was long and comprised of many layers, meaning that while the process had begun in my class, the school year had come and gone, and he was he was now a student in Carly's class. His parents, along with our school administration, had made the decision to hold Francisco back and keep him in fifth grade another year. Moving him to another classroom was done to see if he would have better luck with a new teacher. Our good intentions didn't result in much growth. Research has failed to show any consistent or widespread evidence supporting grade-level retention for academic, psychological, or sociological reasons (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2005; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Pierson & Connell, 1992; Reynolds, 1992; Shepard & Smith, 1989) and I now realize that this decision was most likely a disservice to poor Francisco.

After numerous observations, tests, evaluations, and nearly eight months a decision had been made. The school district psychologist informed us that Francisco did not qualify for additional services based on his IQ score. The psychologist had interacted with Francisco only one time to question him and administer a few tests. His decision had been made purely from this one interaction, and he chose not to consider the pages and pages of documentation that myself, and the other members of the teaching team, had prepared to

demonstrate that Francisco was indeed struggling outside the norm and would deeply benefit from the smaller class size, slower pace, and individualized nature of the special education program at our school.

The people who worked most closely with Francisco, who had seen him in the classroom for years, and who had raised him were stunned. This was not what we had expected to hear, and it certainly wasn't what we wanted for him. We were all in agreement that Francisco needed additional support to be successful in school. Despite his sustained efforts in the classroom, he was struggling in ways that indicated something was being lost along the way. His reading comprehension was poor, his math skills years behind where they should be, and his frequent blank stares were worrisome both at home and at school. His mother had revealed to me a harrowing story of their illegal passage from Mexico to the United States when Francisco was just a baby. She said that during their journey he had a terrible fever, but with no way to help him – she feared he would die. He had survived, but she always wondered if this had caused him to act the way he did – a little slower than her other children, as if things weren't quite in focus for him. Her intense fear and guilt had been evident in this emotive confession.

Furthermore, instead of a decision carefully crafted by a team of educators as stipulated by federal laws regulating special education (IDEA, 1997), this decision was handed down like a directive by the newly hired district psychologist to a room packed with Francisco's support team: our school administrator, special education teachers, regular classroom teachers, Francisco's parents, a translator, and Francisco himself. The two special education teachers at our school immediately disputed the psychologist's decision, going back and forth with him about what was best for the child.

"He may not qualify for a MMR label (his score was 9 points higher than necessary), but there is certainly ample evidence of other possible deficiencies that would make his entrance into the special education program legal." Mrs. Jiménez, a veteran special education teacher of thirty years reasoned.

She shuffled through her notes and was in the middle of citing her classroom observations and work with Francisco, when the district psychologist cut her off saying, "My decision is final" silencing the room.

Mrs. Jiménez scoffed and stood up, saying, "That's not how this is done. This is a joint decision made between all the parties at this table. You know this."

The psychologist held his ground saying that he was the final decision on the matter and that it was done. This bizarre power play was so far outside of any IEP meeting I had ever attended previously. I had always experienced a supportive, child-centered, and solutions-focused atmosphere that I believe was a tribute to the hard work and dedication of our special education teachers. I viewed our special education team as a glistening triumph at our school. Their dedication and innovation to their students and the community always inspired me. His unwarranted hostility was foreign and baffling. It was as if he was trying to teach us a lesson about his authority with Francisco as the sacrificial lamb.

The meeting ended with our special education teachers storming out of the room and everyone, our Principal included, flustered with the decision. Somewhere in the middle of all this back and forth, the translator had stopped interpreting and Francisco's mother sat with a confused look on her face, feeling the tension in the room but not knowing what was being said about her child. Francisco sat quietly in his adult sized chair with big eyes. I am

certain that no other time in his ten years of living had so many adults gathered to talk about him.

Fast forward to Carly and I sitting in at the district office, waiting to dispute the decision with a district superintendent, Mr. Jones. He arrived in a flourish of papers and hellos, ushering us into his office and asking us to sit down.

"So I understand you are here to talk about a special education student?" Mr. Jones said as he folded his hands on his desk and stared at us with the confidence that belied the differences in our positions and experience. He had worked at the district over twenty years and navigated treacherous political and bureaucratic waters to attain his current position. We were two second year TFA teachers, idealistic and doe-eyed, interacting with the establishment for the very first time. The other educators from our school had declined to attend this meeting, even though they also strongly opposed the decision. We had self-righteously assumed that they must not care as much about Francisco as did. We were about to be given an education.

We summarized our meeting with the district psychologist, and started to passionately outline our reasons why we thought the decision should be reversed when Mr. Jones interjected, raising his hands to stop us, "Listen. I know that you two have the best intentions in mind for this student. We all want the best for our kids. But based on what the district psychologist told me, Francisco doesn't qualify for services. He's just not a bright kid. That's ok. There are all types of kids and you know what? We're always going to need someone to push a broom."

The room went red from my internal rage.

Mr. Jones continued, "I can sign this override and put Francisco in special education classes," he grabbed a paper and pen on his desk "but that doesn't mean that he's going to be a rocket scientist in the future. It sounds like he comes from a family that cares about him, so that's good. He'll have them to depend on in life and with a little luck he'll be just fine. Most of the time that's the best we can hope for these kids."

These kids. This was the same us/them dichotomous thinking I had started my teaching career with. Much had changed in the past two years.

He paused and signed the paper as Carly and I sat silently.

"I'll fax this over to your school, and Francisco can start in the resource room next week. Is there anything else you wanted to talk to me about?"

We shook our heads, sheepishly thanked Mr. Jones, and left the district offices. Carly and I were horrified. We had gotten what we wanted, but also much more than we bargained for. It was if Mr. Jones had been trying to give us a lesson in lowering expectations for poor, urban, minority kids. Who the hell was he to declare what a ten year old little boy was or wasn't going to amount to in his lifetime? He had never met the kid and already decided that the best he could do was "push a broom." This was what our district's leadership thought of students? The rosy panes of idealism came crashing down around me. No wonder Mr. Grayton had lost his love for teaching years ago. Interactions like this were soul-crushing.

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The teacher's lounge was packed on this Monday. Five of my colleagues were talking in hushed tones around a table with wide eyes and shameful nods. I pulled out my seat and listened to the conversation as I opened my lunchbox.

"Now that I know, it makes me wonder how I didn't say anything sooner. I always thought it was weird that she gave out her personal cell phone number to students. Why would you do that?" the art teacher said with a disapproving head shake.

"It's disgusting. How could a grown woman do this? She has grown kids and a husband!" Mr. Garcia said forcefully as he and a few others stood up, getting ready to pick up their classes from recess.

"What's going on?" I asked Mr. Grayton who rarely ate his lunch in the teacher's lounge.

"One of the middle school teachers was arrested this weekend for having sex with one of the middle school boys." I uncomfortably gulped my first bite of sandwich down. "The police are here and there are camera crews filming out front of the school."

Oh Lord. "Is it true?"

"We don't know yet. She's been arrested and put on leave from her teaching position, so it doesn't look good."

"Oh my god. This is terrible."

In this moment, I was extremely relieved to be a teacher and not our Principal. While I had questioned his judgment in the past, I knew that his "mixed" methods were because he cared about the students and families at our school. To know that something like this could happen under his supervision must have been devastating. How do you even go into damage control for something as awful as this?

As the day wound down, a letter was brought to our classrooms to go home with students explaining what was known and what the district was doing. Counselors would be on campus the rest of the week for middle school students to talk to if necessary, and parents were told they could contact the office with any questions they may have. The anonymity of the child involved would be protected.

The next day, rumors were swirling and our administrators called an emergency meeting before school started essentially saying: "Unless questioned directly by police, we do not want any staff talking about this incident. You represent the district. We don't know anything more than what investigators have shared, so speculation is just adding to the hearsay." It was a tough directive to follow, given that we were all pretty unsettled ourselves, yet not offered any additional support as students and families had been.

While I hadn't worked with this teacher closely, I searched my memory for anything that should have alerted me but came up short. Other teachers who worked more directly with her more made references to comments or incidences that should have triggered some sort of flag, but ultimately no one could have known she would do this. That she would prey on a student in one of the most deprave ways imaginable.

She confessed to her actions in court and is currently serving time in prison.

Figure 34. Classroom worktime, 2007.

Figure 35. Classroom worktime, 2010.

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Don't' Smile until Thanksgiving – and Other Teaching Advice

I had repeatedly heard the terrible (yet somehow surprisingly common) adage given to beginner teachers, "Don't smile until Thanksgiving." Many veteran teachers ascribed to this view of management, believing a classroom was more successful with a joyless tyrant at the helm, inspiring compliance through strength and fear. I was warned that if I showed any ounce of weakness, my students would turn and attack me like a wild pack of beasts. What a terrible way to view children. I felt tension every time I played the disciplinarian and reprimanded students for infractions, tallying them up daily on behavioral checklists and dolling out punishments for "poor choices." I could hardly go a few hours without smiling, let alone months. This strategy wasn't for me.

Over time, I realized that this view of the teacher-student relationship came from the widely believed myth that somehow today's students were far worse than ever before (Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010). I heard this from thirty-year veterans, who pontificated about the culture of entitlement, and how kids these days got away with everything. Certainly, the dynamics of the classroom had changed over the past thirty years, but I couldn't buy into the notion that there was ever a golden age when children always listened and did what was "right." An integral part of growing up is testing boundaries and pushing limits – and the power structure of the classroom is an obvious site of struggle. There would always be students that pushed the limits and others that stepped in line.

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Student/Estudiate		Keep hands, feet & negativity to yourself	Follow directions the first time	Stay in your seat	Raise your hand to speak	Week of/Semana de
0-3 marks = Recess & Ticket / 4-6 marks = Recess / 7-9 marks = No Recess / 10+ marks = Conference						
M O N	Ms. Streff					
	Mr. Grayton					
	Ms. Wallace					
				Monday Total:		
T U E	Ms. Streff					
	Mr. Grayton					
	Ms. Wallace					
				Tuesday Total:		
W E D	Ms. Streff					
	Mr. Grayton					
	Ms. Wallace					
				Wednesday Total:		
T H U	Ms. Streff					
	Mr. Grayton					
	Ms. Wallace					
				Thursday Total:		
F R I	Ms. Streff					
	Mr. Grayton					
	Ms. Wallace					
				Friday Total:		
				Week's TOTAL:		
Parent Signature _____ Date _____						
Student Signature _____ Date _____						

Figure 36. Behavioral chart used in first year of teaching, 2007.

On the other end of the spectrum was this notion that I heard from younger, more energized educators: in order for learning to take place, lessons had to be magical spectacles of fun and excitement. To truly capture the curiosity of this attention-deficit generation, your teaching had to be shiny and loud. Hands on activities, games, new technology, these were the keys to success. If students were smiling and laughing, then learning had to be taking place. These teachers seemed to think they were in competition with video games and

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television, and losing badly. In their minds the key to being a great educator, was to be a great entertainer. This strategy might work for some teachers and some lessons, but even with a truckload of creative energy, I'm not sure how you could sustain this sort of momentum throughout a year. Just the thought of figuring out how to turn every math lesson into a game tired me out. At some point, you just have to memorize your times tables. What this philosophy missed was that sometimes learning isn't fun. Learning can be engrossing, challenging, transporting, emotional, troubling, disorienting, and whole host of other things (Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010).

Finding the balance between these dichotomous outlooks in my own teaching took years, and is something I still negotiate within each teaching context. I know full well that a classroom must have some structure and boundaries to ensure that students can learn safely and comfortably, and a little tough love is absolutely necessary at times. But the things that I spent so much time and energy trying to control in my first year of teaching far more indicated the shortcomings of adult educators than of children. The practice of having children sitting for hours as passive receptacles, tightly controlled while they selected correct answers was prevalent in my classroom and throughout my school. In my second year, I rejected this model and began to adopt one in favor of children and teacher both feeling ownership for their learning and classroom. Where problem-solving, powerful communication, creativity and imagination were encouraged, project-based learning was predominant, and activities were used not for their ability to make learning fun, but for their usefulness in conveying an idea. I began to seek out examples of teaching that I wished to emulate, and asked for resources and assistance. I began to find my footing in a more holistic, empowering, humanistic approach to learning.

***

As a teacher I was asked to be many things:

A mentor, advisor, protector, therapist, nurse, facilitator, advocate, coach, leader, fundraiser,

confidant, community organizer, curriculum designer, strategist, tutor, resource manager,

exam administrator, substitute, friend, performer, janitor, motivator, listener, mediator, role-

model, actor, goal-setter, cheerleader, referee, disciplinarian, ambassador, counselor, artist,

provider, social worker, translator, colleague, behaviorist, chaperone, security, grant writer,

secretary, technical support …

But all of these roles put the pressure, the responsibility on me,

and I cannot, will not, be everything to everyone

A slow shift from

teacher-centered

to

student-centered

meant asking:

What can my students be? What can they do? How can they contribute to their learning?

I found that when I asked my students to share the workload, to show responsibility towards

their classroom and each other

learning

F   l   o   u   r   i   s   h   e   d

I had to relinquish control,

Set the spotlight on them

And let them bloom

I discovered that being a teacher meant it wasn't about me

It was about

students

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Bridge to True Understanding

All thirty of my students are completely submerged in the literary world of *Bridge to Terabithia*. We have been reading the children's novel aloud as a class for three weeks now and as we approach the story's pivotal moment all of them are at the edge of their seats – a class without fidgets, wiggles, or wandering eyes. Completely invested in the story, their grief is palpable as I read aloud the tragic death of a main character. I finish reading the sobering chapter and look up at the melancholy faces of my students. I had anticipated the need to really discuss and hash out what we read, and hold some prepared questions in my hand.

Before I can reference them, the usually boisterous Pablo asks in an uncharacteristically soft

voice, "Did she really die?"

Before I can respond, Yesenia says woefully, "Yeah. She drowned."

The room is silent for a few beats. Jazmin raises her hand, "This makes me feel the

same way I felt when my Daddy died." There were tears streaming down her face. "It's so

sad." Taken aback by this emotional and personal connection to her real life, I gently

respond, "I'm so sorry about your dad, Jazmin. How long ago did he pass away?" She

tearfully recounted his illness and passing a few years prior. Other children are now quietly

weeping and a few more hands go up.

Griselda adds, "My Daddy died last year too. I miss him so much."

Dashawna says, "My older brother died when I was seven."

A few other students interject their stories of loss, until nearly every child has had a

turn mentioning siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and friends that have

perished. I scan the room through tear-stained eyes and see that every child, even our class

"tough-guy," Tyrell, who prides himself on being "hard" is wiping away tears. I am touched.

Many of their stories are surprising to me – new information about their lives,

windows into how much some of them have endured already in their young lives. In this

moment of collective grief, they have opened their hearts to one another and there is a

feeling of connection, of understanding, of shared humanity. This public recognition of loss

has brought a change in the dynamic of the classroom. The students are unified. Our

classroom feels like a safe space to be vulnerable – because everyone has just done so. I

share my own story of loss from when I was about their age – the death of my best friend,

my cousin to cancer. Our read aloud has evolved from a fluency demonstration into a

therapy session. Strangely, this honest discussion of loss feels empowering. I look up to the clock, realizing we are late for our P.E. class, and unwillingly end the potent exchange taking place. As students line up they are silent, many of them still wiping away tears.

When the P.E. teacher sees us coming, she mouths to me "Were they bad? Did you yell at them?" I chuckle and tell her no, that we had just read something very sad. She shoots me an incredulous look and says, "Well, I'll do my best to cheer them up." I thank her.

Back in the classroom alone, I pull out the Bridge to Terabithia and stare at the worn cover art. This is the power of literature – to make readers feel and connect deeply, to develop emotional and social skills from one another, to build a community in reading together. As I cross out and scrawl down notes on my lesson debrief plan, I think to myself these are the teaching moments that make it all worth it. I love my job.

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Figure 37. Teaching in Phoenix, 2009.

I am starting to come into my own. I have found a rhythm and we have built a family in our classroom. I am experiencing a second year high – I have connected with these students and love everyday of teaching just a little bit more. I have tossed out our scripted textbook and am developing my own curricula, activities, and assessments and feel good about my lesson designs and teaching strategies. I've realized the lessons that go most smoothly are the ones with the most student participation – the more they are doing, the better they understand the concepts, and the more enjoyable it is for everyone. How it has taken me a year to realize this simple principal is beyond me. I rely less and less on punishment, and more and more on positive reinforcement.

We are all about creation: writing, calculating, presenting, problem-solving, reading, interpreting, building, designing, experimenting, these are the things taking place in our classroom. The majority of our learning is project-based, with small individual lessons

culminating in the completion of a larger goal – a presentation, a demonstration, the testing of an invention, the publishing of a story, attendance on a field trip. The students in my class are eager to learn and are far more on grade level than the previous year, thanks in large part to their 4th grade teacher Mr. Garcia, who humbly describes his monumental efforts as "easy work." I have six or seven students who have tested at "gifted" levels and push classroom discussions and understandings to a much higher place. Every day is different – I am challenged to creatively problem solve, navigate the various developing personalities in my class, and find ways to make our curriculum relevant to my students' lives. I am falling in love with teaching.

Figure 38. Speaker from local wildlife refuge discussing desert creatures before handling animals, 2009.

Figure 39. Classroom in Phoenix, 2009.

Figure 40. Students read aloud their published stories to others classes, 2009.

Figure 41. Creating poster boards to display research findings from science projects, 2009.

Whereas before I only recognized the trauma and misery in my students' lives, now I see the joy, hope, and strength. I listen as Juanita proudly describe that her father works three physically demanding jobs to provide for her family of seven, despite having a bad back. I am amazed by Cindy's writing abilities, Damond's artist skills, and Pedro's ability to connect with people. I see that Dulce's mother dutifully signs up for and attends every volunteer project, event, and field trip for her daughter, despite having a newborn strapped to the front of her each time. I appreciate the grandmother who is raising her two grandsons, fighting hard to teach them right from wrong and "trying to keep them out of prison like their father." I now recognize that a 95% turn out rate for parent-teacher conferences is no small accomplishment. I know that hearing from the docent, "You have a wonderful group of students" at the end of our field trip means as much to my students as it does to me. I relish students' joyous stories of visiting Mexico and seeing pictures of new born baby brothers and sisters. I understand what a colossal gesture it is to receive an expensive wedding gift from the school's PTA group, students, and parents the week after I transform from Ms. Streff to Mrs. Mazza. The exhilaration and pride my students and parent volunteers exhibit, when they hear President Barack Obama speak at my Master's commencement ceremony at ASU, is palpable. They, and the other sixth grade classrooms, are able to attend the ceremony through a generous gift of tickets and transportation drummed up from my Teach for America connections. For many of my students (I have been told) this experience is the moment they decided they want to attend college. I am grateful to be given the opportunity to be a part of my students' lives. I see what an honor it is to teach children, to shape their lives in both small and large ways, and this shift in perspective makes all the difference.
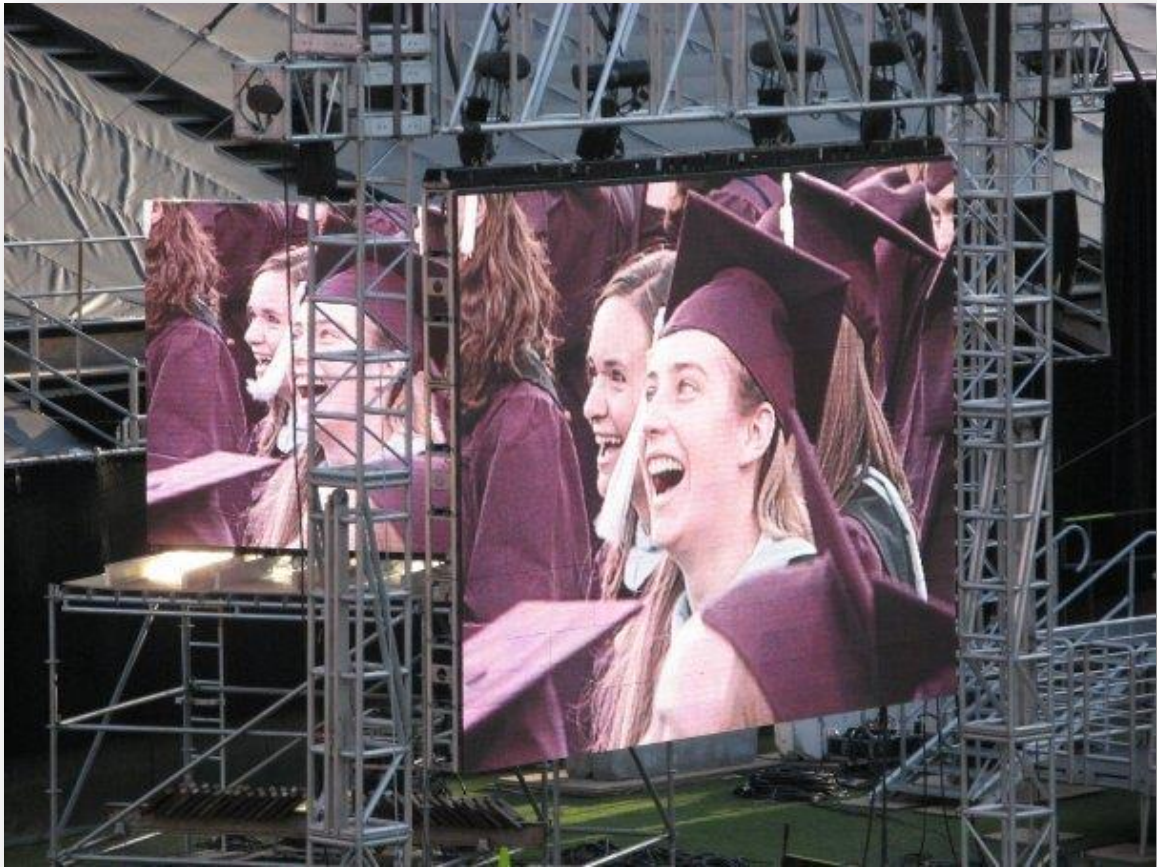
Figure 42. My face on the jumbotron during ASU's commencement ceremony, 2009. I received my Masters in Elementary Education in a pilot program designed for Teach for America corps members. My fifth grade students, who were in the audience, could be heard yelling wildly when I blew kisses and waved. President Barack Obama later took the stage at Sun Devil Stadium to deliver a commencement speech.

Ironically, this change in praxis away from assessment-driven teaching that relied on "drill and kill" techniques, rote memorization, and a banking-system view of education to one that considered the whole-child had the effect of increasing student test scores. By implementing a more balanced curriculum that considered the social, artistic, and physical needs of my students, their cognitive development thrived. In my second and third year of

teaching my students achieved higher average scores on the AIMS reading, writing, and mathematics test than their district peers on nearly every educational standard tested. More than this, students in my third year of teaching bested average state scores in the vast majority of categories. Something about this new method that encouraged students to move (with frequent breaks for stretching, yoga, acting, etc.), create (through project-based learning), and communicate (by holding a community circle to discuss feelings and thoughts each day) seems to be working.

<p align="center">***</p>

Some of the most powerful learning in my classroom happened, tellingly, at the end of the school year - after the AIMS assessments had been administered, during a brief period when administrators encouraged flexible curriculum, rather than a strict adhesion to standards-prescribed instruction. This was the time I was able to be most creative and innovative with my students. And more importantly, when I was able to be most responsive and inclusive of their needs and interests. We dove in head first to social studies and science activities which had shamefully been neglected in favor of test preparation (only reading and mathematics were tested on the AIMS and therefore considered highest priority).

Several former students have expressed that their favorite lesson and activity in the sixth grade was a Civil Rights unit that took place during this time. Instead of relying on the required and, quite frankly, dumbed-down language arts or history textbooks, we were able to read, listen, and watch primary sources from actual historical figures – speeches, legislation, and news footage were our reading materials. Together we watched and analyzed

the language and meaning of the Academy Award winning documentary "Mighty Times: The Children's March," having candid and challenging conversations about race and discrimination both in the past and present (Ellison, Hudson, & Houston, 2004). Students hungrily participated in open dialogue about their experiences with racism, and expressed horror at the happenings of 1963 Birmingham, Alabama. History came alive when a child's grandmother came and spoke about growing up in the segregated South. We picked a civil rights issue that they felt should be addressed at our school – dress code, and together wrote a persuasive letter to our Principal arguing for free dress for all, rather than required uniforms. I had more engaged and committed students at this time than during the rest of the year, despite the freedom of summer whispering seductively outside our classroom door.

Their adolescent ability to understand, connect, and analyze these complex ideas and topics was remarkable to me. Especially when I later saw how adults in my ASU classes struggled to connect with issues of injustice. Anyon (1981) argues that students in working class schools are often not taught their own history "- the history of the American working class and its situation of conflict with powerful business and political groups, e.g., its long history of dissent and struggle for economic dignity" (p. 32). By diving into racial and class divisions of the 1960s and present day, I was able to provide my students with historically relevant teaching, helping many of them frame their situation in the world with conceptual and critical understanding. *This* was powerful learning. This was the sort of knowledge that stuck with students. It was also the sort of teaching that lit my internal fire.

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It is group presentation day and, as the undergrads set up, I make a few announcements to the rest of the ASU students. This is my fifth semester teaching this course, and I have it down to a science. I enjoy seeing what students come up with in their projects, how they interpret the various diversity related topics, and what teaching strategies they incorporate into their presentations. Today's group is presenting on exceptionality – focusing on students with special needs in the classroom. With such a broad topic, the presentation can cover any number of ideas, policies, practices, laws, and history – but what the group delivers is truly memorable.

Zach, a white, junior education major, has been a stand out student the entire semester. He asks questions, consistently participates in class discussions, and frequently slips in remarks that indicate he is reading not only the required, but optional materials available on our course website. He has a one-of-a-kind personality and has made friends with nearly all of his classmates. It's obvious there is something a little different about him, but he is able to easily win over the hearts of those around him. As he steps up to present his portion of the group project, he begins by defining his topic - Asperger's Syndrome - in a poem, a style that is uniquely his own. As he reads his rhyming, Seussian verse, there is a sudden pause and dramatic reveal as he unbuttons his dress shirt to expose a superman shirt beneath:

"I am a person who has Asperger's!" he proudly proclaims. "I have struggled my entire life understanding others, knowing what acceptable boundaries are, and trying to decipher sarcasm. In school, I had a hard time making friends and fitting in because everyone around me thought so very differently. I made it through only because of the dedication and love of my special education teachers, and this is why I am here today. I will

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become a special education teacher to continue the work that changed my life." His declaration is received with a standing ovation and cheers from his classmates. He finishes with a few more PowerPoint slides about Autism and how it relates to Asperger's and then opens up the room for questioning.

The exchange back and forth is honest, informative, personal, and moving. Students ask questions about teaching strategies that Zach felt helped him, how he perceives and understands the world, and how other people with Asperger's might differ from him. This open dialog isn't confrontational, although in another context could certainly be considered insensitive or rude. It is inquisitive, truth-seeking, and caring. We have built a safe and comfortable classroom environment to talk about issues of race, class, sex, socioeconomic status, religion, exceptionality, language, and injustice. I sit back and marvel at how far we have come from the beginning of the semester, and how much my teaching and understanding of these issues has improved since my first semester of teaching this course, four years prior.

As the presentation comes to a close, I have a heartwarming thought: Zach is going to make a wonderful teacher. By far the most rewarding part about teaching at ASU is seeing future teachers hone their skills, and knowing that another generation of passionate educators is dedicated to helping kids reach their potential. It brings the many layers of my teaching experiences full circle, back to the beginning in my own first year classroom. I wonder if any of my former elementary students will become teachers. I wonder how many of them will make it to a university classroom like this.

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Figure 43. Starting line of the March for College Readiness with College Bound Club, Phoenix, 2010.

The College Bound Club

During my third year of teaching elementary school I felt ready to take on the added challenge and responsibility of an after school activity (something my Principal had been pushing me to do since my first year). I became advisor to the College Bound Club, following in the footsteps of another TFA teacher who asked me to take over as she moved to another state to teach. She had done truly amazing things with our middle school students over the past four years, traveling to New York City, Chicago, and California to tour universities and colleges as part of an effort to get our students to set their sights on attending college. As a first generation college student, I knew some of the challenges of not having a guiding hand during the college application process, but as a teacher of poor, urban,

minority students I knew that even more obstacles stood in their way. In 2014, only 70% of economically disadvantaged students in Arizona graduated from high school (Arizona Department of Education, 2015). While in 2013, only 51% of high school graduates from low income, high minority, urban public schools enrolled in college nationwide (National Student Clearinghouse, 2014).

Officially, the club's mission was "to expand opportunities and map a successful future by developing students' knowledge of college through study and firsthand experiences on university campuses." Unofficially, most of the kids joined because of the prospect of a free trip. The club was open to any middle school student who was interested – resulting in over thirty students. We met once a week and would learn about a different topic – starting with student interests and personal aptitudes and ending with a high school course plan and next steps.

While my predecessor had centered her teaching on higher education as *the* answer to life's challenges, I tried to take a more rounded approach. The product of two successful parents who never attended college, I knew firsthand that college wasn't the end-all, be-all of becoming a successful person. I also knew that the vast majority of my students' parents had not attended higher education, and worried how the message of college = success would be interpreted by them. Was I calling their parents' way of life unsuccessful? Was I asking them to view their low-income status with contempt or shame? The not-so-hidden curriculum of this club was simple: a college education was a path to escape poverty. By teaching low-income kids the steps to become monetarily successful in our economic system, I was revealing the stratified nature of our society and placing their parents towards the bottom of that hierarchy. I was asking students to do more for themselves than their parents had done.

I'm sure for many students the news of their poverty wasn't revolutionary. However, for others our college tours were their first experiences outside their neighborhood. During our visit to NAU and the Grand Canyon we stayed at a nice hotel and fine-dined at the restaurant. Dressed in formal clothes, Pablo exclaimed, "This is the nicest place I've ever been to! Can we order anything we want?" We toured all three of Arizona's beautiful university campuses, saw some of the state's most iconic natural wonders, took part in a parade in downtown Phoenix, and heard inspiring speakers. I was proud of what we accomplished (and that I was able to fully fund our excursions through donations), but I was not completely at ease with the covert socialization taking place.

While I wanted (and want) all of my students to live well, I knew that my middle-class conforming version of this may not be the same as theirs. I did my best to discuss students' ideas of "success" and "achievement" at our meetings, and brainstorm what the advantages and disadvantages of attending college might be (students came up with a list that included: being far from your family, having student debt, not being able to work as much, etc.). A few of the club's members planned to attend culinary school or join the military as part of their life aspirations, and I worked with them to map out plans that best fit their dreams. Even still, I felt like I was cramming the idea of college as the only path to success down their throats.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue formal and hidden curricula in schools work to reproduce the social relations necessary to maintain capitalism: competition and evaluation, hierarchical divisions of labor, bureaucratic authority, compliance, and the fragmented and alienated nature of work. Through the educational system the reproduction of these skills and attitudes prepares students for future stratified work roles, priming them to take their

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place within the social classes (Margolis et al., 2001). For someone who grew up economically advantaged, I had easily bought into the curriculum of school and accepted my place in society, dutifully completing what was expected of me by my peers, elders, and society. Until my second year as a TFA teacher, I didn't question the motivation behind the skills and socialization I was expected to replicate because I believed schooling served to provide me with the most opportunities possible. My upper middle class family had it good; I had no reason to question the motives behind educational structures or curriculum. Going to college after high school was the next step in becoming a successful, independent, productive member of society. Fostering the skills and attitudes to make this possible was the purpose of schooling.

It wasn't until graduate school that I was exposed to the works of Paul Willis, Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, and Michael Apple that a different narrative emerged, one that helped to explain the resistance and disinterest towards learning that some of my students exhibited. One that helped to explain the tension I felt in my role as advisor to the College Bound Club. One that helped to clarify causes for the gross inequalities in education and society.

Figure 44. College Bound Club students during ASU presentation, 2009.

Figure 45. College Bound Club students walking on ASU's Tempe campus, 2009

Chapter 3: Researcher

<u>A Fallen Castle on a Cliff</u>

A fallen castle on a cliff

  I step through a stone arch into a small entryway

  All appears to be in order

    Smooth stone walls, ancient but strong

    Proud standards boasting colors of maroon and gold

    Three sages greet us, "We've been expecting you."

    They talk with us as if all is well

  Yet there are whispers of the wreckage beyond

A fallen castle on a cliff

  We pass through the alcove into what was once a great hall

  The sages leave us for

    their soothsaying

    their amulets

    their brews

  Amongst the toppled and cracked stone walls are the echoes of former greatness

  But where are

    the nobles

    the knights

    the vassals

    the merchants

    the serfs?

  Remnants of

    their orders

    their conquests

    their riches

their labor

their toils lay abandoned in the rubble

We were invited, guests in their kingdom, apprentices to their crafts

A Dean arrives, breathless

The exodus was swift, but not without struggle

As they departed, the castle walls fell

There is no one left

A fallen castle on a cliff

No herald brought word of their demise, no word of warning

We have traveled far, given up our former lives, prepared to start anew at

A fallen castle on a cliff

Figure 46. Parking lot at ASU's Tempe campus.

Figure 47. Central courtyard of the Farmer Education building, ASU, 2011.

Figure 48. Looking through the cement-latticed windows towards the music building, ASU, 2015.

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How could our school system be so broken? What could be done to improve students' lives? These were the questions that drove me to apply to graduate school yet again. Surely studying under the tutelage of great minds, who had scrutinized schooling for

decades, would shed some light on how to improve education and could give me direction into combating the gross educational and economic disparities I saw play out in my classroom. I was worn down by three years in the classroom, witnessing what Kozol (1991) called "savage inequalities" unfairly shape the lives of my students. These were my thoughts, as I wrote my application essays for Arizona State University's Educational Leadership and Policy Studies PhD program.

Three years of working in a poor, minority, urban community only twenty miles from my childhood home had opened my eyes to the great social injustices I had been blind to for most of my life. My K-12 public education had been so wonderful, had over-prepared me for college, and given me opportunities that made most goals seem attainable. But it wasn't just the schools I attended; it was the community, the family, the social structures, the systemic scales that tipped success in my favor. What I really needed to study was social injustice, inequality, and inequity. Unbeknownst to me, the questions I was really grappling with were: How could our society be so broken? And, what can be done to improve Americans' lives? The classroom was merely a reflection of larger societal problems.

When I read the acceptance email during my lunch break at my elementary classroom computer I rejoiced! I loved teaching, but this would be a new chapter in a lifelong career – I hoped it would allow to impact more students, more classrooms, more schools, more lives. I was thrilled to be challenged by big ideas and discover solutions to problems I faced every day at my school. I imagined the rigor of a doctorate course and fantasized about the academic personalities I would meet.

Six months later, I entered the Education Lecture Hall, and marveled at how many people were present for the Teachers' College Orientation. Finding a seat, I swiveled to

introduce myself to a young woman sitting next to me. We small-talked, eagerly waiting for the presentation to begin, and discovered we were both first year PhD students. Two other women sat down next to us engrossed in conversation, "I don't know what we are going to do for classes this semester. I have to find a new Chair; at least part of your committee is still here."

"It's so awful. I can't believe it all happened so fast."

I had no idea what they were talking about.

The presenter began speaking and the room fell quiet. Typical introductions, policies and reminders were covered by university administrators. The bulk of the presentation was on proper procedures and conduct for teaching assistants, and I took vigorous notes excited to start teaching my first college courses. A few clubs and organizations also presented about their activities and attempted to recruit new members before a question session was opened up. It quickly became apparent that there was much more on the minds of the people in the room besides administrative policies. Most of the exchange went over my head as I didn't know what was being discussed, but it was clear that the second, third and fourth year PhD students were upset with how some organizational decisions had been handled the previous year.

It took a few hectic months filled with a full course load, intense readings, teaching, and navigating the new demands of being a graduate student before I began to piece together the story. I had applied and been accepted to a college that apparently no longer existed. A program that had nearly thirty full-time faculty members (many of which I was eagerly looking forward to working with) now had few remaining professors. The rest had retired, quit, or moved to other units on campus or to other colleges and universities,

dispersing their knowledge and expertise around the country in a mass exodus of intellect. The clerical staff that made up the college had an even worse fate. After years of service to the college, a few were kept on as advisors to the incoming graduate students (myself included), the rest were either transferred or "let go."

The program I was attending no longer existed. It had imploded on itself. While other colleges built new buildings, hired new instructors, and expanded their programing, the hammer of budget cuts had come crashing down hard on the Fulton Institute and Graduate School of Education (FIGSE). The decision was made to disestablish FIGSE and create a "new" Teachers College. The rationale provided publicly was that this was done to comply with budget cuts mandated by the Arizona Board of Regents. This "cutting of the fat" by merging or disestablishing colleges and programs happened throughout the university, mainly affecting the education and arts disciplines (Margolis, 2013; University Academic Council, 2010).

This was my first lesson as a graduate student – inequality applied to fields of study as well as groups of people. If your college didn't produce wealthy donors, flashy grants, or garner enough clout to keep you in the papers – than it was first on the chopping block. Poor, unsexy education fit the bill. So what did this mean for me? I was attending classes and didn't know any different than what I was experiencing. Faceless emails, directives, and mandates were how I was communicated to by the new college – but that wasn't unexpected in 2010. I was just happy to be working towards a PhD in education (what if they had scrapped their doctoral degrees completely?!). So I soldiered on.

When it came time to register for classes, this restructuring became more of an issue. I was unenrolled from required courses, because I wasn't from the appropriate "cohort" to

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take these classes. When I attempted to get administrative overrides, I was told that some classes weren't for PhD students (EdD students only) and to register for something else. I attempted to learn more about the specialty areas my program was known for like: American Indian Education Policy, Anthropology and Education, Higher Education, International & Comparative Education, Language Policy, and Social & Philosophical Foundations (ELPS Program Handbook, 2010). However, I was told that these specialty areas no longer mattered (or existed) and to just take whatever was available and "make your own specialty." So I went forward and registered for courses that seemed interesting and fit my schedule. Perhaps this relaxed attitude towards requirements was to my advantage after all?

I taught university courses, worked as a research assistant, became involved with *Current Issues in Education*, an open access peer-reviewed academic education journal, and started to question my reasoning for entering a doctoral program. I loved teaching. I already had my Masters in Education, so what was I doing here, back in school again? Queue the first of many graduate school existential crises.

Figure 49. Posing in the classroom after the first day of teaching for the semester, ASU, 2014.

Figure 50. Presentation room during International Visual Sociology Association conference, Brooklyn, 2013.

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Is this what doctoral level research was? Unlike most of my colleagues, I wasn't required to do the bidding of a randomly assigned professor. I had chosen this, applied for this, and created my own research assistant position outside of the College of Education. And I hated it.

The hum of computers in a windowless room.

The squeak of my office chair as I pushed back from my desk to stare up at the ceiling tiles.

Sitting alone with my wilting potted plant.

The beige walls of the office closing in on me.

I was mildly interested in the project I was working on, a study of education colleges throughout the country, looking at how they recruited, trained, and kept track of their graduates, but clearly not enough to make the isolation and monotony worth it. I could do this work; had done this work before as an undergrad and masters student, and done it well. But I was quickly realizing that this type of research – quantitative, literature-based, faceless, interactionless – wasn't for me. Alone in my orderly, silent office, I craved human connection. This was the opposite of teaching.

The Sanford Inspire Project was just getting off the ground, starting to form its mission and focus its goals, and I was now heading up one of the organization's first research projects (Schlesinger, 2014). Again, my Teach for America connections had made this opportunity possible. Without them, I highly doubt I would have been considered

seriously for the position, just a first year doctoral student with no notable publications under her belt.

From the outside, this research opportunity seemed prestigious, or special: I was interacting with powerful people and had the prospect of influencing policy at my own university. I presented the study's findings to a panel of heavy hitters: the Director of the program, Dean of the College, a Vice-Provost. I made policy recommendations and suggested ways the Teachers College could improve their admission and progression requirements for its undergrads: Seeking NCATE accreditation, requiring certification exams for all education majors, requiring a specified number of volunteer or paid work experiences with children before admission, and developing pre-clinical experiences for early interaction with the classroom (Mazza, 2010). The project was received well by the director of the Sanford Inspire Project, who pushed for implementation of some of my recommendations. However, the rest of the establishment was not as enthusiastic and little change was made. Also, no further graduate students were employed as research assistants, as the cost of covering my health insurance and tuition was seen as too wasteful. The forty page report that took five months to create was put away on a shelf somewhere, if it was kept at all. Only a few people read it and nothing came of it. I decided Teaching Assistantships were the way for me from then on.

Figure 51. "Academic Malaise," 2005, mixed media (created by author as undergraduate).

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I got the email in my second year of doctoral studies: a job offer at a charter school

serving the same South Phoenix community as my former public school district. I felt unsure

about my future in my doctoral program, and was struggling financially with only an

extremely modest teaching stipend, so I decided to look into it. As I toured the school, I saw

familiar student faces and realized I missed working with kids more than I had imagined. So

began my position as an eighth grade Social Studies teacher. Originally, my role was a part-time position, splitting the teaching responsibilities with the school's Director so that I could continue teaching at the university during the afternoon two days a week. However, as the year progressed, I backed off from my responsibilities at the university and became a fulltime teacher again, additionally teaching art as a special area in the afternoons to seventh and eighth graders.

The differences between my experiences at the charter and district schools were vast. The majority of the staff were first or second year Teach for America corps members at the charter, and while they poured their hearts and minds into their teaching, I was relieved to be past the beginning teacher struggles and doubts I saw them suffer through. I enjoyed the communal sense of enthusiasm and shared goal of college readiness. We had all been seduced into teaching by the same dreamy TFA promise: come fight the good fight and make a difference in students' lives (Millen, 2015). There was urgency in our teaching efforts and a comfortable cohesiveness with my colleagues, which I hadn't experienced at my district school. As mostly current or former TFA teachers, we had similar motives, backgrounds, and methods.

Acutely aware of academia's arguments against the charter school movement, I felt conflicted in my new role. Theoretically, I agreed with the commonwealth view of education as a common good; that public interests demand a public school system funded by tax dollars to effectively set students up for success in our society (Smith, 2003). Alternative market-based systems like vouchers, charters, and private schools take the power and resources from the collective, public sphere, and place it into the hands of the individual consumer, effectively diminishing the democratic process of public interests in favor of self-

interests and the free-market. Historically, this creation of alternative, competing schools has had the effect of benefitting children at the top (economically, academically, etc.) and harming those at the bottom (Schneider et al., 1997). With Arizona's push towards policies that encourage the privatization of education, a system that should be dedicated to serving all kids is being dismantled and drained of its resources for the benefit of a few (Sanchez & O'Dell, 2016). Theoretically I understood this. But in practice, providing my eighth graders who lived in a failing public school district with an alternative schooling option didn't feel like an evil undertaking. It felt like I was setting them up for success. The tangible, everyday needs of these kids out powered the academic arguments for the larger system. I rationalized this conflict with the thought, "Every kid deserves a great education no matter what type of school they go to!" Unfortunately the unstated part of this declaration was "just not at the expense of others" (like the kids down the street that I used to teach). Contradictions abound.

Other realities of this charter school were harder for me to rationalize away. While I had had significantly more power and flexibility in negotiating my pay and contract with the charter school than district school, I did not receive the benefits of enrollment in the state retirement system, a huge financial blow. The younger, frantic TFA teachers didn't seem to consider this long term planning as an important or necessary part of their job (most of them would likely move away to another state in a year or two anyway, and besides who can think of retirement when you're just trying to survive the day?), so there was little chance of organizing amongst staff. Which brings me to another difference I saw play out at our charter school: the swiftness of hiring and firing. When a teacher was deemed unfit, they were gone shortly after. I saw this work to my advantage several times – my initial hiring had

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been because the previous Social Studies teacher had been let go. But, also, when there was a truly struggling teacher, one who wasn't living up the high demands of the school, the rest of the teaching staff had to pick up the slack by covering their class (there was no substitute system as with the public school), completing their paperwork, and feeling the effects of their poor management spill over into our classrooms and lessons. I was relieved to see how quickly a decision could be made and implemented, unlike my public school experience where tenured teachers were nearly impossible to be rid of. I also know that I feel this way because I was not one of the teachers who were fired. No doubt, these teachers would not hold the same favorable view of the efficiency of staffing changes at the charter school. But they never returned to work, so I never got to ask them their perspective. I wonder if they found work elsewhere, midway through the school year.

The largest struggle I had with this school was adhering to the school-wide behaviorist model of discipline. The use of behavior charts with number codes for every kind of infraction imaginable felt like a huge step backward. Instead of focusing on building meaningful relationships focused on students' personalities, interests, and hopes, the majority of my out of classroom interactions with students were spent answering the question, "How many demerits did I get yesterday?" Demerits equaled punishments like lunch detention, after school detention, exclusion from celebratory events, etc. During the time I taught at the school, this system seemed to unnecessarily set up an adversarial role between teachers and students that tainted classroom dynamics and learning. This focus on negative rather than positive reinforcement was contrary to what I knew worked best in my classroom. It set up a system of external, negative motivation, which may have worked to

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discipline some of the rebellious antics of middle school students in the short term, but at the detriment of developing a true love of learning, work ethic, and initiative.

Each time I recorded a student's infraction on my behavioral clipboard, I felt ashamed of my compliance with a teaching method I did not believe in. This was the sort of educational practice designed to humiliate and embarrass. I had worked towards a pedagogy I hoped dignified and humanized my students, not one that treated them like Pavlov's dog. This was the sort of training of working-class children to be obedient towards authority that researchers like Anyon (1981), McLaren (1999) and Willis (1977) railed against in their research. Yet, comply I did. It was the most disheartening part of my work at the charter school.

Figure 52. My desk area in teacher work room at charter school, 2012.

Figure 53. Hallway with teacher carts at charter school, Phoenix, 2011.

Figure 54. Student artwork from charter art class, 2012.

Figure 55. Student artwork from charter art class commemorating 100th Arizona Statehood Day, 2012.

Back in the Classroom

The comfortable, cool feel of a new whiteboard marker in my hand

    Jotting down the day's schedule; possibilities unknown

The familiar battle with the copy machine

    Today I've won; warm papers stacked and ready to be passed out

The squeak, squeak of my rickety teaching cart as I push through the hall

    At this school the teachers travel, the students sit

A quick glance at my clipboard,

    The dreaded behavior chart is gripped tightly in its clip

        I detest it as much as my students do

        It is a school mandated boundary between my students and self

I push my cart past their exiting teacher into a cramped classroom

    Desks from wall to wall

        The smell of large middle school bodies and bad cologne

        At least some of them are trying

Restless silence is what greets me as I set up

    These students are experts at staring at a page but reading nothing

        Silence does not equal order

        Order is not my desired outcome

"Who among you is a communist?" I ask. Half the hands go up.

"Who among you are capitalists?" Half the hands go up. "You all know your missions from

yesterday?" Smiles, light chatter, and head nods greet me. "Then let's begin."

    I power up my laptop, continuing a lecture on the Cold War.

Students flip over country flags that were previously hidden, squish their desks to form a gap through the middle of the room, get out notes.

Two students stand up, place KGB badges on their arms, and pace the room.
As I describe life in divided Berlin, a student jumps up and exclaims, "Communist! Take him away."

I nod as two students playing the roles of McCarthyists, place him at a desk labeled "prison," but continue lecturing.

Most of the class is distracted at the dramatic pretend imprisonment.

"I want my lawyer!"

"You'll have a trial Friday."

A few students ignore the scene, studiously taking notes through the clamor

A note is quietly passed to me from the front row

It is a report from a spy, who has just completed their mission unnoticed

Students are living the tensions of the Cold War

This is a lesson about mistrust, surveillance, and deceit as well as the Cold War

Students are loving it, I am loving it

This is meaningful,

challenging,

rewarding work

This is where I am meant to be

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"Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers"
(Susan Sontag, 2003, p. 101).

Pessimism. Bitter pessimism is what I heard from world renowned minds when tough questions were asked. My idealism, my youth, my desire for practical solutions to educational inequity are met with biting hopelessness. Teach for America's bold mission that "One day all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education" seemed very far away (Teach for America, 2016a). My professors maintain that America's education system is designed to socialize the masses into conformity with a capitalist system that necessitates inequality. Any attempts to penetrate or reform the current system will fail because America and other powerful consumerist societies around the world rely on maintaining an imbalance of power. Education, as a systemic extension of this inequality, works to maintain separation between the haves and the have-nots through replication of the social classes and social subjugation (Apple, 1979; Giroux, 2004; Smith, 2003). My introduction to neo-Marxism was complete.

What was a teacher to do? Was this really what I had come to my doctoral program to learn? Surely there must be a brighter, more hopeful outlook that I was missing. Is there no place for idealism in academia? Are idealism and materialism incompatible? My spiral bound notebook in hand, I frantically took notes during years of classes, trying to understand the casual references to theorists, philosophers, and research, with which (it was apparently assumed by my professors) I should already be familiar. The list of books, articles, and researchers I needed to cover grew and grew. I read so much in my first two years of study that I went to the optometrist to make sure the blurring of my vision wasn't going to be permanent (it wasn't). I was taught to view the social world through different lenses:

critical, feminist, intersectional, postmodern, Marxist, Foucauldian, etc. My practitioner background was failing me in this new setting. Instead of considering the merits of theoretical and epistemological arguments, I kept thinking of the names and faces of my former students, and wanting more for them. Was there no way to merge these system wide understandings with the daily, individual realities of the classroom?

Sure, there were a few professors at ASU that did not express these pessimistic views, but instead focused their work on the micro-issues of educational sociology – specializing in areas like charter schools, policy, and technology. But the professors with tenure, the ones who had been in academia the longest, and the ones who, quite frankly, didn't need to sugar coat it or play nice with others – they told us straight up: America's education system did what it was designed to do - provide the next generation of workers in an industrial system. For most kids, the school system did a fine job. Students finished with enough skills and knowledge to secure a job and take their place in society. It was the kids at the bottom that got the short end of the stick, but that was to be expected. If you wanted real, lasting change to inequality, the next logical step was to examine the larger social systems; to look at the political and economic connections to education and put your efforts into changing these arenas. I clung to positive messages of change offered by authors like Freire (1970; 1974; 1994) and hooks (1994; 2000; 2003; 2010).

My discomfort with these conclusions clearly indicated that I wasn't ready or prepared for this as an answer to my original questions. The solution to the educational inequality I saw in my classroom was political revolution? There had to be another way, one that would actually take place in my lifetime. I didn't like this answer because it meant taking a political stand that I wasn't fully convinced would be effective anyway. Of course, I wanted

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social justice for my students, but these professors, who I considered far more brilliant and knowledgeable than I, had been working, writing, and shaping policy for decades and admitted that little progress had been, could be made. Their efforts seemed so detached and top-heavy from the daily realities I had experienced in my own classroom. I may not have been changing the world in my classroom, but I had been making a small difference (hopefully for the better) in my students' lives. This was the sort of revolution I could ascribe and commit to. Even if it meant I was just another brick in the wall.

Besides, *my* life was too comfortable to commit the sort of political extremism these professors touted. At the end of a long day of teaching in South Phoenix, I got to go home to a safe and comfortable neighborhood, to the refuge of a loving and caring husband, and to the support of friends and family. What would they think if I made some radical political stand? I'm not willing to find out.

As Susan Sontag writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, "There is shame as well as shock in looking at the close-up of real horror. Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it… or those who could learn from it" (2003, p. 42). I had seen barbarities in education, but been unable to do much about it. My university professors had studied injustice for years, but conceded that little could be done.

Perhaps the individual is powerless against these larger social forces, but I could choose to learn from these experiences. And learn from them I have.

Figure 56. A presentation room at AERA Annual Meeting, San Francisco, 2013.

Figure 57. AIMS rally at charter school, Phoenix 2013.

Epilogue

"There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world"
(Shaull, 1970, p. 16).

One thing that dawned on me rather slowly as an educator is the inherently political act of teaching. By choosing to teach, I choose to impose values as well as knowledge onto my students. Not all of my values or the values present in our curriculum have aligned with my students, their families, or the communities in which I have taught. While it was easier to overlook dissimilarities between myself and children (because my authoritative role of teacher often quelled much of the debate), differences in cultural assumptions became harder to ignore in my interactions with parents or my adult university students. As a woman in my early twenties, I viewed my fifth and sixth grade students' parents as my elders. I held the awesome responsibility of teaching their children, and had a duty to honor their beliefs and ways of being as much as possible. It was when these beliefs were so different from mine that I began to question my role as "teacher" and challenge my taken for granted cultural assumptions. Parent-teacher conferences were always a source of enlightenment.

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After a discussion about her daughter's complete lack of effort in class, Maricela's mother turned to me and said, "Lately she's been like this at home too. I can't get her to help with chores, or finish her homework; all she wants to do is watch TV with her older

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sister or she whines. How do I get her to do what I want?" She paused, waiting for my counsel, and I looked from mom to Maricela, who was sitting nervously next to her.

Did this mother expect me to know how to motivate her child at home? I was informing her about her daughter's lack of effort in the classroom so she would let *me* know how to motivate her child. I consider parents the experts of their children, and had been looking for insight and guidance. *Didn't Mom know I was just a 23 year old, with no kids of my own, playing the part of "teacher"?* I didn't know anything about the dynamics of their home or what sorts of discipline strategies they used. So I thought back to the only experience I could reference - my own childhood. When I misbehaved my parents and I would have sit down chats to talk together about appropriate punishments for poor behavior.

"Maricela, why haven't you been helping your mom at home or doing your homework?"

"I don't know." Maricela changed her pitch to a groan, "I don't *like* doing chores!"

"See? This is what I am talking about. All she does is whine." Mom motioned angrily towards her daughter.

I disliked talking about Maricela like she wasn't present, but her mom didn't seem to have any qualms with it. "Well, have you tried taking away TV time until she finishes her homework or helps with chores?" Maricela scowled at me. *Yikes, what was this conversation doing to our in-class relationship?*

"No, because I know she is just going to whine and complain a lot. She's just *so* lazy." Mom's permissive stance towards disciplining her child was irking me.

Seriously? What do you want from me lady, a magic button that enables you to parent struggle free? How can you talk about your kid like that *with her sitting right here?* "Well, I would stand my

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ground, make some rules about TV time and use it as a reward, rather than a given." I looked back at Maricela, "You know that we are talking about this for your own good, so that you are able to improve your grades and do well in school? That's what we want for you. " Maricela glared at me like a traitor. Her level of effort and grades didn't change much during the rest of the year, yet she always seemed to be caught up on the celebrity gossip from her favorite television shows. *So much for that strategy.*

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Leroy's mom attempted to follow her fifth grade son on his student-led tour around the classroom, distractedly glancing at his posted work on the wall as she fended off blows from her wild three year old. She let go of the toddler's hand for a few minutes, and he ran madly through the room, marker in hand, coloring on walls and toys. I pulled a box of blocks out from the shelf trying to interest Leroy's younger brother by showing him how to stack a few pieces. This distraction lasted a whole two minutes before he was off and running again. Leroy tried to demonstrate long division on a white board to his mom, but she huffed up during his explanation to stop her youngest from tearing a book in half. Obviously stressed, Leroy's mother asked if they could skip the rest of the walkthrough and just get his grades. As Leroy proudly began explaining his marks, the toddler thrashed around on the edge of a full blown tantrum.

Leroy's mother lost what little pretenses she had been clinging to and aggressively pulled the boy in close, put her mouth up to his ear, and snarled, "Do you want me to take

off my belt? Stop clownin'." She placed her hand on her belt-buckle to show him she meant business. The toddler's eyes widened and he fell limp and silent.

Mom exhaled, turned to me, and threw an exaggerated smile, designed to distract from the disturbing and forceful exchange. "Kids! What can you do?" She laughed nervously.

I laughed too; desperately uncomfortable with the realization that this three year old had been belted as a form of punishment before.

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"That's the devil's work!" Grandma shrieked as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* hit the classroom floor. I turned from my conversation with another parent to see Yvonne standing sheepishly next to her desk. "Is this what they have you reading?! This is sorcery, it is evil!"

I quickly crossed the divide and addressed Grandma, "Is everything alright?" The other families were listening keenly from their frozen positions around the room.

"No it is *not* alright. Have you been reading this blasphemy to my grandchild?" she pointed to the book lying innocently on the floor like a wicked talisman.

"We've been reading this book together aloud for the past month, Mrs. Johnson. I didn't think that anyone would have a problem with it. It's one of our school's…"

"Well I do. This is *not* ok. I do not want my grandchild exposed to this nonsense. It'll warp her mind." The intense fear in Grandma's eye was menacing and sincere.

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I took a deep breath, "I'm so sorry, I never meant to offend or upset you. Yvonne never mentioned that this was a book she wasn't supposed to read, I'm sure we can find a solution. She won't read the book anymore if that's what you want." Yvonne stood silently between us.

"That *is* what I want, and you *better* send a letter home to all the other children's families," Mrs. Johnson pointed around the room, "because I know there are other children in this class who go to my church and they would not approve of this garbage." *Was she threatening the other parents? How can she think Harry Potter is garbage? There is no way she has actually read it.*

"I will absolutely do that Mrs. Johnson. Maybe we can have Yvonne go to another fifth grade classroom and read with them while we finish the book?"

Grandma nodded her head, calming down, "That would work. I would be ok with that, but I want to know what's being read in this class ahead of time from now on."

I reached down to pick up the offending object and placed it on my desk. "I'll make sure to send that letter out tomorrow." I had never experienced being thought of as a source of immorality before, but that's exactly what had just happened. My curricular choices weren't fit for her child. I had exposed my students to something Grandma considered wicked. I was further shocked to discover that two other families, (who I presumed all attended the same church), asked for their children to be excused from class during our reading of Harry Potter. The thought of imaginary wizards and witches as deprave or dangerous, would *never* have crossed my mind without this experience of cultural collision.

<p align="center">***</p>

I could hear the hoard of children shrieking outside my window as I attempted to answer emails during lunchtime. There was a fight happening on the playground *again*. I jumped up from my desk, wondering where the recess aides were and walked out to see a swarm of boys surrounding two fourth graders who were going at it with fists and blows. I thrust myself through the crowd of shoulder high testosterone-fueled excitement and pulled the boys apart, taking a swing and a scratch to my arms. An aide appeared and held back the other child while she yelled at the other kids to disperse. My pulse racing, I ushered my fighter into the building and the sudden change to quiet school halls acted like a calming effect on both of us.

The unfamiliar boy glowered as he slumped down into a chair next to the Assistant Principal's office. "What happened?" Mrs. Velazquez, our school secretary, asked me.

"He and another boy were fighting on the playground. I'm guessing he will be escorted in here soon as well. I need to fill out a referral form, do you have one?" While she fished for one, I asked the boy his name and whose class he was in. His pouty answers were delivered with crossed arms. Clearly, this was not his first rodeo at the Principal's office. As I worked on writing out the incident report, the school's front entrance swung open and a Latino man entered with a zip-lock bag of General Mills box tops donations for our school.

"Hector? What are you doing in the office?" The boy's face lit of up with recognition.

"Papi! It's not my fault, but I got into a fight again. Sebastian pushed me."

I braced, expecting to hear a stern reprimand. Instead, the father looked at his son intensely and asked, "Well, did you win?"

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A grin spread over Hector's face, "Yeah. I did."

"Good. You better not be starting fights, but you sure as hell better be the one to finish them."

My jaw dropped as I witnessed this dialog. *What was wrong with this man? He wanted his son to "win" fights? "Finish" the fight? Like knock a kid unconscious? What did he think this was, boxing camp?* Furious, I looked down at my nearly completed incident report and noticed a trickle of blood running down my forearm. I found a tissue, dabbed my cut, handed the report to our secretary, and huffed away. *Finish the fight? I finished the fight, you idiot. And now I have to explain to your kid why violence isn't ok in school. I'm sure that's going to go over real well.*

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Beliefs about parenting, violence, and morality are only a few examples that illustrate differences between my cultural identity and those of the families I taught. While I concede that teaching at any school is bound to bring diversities to the surface, I believe my status as a cultural outsider in the South Phoenix community sharpened many of these differences. My performance of "teacher" was dependent upon my perceptions of self and others, as well as my understandings of success and achievement in education and life:

- A successful parent was an authoritative one: affectionate with clear expectations and consequences for their child. Including children in conversations, boundary setting, and decisions-making showed them respect and the importance of collaboration. Corporal punishment should be

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extremely limited, if used at all. That's the kind of parenting I had grown up with and it had worked for me.

- Violence was not acceptable at school or at home. I worked to develop children who would think, feel, and act with compassion and esteem towards others. Building a school and classroom that felt safe for everyone was essential to learning. Observing how often students' lives were impacted by violence broke my heart.

- Exposure to literature that captivated and transported student's imaginations was a way to develop a love of reading, not a pastime of alchemy. That others could have such vastly different estimations about something I considered so innocuous, was baffling to me.

My principles about these issues were informed by my manifold experiences as child, student, friend, non-Christian, peacekeeper, bibliophile, etc. The intersectionality of these various life-roles, including, but not limited to race, class, and gender, comprise my notions of "self" and right and wrong. As a student, teacher, and researcher I have held differing emotions, desires, values, strengths, weaknesses, knowledge, and skills that reflect the fragmented, context dependent, and self-adjusting structure of self (Gee, 2004; 2007). The narratives presented here, in this project, are a testament to some of these embodied identities.

Figure 58. T-shirts from some of the different educational institutions which I have been a part of as a student, teacher, or researcher.

To write about the American education system with sensitivity and cultural insight is a daunting task. I have been trying to work out my own account ever since I walked through the classroom door as a teacher in 2007. Similar to Segrest (1985), at first "I was afraid whatever I wrote attempting to understand race and class in my life would betray my racism and my class pretension - I would unconsciously illustrate what I was trying to criticize" (p. 148). By writing about power in the classroom, I was forced to scrutinizing my

performances, words, actions, and beliefs for bias, discrimination, and inconsistencies in my educational philosophy, teaching practices, and treatment of others.

I found that "in my work for my own liberation from my various roles as oppressor," I was often "caught in contradictions" (Segrest, 1985, p. 170). It is these moments of tension or incongruity that I believe hold the most promise for self-development, not as an attempt to create self-resolution in my narrative or self-conception, but as an active and on-going site of learning and struggle. In considering the narratives presented in this autoethnographic account, I believe two tensions in particular deserve further consideration: (1) the influence of neoliberalism, colonialism, and psychological distance on finding my purpose in the classroom, and (2) the negotiation of reconstructing self through purposeful pedagogy.

Tension #1: Neoliberalism, colonialism, psychological distance, and finding purpose

At times this narrative is framed simultaneously by my roles as both victim and oppressor. I describe my first year of teaching as the worst time in my life; a time when I felt like an abused pawn, taken advantage of by the larger institution of Teach for America and forced into a situation for which I was unprepared, afraid, and overwhelmed. I am not alone in this narrative (Brewer & deMarrais, 2015). However, seen from my current vantage point as researcher, my work as a TFA teacher within a low-income community can be viewed as an act of oppression in and of itself. Despite my internal struggles and discomfort with my oppressor role, I was doing the work of the institution: maintaining power for the ruling class through the socialization and conformity of children, specifically working-class children, into the current system.

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I used teaching methods that reinforced ideological hegemony – at first focusing my efforts on teacher control, using a curriculum that excluded working-class history, and relied on praxis designed to create passive acceptance of remedial tasks rather than encourage problem solving or creative thinking (Anyon, 1980). During this time, my classroom was marked by frequent active and passive resistance by students, displayed in varying forms from wild outbursts ("Big booty hoe!"), purposeful sabotage (every child in the classroom suddenly becoming ill and needing to visit the nurse), and sustained disinterest and apathy towards learning (Maricela). In her seminal study on hidden curriculum, Anyon (1981) argues that children from working class backgrounds are "not offered what for them would be cultural capital knowledge and skill at manipulating ideas and symbols in their own interest, e.g., historical knowledge and analysis that legitimates their dissent and furthers their own class in society and in social transformation" (p. 32). Instead, curriculum for low-income children is designed from a "banking system" of education, focusing on "fragmented facts, isolated from context and connection… and knowledge of 'practical' rule-governed behaviors-procedures by which the students carry out tasks that are largely mechanical" (Anyon, 1981, p.12). This emphasis on copying teachers notes, answering textbook questions, and encouraging organized responses serves to reproduce a class of workers who accept their role as workers. This is exactly what I did in my first year of teaching.

My teaching practices at this time were largely coached by Teach for America, and fit into a behaviorist model, emphasizing step-by-step thinking and rote memorization that reinforced low-level understanding. While this kind of teaching was certainly a strategy for raising student test scores, it didn't do much in the way of developing imaginative, critical thinkers. By looking at learning as a product ("educational outcomes" was the corporate

jargon TFA used), with families as the consumers, learning could be measured and controlled; with increased production as the goal. Higher test scores determined teacher quality, demonstrated TFA's effectiveness as an organization, and showed progress towards the organization's goals of closing the achievement gap. This cut and dry distillation of student "learning" was something that sponsoring businesses and corporations could understand and get on board with – to the tune of 70 percent of TFA's 2007 $75 million annual operating revenue (Lahann & Reagan, 2011, p. 17). But in practice in the classroom, this added pressure on student data to drive curriculum was extremely tiresome, especially working for a district already hyper-focused on raising student scores in order to escape a looming state takeover.

Teach for America had hooked me with the progressive promises of working towards a more equitable public education by "[enlisting, developing, and mobilizing] as many as possible of our nation's most promising future leaders to grow and strengthen the movement for educational equity and excellence" (Teach for America, 2016b). But the organization's underlying political philosophy was, in some ways, contrary to this mission. The organization is informed, in large part, by neoliberal assumptions of:

> privatization (e.g., the growing number of for-profit teacher preparation and teacher staffing programs); fragmentation of control and oversight of schooling (i.e., hiring and practicum placements in charter schools, non-university based programs for teacher preparation); use of standardized tests to gauge teacher quality; and the weakening of teacher unions as a voice in what constitutes teacher quality. (Weiner, 2007, as quoted in Lahann & Reagan, 2011, p. 9)

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My teaching in the classroom was a primary example of the organization's fundamental support of deregulating university-based teacher education in favor of alternative certification programs. As an alternative program, my membership with Teach for America meant I was allowed to substitute years of study, training, coursework, and student teaching at a university in exchange for a five week Summer Institute program that left me feeling anything but "highly qualified." Perhaps my disgruntled coworker *was* on to something when she informed me of how much I was "getting away with" at our school.

Furthermore, TFA's collaboration with private sponsors that "seek to improve public education specifically through marketization and privatization" assumes that "public education benefits from deregulations, market reforms, and collaboration between the public and private sectors" (Lahann & Reagan, 2011, p. 17). Most educational researchers do not agree with this assumption, questioning the motives behind profit-driven companies and corporations which financially support Teach for America. Apple (1998) and Teeple (1995) argue that neoliberalism considers school as a space for economic development and profit, instead of political empowerment. In this view, educational attainment is a step towards attaining a career with higher incomes, and the valorization of capital is the goal of schooling (echoes of my lessons from the College Bound Club dance in my mind as I write this). A neoliberal education is an education focused on the generation of little consumers, not little thinkers.

In my first year of teaching, I didn't understand or actively challenge these taken-for-granted views about education, because the schooling process had worked for me. As an educator it was my job to prepare my students for success as the institution defined it. I was a good soldier and did as I was told, using conscripted curriculum and creativity-killing

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methods. It wasn't until my hate for my job overtook my blind obedience that I began

questioning what I was really doing teaching at a Title-1 school.

Began wondering what the purpose of education was.

Began searching for alternative visions of success.

Began looking for truly liberating and transformational visions of education.

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Apple (2004) argues that "until we take up seriously the extent to which education is

caught up in the real world of shifting and unequal power relations, we will be living in a

world divorced from reality" (p. xx). Giroux (2004) takes this argument one step further,

contending that those who ignore the injustices in society are not neutral in their stance

towards inequality, but complicit with oppressive ideologies in their performative ignorance.

He argues that critical practice "requires that educators consider the political and pedagogical

importance of struggling over the meaning and definition of democracy, and situate such a

debate within an expansive notion of human rights, social provisions, civil liberties, equity,

and economic justice" (Giroux, 2004, p. 39).

Critical theorists contend that institutions are "one of the major mechanisms through

which power is maintained and challenged" and that "the manner in which they are

organized and controlled are integrally related to the ways in which specific people get access

to economic and cultural resources and power" (Apple, 2004, p. vii). By examining the

assumptions underlying sites of struggle, including institutions, labor, and interactions

between groups and individuals, critical theorists work to challenge the subjugation,

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oppression, and domination of people. Giroux (2004) maintains that "cultural politics matters because it is the pedagogical site on which identities are formed, subject positions are made available, social agency enacted, and cultural forms both reflect and deploy power through their modes of ownership and mode of public pedagogy" (p. 32).

As I learned about these critical theorists in my role as a researcher, I imagined an education for my students that began paying attention to the practical aspects of pedagogy for social transformation and organizing to achieve a more just society (Ross & Gibson, 2007). An education that included a loving praxis (hooks, 2003), where students could critically engage with governance (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006), and work towards their own definitions of self-actualization (Maslow, 1973). This line of thinking made me question one of the more dangerous assumptions I had been operating under as a beginning teacher: child-saving.

Much like my volunteer work in Tanzania, I had gone into my teaching position with Teach for America with a self-righteous view of myself as a benevolent "savior" coming into a community in need and offering them solutions to *their* problems. In Tanzania this had meant teaching about HIV/AIDS, and all the underlying cultural assumptions and values wrapped up in educating about sexual practices. In Atlanta and Phoenix, this had meant offering my "superior" teaching in a system desperate for excellent teachers, or so I was told by TFA. Just writing this now makes me scoff at my own laughable, self-aggrandizement – I had foolishly bought into the fallacy that because I had been an excellent student, I would make an excellent teacher. It's one of the assumptions that drives TFA to aggressively recruit "outstanding recent college graduates" to become Corps Members (Teach for America, 2010). In reality, the work of "child-saving" in TFA's mission of closing the achievement gap

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meant actively seeking to conform students to the current educational system (no matter how unfair) supposedly for their own "good" (read: future economic opportunities).

I now view both of these endeavors as forms of modern day colonialism. Here I was, the wealthy, white woman intruding into the homes and schools of strangers with messages about the "right" way to live, behave, learn, etc. I was a temporary cultural tourist (four months in Tanzania, two years with TFA) in a community not of my own, instructing *them* on how to be healthy/educationally successful according to *my* cultural contexts. No one had asked me to be there. I had invited myself for personal fulfillment (*What admirable work I am doing!*) and personal gain (*My first full time salary position, won't mom and dad be proud?*).

While my intentions had been compassionate, I came into these communities with an "us/them" dichotomy, a sort of psychological distance, emblazoned in my mind. What could *I* do (with all my wealth, power, and privilege) to help *them* (poor destitute lot that they were)? While I started working in the Roosevelt School District as an intruder, at some point in my second year the separation between "us" and "them" started to blur. By my third year, I viewed students as "my kids" and felt like a part of the South Phoenix community. My cultural tourism had ended and full citizenship began. My patronizing and glib assumptions began to unravel as I established authentic relationships with students, parents, teachers, and community members (Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010). Rather than undeveloped caricatures, I saw the full dimensionality of my students and their lives. The distance between "us" and "them" had closed.

This transition to connectedness is marked in my mind with a conversation that took place with an acquaintance. He casually asked how I was doing, and I responded with an honest (and much too open) recounting of struggles in my classroom and a concerned story

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about a particular students' troubled home life. Apparently unmoved, he sort of rolled his eyes, and said matter-of-factly, "Why are you so caught up in this, Bonnie? TFA is just a thing rich kids do so they have something to talk about at their yacht club. Your poor kids are still going to be poor kids once you leave." My response was uncharacteristically belligerent. I responded like a mother bear who sensed her cubs were in danger. How dare he talk about *my* students like that? He didn't know them and didn't have the right to pigeonhole them (despite the fact that I had done that very same thing myself not too long ago). I gave him and earful and sent him on his way.

My belief in democracy was strengthened. I no longer saw educational inequity and poverty as *that* community's problem; I saw it as my own. Everyone in the larger community had a duty and responsibility to these children and to one another – not just the people in their immediate social circles. And something desperately needed to be done to address these injustices in a meaningful and transformative way. This was what motivated me to study educational policy.

Poignantly, it is in this way that TFA has most succeeded influenced me. Lahann and Reagan (2011), former TFA Corps Members themselves, argue in their research that TFA's "primary conception of itself is not as a teacher training organization, nor a non-university-based early entry recruitment program, but rather as a 'movement' against a pressing and untenable social problem" (p. 20). I had been pulled into that educational reform movement, and with three years in the classroom, had no intention of going back. I had found a purpose for my life's toil. I could not imagine myself doing other types of work. Not when the need was so pressing in our nation's schools.

As much as I criticize and lampoon the framework, policies, and practices of Teach for America, I am incredibly grateful and indebted to the organization. My professional and political life today would not be possible without my acceptance into the program. Who knows what job I would have found with an undergraduate degree in psychology, or in what field I would be working? While I question some of the missteps of the organization, I know that it is only because of TFA that I have been able to collaborate with truly remarkable Corps Members and support staff who are committed to social justice and change. As a teacher, time and time again I was able to use the resources, connections, and opportunity pipeline of Teach for America to benefit my classroom, students, and self, in ways that traditional teachers could not (my disgruntled coworker's chiding again flashes through my mind as I write this). I also have no doubt that my admission into my doctoral program would not have occurred without the experiences afforded to me through Teach for America. In this way I am committed to the progressive efforts of Teach for America: equity and activism. Lahann and Reagan (2011) contend that TFA exhibits progressive policies and practices by actively encouraging TFA corps members to "ultimately work against a system that promulgates inequalities" and adhere to the core values of "disciplined thought, respect and humility, and integrity" (p. 19). By working to demonstrate that students in low-income communities can achieve at high levels, TFA holds a "vision to improve the educational opportunity of historically marginalized populations" (Lahann & Reagan, 2011, p. 20).

The organization simultaneously embraces neoliberalism's focus on deregulation, business strategies, and the managerial culture of accountability, but works progressively to fight inequity and reform the systems which produced it. This complicated relationship between the neoliberal and progressive aspects of Teach for America, helps to explain some

of my own muddled thinking about educational reform and my place as a social justice advocate. It also makes me question if an educator, working within an inequitable system, can enact meaningful change, or are they condemned to replicate the injustice which they seek to abolish? Presently, I have no clear cut answer to this question, but for the sake of my students, our society, and self, I hold out hope that the answer is yes.

Figure 59. Student artwork given as gift, 2012.

Tension #2: The negotiation of reconstructing self through purposeful pedagogy

Freire (1970) argues that a humanist and liberating praxis is only possible through "authentic reflection [which] considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world" (p. 62). In undertaking this inquiry, I attempted to authentically reflect on my experiences and interactions with others as means to understand, confront, and challenge my own words, actions, and beliefs with the intention of developing into a more progressive educator. I raised questions about inequity and inequality in the classroom and our society, and pondered what privilege means for my life path - politically, professionally, and personally. Through "(1) retelling the story of one's educational experiences, (2) imagining future possibilities for self-understanding and educational practice; (3) analysis of the relationships between past, present, and future life history and practice; and (4) new ways of thinking about education," Pinar (2004, p. 35) argues that educators can "understand fully, with more complexity and subtlety, one's submergence in the present" (p. 4). While Chapters 1, 2, and 3 of this project have retold many of my educational experiences and analyzed relationships between the past and present, I have yet to imagine a future history or practice in a meaningful way.

Undoubtedly, my experiences as a student and researcher have intimately influenced my identity as a teacher. Yet, when I consider my role in education today, I primarily identify as an educator. When strangers ask what I do, I respond with "I am a teacher," even though I haven't been active in the university classroom since the birth of my son over two years ago, or in the elementary classroom in nearly four years. I respond this way for two reasons: (1) explaining my work as a doctoral candidate is not nearly as intuitive, comprehensible, or

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appreciated, and (2) teaching is where my heart lies. As I progressed through my doctoral studies, my grand imaginings of how I would impact educational inequity on a larger scale shifted. I realized that teaching was my calling, my passion, and a way to fight for social justice. A plan to reenter the classroom in the role of teacher (albeit with a newly established theoretical understanding and critical eye) emerged. In preparation for this future practitioner version of self, I undertook this project to better understand my own motivations for teaching, to explore in depth the knowledge, beliefs, feelings, and values that have accompanied my various educational practices over the years, and to truly "own" the political, social, and personal consequences of my praxis. This process has led me to ponder the following questions:

- What kind of educator do I wish to become?

- How do I view the purpose of schooling, and what does my role within this framework mean?

- How can my actions and praxis become more aligned to struggle against injustice?

hooks (2003) writes that "Love in the classroom prepares teachers and students to open our minds and hearts. It is the foundation on which every learning community can be created… Love will always move us away from domination in all its forms. Love will always challenge and change us" (p. 137). In considering an ideal vision of schooling and my role within it, I see the repeated themes of empowerment, liberation, and transformation in my narratives.

As a student, I evaluated my teachers by their ability to create a classroom environment of empowerment where transformational thinking took place and love and

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support was offered. Mrs. Parker, Mr. O'Brien, Dr. Barrera, and Mr. and Mrs. Tracey were all able, in their own unique ways, to create a "pedagogy of connectedness" where they connected with the social context and emotional complexities of students' lives in order to "envision futures the young people cannot and keep them moving towards those futures" (Payne, 2008, p. 116). They looked for and found potential in their diverse students, and pushed us towards visions of success.

As a teacher, my students became profoundly engaged by lessons that encouraged active learning through the integration of students' interests, aspirations, and cultural backgrounds. Student-centered, project-based learning that challenged them to problem solve, think creatively and critically, communicate powerfully, and demonstrate their achievements was only possible with the right conditions for learning. It was essential that I first develop a classroom environment of connectedness through respect, honesty, and love of my students. Modeling these attitudes and setting clear expectations for students helped to bring about unity and a sense of community in the classroom.

These methods were a giant shift away from the banking-system view of education to which I had originally adhered, and that too often is relied on in classrooms today. hooks (2003) explains that students who are accustomed to this method sometimes

> become upset when confronting alternative modes of teaching that require them to be active rather than passive… But the student who longs to know, who has awakened a passion for knowledge is eager to experience the mutual communion with teacher and subject that makes for profound engagement. (p. 130)

Awakening this passion for knowledge is my mission as an educator. It disrupts the "learned helplessness… necessary for the maintenance of dominator culture" (hooks, 2003, p. 130),

and "respects and cares for the souls of our students" in a way "where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (hooks, 1994, p. 13).

As a researcher, I have sought to investigate and question oppression in the classroom, educational institutions, and society at large. Payne (2008) argues that in addition to a "concentrated focus on improving curriculum, pedagogy, and the capacity for learning in schools in a district context" we need to ensure that schools are provided adequate resources, time, and political support (as quoted in Mediratta, 2009, p. 87). Ensuring an excellent education for all should be a primary goal of our communities, states, and nation. Instead, current budget cuts, legislation, and neoliberal policies appear, in my view, at war with this objective. By working within and amongst communities towards reform efforts and educational policy that serves a communal, democratic view of education, it is my hope to politically align my academic efforts and praxis.

Gee (2007) argues that literacy and schooling are inherently political:

Attitudes, values, norms, and beliefs (at once social, cultural, and political)… always accompany literacy and schooling. These consequences may be work habits that facilitate industrialization, abilities in "expository talk in contrived situations," a religiously or politically quiescent population, radical opposition to colonial oppressors, and any number of other things. A text, whether written on paper, or on the soul (Plato), or on the world (Freire), is a loaded weapon. The person, the educator, who hands over the gun hands over the bullets (the perspective) and must own up to the consequences. There is no way out of having an opinion, an ideology, and a strong one, as did Plato, as does Freire. Literacy education is not for the timid. (p. 64)

Up until this point, I have avoided taking on an active political role in educational issues out of fear of unfavorable reactions from friends, family, and community members (clearly, my inborn need to please still firmly holds a grip over my actions). However, through the creation of this project, I can no longer ignore the importance of taking a firm public political stance towards educational injustice. In crafting these narratives, I realize how my safe, neutered, and neutral stance around issues of educational equity contradicts my core, innermost beliefs. In better understanding my motivations for teaching, and exploring in depth the knowledge, beliefs, feelings, and values that have accompanied my various educational practices over the years, I find I must truly "own" the political, social, and personal consequences of my praxis. hooks (1994) contends that "teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (p. 15). By fighting for equality and justice in my political life, as well as in my research and classroom, I hope to more fully attain a coherent vision of self-actualization.

In spite of this declaration of political resolve, I know my life going forward will not be without its tensions or contradictions. With the arrival of my newest pupil, my son, I have gained a different appreciation for the work of educators, and the extreme trust that parents put into the educational system. To hand over your most precious treasure to a teacher, school, and system for their education, socialization, and "betterment" is truly a leap of faith. An act of allegiance to the promise of public education. I look at my sweet little boy and wonder if I am willing to make this same jump. Will my son attend a public school when he comes of age? My principles adamantly avow "yes," but only time will tell.

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Throughout this narrative I discuss at length *my* perceptions of students, parents, communities, teachers, administrators, professors, institutions, and self. I describe wanting to be a force for change and having a desire to fight for justice. But I give very little consideration to how the other actors in this narrative perceive themselves, or their role in fighting for their own liberation and justice. I do not claim, nor desire, to be the mouthpiece for any of the Others mentioned in this project. Instead, I speak only from my own vantage point and realize that my understandings are limited, fragmented, and subjective. Furthermore, I don't claim that this project serves peoples in distress, but rather that it brings to light issues of inequality as I perceive them. Eisner (1997) argues that

> each person's history, and hence world, is unlike anyone else's. This means that the
> way in which we see and respond to a situation, and how we interpret what we see,
> will bear our own signature. This unique signature is not a liability but a way of
> providing individual insight into a situation. (as quoted in Suurtaam, 1999, p. 34)

The insights and understandings I have gleaned from undertaking this project may be different from what, you, the reader have taken away from it. This is the wonderful, interactive nature of a dialogic text.

In imagining future possibilities for educational practice and new ways of thinking about education (Pinar, 2004), I acknowledge the importance of developing a pedagogy which assists students in achieving *their* visions of self-actualization and attending to their understandings of social justice. By honoring the needs, wants, emotions, values, desires, understandings, strengths, skills, knowledge, and perspectives of students I hope to maintain

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a student- *and* community-centered model of teaching. I will strive to use culturally relevant materials and curriculum, dependent upon the contexts in which I teach. And I will work to consider the whole-child in my teaching, aware that I am developing more than just minds in my interactions with students.

As a first step in a continual quest for pedagogical justice, the process of sketching out an ideal to strive towards has been eye-opening and empowering. Whether or not I will be able to achieve this lofty vision of education will be a matter of continual evaluation, development, and commitment to humility, love, and understanding. No doubt, I will fail many times as I continue to learn from my students, community, and personal shortcomings.

Unfortunately, there is no clear or succinct road map about how to turn pedagogy into "the practice of freedom" (Freire, 1970). I believe this is because, much like this text, teaching is inherently caught up in a world that is complex, context-dependent, ever changing, and subjective. But this does not mean that despair is our only answer. When I do reenter the classroom as a practitioner, I will hold fast to the optimistic reminder that hooks (1994) so eloquently shares in her work: "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (p. 12).

***

I keep in touch with my students. The ones who I have lovingly named gray hairs after. The ones who have made an indelible mark on my life. Through the magic of social media I am able to know the ups and downs of their lives as they enter adolescence and

adulthood. Some of my former students post pictures of themselves and their crew in their gang colors holding guns and trying to look menacing. I'm sure to the average outsider these images are intimidating. But when I look at these pictures, I see the little boys who wanted to fit in and be seen as tough. The little boys who suffered through tragedies at very young ages, living out the consequences of social injustice. The little boys who cried when we read *Bridge to Terabithia.*

Some of my former students are teenage mothers, posting pictures of their ultrasounds, growing bellies, and newborns. I have been pregnant at the same time as a former student twice now, and wondered what that child's life will be like, and what my former student will make of motherhood. I wonder if my own child's path will cross with theirs in this exceedingly segregated society. Most likely not. I post similar pictures of my growing belly and these teenage moms like and comment on them supportively. I wish them all the best in their own journeys.

Some of my former students have fallen in love and in painstaking, public detail shared the joy and heartbreak as only this technology-centered generation is willing. Some of my former students have dropped out of high school, posting about the ups and downs of their jobs and day to day life of being an "adult." Messages like, "So glad I don't have to wake up for first hour ever again!!!" make me wonder where they will be in a few years' time.

The vast majority of my former fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders are still in high school, or are graduating this year. Many have gone on to local colleges and universities studying everything from business to nursing. Many have kept me abreast of their plans or asked for recommendations for various scholarships and recruiting events. Always glad to

hear from a former student, I am eager to oblige. Just this past week a former student

reached out via Instagram to send me this heartwarming message:
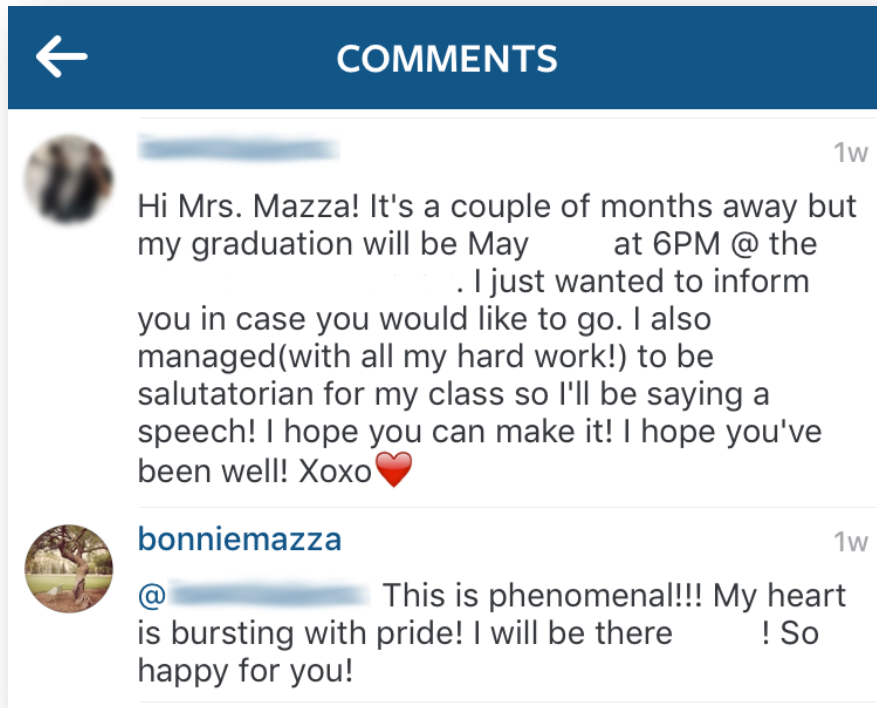
Figure 60. Screen shot of Instagram conversation between former student and author, 2016.

Salutatorian! Of a 5A high school. This was no small feat. I can't help but marvel over his

accomplishment. How I love to delight in my students' successes. His will be the third high

school graduation ceremony scheduled for May on my calendar. It feels good to know that,

seven years later, my students still want me to be a part of their lives. Is this evidence of an

empowering, liberating, or transformational pedagogy? Or simply a desire to connect with a

"nice lady" from the past?

I know I shouldn't, but I can't help but feel some ownership in their accomplishments, as well as their downfalls. Hearing about a former student who is in jail breaks my heart, just as much as receiving messages like this fill it up:
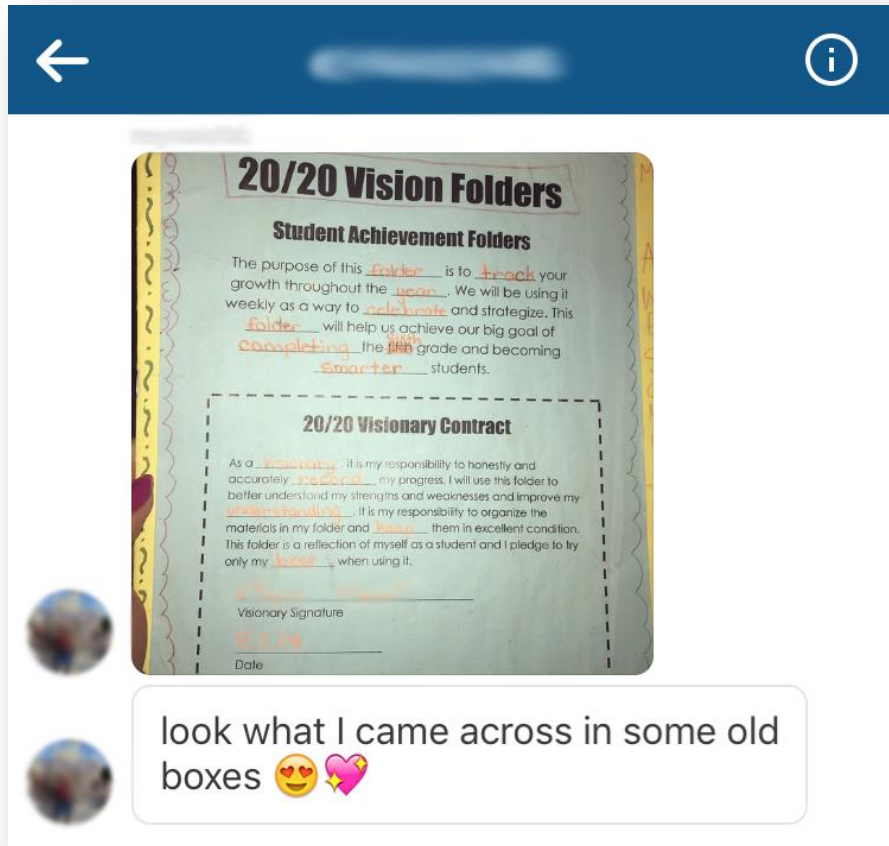
Figure 61. Screen shot of Instagram conversation between former student and author, 2016.

A picture of her fifth grade classroom achievement folder. She had kept it all this time. Seven years. That she still felt connected with me enough to randomly share this brightened my day. More importantly it reminds me that my former students, much like myself, are on their own enculturation journeys, gathering experiences that hopefully continue to develop

them into thoughtful, caring, and justice-minded adults. That I have contributed in some small way, to who my students are and who they are becoming, fills me with joy.

In this way, teaching truly is limitless.

Part 2: An Academic Discussion about the Narrative

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

"Social science researchers too frequently neglect "at hand" knowledge and expertise they alone possess in the engineering of their research ventures. They often ignore or treat as ancillary their own unique biographies, life experiences, and situational familiarity when these could opportunistically serve as important sources for research ideas and data"
(Riemer, 1977, p. 467).

This is a story about public education. It is a single story – my story – one of many that could be told about the American schooling experience. The focus of this writing is as much for me as it is for the larger audience of justice-minded educators. This autoethnographic narrative derived from careful reflections and evaluations of my lived, personal experiences in education, and critical explorations of identity, power, and pedagogy in order to examine three guiding research questions:

- What do my educational experiences reveal about my identity as a student, teacher, and researcher?

- What do my educational experiences reveal about power-relations in education and society?

- What do my educational experiences reveal about pedagogy?

American public education is a complex system with millions of working actors, and no single narrative can fully capture the vast diversity of cultural meanings that students, teachers, or researchers assign to it. However, "a single story told strategically and in the spirit of narrative inquiry, can contextualize complex social actions for the reader, and bring the cultural complexity of a cultural phenomenon… out of the realm of experiential chaos and into the realm of orderly, and immediate, and critically discursive exploration" (Stewart,

2010). In undertaking this study, it was my intention to shed new insight and critically explore cultural issues, consequences, values, and moral dilemmas stemming from my experiences with public education.

I looked to the narrative work of Stewart (2010) as a guide to structure the final representation of my study, conscientiously choosing how I wanted to write up the story by creating a list of project goals and prioritizing them in the following order:

1. Create an informative and aesthetic research project exploring the three guiding research questions (listed above) by producing and investigating narratives of my lived experiences in education.

2. Produce a final research product that includes both visuals and written passages.

3. Strive not to privilege the writing over the visuals or the visuals over the writing so both epistemologies are present in tandem.

4. Produce a final project that is simultaneously academically sound and publicly accessible.

5. Produce a final project that uses a variety of means to produce partial knowledge and increased understanding (Barone, 2001; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

In order to accomplish these goals, I chose narrative-based autoethnography as my method for its ability to: (1) explore the life of an individual, (2) describe a detailed analysis of culture, (3) prioritize experiential data, and (4) encourage a creative, literary presentation of story. For this particular inquiry, an evocative style to narrative research was a natural extension of the autoethnographic method because it fits "best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life" (Creswell, 2007, p. 55) and allows for "an emotional first-person stance that highlights my multiple interpretive positions" (Tillman-

Healy, 1996, p. 80). Additionally, I chose to implement a layered approach (Ronai, 1994) to visual and written passages, allowing the weaving together of both medium throughout the story.

Ellis (2004) argues that narrative is most successful when the story evokes "a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible" (p. 122). In order to connect with readers, this narrative-based autoethnography was written and arranged in an evocative literary manner to achieve what Ellis (2004) calls "narrative truth" (p. 30) and "verisimilitude" (p. 124). Ellis (2004) contends that "rather than believing in the presence of an external, unconstructed truth, researchers on this end of the continuum embrace narrative truth…" where "we learn to understand the meanings and significance of the past as incomplete, tentative, and revisable according to contingencies of present life circumstances" (p. 30). Rather than seek "Capital-T" truth and reliability from a modernist framework, interpretive narrative researchers seek local "little-t" truths and verisimilitude, or a feeling of the story "ringing true" for readers (Fisher, 1987). Researchers with this viewpoint judge their work by considering how plausible and useful it is (Ellis, 2004, p. 122) rather than evaluating its correctness (Polkinghorne, 1992). Barone and Eisner (2012) clarify that arts-based research need not be:

> a literal description of a state of affairs; it is an evocative and emotionally drenched expression that makes it possible to know how others feel. In the pursuit of such an aim, metaphor will be appealed to, analogies will be drawn, cadence and tempo of the language will be controlled, innuendo will be employed, simile will be used to illustrate meaning, and other such devices will be used to create the expressive form (p. 9).

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Cho and Trent (2006) differentiate between transactional (truth-seeking) and transformational forms of validity, explaining that "transformational validity in qualitative research is a progressive, emancipatory process leading toward social change that is to be achieved by the research endeavor itself" (pp. 321-322). They contend that autoethnography and other personal research formats require "a deeper, self-reflective, empathetic understanding" and self-assessment of experiences in order to change the existing social condition (Cho & Trent, 2006, p. 322). When considering how to assess validity in narrative autoethnography, Reason and Rowan (1981) argue that accounts should be viewed as "descriptive… [a] dialectical view of truth as becoming… that there are always emerging possibilities which are not yet included" and should probe "meaning" by asking "is it useful? and is it illuminating?', as opposed to considering 'is it right?'"(pp. 243–244). By recounting my lived educational experiences in narrative form, I attempt to put my lived experiences to use by encouraging meaning making in the reader and practical development in myself.

Representational images were included as standalone narratives in order to thicken interpretation, build narrative verisimilitude, and "evoke emotions and imaginative identification, too often lacking in social science writing" (Riessman, 2008, pp. 179-180). Prosser (1998) argues that images relay cultural information on multiple epistemological levels: "Taken cumulatively images are signifiers of our culture; taken individually they are artefacts that provide us with very particular information about our existence. Images provide researchers with a different order of data and, more importantly, an alternative to the way we have perceived data in the past" (p. 1). Radley (2002) argues that the inclusion of images "not only restore[s] feeling but also the capacity to feel" (p. 21) in research. In creating a narrative focused on the social interactions taking place in classrooms, images help

to contextualize and humanize the written passages through visual sense-making and emotional connection, as well as act as independent, standalone stories.

Riessman (2008) posits that "spoken and written texts examined alongside visual data show how identities can be revealed, concealed, or fictionalized through images" (p. 179). Similarly to notions of truth and verisimilitude applied to written accounts, visual materials should also be actively analyzed, interpreted, and understood as subjective aspects of our research (Harper, 1987). Also like written narratives, stories told through photographs or images need to appear as representational to be seen as truthful (Berger, 1972). By including images of the people, places, and things I have written about, I believe readers are able to more readily connect, sensemake, and judge the truthfulness of written passages while adding a new dimension of understanding.

Over time, the narrative's style emerged as a careful attempt to capture the eclectic spirit and messy nature of my educational experiences while achieving visual and verbal validity within the story. In order to stay true to the many experiences of my academic career, I wove together visuals and written passages in a way that felt "right" to me. While I believe my self-identity is an ongoing "life-long acculturation journey, which is ultimately defined by seminal moments and socio-cultural influences along the way" (Ownby, 2011, p. 4), I harbor clear distinctions in my mind regarding the places, times, and social roles I performed within various educational settings. These mental divisions meant I was inclined to loosely group narratives into chapters based on my identity as either student, teacher, or researcher. The chapter about my identity as a student is marked by a more orderly, chronological flow, building from a description of self as student, zooming out to an overview of family influences and academic achievement, and finally describing significant

teacher influences. I chose this more orderly presentation because it reflects the safe, tidy, and controlled emotions present during most of my experiences as a student. In contrast, the chapter about my identity as a teacher tends to more readily bounce between time, space, and attitudinal realms, because the overall feeling during this time was chaotic and jarring. Finally, the chapter about my identity as a researcher is sparse and drifting, reflecting the existential and professional qualms I had while attempting to commit myself to the PhD endeavor.

The content and style of the narrative was also influenced by my desire to create something beautiful as well as insightful. This led me to the pay special attention to the rhythm and pacing of words, the movement between different voices and perspectives, including personal, historical, popular, and organizational views, the inclusion of typesetting considerations for certain poetic passages, and the aesthetic considerations of inclusion, cropping, and arrangement of visual narratives. I attempted to balance linear storytelling against moments of alinear discovery and academic analysis throughout the narrative.

Furthermore, the narrative style was impacted by my negotiated role as both researcher and researched. By studying my own educational and cultural past, I viewed myself as an object, while simultaneously being an active subject. This tension and self-dialogue was present throughout the writing process as I constructed, edited, reflected, judged, objectified, and rewrote myself in response. Rather than shy away from these seemingly conflicting roles, I acknowledge that "through multiple reflections from multiple points of view, I am armed with alternate discourses to define my self" (Ronai, 1994, p. 418). Ronai's (1994) layered method to autoethnographic writing embraces this dual quality of consciousness, accepting the "dialectical relationship" (Bourdieu, 1989) between the roles of

subject and object by attempting to "break out of the conventional form and expand the types of knowledge [researchers] are permitted to convey" (p. 396).

Using a layered account in my writing approach mitigated the issues of managing the dual autoethnographic roles of subject (researcher) and object (researched) by acknowledging that there exists an irreconcilable contradiction between being and observing oneself as an object. Ronai (1994) clarifies that "I can never get outside myself and perceive myself wholly as an object, nor can I exist without reflecting on myself as I believe others perceive me" (p. 418). This conflict is recognized and used as an asset in the multiple-perspective format. In one paragraph I may use an authorial social science voice and in the next a first-person evocative tone to describe the same phenomenon. In this way, the multifarious nature of identity is recognized and represented in this study. By being able to shift through time, space, and voices in my writing, I was able to craft a narrative that makes thematic connections and honors the object/subject tension present in all autoethnographic research.

Additionally, the content and style of the story reflect my internal struggle of viewing these experiences through the contrasting lenses of artist and scientist. When embarking on this project, I initially wanted to pour onto the page all of the unfiltered, raw, and emotional recollections of learning, teaching, and researching. I let my artist soul get swept away in crafting beautiful descriptions of the people, places, and happenings of the past, taking myself back in time and to entirely new fantasies. Used for exploring the tactile and embodied aspects of my educational experiences, this strategy helped to bring to the forefront my feelings surrounding the classroom and beyond. Through self-observation, self-introspection, and self-dialogue, I was able to access "covert, elusive, and/or personal

experiences like cognitive processes, emotions, motives, concealed actions, omitted actions, and socially restricted activities" (Rodriguez & Ryave, 2002, p. 3) and bring to the surface what was "taken-for-granted, habitual, and/or unconscious matter that… [is] unavailable for recall" (p. 4). Furthermore, Ellis (1991) argues that

> without examining the lived experience of emotion in individuals and across collectives, we are forced to talk of spiritless, empty husks of people who have programmed, patterned emotions, and whose feelings resemble the decision-making models of rational choice theorists. Introspection [allows] us to study emotions as they are experienced without using models that have rationality built into them. (p. 45)

By utilizing a method called systemic sociological introspection, researchers acknowledge the "individual's private role in the interpretation of processual emotional details," in addition to the cultural and social factors that influence action (Ellis, 1991, p. 44). By including my emotions, thoughts, and recollections as experiential data in this study, I attempted to bridge the gap between the individual and institution, examine my role within this larger system, and consider the inner world, as well as the outer world.

However, my identity as a scientist was not satisfied by this raw and emotive account. I also desired to examine these experiences with a stronger analytical eye, probing the structures and processes present in my accounts of American public education. My social scientist side needed to pull back from the personal and identify the organizational patterns found within my narrative accounts in order to gain insight into to social and cultural processes at work in my lived experiences. In order to accomplish this, I examined visual and written passages for common themes and turned to scholarly research to help inform

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and frame issues of identity, power, and pedagogy in my narrative (see more about thematic analysis in the Implementation of Methods section below).

Ethical Considerations

"Once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world"
King (2003, p. 10).

Presentation of Self

As the study of self-culture, autoethnography comes with specific ethical affordances and constraints. All researchers have an intended audience in mind when writing and, in addition to a desire for discovery, a political or professional agenda. In this case, my intended audience is justice-minded educators interested in issues of identity, power, and pedagogy. However, in the case of autoethnography, the personal nature of the research makes what is written - the descriptions, analysis, and conclusions - a potentially precarious negotiation. As both researcher and researched, authors of autoethnography must wrestle with the issues of self-presentation and self-disclosure that are not as obviously present in other forms of inquiry. What identities should an autoethnographer present to the world? How much of themselves should they reveal? What are the potential consequences of autoethnography? Scholars have conceptualized this delicate role of the autoethnographic researcher as a "vulnerable observer" (Behar, 1996, p. 1), an "ultimate participant" (Merton 1988, p. 18), a "complete member researcher" (Anderson, 2006, p. 378), or "a performer" within the narrative (Denzin, 1997, p. 123).

When writing autoethnographically, there is the ever-present knowledge that what is portrayed in the research might affect relationships (both personal and professional),

employment opportunities, and other areas of life. Personal stories and interpretations are made public and permanent through the act of dissertation defense and publishing (while undoubtedly the author's understandings continue to change and grow through the passage of time) and authors must assess and justify what is included in their narratives. This importance is not lost on Ellis (2004), who argues that in constructing narratives, "your current perspective always clouds your memory… writing will cloud your memory in that what you write will loom larger than the actual experience and essentially replace experience, much like 'snapshots of your vacation fix and become more real than your vacation'" (p. 117). Bruner (1987) supports this conclusion, writing that "in the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we tell about our lives" (p. 53). Thus, the risks, consequences, and impact of autobiographical research should not be taken lightly (Delamont, 2009).

With the personal under the microscope, comes the temptation to present the self in an eschewed benevolent light. De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2012) suggest that researchers who utilize biographical narrative assume that "a good life is seen as one that has narrative unity" (p. 160) and that "disjunctures, ruptures, and lack of coherence have been seen as evidence of a life that has not been sufficiently assembled, reflected upon and rendered meaningful" (p. 161). Thus, some autoethnographers may omit or smooth out the inconsistencies of their life stories and present themselves as a benevolent protagonist with a unified story. The presentation of a fully-resolved self, or hero/heroine who chooses the "right" words and does the "right" things is easier to display to the public, and, (if we are honest) to the author himself/herself, than a true warts-and-all depiction. I agree with Ellis

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(2004) that when it comes to truth claims, "The worst offense, in my mind, is omitting details that don't fit the analysis, or playing down their importance" (p. 126).

Conversely, Morse (2002) argues that some researchers' enthusiasm in sharing rich personal experience causes them to unintentionally move away from the immediate focus of the study and that at times this self-disclosure can actually "derail the inquiry, or at least seriously impede it" (p. 1159). Finally, Doloriert and Sambrook (2009) explain that some researchers "may feel a pull towards revealing a vulnerable, intimate, autoethnographic self, yet on the other hand she may be pushed away from this because the oral/viva voce examination process may deny the student anonymity" (pp. 27-28).

In navigating and managing these issues of self-presentation and self-disclosure in this study, I have relied on my research questions as my compass. Instead of attempting to infuse emotional vignettes for the sake of dramatic flair or personal indulgence, narratives were chosen because they presented insights related to power, identity, and pedagogy (see, Inclusion Criteria below for more detail). Also, in creating my narrative-based autoethnography, I attempted to resist the champion narrative by purposefully exploring struggles, flaws, inconsistencies, and ambiguities in my story because I believe that these sites of conflict are where real growth and development can be made in my personal, professional, and political life. I admit to racism, biases, unresolved inconsistencies in my teaching philosophy and practice, and compliance with policies I do not agree with. Like hooks (1994) shares, in creating this narrative I felt "compelled to confront the biases that have shaped teaching practices in our society and to create new ways of knowing, different strategies for the sharing of knowledge" (p. 12).

Also, I believe the story's style and layered approach assists in resisting the creation of a unified or resolved narrative in favor of an account of my experiences that includes contradictions, moral depth, and fluidity. Through the development of a rich and complex narrative, I believe my self-presentation to be nuanced, undecided, and as "true" as possible. Ultimately, I agree with Strawson (2004) in that "experiencing or conceiving one's life as a narrative is a good thing; a richly narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood" (p. 427). And this full personhood required new level of openness and honesty with myself.

Presentation of Others

In undertaking this endeavor, it is critical to acknowledge the other lives involved in my story: the communities, the contexts, and their needs. Autoethnography is not simply a presentation of self, it is an investigation into the culture of self, and the social interactions and actors that make up that culture. In writing this narrative I constructed the details of my interactions with students, teachers, colleagues, family, and friends. How I presented these "Others" (many with which I maintain strong relationships), was and is of the utmost concern. As Goodley (2004) states,

> researching Life Stories leads us into a complex arena of ethical debate. While the usual criteria of assessment such as informed consent, anonymity and potential withdrawal contain much social scientific research, life story research throws up a host of difficult considerations… We are concerned that the narrative does not disserve the very people it is meant to represent and address. (p. 174)

As a researcher I hold a position of power and ethical duty to protect the identities of the people I have presented in my narratives. However, with autoethnography, there are

serious challenges to accomplishing this task because of the personal and easily identifying nature of my work. While I actively sought to protect the anonymity of certain actors (former students for example) through changing names and identifying characteristics, certain people close to me were much harder, or impossible to disguise. For example, when describing, analyzing, and interpreting my educational experiences, I referenced the importance of my relationship with my first teachers – my parents. Because of the nature of our relationship, no amount of name changing or removal of identifying characteristics was going to change the fact that, with very little digging, a reader could easily discover who they are. Because of this, I had to ensure that what I chose to include about them, as well as other recognizable figures, was both necessary and useful. This does not mean that the autoethnographic researcher:

> is bound to producing only positive reviews. It does mean, however, special care should be given to language choices, the use of subjective data… and disclosing the researcher biases which could affect his or her interpretation of cultural and material situations. (Stewart, 2010, p. 283)

Goodall (2008) adds that "through the incorporation of reflexive writing passages and careful consideration for representation and voice, narrative inquiry also allows the author to address his or her ethical concerns directly in the academic study, through the writing itself" (p. 110).

In addition to these concerns, autoethnography raises another important ethical question: Can an autoethnographer speak for others? Through this investigation I proffer truth claims about the conditions of my life, the lives of others, and our needs, as I understood/understand them. An example of "speaking for others" in this text is in the

inclusion of dialogue between myself and other actors (students, parents, teachers, etc.). While some of this dialog was reconstructed using materials such as letters, emails, and recordings to guide my writing, most dialog was reconstructed relying solely on my memory of undocumented conversations – not as an exact approximation of actual spoken-words, but as a means to portraying the feelings, ideas, and messages conveyed during these exchanges. Again, I relied on the concepts of narrative truth and verisimilitude to craft these exchanges. Chang (2008) warns that:

> memory is not always a friend to autoethnography; it is sometimes a foe. It often reveals partial truth and is sometimes unreliable and unpredictable. Memory selects, shapes, limits, and distorts the past. Some distant memories remain vivid while other recent memories fade away quickly, blurring the time gap between these memories… Reconstructing the details later is a challenging task, and the reliability of the outcome may be questioned. Memory can also trigger extreme emotions: aversion with an unpleasant experience and glorification of a pleasant one. (p. 72)

Even without dialogue, the description of actions and characterization of these Others in my narrative create a specific presentation for reader interpretation. What if the Others I write about don't agree with their portrayal or dislike what has been written? These are but a few of the risks and moral quandaries autoethnographic writers must grapple with when conducting their investigations.

As an interpretive researcher it was my responsibility to clearly describe the limitations of this methodological framework and caution readers against privileging this narrative over others, which I have attempted to do in the Introduction and Academic Discussion sections of this text. By framing this research from my own lived experiences, I

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acknowledge that I cannot and do not speak for these others, but from my own, subjective position at the overlapping interactions between our lives. This does not mean that my understanding is the final or best interpretation; rather it is only one contribution in a world of many.

Ronai (1994) argues that the layered account "is not a claim that an account of lived experience should be privileged over other accounts" (p. 398), but rather by doing autoethnography researchers thoroughly learn that "your viewpoint is only one way of seeing" (Ellis, 2004, p. 287). The act of narrative creation forced me to deeply consider my positionality in relation to the Others presented in my story. I had to consider the power dynamics present between myself and Others both in my lived experiences and in my representation of these occurrences. By writing this autoethnographic narrative, I feel I was pushed to further develop a culturally pluralist viewpoint; one that is open to other ways of viewing the world and builds heartfelt connections with others. Eisner (1997) observes that an advantage of autoethnography "is engendering a sense of empathy… because we have begun to realize that human feeling does not pollute understanding. In fact, understanding others and the situation they face may well require it" (p. 8).

When implementing my autoethnographic approach, I consciously tackled these issues of presentation of self and others with a clear statement of methodological limitations, disclosure of researcher biases (within the narrative itself), conceptualization of ideas of "narrative truth" and verisimilitude, and care in word choice and portrayal of others. In assessing the benefits of this method, I found that the potential for understanding and growth outweighed the possible detriments, and chose to go forth with an evocative, layered approach to narrative-based autoethnography.

Implementation of the Methods

"If we think of the writing of stories in educational research as the creation of a building, the writer becomes an architect. The question, therefore, is not technical; it is not "how do I construct this building" but rather "what is the building for?" So, in setting out to write a story, the primary work is in the interaction of ideas; in the act of thinking, tuning in, and decision making and focusing on the primary intent of the work. And of course, writing a story—like constructing a building— is not carried out outside of a need, a community, a context. These are actually the primary ingredients"
(Clough, 2005, p. 8, as cited in Azocar, 2011).

Research Design

In order to craft a plausible and useful narrative, I relied on Lévi-Strauss's (1967) concept of methodological bricolage - making do with what is at hand - in order to employ a combination of data collection, data creation, narrative layering, and thematic analysis to inform the project. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) describe bricolage as adding "rigor, breadth, and depth to an investigation" through "'the combination of multiple methods, empirical materials, perspectives and observers in a single study" (p. 4). In addition to producing artful science as a kind of collage, Denzin and Lincoln (2008) argue that bricolage is ideal for producing political work:

> In texts based on the metaphors of montage, quilt making, and jazz improvisation, many different things are going on at the same time – different voices, different perspectives, points of view, angles of vision. Like performance texts, works that use montage simultaneously create and enact moral meaning. They move from the personal to the political, the local to the historical and the cultural. These are dialogical texts. They presume an active audience. They create spaces for give-and-take between reader and writer. They do more than turn the other into the object of the social science gaze. (p. 7)

In this inquiry the different voices, perspectives, points of view, and angles of vision include my own as a student, teacher, and researcher. By using a methodological bricolage of data creation, data collection, layered accounts (Ronai, 1991), and thematic analysis, I attempted to construct an artful narrative that gets at the heart of educational injustice, identity, and practice in my lived experiences.

By choosing a layered approach the act of writing was a dialogic process in and of itself. While more traditional approaches maintain separate data collection and analysis phases, van Manen (1990) argues that "writing is our method" (p. 124) while Richardson (2000a) posits that "writing is a method of knowing" (p. 929), suggesting that through the act of writing, data construction and analysis take place simultaneously. I conceptualized the research design for this project as a dynamic, cyclical process where the data construction, data management, and data analysis phases of my research naturally flowed from and spilled into one another (see Figure 62).

First, I began this research process by focusing on collecting and creating narrative, textual, and visual data from my educational experiences (see Table 1). Next, I organized, refined, and managed data through thematic coding and visual mapping. Then I moved onto Data Analysis and Interpretation, where I scrutinized narratives and visuals thematically, built connections through literary conventions, adjusted narrative layering, and critically analyzed narratives. This cyclical process was repeated until I felt my work reached a level of saturation and was able to stand alone as a "finished" product reflective of the three guiding research questions. Lastly, the manuscript was organized into a "show first, tell later" format. The final presentation of the study is comprised of two parts: the narrative and an academic discussion of the narrative. I chose this format to allow readers to first experience the story

in a clean, uninfluenced manner, letting their initial reading be one that was shaped by their relationship with the narrative text, rather than academic discussion of the format. The following section (this section) is dedicated to a more traditional scholarly overview of the study.
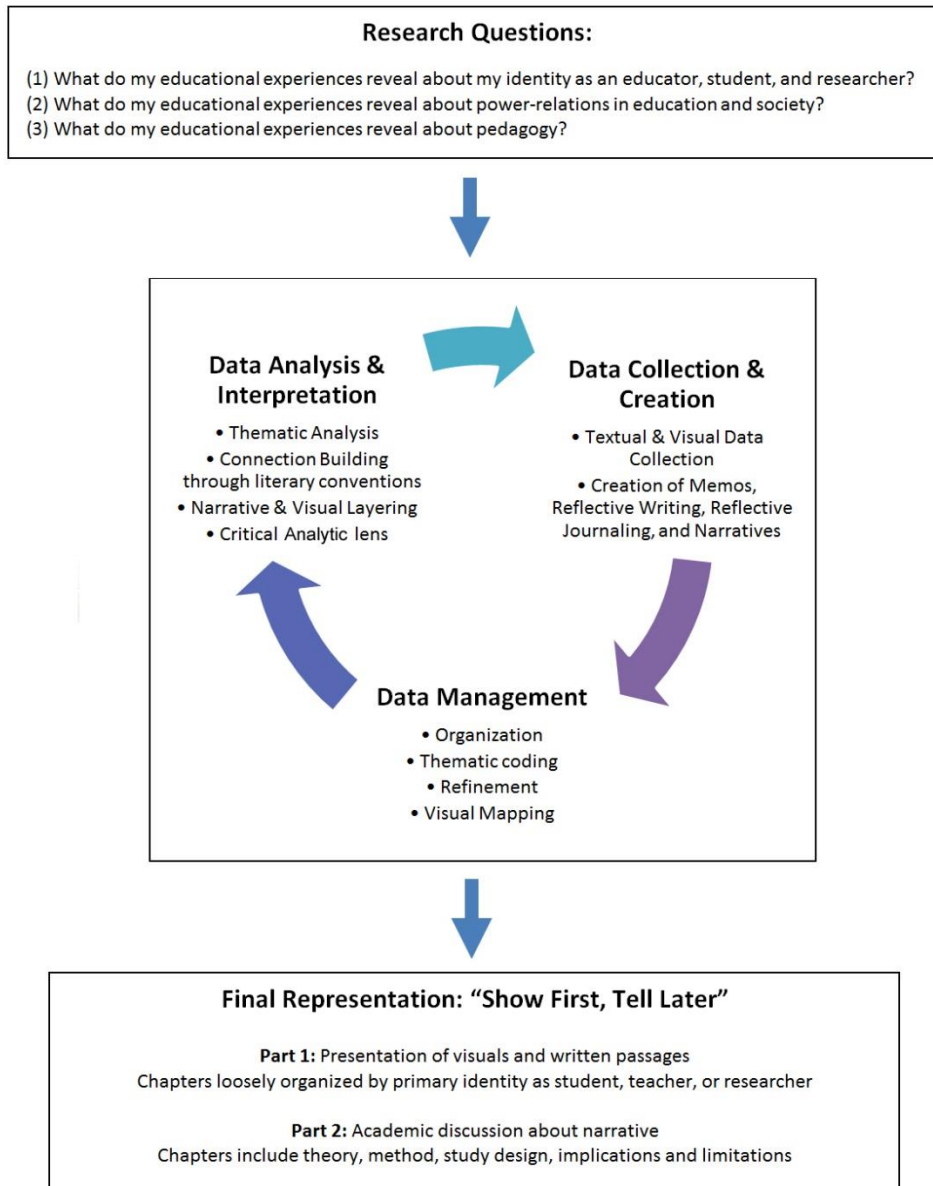
Research Questions:

(1) What do my educational experiences reveal about my identity as an educator, student, and researcher?
(2) What do my educational experiences reveal about power-relations in education and society?
(3) What do my educational experiences reveal about pedagogy?

Data Analysis & Interpretation

• Thematic Analysis
• Connection Building through literary conventions
• Narrative & Visual Layering
• Critical Analytic lens

Data Collection & Creation

• Textual & Visual Data Collection
• Creation of Memos, Reflective Writing, Reflective Journaling, and Narratives

Data Management

• Organization
• Thematic coding
• Refinement
• Visual Mapping

Final Representation: "Show First, Tell Later"

Part 1: Presentation of visuals and written passages
Chapters loosely organized by primary identity as student, teacher, or researcher

Part 2: Academic discussion about narrative
Chapters include theory, method, study design, implications and limitations

Figure 62. Visual model of research design.

Data Collection & Creation

In order to structure the data collection phase of research, I chronicled my past educational experiences with a detailed autobiographical timeline including dates, institutions, circumstances, actors, and details of my educational experiences (Chang, 2008). Next, I sought out appropriate texts, images, and artifacts in connection to the timeline from my personal belongings, educational records, scholarly literature, etc. This collected data was used to inform initial reflective writing, reflective journaling, and memos about my experiences. In this first stage of writing, I attempted to get as much down as possible about my experiences – details, facts, and descriptions of people, places, emotions, thoughts, epiphanies, etc. – focusing on the creation of short narratives, knowing that I would later select, omit, expand, and refine these stories during the Data Management and Data Analysis stages.

In order to create rich narratives, I employed an evocative writing method called systemic sociological introspection to utilize "thoughts, feelings, and personal experiences as legitimate and insightful data" (Ellis, 1991, p. 30) and generate "interpretive materials from self and others useful for understanding the lived experience of emotions" (p. 26). Through the processes of self-observation, self-introspection, and self-dialogue, I actively examined: (1) my current thoughts and feelings as a researcher, (2) textual and visual data, and (3) narratives derived from reflective writing, reflective journaling, and retrospective observations. Ellis (1991) explains that introspection "emerges from social interaction; it occurs in response to bodily sensations, mental processes and external stimuli as well as affecting these same processes. It is not just listening to one voice arising alone in one's head; usually, it consists of interacting voices, which are products of social forces and roles"

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(pp. 28-29). By conjuring up emotional, visual and other sensory images about my
experiences I engaged in a written self-dialog dependent on the many discourses I have
embodied.

Data Sources

In order to construct this tale, I included the use of both found and created data
sources, with found textual and visual data informing the creation of narrative vignettes (see
Table 1). Textual data included the collection, assembly, and production of primary data
sources such as: diaries, journals, school work, training handbooks, student artifacts, school
progress reports, curriculum materials, yearbooks, etc. To develop a robust depiction of the
various social and cultural contexts of my educational experiences, I also augmented primary
data sources with multiple forms of secondary textual data such as: school records, U.S.
Census data, periodicals, newspaper articles, scholarly articles, demographic data, and other
sources of background and historic data.

Table 1

Data Sources

Data Type	Data Sources	
	Textual Data	**Visual Data**
Found	Journals, diaries, school work, report cards, school records, syllabi, transcripts, course readings, course curriculum, emails, social media, training handbooks, field notes, local newspapers, demographic data, background or historic data, etc.	Photographs, student artifacts, student art work, art journals, home videos, , recorded teaching, yearbooks, etc.
Created	Reflective writing, reflective journaling, self-interviews	

Found visual data such as photographs, student artifacts, home videos, yearbooks, cultural artifacts, maps, artworks, recorded teaching, etc. were used to inform my self-study. Visual data were used in two ways: (1) to inform narrative creation, and (2) to be presented alongside text as a standalone layer calling for readers to "scrutinize images for the discourses image-makers take for granted" (Reissman, 2008, p. 178). Visuals that were included as independent, standalone narrative vignettes were used to portray, describe, and analyze social phenomena similar to written layers. However, they are still "found" data sources, rather than created specifically for this project.

Written narratives were derived from the examination of found textual and visual data, reflective writing, reflective journaling, and retrospective observations of my educational experiences. I chose to write about the majority of my educational experiences from a first person point of view to create a complex, dense, reflexive, collage-like representation of my understandings, images, and interpretations of the world (Geelan & Taylor, 2001). In my writing, I attempted to stay true to the different perspectives, values, and beliefs I harbored at different points in my educational career, while acknowledging present day understandings, conflicts, and growth. This dual nature of my role as both subject and object of this research was previously introduced in the above section, and is further discussed in the Ethical Considerations section below.

I believe the pastiche of textual, visual, and narrative data enriches the autoethnographic discussion of issues of identity, justice, and pedagogy in a way that one data source alone could not. Rather than create what

Elkins (2003) calls a "magpie theory of interdisciplinarity" where various methods are cobbled together to cleverly or seductively use images to illustrate theories

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and/or arguments (2003, p. 27). Instead the goal of the interdisciplinary approach is

to create "interesting" scholarship based in immersion with the visual material so

that "preoccupation" with the images leads the researcher to new insights and

discoveries about visual experiences (p. 30). (as quoted in Stewart, 2010, p.276)

It was my intention with the use of this study's methodological bricolage to create an

interdisciplinary project that encouraged "bottom-up, grounded theory approaches to

research" rather than "top down, theoretically driven lines of inquiry" (Stewart, 2010, p.

276). In order to steer clear of a "magpie theory of interdisciplinary" I relied on the Data

Management phase of my study design to help organize, refine, and select narrative vignettes

that "raise significant questions and engender conversations rather than to proffer final

meanings" (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 166).

Data Management

Initially, textual and visual data were labeled and cataloged according to which

chronological identity each belonged, i.e. student, teacher, or researcher (See Appendix 1:

Timeline of Author's Educational Experiences). Thinking about my experiences in this time

bounded way was done so that I was able fully re-immerse myself in each time period,

identity, and role before moving on to the next. Through the use of a digital data log I

recorded and kept track of data types, descriptions, dates, locations, themes, and usage to

help streamline the Analysis phase. In the beginning data collection and creation phase, I

also employed visualization strategies such a culture-gram (Chang, 2008) and social mapping

(Smith, 1987) to establish the various identities, relationships, and communities I have

embodied or interacted with as student, teacher, and researcher over the years. Social

mapping entailed identifying exclusive, oppressive, or problematic discourses in policy, curriculum, work process instructions, procedural instructions, reports, and forms, and considering how my "everyday/everynight activities are being hooked into 'the ruling relations'" (Leckie, Given, & Buschman, 2010). These exercises helped to organize and map my cultural identity and social membership on the onset of the project.

After the construction of literary narratives about my experiences had taken place, I examined each vignette for common themes and kept track of my observations by entering codes into a digital data log. In this way, I was able to more easily view and organize the many pieces of data I collected and created as coding took place.

Coding was undertaken *not* as a way to craft a unified, cohesive, consistent, or confluent narrative, but in order to shift understanding and push analysis. By breaking down individual narratives into thematic codes I was able to view them from a new perspective. This was done through several rounds of review, using a color-coding system to help organize my thoughts, where the color of highlighting corresponded to a specific theme or category (Stockrocki, 1997). I first read through each narrative, making "memos" or notes in the margins and color-coding passages that fell into specific themes or categories. For particularly significant textual data, line-by-line highlighting and coding was used to operationalize the action taking place in each line (phrase, sentence, utterance) of a spoken or written text, and notes were made in the margins describing themes or categories (Charmaz, 2008). Color-coding was also used for visual narratives like photographs, artwork, and videos in the same way it was done for written passages. For example, recorded videos of my teaching in the classroom were coded and examined similarly to a line of text (Konecki, 2009).

Initially, I grouped passages by the larger thematic categories of identity, power, and pedagogy, but after critically examining each independent narrative for descriptive codes, other thematic "umbrella" categories emerged like, "agency," "resistance," "positionality," "values," etc. emerged. As the work progressed and data refinement took place, the chronological format of narrative layering was replaced by a thematic format of social roles (i.e. Student, Teacher, and Researcher) that better spoke to the guiding research questions.

The creation of codes allowed me to further develop conceptual maps and study connections and tensions arising between and within narratives (see Figures 63-64). One of these visual maps included the construction of a chronological visual flow chart of the narrative layers (placing narratives on the timeline mentioned above) in order to locate important moments, like a change of understanding, or a significant event or series of events (Creswell, 2007). Through the use of coding and visual mapping, I was able to consider the thematic, descriptive, and chronological nature of narratives, examine connections and divergences, interpret larger meanings in the story, and consider the order of layering. However, it's important to note that the final narrative was intentionally left unresolved and "messy," allowing readers to actively seek patterns or evaluate the work by their own standard, connections, or life understandings.
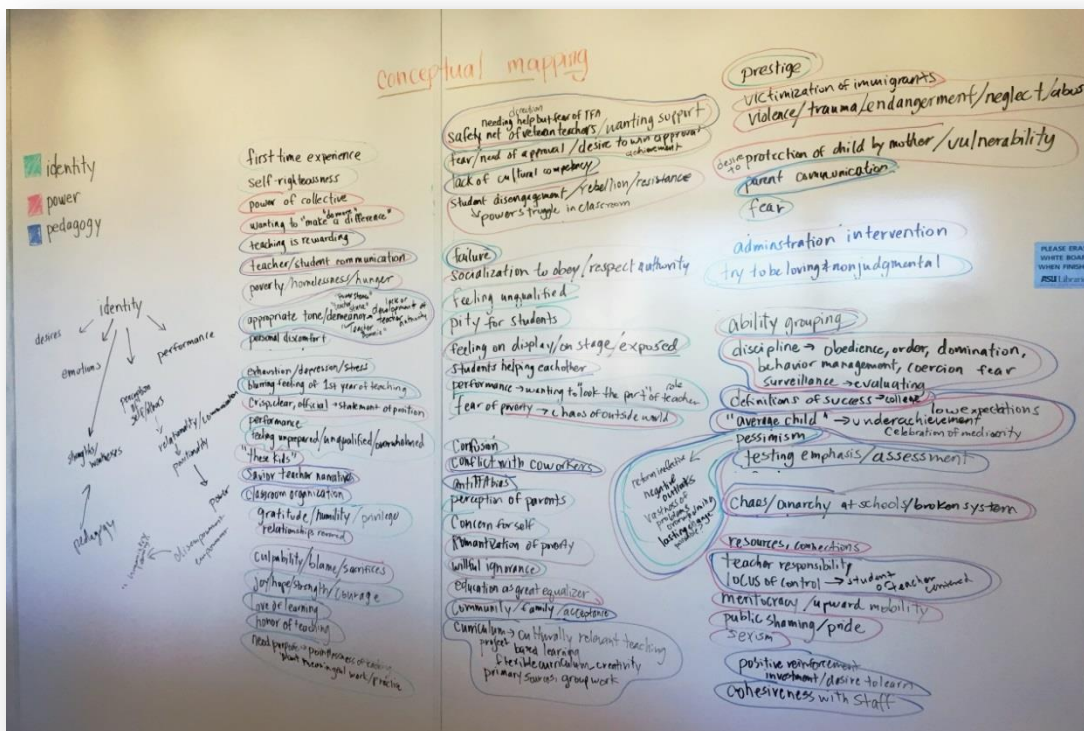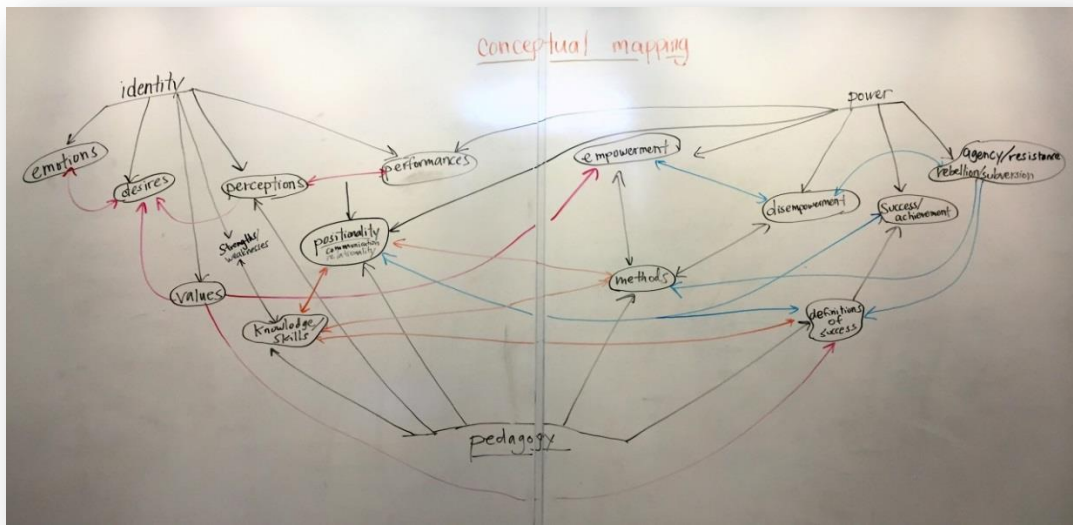
Figures 63-64. Processes of coding development and conceptual mapping.

During the coding process, it became evident that some visual and written passages would not make the final cut because they did not connect with or build upon guiding themes. Pennebaker (1990) advises that when writing is the method of inquiry "then you want to revise a great deal so that you achieve understanding and reframing of the issue about which you are writing. If you're writing about yourself, write until you have written a coherent story that helps you make sense of the events that happened" (p. 103). While coherence was not my primary goal in this research, sensemaking was. Writing took place until I was challenged to think differently about my educational experiences and the larger contexts of power, identity, and pedagogy.

Given the cyclical nature of this research design, the data collection and refinement stages took place through many revolutions before the research felt substantial and "complete." Chang (2008) argues that the data management phase of autoethnographic research helps to focus "data collection and further data analysis by trimming redundant and less important data and expanding more relevant and significant data" (p. 119). By pulling bits of data that mentioned, implied, or represented issues of guiding themes, I was able to determine if more or less data creation was needed to fully develop the story.

Inclusion Criteria

The content of this story was written purposefully, with written passages and visual imagery selected by their ability to build cultural understanding or raise significant questions around the themes of power, pedagogy, and identity. Visual and written passages were created, refined, and chosen by their ability to answer, challenge, or speak to the three guiding research questions. Through the completion of several cycles of the data process

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(see Figure 62), standards or criteria for inclusion in the final story were developed. In order to be included, each narrative vignette or visual layer needed to address one or more of the following:

- The vignette establishes an important turning point in personal understanding and/or growth in my identity as a student, teacher, or researcher

- The vignette illustrates issues of empowerment or disempowerment in the classroom and/or society

- The vignette exemplifies pedagogical practices I hope to avoid or emulate in my own teaching

- The vignette demonstrates the unresolved nature, hypocrisy, conflict, or inconsistencies stemming from power and/or identity in education

- The visual vignette builds on or challenges what has been written, adding a material dimension to the narrative

The application of these criteria to all the completed narratives meant that some were found lacking and deemed inappropriate for the study at hand. Visuals and written passages that did not meet these inclusion criteria were excluded from the final story.

Analysis

"What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning"
(Heisenberg, 1959).

Drawing on the narrative works of Ronai-Rambo (1994; 1996; 1997; 1999; 2003; 2005; 2006; 2007), Ellis (1999; 2004), Richardson (1997; 2000b), Bochner (2001), Kiesinger (1998), Stewart (2010), and Tillmann-Healy (1996), I crafted an evocative autoethnography that simultaneously intertwines description and analysis of power, identity, and pedagogy. Through the use of (1) thematic analysis (previously discussed), (2) narrative analytic techniques such as scene setting, character development, dialogue, and plot development, and (3) the layering of visuals and written passages, I created a narrative that integrates critical analysis into the main text.

Narrative Analytic Techniques

Moro (2006) believes it takes a "darn good" writer to do autoethnography because writing *is* the analytic process. Ellis (2004) agrees, arguing that "narrative analysis assumes that a good story itself is theoretical… When people tell their stories, they employ analytic techniques to interpret their worlds. Stories are themselves analytic" (pp. 195-196). In Figure 62, a visual model of the research design, I conceptualize analysis as the final step in an ongoing cycle, but in practice examination, evaluation, and assessment of the text happens during each stage of research process. The act of writing necessitates concurrent analysis (Richardson, 2000a; van Manen, 1990) and good writers employ writing techniques that powerfully communicate these critical assessments.

By invoking multiple senses, creating intriguing, complex characters, using rich and differing voices, I employed narrative analytic techniques throughout the writing process to weave critical reflections, theoretical and epistemological analysis, practical insights, and other revelations into written form. Through literary techniques such as character development, dialogue, scene setting, and plot development I: (1) examined how specific social relationships and discourses have shaped my identities, (2) highlighted important interactions with key figures in my life (students, teachers, classmates, colleagues, etc.) and (3) recreated dialogue to build understanding of power, identity and pedagogy. Through shifts in different voices and perspectives, including personal, historical, popular, and organizational views I was able to weave together research, theories, and critical analysis of individual experiences, without attempting to develop a grand conclusion to story.

Narrative Layering

The layering of visuals and written passages also served as a mechanism for the presentation and active analysis of lived experiences. By presenting the story in a specific order, I guide readers through over fifty written passages and sixty-one visuals about my experiences in education. The presentation of layering in this story was strategic, deliberate, and purposeful, permitting "readers to experience the woven vignettes together, within contexts that [are] meaningful to the author" (Ronai, 1991, p. 419). I attempted not to privilege written passages over visuals or visuals over written passages by presenting them in tandem alongside each other.
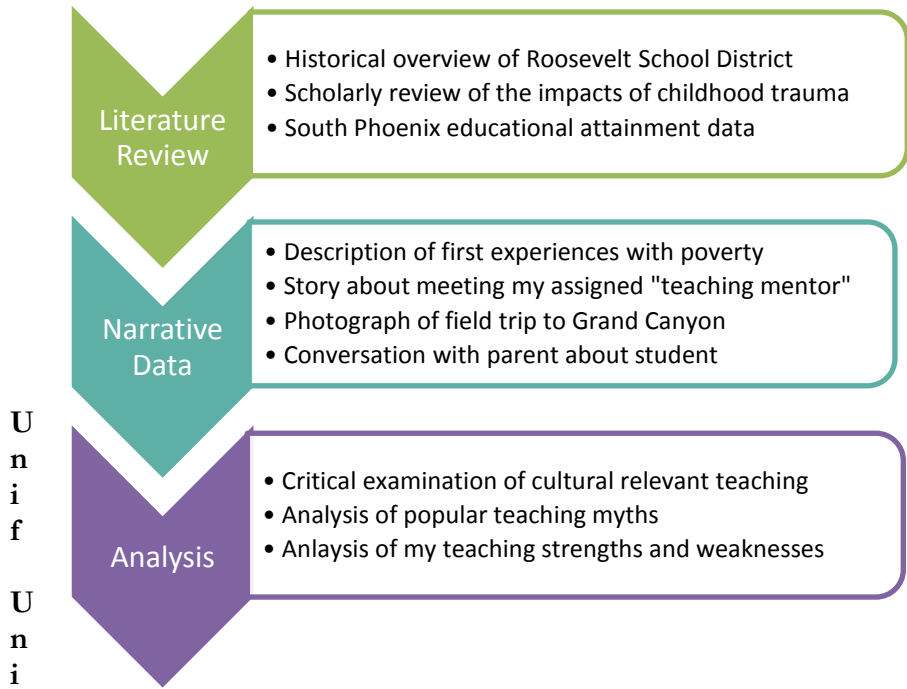
Layering of Written Passages

Layering was used to build upon common themes or juxtapose identities, ideologies, or understandings in a thoughtful and artistic manner unbounded by the constraints of chronological time, space, or authorial roles. When deciding the organization and placement of layers, I attempted to balance linear storytelling, moments of alinear discovery, academic analysis, and aesthetic considerations. It was only after several cycles of the research model and multiple drafts of the narrative that I achieved a layering of passages that felt authentic, accessible, relatable, and complete. Finally, layering of visuals and written passages was done in a manner I considered faithful to the project's goal criteria (see Theoretical and Methodological Considerations section above for a complete list of project goals).

What sets Ronai's (1994) style of layered accounts apart from other interpretive narrative approaches is that the non-chronological layering effect of each vignette is intended to resemble the nonlinear structure of consciousness and produce "a continuous dialectic of experience" (p. 396). This peek into the author's mind mirrors what it is like to embody the researcher's experiences, adding another dimension to the storytelling and giving readers a rare perspective into the author's sensemaking process. This layered format attempts to resemble the *duree* (Shutz, 1970) or stream of consciousness as experienced in everyday life, which Ronai (1997) claims is "processual, nonlinear, dialectical, and n-dimensional" (p. 419).

Through the strategic reorganization and integration of academic literature, narrative accounts, and analytic vignettes into a single layered account, autoethnographic researchers are able to draw on as many resources as possible in the writing process, de-centering the author's voice "to become one voice among many contributing to the production of [the] text" (Ronai, 1991, p. 419). By integrating narrative, analysis, and academic literature

together, researchers make space for readers to develop their own analyses by moving "forward, backward, and sideways through time, space, and various attitudes" (Ronai, 1991, p. 419). This layering attempts to disrupt the sociological writing expectations of conventional scholarly papers and articles through the unification of traditionally separate research chapters such as literature review, data (narrative), and analysis. For a specific example of how this experimental layering worked in this project see Figure 65.

Separation of Traditional Research Chapters:

Literature Review
- Historical overview of Roosevelt School District
- Scholarly review of the impacts of childhood trauma
- South Phoenix educational attainment data

Narrative Data
- Description of first experiences with poverty
- Story about meeting my assigned "teaching mentor"
- Photograph of field trip to Grand Canyon
- Conversation with parent about student

Analysis
- Critical examination of cultural relevant teaching
- Analysis of popular teaching myths
- Anlaysis of my teaching strengths and weaknesses

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Unification of Traditional Research Chapters through Layering Technique:

- Historical overview of public education in Arizona
- South Phoenix educational attainment data
- Descriptions of first experiences with poverty
- Conversation with parent about student
- Scholarly review of the impacts of childhood trauma
- Photograph of field trip to Grand Canyon
- Analysis of my teaching strencths and weaknesses
- Story about meeting my assigned "teaching mentor"
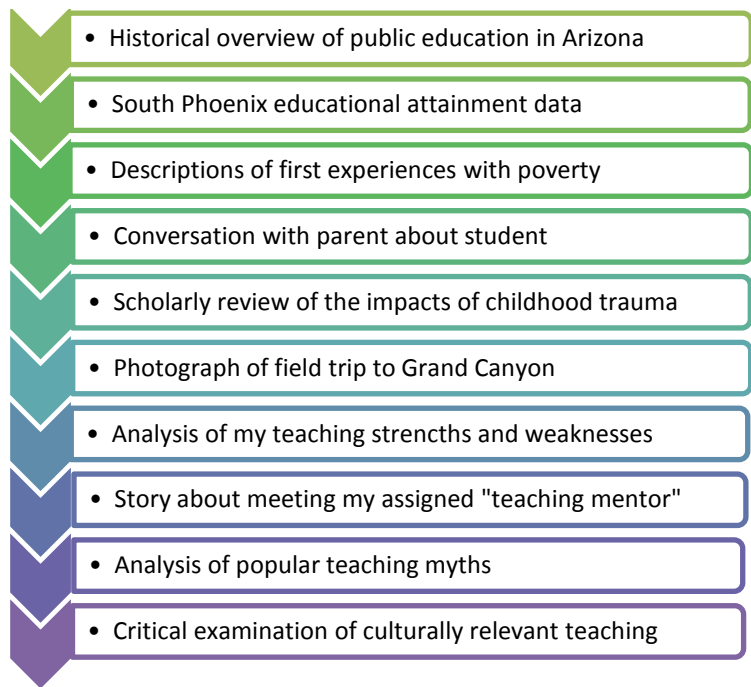- Analysis of popular teaching myths
- Critical examination of culturally relevant teaching

Figure 65. Example of layering technique versus traditional separation.

"The camera is merely a means through which an informed vision can be made concrete"
(Harper, 1988, p. 60).

The inclusion of visuals as individual, standalone narrative vignettes was done by weaving photographs, images of artifacts, drawings, etc. into layers of the narrative text. I chose to tell a story with images, rather than tell a story about images (as is the case in some visual studies). The use of captions was chosen to add information about origins, clarity or additional details about each visual narrative. These layers of visual data are intended to stand on their own - sometimes harmonizing with the written text, and sometimes juxtaposing against what is written. For example, photographs of a school field trip to the Arizona state capital are layered after a written discussion about a possible state takeover of the school district; a charcoal drawing of a nude woman standing on stage before an empty auditorium of some sort follows a narrative about a failed first attempt at solo teaching and humorous exchange about large derrieres; two photographs of classroom worktime are presented together representing very different strategies, epistemologies, and examples of what learning looks like.

Placement of visual layers was often intended to stimulate questioning about surrounding written passages, in an attempt to push readers' understandings or analysis of both visuals and written narratives. In addition to providing a complimentary, "subjective experience in conjunction with the written story" I attempted to layout the visuals in a way that encouraged interpretive exploration of the images and artwork itself (Stewart, 2010, p. 294). When selecting and layering visuals I considered image content, size, ratio, color, form, perspective, style, genre, and intertextual relationships between images themselves (Ott &

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Walter, 2000). Images that did not accomplish content as well as aesthetic goals were not included. For photographs, I gave photo credit in the captions when possible. Photographs were left uncredited either because: (1) I was the photographer (which was the case in the vast majority of included images), (2) the cameraperson's identity was unknown, or (3) I chose to omit the identity of the photographer in order to protect them. As this is cultural study that includes narratives about sensitive populations like students, I did not include images that compromised the anonymity of individuals. In some instances this meant cropping images or using Adobe Photoshop to blur and smudge identifying facial features or other characteristics to ensure anonymity. Images that did not conform to project standards were not considered for use.

Implications and Limitations

"Our tales are not THE truth, but they also are not lies - they are the truest and, more importantly, the richest and most pedagogically valuable accounts that our understandings and reflections, our assumptions and perspectives, and our story-telling skills will permit us to present"
(Geelan & Taylor, 2001).

As many educators before me (Brookfield, 1995; Chang, 1999; Clausen & Cruickshank, 1991; Kennett, 1999; Nieto, 2003; Powell, Zehm, & Garcia, 1996; Tiedt & Tiedt, 2005), I used thematic focus to reveal not only my own teaching practices, but also the social and cultural assumptions I bring to my praxis. I questioned ideologies that underpin my various identities through an examination of scholarly literature as well as my actions and beliefs. I scrutinized personal, social, and cultural knowledge and beliefs, feelings and values that have accompanied my identities through the thematic lenses of power, identity, and

pedagogy. By including narratives from various scene settings, I examined power from multiple loci – self, classroom, institution, and society. This layering of personal narrative and abstract theoretical thinking led to deeper, more robust understandings.

While more traditional research is designed to argue or lead readers to specific, generalizable findings, this work presents truth claims as unfinished and open for interpretation. In using thematic focus to inform the organization of my layered accounts, I presented the narratives in such a way that readers are able to see connections across identities, discourses, and ideologies, and observe how my identities have stabilized or transformed over time. In this way, "readers provide theoretical validation by comparing their lives to [authors'], by thinking about how our lives are similar and different and the reasons why" (Ellis, 2004, p. 195). Rambo (2007) elucidates that "autoethnography is reflexive, personal, and emotional and often serves as cultural critique, posing more questions than it answers. It is a moment in an open, ongoing, dialogue with oneself and an audience" (p. 364).

In keeping with the objectives and epistemological framing of this research project the findings will not be fully restated here. However, the three main themes the narrative addresses – identity, power, and pedagogy – warrant a bit more methodological discussion and brief summary.

Identity

The term 'identity' used in this inquiry is based on the concept that self-identity is socially situated (Gee, 2007) and constructed "as a life-long acculturation journey, which is ultimately defined by seminal moments and socio-cultural influences along the way"

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(Ownby, 2011, p. 4). This socially situated view characterizes an individual's identity as multiple, dynamic, context-driven and performative. Conflicts and inconsistencies inevitably arise among these socially situated identities (Gee, 2007), and these sites of struggle are where I chose to focus my analytic efforts because I believe they hold the most promise for self-development and learning. The narrative demonstrates how my identities as student, teacher, and researcher influence and impact one another, and led to the development of a future vision of self.

Two of these tensions that I examined more formally include: (1) the relationship between neoliberalism, colonialism, psychological distance, and my finding purpose in education, and (2) the negotiation of reconstructing self through purposeful pedagogy. By including the works of critical theorists such as Apple (2004), Giroux (2004), and McLaren (1999), I attempted to confront my role as an educator in upholding or opposing institutional oppression. By using Pinar's (2004) model of self-development, I created a vision of future self, grounded in ideology, and described pedagogical implications.

Power

In this study, several themes surrounding the idea of power emerged throughout the narrative including, but not limited to: positionality, performances, empowerment, disempowerment, success/achievement, and agency/resistance. To analyze power-relations in my own educational life, I attempted to examine the "knowledge, beliefs, and behavior reflected and shaped by the economic relationships that exist in society" (Gee, 2007, p. 28). By including stories that highlight the empowerment and disempowerment of the many

actors in my life (myself, students, communities, etc.), I interrogated harmful cultural models both in my classroom and personal life.

In looking backwards and forwards throughout my life, I scrutinized some of the inconsistencies and conflicts that exist between my various roles and built connections across these identities and ideologies. Furthermore, by analyzing the educational identities I have personally embodied, I attempted to confront systemic, as well as individual prejudices both as victim and agent.

By considering the impact of neoliberalism, colonialism, and psychological distance in my teaching experiences and the institutions with which I worked, I arrived at the question: Can an educator, working within an inequitable system, enact meaningful change, or are they condemned to replicate the injustice which they seek to abolish?

While I don't concretely answer this question in this inquiry, I appeal to hope and optimism in my conclusions citing the works of hooks (1994; 2003) and Freire (1970), and asserting that the fight for equality must go on, despite unsure footing.

Pedagogy

I used the term "pedagogy" broadly in this study, referring to a theory or method of how to best teach. By examining the knowledge, skills, strengths, weaknesses, perceptions, positionality, methods, and cultural definitions of success/achievement found in the narratives, I derived a personal pedagogy based on themes of empowerment, liberation, and transformation. By imagining future possibilities for educational practice and new ways of thinking about education (Pinar, 2004), I developed guiding questions to assist in my discussion and development of a personal pedagogy. These questions include:

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- What kind of educator do I wish to become?

- How do I view the purpose of schooling, and what does my role within this framework mean?

- How can my actions and praxis become more aligned to struggle against injustice?

The process of sketching out of an ideal pedagogy to work towards was both eye-opening and empowering. However, rather than viewing this sketch as a final or complete theory of how to best teach, I accept that good teaching is context-dependent and ever-changing. In response, I understand that my progress towards the vision laid out in this project will require continual evaluation, revision, development, as well as a deep commitment to humility, love, and understanding.

Final Considerations

To conclude, I would like to discuss an unintended consequence of undertaking this project: an emotional, psychological, and spiritual healing. I now understand why Bochner & Ellis (2002) boldly promote autoethnography's therapeutic effect on authors and readers. By allowing both my inner-artist and scientist-self to examine my educational history, I was able to relive and reframe my understandings of these experiences in ways which other methods simply would not allow. I found that old wounds were opened, examined, and cleaned. Healing began in areas I did not know were injured. New discoveries about self, society, and culture were made. While some scholars may criticize interpretive autoethnography as narcissistic or self-indulgent (Coffey, 1999; Holt, 2003; Salzman, 2002; Sparkes, 2002), considering it a romantic self-construction, vulgar realism, and hyperauthentic (Atkinson,

1997), or even openly discourage its use, I found this research process to be incredibly rewarding, revealing, liberating, and healing.

I feel transformed and energized about my future vision of teaching, and more at peace with some of the challenges I encountered in my identities as student, teacher, and researcher. Other areas of analysis have left me feeling unsettled, instilling a drive to find ways to more fully incorporate social justice into my personal, political, and professional life.

The personal nature of this inquiry allowed me to "practice an artful, poetic, and empathic social science in which readers" (and the author!) "… can keep in their minds and feel in their bodies the complexities of concrete moments of lived experience" (Ellis, 2004, p. 30). In constructing this narrative, I attempted to craft a story which was "rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena" all at the same time (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 283). Furthermore, I now view the production of autoethnographic narrative as a socially just act in and of itself, hopefully with an outcome of producing an "analytical, accessible [text] that [changes] us and the world we live in for the better" (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 764).

While it is up to you, the reader, to judge whether or not I accomplished the goals laid out in this study, it is my hope that this project stimulates a deeper reflection of your own educational experiences. I challenge the reader to consider, question, feel, and interact with the text, asking new questions, engaging in deeper discussions, and engendering your own analysis about the issues of identity, power, and pedagogy in education. This honest and thorough scrutiny of my life has led to actionable changes in my life, and it is my hope that the reader will also consider ways to take their interpretations beyond the page.

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APPENDIX A

TIMELINE OF AUTHOR'S EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Year	Role/Identity	Location
1988-1990	Preschool Student	Phoenix, Arizona
1990-1997	Elementary School Student	Phoenix, Arizona
1997-1999	Middle School Student	Phoenix, Arizona
1999-2003	High School Student	Phoenix, Arizona
2003-2006	University of Arizona Undergraduate Student	Tucson, Arizona
2005	Educator for Students for International Change	Arusha, Tanzania
2007	International Student	Antigua, Guatemala
2007	Summer School Teacher	Atlanta, Georgia
2007-2009	Corps Member with Teach for America	Phoenix, Arizona
2007-2009	Masters Student	Phoenix, Arizona
2007-2012	Teacher	Phoenix, Arizona
2010-2016	Doctoral Student & University Instructor	Tempe, Arizona