

# writing autobiography: holistic learning in pre-service teacher education

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## Introduction:

As a graduate student of education, I composed autobiography in evocative form, revealing stories about my lived experiences in and out of the classroom. In a scholarly capacity, I interpreted the personal and professional interconnectedness of the texts, gaining teacher knowledge gradually and recursively in much the same way that I have developed as a writer. Now, as an assistant professor in a concurrent BA/MST adolescent education program at a SUNY College in upstate New York, I ask my pre-service teachers to write autobiographies that hone in on a central learning/teaching event in their lives and to wrest the multiple meanings that emerge. The assignment is integral to a third-year undergrad course named "Teaching Writing to the Adolescent Learner" which connects central theories of composition to the practical action a writing teacher takes in the secondary English classroom.

The undergraduate students of the course have not yet practice taught in the public school system, though all of the participants in this study have invested time as volunteer teachers in diverse learning environments as they accumulate the requisite volunteer hours of the program. In the course, I am to facilitate the building of writing strategies, to create opportunities for students to articulate beliefs and to envision the professional roles they will shortly play as teachers of writing. By including this autobiography as an important element of the course, I work with the understanding that my students, emergent writer/researchers, are setting out on an *early but necessary quest* in a continuum of learning. From my own research, I have discovered that writing in the "I" voice is an informed place to discover origins, and so I trust that my students will find sources of teaching and learning inspiration in their past that will direct their learning in the here-and-now.

When I hand out the assignment, I share my interest in the facets of self that will emerge in students' writing and the values and beliefs they will articulate, which embody teacher image. My research question for this inquiry, then, reads as follows: **How will writing an autobiography about a formative teaching/learning event in students' lives impact their pre-service teacher image at a preliminary stage of their teacher education?** After assessing the final autobiographies, I invited four students out of a class of twenty to participate in this inquiry. Their contribution was voluntary and did not reflect in any way on their final assessment in the course. My participants were all female; 90% of the student population in this course has been female to date. Specifically, I sought out students who displayed openness to revision during the process and whose teaching/learning roles and environments varied distinctly from one another.

## Literature Review: Narrative Inquiry and the Transitional Moment

Narrative inquiry as a mode of research for teacher inquiry has a rich history; scholars including Beattie; 2004; Barone, 2000, 2001; Richardson, 1997; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997; Diamond & Mullen, 1999; Conle, 2000; Vinall-Cox, 2004 chronicle and qualitatively render valid the multiple rewards of this arts-based method of research. In composing narrative vignettes in their autobiographies, students select meaningful teaching/learning episodes from the plot of their lives. By reconfiguring a part of their life stories, I hope they better understand the selves they once were and the teacher/learner selves they hope to become. Through organizing, writing and interpreting those vignettes and, thereby, expanding their knowledge, students might then assimilate what they learned into future learning/teaching contexts (Polkinghorne, 1988).

As students flesh out a narrative vignette in their autobiographies and bring me into the scene, they will concurrently recreate transitional moments. Literature that spans the fields of autoethnography, qualitative research methods, narrative inquiry, and complexity theory refers to pivotal, epiphanic or nodal moments that signify instances of growth. I ask students to identify resonant moments which occurred while they were interacting with the learning environment. During such turning points, the literature points to our potential to construct alternative and individual meanings about ourselves and our life projects, question usual definitions, and as a result, develop a freer, more mature, critical consciousness. Such growth is only achievable, however, with a mind prepared for insight and developed through thought, dialogue and

writing (Graham, as cited by Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Bruner, 2001; Denzin as cited by Barone, 1995; Denzin as cited by Barone & Eisner, 1988; Kyburz, 2004; Tann, 1993).

When identifying resonant moments in their lives as former students or teachers, I inform students that these moments can range in intensity from a quieter insight to an elating transformation (Capra, 2002). Imagine different sound waves and intensities, I suggest, as you open yourselves up to the experience and the insights you might glean through reflection, dialogue with peers and myself in editing conferences, and through the writing process itself (Lipszyc, 2006; Intrator, 2003; Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Bruner, 2001; Barone, 1995, Barone & Eisner, 1988; Kyburz, 2004; Tann, 1993).

In this close reading of four student autobiographies, I am responding as a researcher to Conle's call for more "public spaces" for personal narrative writing in a quest to develop teachers holistically (1996). Further, concrete imagery and concrete telling were highlighted in this inquiry as resonant elements of craft in alignment with Conle's (1996) pre-service teacher inquiry. Where I differ from Conle, however, is in my interest in participants' writing process and in my prompting of students to frame their autobiographies around transitional moments in teaching and learning. Conle's students wrote and orally relayed experiential narratives in a spontaneous chain, building stories reciprocally and dialogically, one from the other.

I follow, too, in the footsteps of Elbaz (2002) who has worked with autobiography to foster teachers' professional and personal growth through describing, storying and questioning. As was true for Elbaz, my participant composers of autobiography became more cognizant of

writing skills available to them as prospective teachers and writers. However, I hope to expand upon Elbaz's characterization of autobiography as intrinsically an emotionally-driven dialogue with self where social/cultural issues come up indirectly or marginally (2002). Certainly, as I will illustrate, my students wrote in first-person voice with joy and agency, seeking to communicate through language what they felt. Nonetheless, I propose that this inquiry points to my participants' intellectual engagement and to the deeper understanding of *self* gained through their re-enacted relation to *others*.

## **Methodology:**

### **(i) Pre-Writing: Reading Model**

Writing autobiography culminates the Teacher as Reflective Writer and Researcher segment of the course. To prepare students with models at the reading/pre-writing stage, I ask that they transact with both student teacher and professional writing. Specifically, two pre-service teacher journals are extracted from Mary Beattie's *The Art of Learning to Teach Preservice Teacher Narratives* (2001) to better approximate students' level of writing (Vygotsky, 1978). We then examine with a close critical lens Mike Rose's autobiographical piece, "I Just Wanna Be Average" so that students develop their reading and writing potential by becoming more aware of the choices a published writer makes.

With the Rose piece, I first ask students to select a passage that most resonates with them and to explain why that is so. Students share their excerpts and the meaning they have constructed about the passage or quote in pairs. I then ask students to consider Rose's use of authentic detail as he recreates a sense of place, as he populates his narrative with idiosyncratic, comical peers and uninspiring teachers. We also discuss Rose's tone when he exposes the invalid placement tests that negated his potential. Highlighting Rose's reflective adult voice, we find examples when, in response to the low bar set by educators, Rose acknowledges the arsenal of defensive strategies he had fine-tuned to tune out. Like Rose, students will write in a reflective voice, looking back with a maturity and understanding they may not have possessed in the past.

### **(ii) Prompts for Writing:**

To prepare students for the narrative vignettes they will write in expressive voices, I pose the following questions:

What descriptive detail (concrete, sensory) is *authentic* to the teaching/learning experience? Consider how you will render a dynamic account of what happened between teacher and student that will allow the reader to co-participate in the teaching/learning experience. That may include a segment of dialogue that augments the experience.

I reiterate that students will aim to distil meaning from the vignette they reenact with this prompt:

As you move from the past to the present, and write in narrative and reflective voices, what experiential knowledge have you gained? Reflect on the experience and bring the meaning you have made to light.

### **(iii) Conferencing and Post-Writing Reflection:**

Conference time is allocated for one 75-minute-class on the same day as peers provide feedback with additional time as needed in my office. One-on-one, I cue students when necessary to orally relay to me the meaning they intend to communicate in the piece. Through talk, I solicit students' tacit or implied knowledge, which can be made more explicit later in writing (Polanyi, 1962). I make specific comments on the margins while students jot down point-form notes during the conference as reminders.

Students then bring in their final copies on publishing day, sharing each others' work and writing end comments on the quality of the piece as a whole. After a few weeks have lapsed, and students have had some time and distance from their texts to gain perspective, all students are asked to write reflections on their writing process for the autobiographies. In these reflections, they share any challenges they faced, problems solved, or lessons learned about themselves as writers and future teachers of writing. Composing reflections, students heighten awareness of how they learn, how they write, thereby developing their meta-cognition. Here is that model.

### **Reflection - Summative Task Partnered with Autobiography:**

I am providing prompts to guide and help you organize your reflective writing. It is not necessary to number your paragraphs; however, I hope these questions will propel you to write with focus. Remember, you are the expert of your own writing product and process.

1. Relay if and how writing your autobiography provided a growth experience for you: emotionally and/or intellectually.
2. This assignment is integral to ENG 305 - Teaching Writing. In terms of the inception (choosing the topic, selecting the (teacher/subject)), writing process and final revisions, how did you benefit in your development as a writer? For example, were there any specific challenges you feel you overcame; strengths that were further reinforced; new strategies you have acquired?
3. Building your teacher image involves shaping and articulating values and beliefs. Re-reading the autobiography now, extract value (s), belief (s) from the autobiography that will constitute part of your evolving teacher image.
4. Would you argue for writing autobiography as an important component of a teacher education program? Why?

### **Overview of Case Studies:**

Selecting and organizing the four participants on this study, I explored a variety of teaching/learning environments and roles. In the first two case studies, my participants reconstruct a student-teacher dynamic at junior grade levels in the language arts, while in the second and third case studies, my participants present themselves as one-on-one teachers of special needs students in literacy and physical education. The first participant discovers how a teacher provided her with an opportunity to construct and voice independent meaning as a reader and writer and to value herself both inside and outside the classroom context. In the second case study, my participant uncovers the genesis of her writing philosophy through her past teacher's active listening and attentive meeting of her individual needs. My third participant broadens the scope of the inquiry. She moves from the school setting to the home and her father's influence as nurturer and reading teacher. She then ties literacy to visual arts and her aesthetic interest in photography, and she connects personally to the transitional moment of her student, a developing reader. Finally, in the fourth case study, the participant, who is situated in an extra-curricular sports environment, explicitly articulates how her past understanding of special needs students shifts and how reciprocal the dynamic between her student and herself can be.

## Case Study #1: A Birthday Invite Becomes a Tradition: Self as Valued Reader

Nel Noddings (2002) encourages teachers not to overlook affect in favor of removed critical thinking. We can't set aside emotions, she reminds us, as students long to read and to write about matters that capture the heart (2002). My first student model, Angie, chose to resituate her past self at a time when she was vulnerable. She relayed her challenges in the sixth grade when her mother suffered from a brain injury and ensuing epilepsy, and Angie was prematurely placed in the adult position of assuming familial responsibilities. Once her teacher, Mrs. W. was informed about the family trauma, she took it upon herself to help Angie envision success both on a personal and academic level in spite of the hardships her young student faced.

In an untraditional act, Mrs. W. invites Angie to lunch on her twelfth birthday, phoning her first at home for permission. The enthusiasm and self-worth Angie felt by being singled out and honored in this way rings through the writing all these years later.

Mrs. W. showed up with a bouquet of flowers and took me to Friendly's for lunch. I got to order anything I wanted, and it didn't matter if I couldn't finish. I felt like I had just been told that I was a princess in a far-away land. It was one of the few times in my life when I allowed myself the pleasure of simply enjoying the moment. We sat at Friendly's for an hour talking about the book we were reading in class. The author was going to come and visit the school, and we were discussing the merits of her writing, what I liked and disliked about the story, and how I thought my classmates liked the book. I still remember the title, *So Far From the Bamboo Grove* by Yoko Kawashima Watkins. It was a well-written, rather gruesome tale about escaping Japan during WWII. I told her that I thought that it was a great story but a little hard to read for some of my classmates because the details were very vivid and unsettling (Unpublished Student Autobiography).

Mrs. W. encouraged her student to apply her knowledge about the book in a social environment other than the classroom, affording Angie the opportunity to exercise voice and judgment about the written word. Angie acknowledges this when she thanks Mrs. W. for helping her to see that her "thirst for knowledge could be

quenched through reading and writing." Additionally, Angie importantly writes: "Above all else, she taught me that I was a valuable member of society and that I mattered both as a person and as a student." In Mrs. W's relational capacity as a teacher, that is, in her acting within the world of her student in a caring mode, and in the connections she makes with Angie, Mrs. W. honored her student's responses as a reader (Berman, 2004; Noddings, 2002; Barone, 2000). Moreover, she prominently promoted social agency in education, instilling pride and a sense of responsibility in Angie as a member of society at large, beyond the confines of her family, which had come to consume her life and minimize its scope.

The relationship was sustained through Mrs. W's retirement. Angie writes in the conclusion:

She continued the tradition of taking me out for my birthday until I moved away during my sophomore year of high school. After I had moved, I still came back once a year and visited with her. I hope I was able to convey my gratitude to her about how much she helped shape my life. I'm not sure how I would have survived some of the trials I faced without her support and understanding. Looking back, I hope that I will be able to touch a student's life as profoundly as she touched mine (Unpublished Student Autobiography).

In the last above-quoted sentence, Angie is composing and envisioning a belief in her evolving teacher image: to recognize the inherent value of a student as an individual. Writing the autobiography also provided the venue for Angie to consider the import of past experience and to merge the child and adult into one as she met the needs of the text. She expresses in her post-autobiographical reflection how thankful she was for the opportunity "to reflect upon my childhood experiences with an adult point of view, instead of accepting them as childish whim or memory. I had not thought about how much these memories meant to me until I wrote about them." As an autobiographical writer, Angie accessed her past, honored her childhood, and then distinguished the present from the past when, much like Mike Rose, she recognized her more mature capacity as an adult to interpret that childhood experience. She writes this telling revelation in her post-autobiographical reflection:

Emotionally, I am ready to accept that I am no longer that child, but a grown woman who is capable of writing an intellectually interesting paper about me.

Reiterating a value that emanated from her autobiography, Angie writes:

“Teaching comes from the heart ....When a teacher takes time to see a student as a person instead of a number or problem, when the teacher shows compassion and understanding for that student, the student learns to be compassionate and understanding” (Unpublished Student Reflection).

Angie is shaping her emerging professional teacher identity and image from Mrs. W’s example of a relational, caring teacher who recognized the value of the whole child in a social context outside the classroom. Angie’s and Mrs. W’s communication expanded and reformed the conventional pattern of teacher elicitation and student response and can be characterized, instead, as a mutually respectful dialogue that valued relationship, attachment and connection.

Locating this transitional moment in her autobiography made prominent for Angie why she was in my classroom and in her chosen program. She also pointed to the writing assignment as a possible means of reducing some of the anxiety in pre-service teachers that can arise when they question or doubt their choice:

Most people have a moment when they know they want to become a teacher - some event that shapes their decision or a person who sparks their interest. I feel that finding that moment and writing about it makes more clear and evident why that person is studying to become a teacher. Some students may be unsure of their choice of major, but writing an autobiography about a moment when they first realize they want to teach may help to alleviate some of that trepidation (Unpublished Student Reflection).

Writing the autobiography reaped interconnected learning benefits for Angie, illuminating writing process and the role that intuition can play in that process, and enhancing positive self-appraisal as writer. Angie was comfortable about how different her writing process was from other students and acknowledged that writing could not be rushed. As well, she addressed peer-feedback in her reflection:

I learned how to accept people’s criticism as they reviewed my piece. Most importantly, I learned that I did not have to take people’s suggestions and revise my paper to fit their opinions. I learned to stay true to my own intuition as a writer and to believe in myself.

Her confidence in self as writer has been bolstered because she has become more aware of and attuned to her writing and to her original intent for the piece. As a writer and teacher, I talk in the classroom about an intuitive kind of knowing, about Gendlin’s “felt sense” (1961) when we experience a bodily awareness that we know what we need to know about the subject of our writing. During the writing process, all of Angie’s faculties were at work, including her emotions, her intuition, her strategic knowledge about writing, and the welcome expressive manifestations of self which leapt onto the page and which engaged me as a reader in their figurative and rhetorical form.

The educational benefits of Angie’s writing the autobiography are holistic. Writing a life story allowed Angie to explore the relationship between the logical thinking that goes into writing and intuition (Miller, 2001). Moreover, the autobiography acknowledges the wholeness of Angie as a social being, a student, a prospective teacher and connects Angie to both the writing portion of my curriculum as well as the teacher education component - two interconnected domains of knowledge.

## **Case Study #2 - Word Web in the Playground: Self as Imaginative Writer**

The interconnected domains of teaching and writing come in full view for the second participant. Barb relays a fifth-grade pre-writing (webbing) experience that was a stumbling block for her, diminishing her belief that she could write at all. In a humorous, honest voice, she replays the experience as a child attempting to write in a classroom filled with children scribblers. Note Barb’s diction choice of ‘sensing’ in her vignette when describing her teacher’s immediate response to the one-model-doesn’t fit-all dilemma.

Webs, I think. I hate spiders. They remind me of spiders...Students all around me are bent over their papers scribbling inside their spidery bubbles, and there I sit. I stubbornly put my pencil down on the desk and put my characteristic, ‘I don’t like this, chin-jutting scowl’ on my face. Even Stinky Jeffy over there has his pencil moving furiously over the page. That’s it. I’m pathetic. Sensing there’s a problem, my teacher hurries over to see what is wrong (Unpublished Student Autobiography).

Approaching Barb, Ms. B. intuitively feels her student's discomfort. In so doing, she takes the first step in opening up to an alternative teaching method. Trusting her teacher, Barb tells Ms. B. that when she tries as a diligent student to write down her ideas on a web, her ideas go away. Ms. B. questions her, listening to her student's frame of reference. "Well, I didn't know you felt that way...but if you're sure." Once she hears what her student tells her, Ms. B. begins to see something she did not see before and uses this new-found knowledge to act. With her student's response confirmed, Ms. B. responds spontaneously, reshaping her activity.

Courageously, Ms. B. asks all the students to put their pencils down and follow her outside to the playground. Amid whispers and confusion, Barb continues with her narrative, fleshing out both authentic and imagined detail via the prompts Ms. B. offers her students in a hands-on brainstorming experience and via the responses students offer back. (Expertly, Barb adds and reconfigures detail to the dialogue to render her narrative more cogent). There is a reciprocal, dialogical dynamic at work here between a teacher who can improvise and encourages her students to follow suit:

Ms. B. grabbed a nerf football. We were out in front of the playground, and she told us to form a circle around her. I was starting to think that we were actually forming a word web. A human word web. Ms. B. Said, "Now that we've formed a web, I want you all to start thinking about anything at all. Pretend that you are writing a story about a tree. I am a tree, so I would go in the middle of your word web. Now I am going to throw the ball to each of you, and I want you to say whatever comes to your mind about the tree, where it is, what a color leaves it has. Are there birds? Is the sky gray or blue? Anything that comes to your mind."

She tossed the ball to Anthony first. "I see a tree in the middle of the ocean, and the dolphins are jumping out of the water over it!" he exclaimed.

Sarah got the ball next and she said: "The sky is dark blue with purple clouds. I think it's going to rain."

Jeffy disagreed. He said, "No, the tree is in the middle of the rainforest, and it is being climbed by a great explorer looking for wild birds" (Unpublished Student Autobiography).

Barb now turns the focus on herself as a child. Ms. B. asks for her to try. As a writer/researcher so many years later, Barb reveals her vivid imagination. "I thought the tree was

a solitary weeping willow next to a big lake with swans gliding across the water."

Ms. B. congratulates Barb, and reminds her of an important writing lesson - not to be overwhelmed at the outset of a writing activity in the future but to take as much time as she needs to write. In Deweyian fashion (1938), Mrs. B. utilized the playground to make her surroundings conducive to a growth-learning arts-based experience. In turn, her students used their imaginations in a personal, experiential way to co-create teachable moments. The playground/turned classroom and the tree as prop provided what Noddings might call an "artistic medium" (2002, 145). Barb reflects as both a college student and future teacher at the end of her autobiography:

This experience really made a difference because Ms. B. illustrated the concept, demonstrating that it was okay and beneficial to think outside the box...I always look back on that day when I am struggling with an assignment and give myself plenty of time to think... I will show my students, just as I was shown, that there is more than one way to do things. I will encourage them to try a number of forms and then choose what is best for them (Unpublished Student Autobiography).

Barb is articulating her emerging writing philosophy - that she will provide students with choice and a variety of representational models. I reinforce this in the course, but here, Barb has constructed her own meaning through writing and remembering her life and the teacher who created the conditions for learning.

The relational teacher, Ms. B. cultivated respect in the classroom by creating a supportive environment (Beattie, 2004), by acknowledging Barb's writing strategy, and by being flexible and responsive enough to transform a pre-planned activity and improvise another that would include a learner who couldn't work with the template. Ms. B. listened, reflected, and critically examined her pedagogy to read Barb's experience and interact with her. What a wonderful teaching model, one whose holistic and positive educative influence Barb fully acknowledges, hopes to emulate, and extends to other teachers in her life.

This assignment reminded me how important it was that I would one day be able to do for others what that teacher did for me. It allowed me to remember the mentor I had and the carefree innocence that we really should never lose. That is both intellectual and

emotional ...I want to become a teacher because of the care and mentorship I received not just in fifth grade with Mrs. B., but from the guidance I have received and continue to receive from teachers over the years (Unpublished Student Reflection).

Often as Clark informs teachers, the effects of learning might not be evident immediately but may surface like a “time-released capsule” (2004). For Barb, that capsule took effect when writing the autobiography. Ms. B. helped Barb forge an important construct in teacher image and in her evolving teaching philosophy about writing. Through her own design, Barb is shaping the philosophy that writing is individual, situational and contingent upon the needs of the task .

In both their post-autobiographical reflections, Angie and Barb express a vital sense of agency. By writing a believable piece, conjuring up for the reader concrete particularities of the learning experience, locating transitional moments, and by making meaning of those moments, their individual consciousness has evolved and their confidence has been strengthened (Conle, 2000; Diamond & Mullen, 1999; Clandinin & Connelly, 1991). Angie and Barb echo this renewed sense of agency in the quotes below:

Autobiographical writing helps a student learn about who they are, which creates a deeper appreciation of self.

I look back and see that I value the experiences of the self, personal growth in writing, and the effect that has on my overall ability to communicate. I value being able to relate personal experience into writing so that people get a clear idea of my point of view and who I am through my writing (Unpublished Student Reflections).

This envisioning of self as a learning individual who has the potential to distil meaning from the past in the present is instrumental in building a teaching image, one that can sustain teachers in the future through some of the trials and fluxes of everyday teaching.

In terms of developing writing skills intrinsic to the genre of autobiography, both students did show and tell in expressive and reflective voices, which balanced the writing, veering the pieces away from the potential pitfalls of sentimentality or heavy-handed meaning-making. Fleshing out the narrative vignettes recaptured a sense of immediacy. Reflecting on those narrative events after composing provoked a certain thoughtfulness in the

students who could then draw out moral and educative implications (Kilbourn, 1988). The narrative, therefore, supported the reflective voice, illustrating for the reader why and how these two pre-service teachers are forming their value systems and professional/personal identities.

### **Case Study #3: Evoking Portraiture of Self as Literacy Learner and Special Needs Teacher**

Of all the autobiographies submitted, Chrissy’s writing style was, perhaps, the most evocative. She drew from her love for and expertise in photography to paint a picture of the room where she was first taught to read by her recently deceased father. The arts merge in the excerpt below pointing to autobiography as a multi-formed vehicle for self-expression. Chrissy sees with a developed sensibility to detail and nuance:

What I remember most about the scene was its warmth...If I were trying to recreate the scene through film, I’d probably use a pink and orange lens filter, and a fisheye lens to give the edges of the scene a nice blurred effect, so the only clear thing in the scene would be the two people on the bed and the book between them. I’d use a frame rate and exposure that would give the motions a blurred effect, and the words would have a nice echo-y quality to them, set to a pretty music box-sounding piece of music playing softly in the background. The end of the scene would fade to sepia and then white. That’s how the scene plays in my mind, anyway (Unpublished Student Autobiography).

The autobiography provided Chrissy with an elegiac site to remember and pay tribute to her father as a patient and sensitive teacher. A free-lance photographer, he took the time on evenings to read *Dr. Seuss*, *Goodnight Moon* and the *Brothers Grimm* fairy tales. Father and daughter lay on their stomachs, a book between them, while Chrissy followed her father’s finger with her attentive eyes and ears. The past is ever-present as Chrissy re-enacts the transitional moment when she first makes sense of the written word. Imitating a child’s excitement with her sentence structure and use of the conjunction “and” as sentence opener, Chrissy recreates her younger self:

I found that I could recognize some of the words. I knew that when the letters were put together like so, it was this word. And when there was the one with

the big C and the two Ls, that was Cinderella's name. And when there was a dot and then a space and then a big letter, it was a new sentence!

Calling from her history again later in her autobiography, Chrissy connects her transitional reading moments to those her autistic student experiences when he first verbalizes the words she teaches from a text. Past intersects with present as learner becomes teacher in the stories Chrissy has opted to tell. She sets a similar scene here to the one with her father when describing teacher and student on task.

When I see a child have that "Ah-Ha!" moment, I look back at that memory as reference..... One day, about halfway through the summer term, my student and I were lying on the floor, our hands on our chins, and the book between us. The book was about space and the night sky. I pointed to a picture of a rocket, and said, "Rocket." He pointed to the rocket. I pointed to the image of the sky and said, "Sky." He pointed to the sky. I pointed to a star and said, "Star." He pointed to the star and said in a soft voice, "Star..." If I tried to turn the page before saying the name of an object, he'd stop me and point to it, as if asking me what its name was (Unpublished Student Autobiography).

Linking past to present in the autobiography provides a venue for considering perspective, that of the student and that of the teacher. Chrissy accesses the effective metaphor of a mirror image to emphasize the commonality of experience in both roles and the broadening of her understanding of the duality of those roles. Her integration of this figurative device becomes part and parcel of her teacher image.

The other thing that stood out to me was the connection and similarities between the two events. I hold both moments as valuable learning experiences, but I never quite realized how much they paralleled each other until I wrote about them. It's like a mirror image, with me on the side of the teacher in one, and on the side of the student on the other. I'm glad I could have that connection between the two; it is a good reference point for learning from both perspectives (Unpublished Student Reflection).

#### **Case Study #4: Testing Physical Limits: Self as Interactive Coach**

To gain experience and test her affinity for teaching, Susan writes about her early teaching experience with children in a sports environment. With humility and insight, Susan voices an appreciation for the reciprocal nature of teaching that a seasoned, professional teacher can sometimes lose sight of.

An able tennis player herself, Susan recounts how she half-heartedly takes on a tennis training position thrust upon her by a coach at a community centre in a town that was further away than she would have liked. The opportunity, however, turned out to be a rich value-laden experience, one she could not have predicted. I begin the narrative vignette once Susan is in the gym and students are about to select an activity. Tennis is announced and the two, student and teacher, meet.

A lovely, eager physically disabled child, who lacks arms past her elbows, becomes Susan's student. To Susan's surprise and delight, the girl jumps into the activity wholeheartedly, never allowing her physical restrictions to limit her engagement in the game.

Not only had the girl been waiting to play tennis, but she jumped right up and offered to carry the metal ball carrier, the hopper. The hopper was rather heavy even for me to carry, and the tennis courts were about a block away. I couldn't discourage the eager eyes beading up at me, so I thanked her for offering to help and told her when it was too heavy, to please let me know. Much to my disbelief, she carried the hopper all the way to the court. Playing tennis was not hard for her either. She had great coordination and listened closely to the tips and instructions I gave her. Every chance I could, I would volley the ball with her and teach her new tricks on how to hold and position the racquet in order to place the ball at different angles on the court...Mostly, I enjoyed talking to her and listening about her day. She was such a delightful and warm-hearted child (Unpublished Student Autobiography).

Through concrete action, reflection and narration, Susan generates a relational theme about teaching. She has gained empathic understanding of her student from her physical, intellectual and emotional interaction with the young girl. In an eloquent conclusion, Susan pays homage

to the reciprocal nature of teaching - that she learned side-by-side with her student who taught her about being stoic and resilient.

To go someplace with the intentions of teaching another, and actually being taught in the process, is one of the beautiful benefits of teaching. And although I spent very little time in the grand scheme of things with these children and most importantly, with this little girl, the impact and impression left on me will last a lifetime. I would like to think my time with this child is a reflection of how my future teaching will be. I am so excited to positively impact many others' lives as well have them positively impact mine (Unpublished Student Autobiography).

As is true for all the participants, Susan calls from her history to guide her in future situations (Clandinin, 1985). Writing the autobiography enables Susan to project what kind of teacher she *can* and, as she uses the emphatic future modal, *will* be, and what kind of values she will enact in her practice. The private act of writing foregrounds the social and interactive self, the teacher who connects with her student. Through that student, Susan relinquishes prior assumptions about what physical disability means. Reflection and narration allow Susan, even at this preliminary phase of her teacher training, to recognize the dissonance between what she thought she knew and understood and what she now understands through experiential learning, teaching and writing.

I would have to say the belief that most stands out as I re-read the autobiography is open-mindedness. Never to assume a child is incapable of doing anything, simply because of a handicap. I am thankful to have been given the opportunity to teach tennis to such a special girl who proved my ignorance wrong. I will forever carry these values into my future teaching (Unpublished Student Reflection).

Susan has gained an appreciation of the diversity, courage and unpredictability of learners. She has become more attuned to the unique individual slant that constitutes self and keeps teachers forever learning about others.

Susan also directed her attention to the holistic educational value of the writing task which elicited "joy, respect and hope" and which simultaneously developed her intellectual skills during the writing process. She noted that zooming in on an influential "specific time and instance rather than summarizing periods of time

was difficult but thought-provoking." Having the time to develop a work in progress with a peer who helped her focus her topic assisted her writing in other courses. She voiced appreciation as well for my feedback which she characterized as optimistic and sensitive.

Instead of marking up my autobiography with red pen, Dr. Lipszyc gently wrote little side notes in the margin in pencil. I was then able to go back to my autobiography and take her ideas into consideration to better my paper. I believe this stimulated intellectual growth for me both as a student writer and a prospective teacher" (Unpublished Student Reflection).

My goal as a model of writing teacher is to build confidence and competency, to expand students' repertoire of strategic knowledge, and to encourage growth in a structured social environment with peers who remind one another of the need to consider audience. Fortunately for me, Susan was never defensive about the personal writing piece but revealed what Winnicott would call her "true self," interacting in what could have been a high-stakes writing environment to change the writing (as cited by Allen, 2002)

## **Conclusion: Educational Implications**

### **Constructing a Plural Self: Working with a Dichotomy**

Writing autobiography is an arts-based, holistic vehicle for creating teacher image as "plural self" (Beattie, 1995). That plural self points to a dichotomy inherent to teaching - that in building teacher identity, the personal and the relational intertwine and feed into one another. By constructing and reconstructing their life stories at this early stage of their teacher education, students build a vital sense of agency as writers and individuals. The "I" voice is highlighted, reads back to students resonantly and illuminates for them their individual capacity to create, to distil meaning, to render palpable philosophies they can begin to call their own. Concurrently, in locating transitional moments in their autobiographies, students come to value the relational self as pivotal to their future practice. Learning from positive teacher role models whom they have chosen to profile, they configure themselves as future caring teachers who will place the

building of relationships with students at the heart of their practice.

As Martin Buber wrote (1966), and as my students discovered, growth in the self is accomplished in the relational between the one and the other, between teacher and student. They learned that they are preeminently made more present as individuals by the other in a mutuality of acceptance, affirmation and confirmation.

### **Teacher as Writer and Researcher:**

Through writing, my students identify themselves as experiential learners and teachers standing side-by-side with their students. Text-in-hand, they take pride and assume ownership as imaginative writers who express a desire to participate imaginatively in a shared reality with future students. They have done work too as reflective researchers who have tapped into their past to better understand their present and project into a future. Barb succinctly affirms the value of drawing from personal experiential knowledge: “Your best research tool is your life and your background” (Unpublished Student Reflection).

And as they navigate through the complex and individual journey of composing an autobiography distinctive to them, pre-service teachers are becoming scholars of composition who will be more equipped to teach what they practice. They will hopefully remember what they have experienced and reflected upon:

- that while writing is a process unique to the individual writer, peer and teacher feedback can help focus a piece from the audience’s perspective;
- that autobiographical writing can channel and elucidate past experience into the realized present;
- that intuition may be an accurate indicator of what resonates in their writing; and
- that paradoxically, the private act of writing about one’s life within social contexts imbues the author with a stronger identity, leaving behind a signature line.

These pre-service teachers, then, who produce texts in modes they will be teaching, have the potential of becoming more natural allies of their students (Bloom, 1998). At the end of her reflection, Barb poses and answers a question in a self-directed manner, as if she is

calling out to future colleagues in her chosen career about the power of discovery writing offers:

If we as teachers or pre-service teachers do not know who we are as writers, how can we expect to teach students to discover - or teach them of the great importance of discovering themselves - through writing? The autobiography is a wonderful way to do that, and I am grateful to have had that experience (Unpublished Student Reflection).

The four pre-service student teachers profiled in this inquiry are beginning to write their lifelong teaching stories and will, inevitably, revise their plots as events unfold. Once they teach as professional practitioners, they can test whether the values and beliefs they now hold to be true are congruent with their teaching practices (Schon, 1985). They can reconstruct and elaborate on those theories about teaching, and critically analyze their own and their classes’ performance. Armed with an understanding through reflective autobiographical writing like this, they can generate change in the future. Like Olsen (2008), I advocate to teacher educators that students create and return to a “learning-and-teaching autobiography” over a year’s course of study, both in the university education laboratory classroom and in their student teaching, in order to meet the demands of identity work (37).

### **Final Note:**

The autobiography is a rich holistic pedagogical tool I plan to continue including in my pre-service teacher curriculum. Through writing, my students render more perceptible their nascent teacher images as a foundation upon which to build their future teaching images. They tap into inner resources, making meaning that might otherwise have eluded them. Knowing from doing through this arts-based autobiographical lens shapes pre-service teachers’ images as multi-faceted selves, as cognizant, sentient, imaginative and relational beings. Finally, writing their own stories about a central teaching/ learning moment brings them closer to understanding and empathizing with the learning processes of their future students. If the distance between writer pre-service teachers and their prospective students is diminished, then these teachers-to-be can more instrumentally facilitate the needs of students who will test and trek their own circuitous paths as thinkers and writers.

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