Individual voices, shared experience: The power of knowledge, caring, and understanding in student teacher relationships

by

Shannon Eickhoff

B.S., Kansas State University, 1997
M.S., Kansas State University, 2000

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Curriculum & Instruction
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2022

Abstract

Ethics of care, applied to women's psychology, education, and Black Feminist Thought, provides the framework for this research endeavor. This feminist approach calls us to critically consider our historical model of education based on competitive, masculine ideals which fail to attend to the individual needs of students. Using the philosophical lenses of Nel Noddings' ethics of care in education, bell hooks' engaged pedagogy, Carol Gilligan's feminist ethics of care, and Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Thought, this work created a framework to better understand the powerful effects of caring student teacher relationships. Using narrative inquiry as methodology, this research was guided by storytelling in the form of journals gathered over a twenty-five-year period. The stories themselves serve as the framework for understanding individual voices as well as a collective consciousness illustrating how our students are faring in American schools today. The results of this research provide living examples of the individual philosophical tenets articulated by Noddings, hooks, Gilligan, and Hill Collins. The significance is found in its potential benefit to teachers, administrators, and all those who work with students by offering a new lens through which to view our current philosophical and pedagogical practices as well as the opportunity to recognize the powerful ability of students' stories to take us to a much deeper place of understanding.

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Acknowledgements

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To my husband and children, thank you for going on this ride with me. I know how much you have all sacrificed so that I could live out this dream. I love you all more than you will ever know. And Coraline…you can finally stop counting all the blue things and windows in our house. Mom is coming out of the library.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my students. It has only been through their willingness to share their stories that I have been able to converge upon this work.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

"Touch not these who are my beloved."- Nel Noddings

I am driving to work, listening to music, and thinking about the day ahead. My playlist is on shuffle and I find myself skipping through songs, looking for just the right one to suit my somber mood. My daughter is just days away from leaving for basic training in the Air Force, and I am searching for songs that remind me of her. I stop on Sting's (1994) "When we Dance," and I am taken back to the time when I would hold her and we would dance in the kitchen when she was just a little baby. It's a beautiful, lingering memory, and I can feel my bare-footed steps across the cool tile floor and the smell of her little head resting perfectly on my shoulder. I am content in my memory, and it seems nearly impossible that twenty years has slipped by. I am turning into the entrance of campus as the song ends. I stop at the gate, turn my music down and roll down my window so the security guard can take my temperature… just one of the new requirements since the Covid pandemic changed everything. I record my temperature on my daily sign in sheet, hand it to the guard, and he lets me through the gate. I turn my music back up, look to my left, and see my students sitting on plastic rocking chairs on the large green space in the middle of campus. Most are waiting for class to start. Childish Gambino's (2018) "This is America," is blasting through my speakers, immediately reminding me of where I am and what I am called to do… "This is America, don't catch you slippin'now."

As I get out of my car, I hear voices shouting, "Good morning, Mrs. Eickhoff!" I return the call with a response of "Good morning!" I wave to them in a ridiculous fashion, as if waving down a taxi in a torrential rain storm, letting them know I am as excited to see them as they are to see me. I walk into my building and take the elevator to the third floor. I arrive at my

classroom, unlock the door, and flip on the lights. After putting my things away, I begin the process of preparing the classroom for the day. I have always believed that an essential part of providing an education is creating a space where students feel welcomed, comfortable and safe. I begin by turning on the lamps that light each of the students' computers. I have tried to create a warm, library feel to my classroom as opposed to a cold, brightly-lit fluorescent environment. Bucholz and Sheffler (2009) state, "decorating a classroom with some kind of warmth can promote a sense of comfort and security" (p. 2). My classroom walls are lined with bookshelves, maps, and art. On the community tables, there are puzzles in all different stages of completion. I also have a table with fidgets and found objects given to me by students over the years. Once the classroom is perfectly lit and tidied up, I start up my computer and login to my music channel.

I have a passionate belief that music is essential to creating a classroom that feels inviting to students. When students hear music drifting out in the hallway, they want to come in. Research has shown the many beneficial effects of music in classrooms. Hall (1952) found that music improved learning and increased concentration. Scott (1970) found playing music in the classroom has a calming influence on hyperactive students. Savan (1996) researched students with disruptive, anger-based behaviors and found music encouraged behavioral changes including cooperation and calmness as well as physical changes in breathing and pulse rates, body temperature, blood pressure, and brain stimulation. Giles (1991) found by playing music at strategic times, teachers were able to help relieve stress, increase relaxation, and increase productivity. Hallam and Price (1998) also found playing music in a classroom for students with emotional and behavioral difficulties increased mathematics scores and decreased problematic behavior. I have found personally, music is a brilliant way to connect with students. At least once a week, my students and I play jukebox, wherein each student takes a turn selecting a song to

play for the class. It opens up a space where I can ask students what connects them to the song they chose. I ask them what their song reminds them of, what memories does it hold, and how does it makes them feel. Often, songs lead to stories, and stories lead to a deeper level of connection and understanding.

A couple of years ago, one of my students introduced me to an artist named Donald Glover, also known as Childish Gambino. His song I referenced earlier, "This is America" (Gambino, 2018), became an entire lesson plan I use to teach and to connect with my students. After watching the video for "This is America," (Glover, 2018) I was spellbound by the amount of symbolism I found reflecting both historical and current issues of racism and violence. So, I set about researching the lyrics and each moment of the video. All of the lyrics, images, and their symbolism are too lengthy to mention, but I will speak to a few of them. His lyrics, "This is America, don't catch you slippin'now, look how I'm livin' now, police be trippin' now" are representative of the police presence that restricts the freedom of African Americans. When he raps, "This is a celly, it's a tool," he is referencing the capture of images of violence on cell phones. He speaks to the subordinate lived reality of African American people in America when he raps "You just a Black man in this world." Likewise, he addresses the issue of gun violence when he raps "Yeah, this is America, guns in my area, I got the strap, I gotta carry em'." In his video, he references school shootings through the participation of young children in school uniforms. He speaks to racism by mimicking the Jim Crow pose made infamous by Thomas Dartmouth Rice in 1828 (Pilgrim, 2000). When he guns down a choir with a machine gun, he is making reference to the horrific 2015 massacre at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. And for seventeen seconds of silence in the middle of his

Song, Gambino acknowledges the seventeen students who were murdered at Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School in Parkland, Florida.

Since the release of "This is America," (Gambino, 2018) several scholars have delved into the meaning and importance of Gambino's work (Feliciano-Santos, 2018; Margaretha & Panjaitan, 2020; Simmons, 2018). What I found was the remarkable, if not magical coming together of worlds through this music. It's likely I wouldn't have found this song if our class hadn't been playing the jukebox game. And perhaps my students may have not immediately recognized the historical references made in Gambino's video. But out of sheer luck, or whatever was at play in the universe, a few minutes of music resulted in a lesson plan that wove together history, sociology, and contemporary issues of race in America. More importantly it shows how much my students have to offer in terms of opening up opportunities for learning. I call this lesson "Dissecting Gambino," and I have used it in a presentation to my academic peers in the context of teaching through storytelling as well as a presentation for my colleagues for professional development. This is an example wherein personal research in my own classroom has led to professional development programs (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Little, 1993; Little & McLaughlin, 1993; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996). When I present it to my students, it never fails that I am turned on to other songs they know that speak to their lives, and I am always eager to listen.

This morning, I have chosen a playlist of coffee house morning jazz. It provides the perfect chill vibe I am feeling for the day. I am ready to open up the door and welcome in my kids. My students begin to trickle in. Most of them look sleepy, almost all are carrying small Styrofoam cups of coffee. I am dedicated to letting them know I recognize their presence in the classroom by greeting each one by name, saying good morning, and asking them how their

evening went after school the previous day. We spend the first part of our morning catching up and discussing the developments and concerns in their lives. These are our morning stories. Once we are all settled in, I begin the process of discussing with each student their class progress and their plans for what they want to accomplish that day. All gains in academic progress are shared with the class in hope the students will feel proud of themselves. This whole-class acknowledgement also serves to encourage their peers. And so the day begins, and like the music playing in our ears, we work together like notes in a song providing the soundtrack for our day.

I began my teaching career in a small, rural high school in northeast Kansas. Fresh out of college, I was hired to create a self-contained special education program for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). My experience in student teaching made me realize I wanted to pursue a master's degree in special education, and as such, this was a perfect opportunity to move into the field. Although I had little or no training in special education, I was given a waiver to teach as long as I was pursuing a graduate degree in special education. After only two years, I moved to a larger town where I was hired to be the teacher for the newly created therapeutic learning center at an affluent middle school. It was here I first learned about the abundance of trauma in the lives of my students. Looking back, I realize that I was young and unprepared to effectively work with students who needed more than I could give them. Not surprisingly, research shows that more in-depth preparation is needed for teachers who work with students with disabilities (Flagum & Reschly, 1994; Mihalas, Morse, & Alvarez McHatton, 2009). Tasked with modifying all the curriculum for two grade levels based on the individual needs of my students, I found myself totally overwhelmed. Aside from trying to help my students learn, I was faced daily with behavior I was not equipped to handle. Although I maintain

my graduate work in special education was exemplary, nothing could have prepared me for the work I was doing. In retrospect, I understand now, experience is the only thing that allows you build a repertoire of skills for working with students who have been irreparably harmed by a system that leaves little room for those who do not conform. I was quickly beginning to realize what Mihalas et al. (2009) meant when they state:

> When one considers the state of outcomes of students with EBD and combines it with the truth that the educational system operates in ways contrary to these students' needs, it is apparent that a lack of caring for students with EBD exists. (p. 110)

What I learned from my first few years of teaching in this setting was to become an excellent reader of my students. I had to be deeply in tune with their moods, body language, interactions, as well as their lives at home. I was pregnant with my daughter, and I remember being concerned for my own physical safety in my classroom. As a result, I had to learn to anticipate behavior before it happened. I had to shift my thinking from reaction to prevention. Instead of worrying about what I would do when a student lost control, I started to wonder what would work best when I felt a student escalating in my classroom. Slowly, I began to learn how to deescalate situations in my classroom that might otherwise turn violent. I discovered I could engage with my students through storytelling. Of course, I didn't call it that. I didn't know storytelling as a methodology or pedagogical approach existed. What I did know, was when I carefully approached a sad or angry student and gave them the opportunity to tell their story, I saw a dramatic decrease in both verbal and physical aggression. I realized by listening and showing my students that I cared, I could move them to a place where they felt closer to me and safer in my classroom.

I wasn't aware of the research on caring in education, but I discovered first-hand what it was trying to tell us. I had to get to know my students, to listen carefully to their stories, and become filled with the compassion that comes as a result of that knowing. Mihalas et al. (2009) tell us:

> To know another human being changes who that individual is to the knower. When teachers know a student and appreciate the student's life experiences, their thinking about the student and who the student is can take on more meaning and significance. Such understanding may result in teachers who are more compassionate in how they respond to the student. When students have reason to believe that their teacher really knows them, students can consequently be more accepting of establishing a collaborative relationship with their teacher. (p. 116)

I continued in this position for three years, until a position opened up in an interrelated classroom at the same school. There, I would be working with students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. It was a much-needed break from the strain that comes from working in a high-stress EBD environment. In hindsight, I am tremendously grateful I was able to make this move, as the burn out rate for teachers who work with students with EBD is significantly higher than special education teachers who work with students with learning disabilities (Banks & Necco, 1990; Nichols & Sosnowsky, 2002; Park & Shin, 2020). I stayed in my position as an interrelated teacher for four years, and during that time, I learned a tremendous amount about working with students with learning disabilities. In particular, I learned how to become a fierce advocate for my students.

Twenty years ago, I figured out many regular education teachers were not prepared nor particularly interested in working with students with learning disabilities. Of course, there were

those teachers who were open to working with my students, and they were my curriculum experts. As a special education teacher, you have to be a jack-of-all-trades when it comes to the curriculum you are expected to modify and implement in your classroom. I had been taught the skills to modify curriculum and teach specific skills for students based on individual disabilities, however, I knew my students deserved to be in classrooms with their non-disabled peers, learning from teachers who were not only experts in their individual fields of study, but also outstanding educators as well. Teachers, whether they are in special education or general education, should not act in a solitary manner. Rather, students in special education benefit from the collaboration of educators in both fields (Mihalas et al., 2009). In the field of special education, we refer the inclusion of special education students into the regular education classroom as mainstreaming. I worked tirelessly to ensure my students were included in classes with their non-disabled peers, and thankfully, I had the most tremendous paraeducators to support my endeavors.

My motivation for wanting my students mainstreamed as much as possible was not only for academic reasons. It comes as no surprise that special education students have a long history of being bullied and stigmatized by their disabilities. With the early 20th century rise in public schooling and the increasing mandatory attendance thereof, schools became more populated and therefore more rigid. As a result, abnormal student behaviors and differing academic abilities became more obvious. Consequently, students with special needs were isolated in order to protect the normal children (Osgood, 2008). One would think that over time, this isolationist policy would have dissipated, but in fact, "Most children formally identified as disabled experienced complete and permanent separation from their nondisabled schoolmates from the 1850's until well into the 1970's" (Osgood, 2008, p. 128). With the passage of legislation

including PL 94-142 in 1975 and The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990, significant strides were made to improve the lives and education for students. However, the history of isolation had created a chasm between students with and without disabilities, making those with disabilities the target of ridicule and suspicion (Osgood, 2008). This lack of understanding and compassion continues to this day.

I didn't want my classroom to be a place of shame for my students. I had no other choice but to work my hardest to make it a place where students not only came to learn, but also to relax, laugh, and feel safe and welcomed. In order to do this, I had to take what I had learned in my previous classroom, namely the importance of building strong connections with my students, and apply it to working with my new students. There is significant literature supporting the positive effect of caring teacher student teacher relationships can have on students (Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2006; Deiro, 2005; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Marzano, 2003; Mihalas et al., 2009; Sprick, 2006). Pianta & Stuhlman (2004) credit caring, supportive teacher student relationships for an increase in skills needed for school success, and Deci (1995) asserts that caring relationships between students and teachers increase motivation. Muller (2001) found a decrease in dropout rates when students had positive, caring relationships with their teachers. These outcomes were exactly what I wanted for my students, and therefore I set about ensuring my classroom was one where relationships were built, stories were told, and understanding and mutual growth took place. I may have not been aware of unkind words that were directed at my students, but I knew when they were with me, we enjoyed our time together. Osgood (2008) states, "Even among the earliest special education teachers–one could see in their writings an intimate connection with their students–a commitment to giving each child a chance to succeed on her or his own terms" (p. 127).

After several years of teaching in the interrelated classroom, a position opened up at the high school level for a self-contained EBD teacher. Having had a background in this area, I was chosen for the position. For the next nine years, I worked with some of the most wonderful and challenging students I would ever come to know. During my last year at the middle school, I had a student named Emmanuel. He was a vivacious, funny, animated, and kind young man. When I moved to the high school, Emmanuel followed me and requested to be placed in my classroom as he already knew me. I was glad to have him with me as we had become quite close the previous year. My new classroom was in a hundred-year-old building. I was actually given the old gymnasium to teach in. It had been remodeled, but it was still quite large. I had two back rooms, both designed for storage. I also had direct access to the auditorium stage, where as luck would have it, was a beautiful grand piano that I had the opportunity to play frequently. It was a wonderful space where my students and I could get away from the stresses of the day and relax.

Emmanuel was a calming influence in my classroom made up of a majority of young men with long histories of being in some sort of trouble. We spent the majority of our days together, and in this way, we kind of became a little school family. I believe the extended period of time special education teachers spend with their students is a vital component to the building of strong, caring relationships. Mihalas et al. (2009) state, "The sheer amount of time that teachers spend with students over the course of a school year situates them to be primary relationship builders with youth" (p. 111). I found this to be the case in my classroom. The only place I felt I spent too much time in was the administrator's office. My students' propensities for finding themselves in trouble usually resulted in long meetings with the principal. I was incredibly fortunate to have building administrators and support staff that allowed for helpful

solutions to problems my students faced. Emmanuel was never in trouble himself, but he always supported his peers through their times of trouble. He was a friend to all.

During his freshman year, Emmanuel played on the defensive line of the football team. He was an imposing figure, tall and strong with eyes that felt like he could see into your soul. I can only imagine he was a formidable force on the football field. About half way through the season, Emmanuel began experiencing headaches. His mother took him to the doctor, but nothing was found. Shortly thereafter, he began missing tackles on the field. Emmanuel told his mother, Kathryn, and she took him to see his optometrist. It was there that they discovered something abnormal behind Emmanuel's eye. After several tests at the hospital, Emmanuel was diagnosed with a medulloblastoma, a malignant tumor in his brain. He was scheduled for surgery where the tumor was removed, and then put on an aggressive course of chemotherapy and radiation. I recall very vividly the day that Emmanuel began losing his hair. He was sitting at a table in my classroom writing an essay. He was leaning over his paper and he reached up to scratch his head. I noticed his head fall to the table and rest on his arms. Alarmed, I walked over to where Emmanuel was and found a clump of his hair lying on the table next to his paper. I placed my hand on Emmanuel's shoulder and he looked up at me. He said, "Don't worry Mrs. Eickhoff, it will grow back. I sure had pretty hair though!"

Over the next two years, Emmanuel fought his cancer. He was in and out of the hospital and this made his education one that had to be very individualized. His mother and I became the best of friends. She was a single mom of four, working day and night to support her family. We worked as a team to provide Emmanuel with everything he needed to continue his education. As Emmanuel was immunocompromised, he was unable to move from class to class. So, I cleared out one of my storage rooms and created a space just for Emmanuel. I painted it his favorite

color. He helped as much as he could. I painted his name on the wall, and he painted his hand and left a handprint on the wall right next to it. No matter how hard it was for Emmanuel to come to school, he always did his best. He had to rest a lot, so with the help of our school social worker, we found a giant beanbag where he could relax when he needed to. After one particularly rough bout of chemo, Emmanuel became sick in my classroom. I had a sink and washcloths ready just in case. I remember quietly sobbing and holding Emmanuel's forehead while he threw up. He stopped long enough to ask, "Mrs. Eickhoff, why are you crying?" I responded, "I'm crying because you won't." He said, "It's going to be ok, I promise." It was one of the most touching moments in my life.

At Christmas time that year, I took Emmanuel to the mall to have his picture taken with Santa. He was a junior in high school then, but he knew his mom would love this type of nostalgic photo of him. He also decided to go skydiving. Being terrified of heights myself, I questioned his decision. I told him it was too dangerous. He said to me, "Mrs. Eickhoff, really? I have cancer, what else could possibly happen?" He was always making me laugh. The Kansas State University skydivers took him up in their plane and jumped with him out into the beautiful blue sky. He said it was the most amazing thing he'd ever done. I have this quirky habit of calling my students my chickens. That year, Emmanuel gave me a beautiful rooster cookie jar for Christmas. Shortly after the holiday break, Emmanuel was admitted to the hospital in Kansas City. His kidneys were failing. I went to see him one last time. On January 23rd, Emmanuel left earth, leaving behind him a beautiful family and memories that will never be forgotten. To this day, I keep my sugar packets for my morning coffee in the cookie jar he gave me.

All of my students were released from class for Emmanuel's funeral. I was asked to give the eulogy. I remember looking up and seeing the tears in my student's eyes. Those ornery, big

boys of mine were there, honoring their friend. Their true selves were present. Afterwards, each of them gave me a big hug. Our classroom was not the same for the rest of that year. We had all grown so close and I believe Emmanuel was the conduit for that connection. Eventually, I moved into another classroom. But still to this day, Emmanuel's name and handprint remains on the wall of his special place like his memory remains on the lives of those he touched. As students go, he was certainly among the beloved.

As the years passed, I felt as though my students were faced with greater challenges and obstacles than ever before. I grew increasingly frustrated with the system. I found myself becoming angry at the way my students were treated, and at the same time found myself less empowered to change things. I guess this is what they refer to as burn out. On one occasion, I had a meeting with a student, his parent, and the school administration that made me lose what little faith I was hanging on to. I made a decision that my days as a teacher were over. I enrolled in real estate school and started planning a new career for myself. While visiting my family in another state, I received a phone call offering me a new position at a new school. I had only a few days to make my decision. I drove eight hours home and was taken to see the campus where the position was located. Something amazing happened that day. It was like an awakening. I knew immediately I was where I belonged, and I accepted the position on the spot. It was the best decision I ever made.

Shortly after beginning my new teaching position, I made the decision to go back to school to earn my PhD. This is where my life as a teacher and my life as a student began to collide. I found myself in classes that were opening my eyes to a world I had never seen, and I learned that once something is really seen, it cannot be un-seen. My growing awareness from the literature I was studying was realized in the lives of my students. I felt like I was observing my

life as a teacher under a microscope. It was also during this time that I was introduced to the work of Nel Noddings, Carol Gilligan, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins. Their research guided my work as an educator and my eventual research as well. Having learned about storytelling through the lens of narrative inquiry, Critical Race Theory, and Black Feminist Thought, I found a framework through which I could review literature, and collect data through the interpretation of narrative stories that would enable me to conduct my research.

Statement of the Research Problem

> *Confronting one another across differences means that we must change ideas about how we learn; rather than fearing conflict we have to find ways to use it as a catalyst for new thinking, for growth.* (hooks, 1994, p. 113)

Research suggests ethics of care, feminism, transformative pedagogy, and Black Feminist Thought each hold significant influence in the realm of education (Gilligan, 1982, 2014; Gilligan, Ward & Taylor, 1988; Hill Collins, 1989, 2009a, 2009b, 2013; hooks, 1994, 2000, 2009; Noddings, 1986a, 1986b, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2012). Using narrative inquiry as a research methodology, I seek to understand the potential of caring relationships between students and teachers through the combined lenses of Nel Noddings' ethics of care, Carol Gilligan's feminism, bell hooks' ethic of love and transformative pedagogy, and Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Thought. Additionally, I will investigate the effects of storytelling on the creation of caring relationships and community in the classroom. By examining student teacher relationships through multiple lenses, there is potential for understanding a new way of thinking about who and how we teach. This being said, and taking into consideration the nature of narrative inquiry as a methodology, I do not perceive this research to be a problem to be solved, but rather relationships and connections to be explored. Noddings (1986a) states:

> As we convert what we have received from the other into a problem, something to be solved, we move away from the other. We clean up his reality, strip it of complex and bothersome qualities, in order to think it. The other's reality becomes data, stuff to be analyzed, studied and interpreted. I lose myself as one-caring, for I now care about a problem instead of a person. (p. 36)

Moeller, Brackett, Ivcevic, and White (2020) conducted a nation-wide survey of 21,678 high school students and found that seventy-five percent of the students had negative feelings about their lives at school. They state:

> The effects of schooling are in part characterized by the feelings students experience at school: For example, academic and social feelings experienced at school predict students' attention, motivation, academic performance, relationships, health, and well-being. (p. 2)

Furthermore, they found "Negative feelings were associated with female gender, age, SES, and race/ethnicity" (p. 5). Students reported feelings of stress, depression, boredom, anxiousness, sadness, and loneliness. Pekrun (2017) examined the effects of emotions on students and found they "are often intense and can profoundly affect learning, achievement, and psychological health" (p. 215). He states, "Regarding negative emotions, activating emotions—such as anxiety, anger, or confusion—distract attention and reduce interest, intrinsic motivation, and deep learning" (Pekrun, 2017, p. 217). His research found that the influence of emotions on learning are greater than the impact of other variables including socioeconomic background, cognitive ability, and gender (Pekrun, 2017). As such, Pekrun suggests administrators, parents and teachers emphasize practices where adolescents' positive emotions are strengthened.

I have been a teacher many years working with students who have suffered at the hands of an educational system that has overlooked or purposefully denied them an equitable education based on race, socioeconomic, or ability status. I believe a new way of thinking about and caring for our students must be implemented if we are to have an impact on our students' lives. Noddings (1986b) tells us, "A liberal counter-reform will not revolutionize education, because it will not challenge the fundamental premises of masculine intellectualism, abstractionism and consequentialism. To challenge these, we need a language of relation that guides our thinking in concrete situations" (p. 499). We have an ethical obligation to ask ourselves why students increasingly report they do not feel cared for. While research on ethics of care, Black Feminist Thought, and transformative pedagogy is prolific and specific about the benefits of a philosophy of care in the classroom and elsewhere, we still find ourselves operating in a White, male, hierarchical system of education wherein equity is nothing but a façade (Bergman, 2004; Gilligan, 2014; Hankivsky, 2014; Hill Collins, 2009b; hooks, 1994; Mihalas et al., 2009; Morse, 1994; Morton, 2020; Muller, 2001; Noddings, 1986a, 1986b, 1988, 2003, 2005, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The feminist approach to ethics of care calls us to consider critically our historical model of education based on masculine ideals. It reminds us to consider the benefits our students receive when webs of connection are made wherein all are included and none are left behind (Gilligan, 1982, 2014). Based on the ideals of democracy, love, voice and relationship, it rejects the commonly held masculine justice ethics our schools in America are built on today. The feminist ideal of placing relationship over the individual through the apprehension of another's reality allows for growth in caring student teacher relationships as well as serving as a catalyst for activism, openness, and recognition (Gilligan, 1982, 2014; Hill Collins, 1989, 2009b; hooks,

1994, 2000; Noddings, 1986a, 2002). That being said, there is a practical significance to shifting our perspective on education to one based on feminist thought.

Ethics of care as a feminist perspective with regard to education contributes significantly to the realization that our current system of competitive education fails to attend to the individual needs of students, which results in a lack of moral development that might have otherwise been carried into the world. However, it lacks the specific attention paid to the transformative, healing focus of Black Feminist Thought. I suggest when ethics of care are imbued with the tenets of Black Feminist Thought, specifically a call to activism, resistance, and social justice, there will result a more comprehensive, holistic understanding of how we can effectively serve our students.

The work of Nel Noddings on ethics of care in education, and Carol Gilligan on care ethics and feminism are groundbreaking. Likewise, is the work of Hill Collins on Black Feminist thought and hooks' ethic of love and transformative pedagogy. While the literature from each individual scholar may be substantial, there is, perhaps, a greater understanding that could come from an analysis of how their philosophies complement and inform each other. Specifically, how does the combined work of Noddings, Gilligan, Hill Collins, and hooks help us to understand the power of knowledge, caring, and understanding in student teacher relationships. Noddings (1986b) calls us to find a "language of relation" to guide our thinking (p. 499). I suggest this language can be found in the philosophical underpinnings of ethics of care, a feminist ethic of love, and Black Feminist Thought.

We know students need to feel cared for in our schools. How do we accomplish that? It is the purpose of this research to examine in depth the factors that affect how students perceive care, and how I as a teacher may encourage caring relationships in my classroom. Through the

lenses of feminist ethics of care, transformative pedagogy, and Black Feminist Thought, this study intends to more clearly understand how these philosophies, when applied through an analysis of narrative inquiry and storytelling, result in a better understanding of caring student teacher relationships.

The following research questions provide a holistic account of the cultural, societal, and academic contexts in which I work. Lee, Hunter, and Franken (2014) state, "Narrative research typically focusses on the voices of participants, wherein researchers seek to understand participants' experiences in a holistic and socio-culturally situated way" (p. 146). Additionally, the work of the scholars foundational to my research will have a significant impact on guiding the direction of my research. I converge upon this work with a profound belief in the ability of the combined work of Noddings, Gilligan, hooks, and Hill Collins to create a framework through which to better understand the powerful effects of caring student teacher relationships.
It is my intention to remain close to this work as one-caring, deeply committed to understanding the importance of the relationship between myself and my students.

Research Questions

The subsequent research questions inform my work as an educator and guide my academic research:

1. What is the potential for understanding caring relationships between students and teachers through the lenses of Nel Noddings' ethics of care, Carol Gilligan's feminism, bell hooks' ethic of love and engaged pedagogy, and Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Thought?
2. How does storytelling act as a medium for building caring relationships and community in the classroom?

Methodology

I have chosen narrative inquiry as my methodology for my research. My research questions are guided by a search for understanding through storytelling. As stories are representative of experience, narrative inquiry provides a framework for understanding these experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2008) tell us:

> For us, narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience. Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it. (p. 18)

Research has shown individual stories provide reliable data sources in narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kramp, 2004; Paley, 1981, 1986; Smith, Prunty, Dwyer, & Klein, 1987). Kramp (2004) states, "The researcher who engages in narrative inquiry is interested in determining the meaning of a particular experience or event for the one who had it, and tells about it in a story" (p. 107). As such, my data is found in the career-long stories I have kept in my journals. The stories I have collected represent the deep web of caring connections I have made with my students over the years. They are personal. As Kramp (2004) tells us, "Narrative inquiry assumes "personal involvement" as the very condition that makes it possible for you, as a researcher, to gather and interpret narratives of participants in your study" (p. 114).

Additionally, my research goals are guided by a desire for understanding the effects of analyzing stories through the lenses of ethics of care, feminism, transformative pedagogy, and Black Feminist Thought. Each of these perspectives lend themselves to storytelling and subsequent personal and relational growth. Noddings (2003) speaks to storytelling and conversation in terms of moral education. Gilligan's (1984) focus on the inclusion of individual

voice is central to telling one's story. bell hooks (1994) tells us, "When one speaks from the perspective of one's immediate experiences, something's created in the classroom for students, sometimes for the very first time. Focusing on experience allows students to claim a knowledge base from which they can speak" (p. 148). Hill Collins (2009b) speaks to the essential component of "emotions in dialogue," often found in storytelling, that allows for the growth of empathy and personal expression (p. 282). As my research is carried out in a diverse socio-cultural context, storytelling provides a space where understanding differences is encouraged and celebrated. Bell (2003) states, "As such, stories are a bridge between individual experience and systemic social patterns. Thus, their analysis can be a potential tool for developing a more critical consciousness about social relations in our society" (p. 4).

Definition of Terms

Black Feminist Thought – Hill Collins (2009b) cites resistance, social justice, and intersectionality as the underpinnings of Black Feminist Thought. Based on the normalcy of hegemonic ideologies, and the historical legacies of racial, sexual, social class, and ethnic oppression, Black Feminist Thought seeks institutional transformation through shared knowledge, solidarity, and activism.

Emotional and Behavioral Disorders – According to the U.S. Department of Education's Individuals with Disability Act, Sec. 300.8 (c) (4) (2017), Emotional disturbance means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance: An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.

A. An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.

B. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.

C. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.

D. A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. (Paragraph i)

Engaged Pedagogy – According to hooks (1994), engaged pedagogy has grown out of critical, feminist, and anticolonial pedagogies. hooks (1994) states:

> Expanding beyond boundaries, it has made it possible for me to imagine and enact pedagogical practices that engage directly both the concern for interrogating biases in curricula that reinscribe systems of domination (such as racism and sexism) while simultaneously providing new ways to teach diverse groups of students. (p. 10)

Ethic of Love – As conceived by bell hooks (2000), an ethic of love goes beyond care, commitment, responsibility, trust, knowledge, and respect to an act of resistance aimed at dismantling dominant oppressive systems and structures. hooks (2000) states, "A love ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well. To bring a love ethic to every dimension of our lives, our society would need to embrace change" (p. 87).

Ethics of Care – Ethics of care, applied to a multitude of fields, focuses on relational interdependence (Okkonen, Takala, & Bell, 2021). It emphasizes the role of emotions (Herron & Skinner, 2013), spirituality and the centrality of dialogue (Morton, 2020). Likewise, ethics of care focus on personal connections, reciprocity, and responsibility to and for one another (Caine, Chung, Steeves, & Clandinin, 2020; Dillard, 2006; Noddings, 1986a, 1986b, 2001, 2002, 2005). It likewise focuses on the subordination of oppression (Brown, 2003; Hill Collins, 2009b; hooks, 1994).

Storytelling – Storytelling is defined by Noddings (2002) as the dialogue between the one-caring, and the one cared-for. Gilligan (1992) relates storytelling to a methodology for recognizing different, often silenced voices. For Hill Collins (2009b), storytelling focuses on the importance of personal history in the construction of knowledge and the maintenance of sisterhood and community.

Voice – Voice, particularly in the feminist construct, is integral to the work of Carol Gilligan. Gilligan (2014) calls for us to be a "society of listeners" wherein we are able to hear women's voices who have been silenced under psychological, political, and religious constraints (p. 104). In the context of Black Feminist Thought, the question posed is whose voice is worth listening to? hooks (1994) defines voice as a methodology for hearing and understanding of multiple perspectives through the recognition of the other's voice. According to Noddings (1986a, 1986b, 2002), voice is found in the language of the mother who rejects masculine, artificial, universal virtues and values that silence individual voice and erode genuine caring.

Limitations and Delimitations

It is critical to address the limitations of this research. My research is both qualitative and subjective in terms of the interpretation of my data. The context and circumstances in which the study takes place lends itself to a certain amount of bias. My position as a teacher and researcher results in an inherent power dynamic that may affect the thoroughness and honesty of the narratives I have documented in my journals over the years. The caring relationships I have with my students, however, would indicate a truthful telling of stories as there are no consequences for a lack thereof. The stories I have been gifted through the dialogue with my students is never coercive or derived from a plan of action to illicit any particular response. Rather, they are the result of deeply caring connections.

The collection of my data, as gathered from my personal journals, cannot be perceived as being perfectly factual. The act of interpreting the events taking place in my classroom necessarily means they are filtered through my own mind. As a result, the act of recording my students' stories and life experiences as well as my reaction to them will inevitably be affected by my own personal beliefs and prejudices. My decision to record or not record individual voices within my journals is subjective. Additionally, I would be remiss if I were to suggest that I have recorded enough stories to present a completely thorough representation of all of the voices I have encountered over the years. It is also reasonable to suggest my collection of stories is influenced by both the amount of time I have spent with my students as well as the closeness of the relationships I have formed with them.

As my research is, in part, retrospective in nature, it is reasonable to suggest that my recollection of certain events will be somewhat clouded due to the passage of time. That being said, I have found upon rereading my narratives, I am returned to the time they were recorded with a sense of clarity. Additionally, it is worth noting my most recent recordings of stories will be interpreted and recorded differently than those from years past. The personal recognition of the possibility of using my collection of stories as data likely changed the level of depth and detail I have undertaken in my journal records. The conceptual understanding of my students' stories has without a doubt been influenced by the last four years of my doctoral coursework. As my conceptual framework for understanding has shifted, so have my personal beliefs. This has necessarily affected how I interpret and record my thoughts on the individual stories I collect.

The degree to which I am able to investigate, interpret, and find significance in my collection of stories will necessarily be limited by the lens of the framework I have chosen. By limiting my research to incorporate the influence of ethics of care, feminism, Black Feminist

Thought, and engaged pedagogy, I will not be able to investigate the multitude of other possible influences on my students' lives and their subsequent stories. My position as a public school teacher, and more importantly, my relationship with my students, insists that I respect the personal experiences with which I have been entrusted. As such, I will not share anything that could be harmful to myself or others.

Significance of the Study

Nation-wide, students report negative feelings about their lives at school (Moeller et al., 2020). Students of color, female students, and students from low socioeconomic brackets are particularly affected by negative, damaging emotions that adversely affect their ability to learn (Moeller et al., 2020). As educators, we have an ethical obligation to assuage the stress, fear, and anxiety that plague many of our students. In order to do this, we must create caring classrooms that recognize individual voices and strengths, discourage competition, and encourage social justice.

As schools search for ways to improve their academic productivity and resulting test scores, not enough attention is paid to the individual well-being of the students. As a teacher of over two decades, I have not received any training whatsoever on the importance of caring relationships in the classroom. Nor have I had any training on the importance of recognizing and addressing racism or sexism in the classroom. I have, however, had years of professional development on strategies and methods for improving student's academic performance. The philosophies I have chosen to research have, for the most part, remained in the hallowed halls of higher education. I am certain my exposure to the educational philosophies of Nel Noddings and bell hooks would have never been brought to my attention at a school in-service. Nor would I have been given the opportunity to ponder the effects of an education based on the feminist ideas

of Carol Gilligan or the importance of understanding the effects of intersectionality, described by Patricia Hill Collins, on my female students of color. These contextual frameworks have the possibility of opening new ways of conceptualizing how successful, welcoming, and safe classrooms can be.

The findings of this research have the potential to benefit teachers, administrators, and all other supporting staff who work with students. Studies such as this one, involving students who have experienced some of the worst of what schools have to offer, can provide a new lens through which we view our pedagogy as well as our personal philosophy on education. Most importantly, it has the ability to illustrate the vital importance of listening to our students' stories, and as a result, find a common form of recognition and humanity in one another. This research delves deeply into my growth as an educator as a result of the relationships and memories I have stored for many years. I believe these stories and their effects may be of value for all teachers.

Researcher Positionality

I am a child, maybe 11 or 12 years old. I am in my home, specifically in the room adjacent to the kitchen. My mother is there and someone else, too, but I cannot remember who. Perhaps it was my father. Based on the nature of the conversation, I assume it was a family member. After all, it seems impossible that sharing a story about something so heinous and vile would not be shared openly with others… that is unless the others share the same stories, mindset, or history. The conversation was nonchalant, and I do not recall how it started. Something tells me something happened at my school that brought up the story my mother shared. Frankly, I don't understand why she told me what she did. It seems some things in the past were better off left there. We all have memories we'd rather forget. They are the memories

that haunt us when we can't sleep… the ones that drive us out of bed, out of the quiet, to the coffee pot or the television, where we find a welcome distraction from our ugly thoughts.

My mother said to me, "My daddy was a member of the Ku Klux Klan, just like everybody else where we lived. There was a sign at the county line that said, if you're a Negro, don't let the sun set on your back in Livingston County. I wasn't allowed to walk on the same side of the street as a black person or a Catholic." Wait. What? Hearing this made me confused. I had heard of the Ku Klux Klan, but it had never made its way out of a textbook for me. I could somewhat conceptualize the idea of racism in a small, rural community in Missouri in the 1940s, but I could not understand why my mother's family hated Catholics. I had always known my mother grew up in a Baptist community. My first introduction to music was listening to my mother play Baptist hymns on the piano. She never had a single lesson, but could play beautifully by ear. In fact, she could listen to incredibly intricate pieces of classical music, and play them nearly perfectly. The nearly part came in when hearing the Baptist cadence echoed in my mother's musical past. My earliest meals were made up of good, old fashioned Baptist cooking, where every dish began with a stick of butter. But we weren't religious. In fact, religion was discouraged by my father's strict belief in science. I was told by my father that religion was for the weak. I think for both of my parents, leaving their past behind them was part of who they were. They remembered where they came from, but they never acknowledged how that part of them came to make up who they are in the present. But as Stone (1988) tells us, "Family stories seem to persist in importance even when people think of themselves individually, without regard to their familial roles. The particular human chain we're part of is central to our individual identity" (p. 7).

My mother went on to tell me that her father and several other Ku Klux Klan members tied a young Black man to the top of a school house and burned it down. I guess the young man wanted to go to school and was murdered for trying to do so. I remember reeling from the shock of her statement. It was just so matter of fact, like there was nothing else to add. It was just what happened… what else could there be to discuss? What was I to do with this information? There were other stories, and over time, I found myself confused by my mother's seemingly incongruous memories of her daddy's beautiful truck garden patch and his hatred for others not like him. I never knew my grandfather. He died when I was just a baby. But I knew he hated my father, whom he called a city-slicker. Mind you, my father was from Belleville, Kansas, a town of less than five thousand people. I believe my mother was supposed to marry a farmer. She said she had to pack up her friend's truck three times to leave for nurses training. Her father unpacked it just as many times. In the end, she made it to Kansas City, to a whole different world. But the legacy of hate carried on, as she told me how she once refused to care for a German soldier who fought in World War II. As a result, she was nearly dismissed from the nursing program. There is irony here. Perhaps her escape was not an escape at all. Maybe she simply packed up my grandfather's prejudice and took it with her.

I wonder now, looking back, what kind of evolution of thought happened within my mother. I also realize that the older she becomes, the more she has devolved into her earlier history. Our relationship, at times, has been so strained over differences regarding social justice and politics that we simply cannot speak to one another. In the end, we have agreed to disagree about our differences. And somewhere deep down, I think she realizes that the work I do, the things I believe in, are dignified and important. I am certain that the stories of my students have moved her heart, even if just a little. She often tells me, "Shannon, I don't know how you became

the person you are." I'm not quite sure what she means when she says that. This part of my family's history has lived on and perpetuated itself in the lives of other family members. I see it now, and I am no longer silent about it. Bell (2003) states, "Threat of ostracism or expulsion from the group is a very powerful barrier to White consciousness and action which operates to keep White people in the 'place'" (p. 21). Overcoming that threat, for me, has been life-changing. On one occasion, I was told by my sibling to leave her small Arkansas town and to enjoy the white pride signs on my way out. I told my sister what I thought of her racist, hateful, statement, to which she replied with only a laugh. I think I can assume she enjoys the privilege she never earned.

Perhaps, in some way, my mother's willingness to speak about her past has enabled me to recognize the normalcy of hatred and racism. Her story articulated the accepted mindset and behavior of a time that continues still today. I wonder if hearts and minds change in Heaven… if my grandfather got there, what would he think of me? Is it possible that by some cosmic intervention I became a school teacher with a classroom made up of primarily Black and Brown students? I don't think I will ever know the answer to these questions, at least not in this lifetime.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to the telling of "secret stories" coming to light for narrative inquirers (p. 62). They state,

> *This confronting of ourselves in our narrative past makes us vulnerable as inquirers because it makes secret stories public. In narrative inquiry, it is impossible (or if not impossible, then deliberately self-deceptive) as researcher to stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 62)*

It took a lot of thought for me to write about this part of my history. I don't know if it is because I felt I would be betraying my mother, or because I was embarrassed by my familial roots. Either

way, it is the truth, and now, this part of my truth is told. In the end, my quest to pursue social justice for my students led me to come face-to-face with myself (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

My positionality as a researcher is driven by my White racial identity development. It is one that has evolved substantially over time, picking up speed exponentially as my exposure to new knowledge and new individuals has been expanded. My academic exploits have let me through a limitless tunnel of rabbit holes that allowed me to walk through the history of racism, including the philosophies that either bolstered its existence or raised a fist in defiance thereof. I have had my faced slammed into the wall of ignorance that is perpetuated through our political, economic, and social systems that use subversive, malicious tactics to sustain, indeed widen, the gap between the rich and the poor as well as the perceived racially superior and the racially subordinate. Most assuredly, I have grappled with losing my grip on the America I thought I lived in and the dissolution of my faith in her leadership.

The relationships I have built are instrumental in my understanding of who I am and what I possess as cultural capital as a member of the White race, juxtaposed against a society of people who do not possess nor enjoy my same privileges as their cultural birthrights. My education and my relationships are mutually dependent in that prior to my exploration of the role of racism in American, and particularly the effects of racism in American education, I failed to recognize its pervasiveness. My evolution of realization shoved me into a battle fought in the trenches of my classroom where I have been saturated in the personal stories of my students. They are stories of survival, desperation, and hope. They are the faces of the words I read. They are my teachers, ever present in the evolution of my consciousness.

As a child growing up in affluent Scottsdale, Arizona, my perspective on others from different racial or cultural backgrounds was virtually non-existent. In fact, I don't recall

interacting with people of other races until I began attending a private boarding school. Smith School was not the prototypical all-White boarding school one would picture. Rather, it was home to a multitude of races of people who all had one thing in common, money. My peers were the children of wealthy financiers, bankers, international business men, and hedge fund managers. Of course, I didn't understand all of that at the age of eight, but I did understand my parents wanted me to attend this prestigious school and that there was a hefty price tag attached to it. Likewise, I do not recall issues of racism at that school, but in retrospect, I understand if there is one thing that at least partially ameliorates racism, it is wealth.

My attendance at Smith School led me into what Helms (1990, 1993) describes in her *Toward a Model of White Racial Development*, as a disintegration status. I was a quiet, shy kid who didn't know a soul at my new school. The first friend I met was a girl named Alicia. She wasn't dressed in fancy, expensive clothing, and she didn't carry herself with an air of aristocracy. Rather, she seemed like a normal girl like me. The fact that she was Hispanic, as I recall, did not register with me. I was exhibiting the affect that Helms (1990,1993) describes as having "positive feelings about the "idea" of Blacks and people of color and about fair treatment of people of color" (p. 1). Very soon after meeting Alicia, I was introduced to her father, the Spanish teacher at our school. I also learned the only reason that Alicia could attend Smith School was because her father was on the faculty.

Alicia and I spent the majority of our elementary years together. I enjoyed spending time at her home, which was far away from my neighborhood. It was my first experience of being in a home where English was not spoken as the dominant language. I loved it because it was always so fun when I would try to speak in Spanish and end up saying something entirely different than what I had meant to say. Always, there was humor followed by grace. I was saturated in the

Hispanic culture: the art, the music, the delicious food, and the beautiful, boisterous love of the extended nature of Alicia's family. Alicia came to my home as well, and it was on those occasions I felt my first version of different. I became aware of my possessions, my things, my home, and my wealth. Perhaps I began to understand this more decisively when I realized that my friend could communicate with our maid, and I could not. I must have realized at that point that my race had somehow landed me at my address and Alicia at hers. This is what Helms (1990, 1993) refers to as "recognition of moral dilemmas associated with being White" (p.1). I am certain this was my first experience of understanding my privilege, but also my ability to recognize that friendship trumps neighborhood. I am so grateful to have experienced Alicia's generous home. I wonder now, looking back, how Alicia felt in my home, and I pray she felt as welcomed as I had in hers.

As I grew older, I became more aware of my surroundings and the people in it. In particular, I was aware that the people who worked for us were Hispanic. I assumed that because all of the people who worked for my family and the families of my friends were Hispanic, that this is just what Hispanic people did for White people. Unlike my prior experience with Alicia's family, I felt disliked by the people who worked for my family. I felt like when they spoke in Spanish in my presence, they were speaking about me in a derogatory manner. This is when I became acutely aware of my Whiteness and how it placed me inside a home where others worked for me. The connection between race and privilege had to have been solidified in my life at this stage as I can recall that stereotypical distinctions between myself and my peers, and the people who worked for us were perpetuated through a clearly defined presence of "us" and "them."

I don't recall very much change in my understanding of my Whiteness throughout my high school years. Perhaps that is because I attended a primarily White high school. In fact, I can recall only one African American student. He was our student class president and was well liked by his peers. I do not recall racist remarks or behavior directed at him, but I never walked in his shoes nor did I ever really pay attention. I also do not recall any feelings of resentment or negative feelings toward people of color. This must be at least in part due to what I felt were my entirely White surroundings. What is truly disturbing is there were people of color in my surroundings, but I must have found them insignificant.

I remember going with my mother to the Pima Native American Reservation to buy cigarettes and feeling like I was in a very dangerous, foreign land. We lived less than a mile from the reservation, but in terms of wealth and environment, it was like another world. I recall recognizing three very specific things about growing up in formerly Native American lands. First, the disparity between my home and the homes on the reservation was tremendous. Second, I thought it strange that all of the Native Americans lived in abject squalor, but all the rich White people decorated their multi-million dollar homes, often built to resemble Pueblo architecture, in Native American artifacts. We had a Kiva fireplace on our back patio, Hopi Kachina dolls on our living room shelves, and exposed wooden architectural beams protruding from our home that were made to resemble the Anasazi cave dwellings. Additionally, our kitchen and pool were lined with Mexican tile. I suppose I found it ironic that we had hijacked what we wanted from the other's culture, claimed it as beautiful and our own, and left the creators of that culture behind. Finally, I remember thinking after my visits to the reservation smoke shops that I didn't have a single Native American class mate. Why none of this was ever discussed in my high school classes is a mystery to me.

The majority of my first 25 years of teaching was spent crusading for students with Learning Disabilities and Emotional and Behavioral Disorders. When I began working at my current position and began my doctoral studies, is when I believe my consciousness of my race and my privilege began to evolve. Primarily through my studies I began to understand the role of White people in the perpetuation of racism and how I had unwittingly perpetuated racism myself. I believe this resulted from my intellectual path causing me to acknowledge my own discomfort with my previous racial identity, my increased "intellectual understanding of Black culture and the unfair benefits of growing up White in the United States," as well as my awareness of the current issues of racism and its historical roots (Helms, 1990, 1993, p. 3). Perhaps most important is my desire to use my new knowledge to intervene.

As a teacher, I was raised in the traditional liberal education model to recognize a clearly defined set of knowledge as deserving of importance. It was always deeply ingrained in my philosophical stance on life that education is the ticket out of any situation. Certainly, this was perpetuated by my parents' instilment of the bootstrap theory of social mobility (Labaree, 1997). Therefore, if I am able to successfully implant my knowledge, handed down to me by others just like me, and if my students will do as I say, speak as I do, and be able to regurgitate that knowledge back to me in a way that meets my standards, then surely the Willy Wonka of the educational world will show up and hand my students the golden ticket that will pave the way for their future. I was so very wrong. I was trying, for so many years, to make them like me. I failed to recognize their individual differences, the importance of their history, and I failed to see I hadn't a clue of what their lives were like. I interpreted their entire lives through my White, privileged lens. I had the audacity to set my life as the standard. I recall one day when I had corrected the grammar of a student, something I have always done and never thought twice

about, the student got up the guts to ask me why my way of speaking was right and hers was wrong. I didn't have an answer for him, and it led us into a beautiful conversation about our differences.

My greatest resistance to my changing viewpoints and understanding of myself as a White, privileged, middle class woman has come from my family of origin. Helms (1990, 1993) states, "Many Whites treat persons in Pseudo-independent status as though he or she has violated White racial norms" (p. 3). This is precisely the response I have received from my family. They are genuinely flabbergasted at my fierce dedication to students of color as well as my unwavering desire to learn as much as possible about this realm of education and how it can be used to fight racism and bigotry in our country. I have been told that the damn liberals in education have finally had their way with me. I have been engaged in arguments with family members where I become so enraged at their ignorance that is has severed our relationships.

The greatest change to my identity development has taken place in the last two years. I have taken what I have learned intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually and applied it to my daily life in which I make a deliberate choice to be aware of how my Whiteness affects others and how I may use that awareness to remind myself that I can be an agent for change. I have learned to listen more carefully and more thoughtfully to others. In particular, my students of color and I spend significant amounts of time discussing what I am learning in school. I feel much freer to ask questions and listen more deeply to answers. The comfort I have come to realize is the result of the relationships I have built with my students of color. The amount of respect and care we have for one another is often profound. I believe that if real change is going to occur, it can only happen within relationship.

Though I have come a long way with regard to my understanding of how my race plays an integral part in who I am and how it affects others, I know that my evolution of consciousness is an ongoing process. I recognize several commonalities between Helms' (1990, 1993) autonomy status and where I see myself today and moving forward. Among these commonalities is that I most assuredly feel "a kinship with people regardless of race" (p. 4). Additionally, I feel comfortable in saying I seek out opportunities to learn from people from other cultural and ethnic backgrounds. I revel in the relationships I build with others that are based on both our similarities as well as our differences. I feel I have carved out a significant chunk of my heart and my mind that is open to people, concepts, and knowledge that will have a continuing effect on my ability to love, understand, and care for others. I continue to struggle with legitimizing the curriculum I am tasked with dishing out. However, I find the best remedy for this conundrum is a large quantity of quality conversation. For every oppressive, demeaning and racist concept meant to reinforce subjugation, there is a conversation that allows for the exploration of a pluralistic solution. Within this dialogue there remains hope.

I have tried to fit my life into the framework of Helms (1990, 1993) *White Racial Identity Development Model*. In the end, however, it is simply my story to tell. My story is one of the evolution of my consciousness into a new, burgeoning world of knowledge that serves to better my understanding of how my world view directly affects how I view and treat the people of color I work with as well as the students in my classroom. My story continues to grow, and with surprising limitless room, for the stories of those not like me that bring me closer to the person and researcher I hope to be. I know as I interpret the stories of my students, they are being filtered through a White lens. I acknowledge that I will inevitably fail to understand completely the stories my students share with me. Nonetheless, I will continue to try.

Organization of the Study

Chapter One of this research includes my introduction, the purpose of the study, research questions, methodology, definition of terms, limitations and delimitations, significance of the study, research positionality, and the organization of the study. In Chapter 2, I discuss the relevant literature underpinning the philosophical tenets I will use to interpret my data. Chapter Three contains a thorough discussion of narrative inquiry and storytelling as my chosen methodology. The narratives I have included are all drawn from actual events in my personal life and the lives of my students. The names of places and all individuals have been changed to protect the identity of all persons in my research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

"Care is a feminist, not a "feminine" ethic, and feminism, guided by an ethic of care, is arguably the most radical, in the sense of going to the roots, liberation movement in human history."

– Carol Gilligan

"How do I become so attached?" is a question I frequently ask myself. Why do I allow myself to become emotionally entrenched in the lives of my students when I know they will inevitably leave my classroom and me along with it? I joke that I will bring them all home with me when they complete their education… that I have a special place for them to stay so that I don't ever have to lose them. When my students come to say goodbye, I have emotional and physical pain, and a palpable fear of what may happen to them when they leave. There are always tears, promises for keeping in touch, and hugs accompanied by "I love you!" And when they walk out my door for the last time, the other students look at me with such compassion and

empathy often telling me, "It's alright Mrs. Eickhoff, we're still here." I reply to them, "I know… and that is why I am still here, as well."

In the classroom next door to mine is a teacher named Mr. Walker. He is an outstanding educator. As far as our teaching styles go, however, we couldn't be more opposite. Mr. Walker, or Keith as I shall call him, is a mathematics teacher by training. He is logical, consistent, measured, and always follows the rules. The students always know what to expect in his classroom. I admire his high standards and his ability to speak truth to his students. He easily approaches his students with the hard facts concerning their work ethic and resulting consequences. He is honest and fair. He does not waiver in his belief about his ability to do his job. Rather, he rests soundly on his ethics and mores, counting on consistency and accountability to propel his students toward their goals.

The comradery between Keith and me has been built over many years. And although we acknowledge we are very different teachers, we genuinely appreciate each other and respect the differences in how we approach our students. Often times, we rely on one another to help each other out, whether it be with curricular strengths or technological issues. Keith is a technology and math wizard, and my strengths lie in language arts and history. We are dear friends as well as colleagues. I rely on him as a sounding board when I need to talk through difficult situations about my students, and he relies on me to step in when students are struggling emotionally. When my classroom phone rings and Keith is on the other end asking me to step in to his classroom as soon as possible, I can assume there is a situation where a student is in crisis.

Always, Keith brings me to the student in a quiet, unassuming manner, introducing me, if the student doesn't already know who I am. He is open and honest with the student, letting them know that I am the one he turns to when students need the emotional support he doesn't feel

capable of providing for them. It's a gift, really, that he trusts me with the hearts of his students. And in these moments, I am filled with the possibility of opening a space where the student and I can enter together and find some respite from the frustration and anxiety they are experiencing. By allowing me the space to do this, Keith is acknowledging his care for his students in the best way he knows how. We care for students in different ways, but we care deeply nonetheless.

This seems to be my place at work. Don't get me wrong, I am deeply committed to providing a quality education for my students. I believe wholeheartedly in the importance of integrity and high expectations in the outcome of students' success. I want their diplomas to represent the authentic learning that has taken place in my classroom. But be that as it may, I seek relationship first. I begin by reaching out, getting to know my students by listening to their stories, and finding the spaces where we can connect and grow together. This is how I show genuine care for my students. In this way, "The ideal of care is thus an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 62). It is from this place of caring that I believe real learning can take place.

I have been criticized in my past for caring too much. In fact, I nearly left teaching altogether as a result of certain administrative contradictory perspectives on student needs. For me, the students in my classroom come before the often arbitrariness of rules. I find a connection to the words of Noddings (1986a) when she says, "She does not need to resort to punishment, because the rules are not sacred to her. What matters is the student, the cared-for, and how he will approach ethical problems as a result of his relation to her" (p. 178). I won't back down from any fight where my students' needs are on the line. I see myself as their first line of defense. So many of my students have grown up in a system where they were left defenseless. With no one

to have their back, they have retreated from education altogether. Whether they were left behind because of learning disabilities, behavioral and emotional difficulties, or as the result of racial, socioeconomic, or cultural discrimination, they were denied their right to be treated with kindness and decency by the very people who were entrusted to do so. As bell hooks (1994) states:

> *As a teacher, I recognize that students from marginalized groups enter classrooms within institutions where their voices have been neither heard nor welcome, whether these students discuss facts—those which any of us might know—or personal experience. My pedagogy has been shaped to respond to this reality. (p. 84)*

I may find myself questioning my unabashed attachment to my students, however, I realize it is the only way I know how to be my authentic self. I care. I care deeply and ferociously, with a commitment to sustaining the relationships I form with my students so they may trust me with their stories as well as their education. It is the only way I know how to be.

Review of Literature

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of the literature that has been significant in shaping my perspective as well as my academic endeavors. As seen through the lenses of narrative inquiry and storytelling, specifically the autobiographical components thereof, I choose to include my personal experiences to illustrate my connection to the literature (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Certainly, over the past few years, I have been tremendously informed and enlightened by the research I have undertaken. As a result, it is a worthwhile endeavor to investigate relevant research literature in order to allow the reader to experience who I am as a person, teacher, and researcher.

As I have said before, I have been a teacher for many years. Throughout most of that time, I was not always cognizant of specific theories or tenets that articulated my way of thinking or teaching. In fact, it wasn't until my second year of my doctoral studies that I was introduced to a group of scholars who so clearly defined my thoughts on education and care for students. Upon reading the work of Nel Noddings, introduced to me by my major professor, I found my educational philosophy poured out on the pages of her work. She exquisitely expressed how I had been caring for my students for decades. Likewise, when my major professor's copy of Carol Gilligan's (1982) *In a Different Voice* was given to me, I was transformed. I had finally found the perfect articulation of how I felt as a woman. Together, Noddings and Gilligan changed my world. Similarly, I was introduced to the work of Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, further adding to and perfectly complementing my understanding of a feminist and spiritual understanding of the possibilities of engaged pedagogy and equitable education. These brilliant women opened my mind, my eyes, and my heart to a clear understanding of what it means to be a teacher. It is from the combined perspectives of these scholars as a literary framework that I will show how ethics of care articulated through narrative inquiry lends significance to my research and informs the literature.

Ethics of Care

Ethics of care, in its various iterations, has provided me with a framework from which to build the underpinnings of my academic endeavors. Caring has been applied to multiple fields including global politics, social policy, international relations, nursing, religion, health, social geography, art, bioethics, women's psychology, education, and Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009; Gilligan, 1982; Hankivsky, 2014; hooks, 2000; Milligan & Wiles, 2010; Noddings, 1986a). Each field is embedded with unique characteristics that allow it to stand on its own.

However, when taken together and understood holistically, something truly astonishing results. I liken these collective expressions to a spider web that stretches out in all directions, interconnected, purposeful and feminist in nature, with care at its center. The stories we hear and tell are the threads that connect the points on the web giving it the strength it needs to catch those who fall (Gilligan, 1982). Each point, each story, is essential to the survival of the others. The web is no less than a spiritual metaphor for the inextricable connection of us all.

The diversity of ethics of care can be illustrated by research carried out in various fields to include organizational research, immigration management, rural aging and care, spirituality, as well as education. In 2021, Okkonen, Tuomo, and Bell carried out a qualitative study that examined the role of care ethics in immigration center management in Finland. Faced with a rapid influx of asylum seekers between 2015 and 2016, Finland was forced to tighten their immigration policies to include limiting services available to immigrants who are waiting for asylum application approval (Okkonen et al., 2021). Reception center managers, responsible for overseeing the services provided to asylum seekers, were interviewed in this study in order to understand the ethical dilemmas they faced at the recognition of the inhumanity inherent to a system that denied asylum to individuals in need. The researchers found, “Often compassion and concern were aroused when managers face a situation where the reception services had to be terminated after asylum seekers were declined a residence permit” (Okkonen et al., 2021, p. 377). By approaching their participants from an ethic of care, the researchers found they were able to recognize the importance of relational interdependence between researchers and participants. As a result, they were able to create a space where understanding the ethical, political, and emotional effects of the immigration policies not only affected the asylum seekers, but the managers as well. Okkonen et al. (2021) state:

> The importance of caring in research stems from the notion that detachment, whether from the self or others, is epistemologically as well as morally problematic. Epistemologically, without care it is difficult, if not impossible, to see the other's world or imagine oneself in another's position. Ethically, the denial and abnegation of caring responsibility encourages indifference and moral blindness. (p. 381)

Herron and Skinner (2013) embarked on a qualitative study in rural Canada that examined caring for the elderly by applying Hankivsky's (2014) principles of care ethics. In doing so, they "make explicit the role of emotions in connecting with research participants, collecting and participating in narrative-based research and negotiating identity" (Herron & Skinner, 2013, p. 1697). In this study, Herron and Skinner (2013) focused heavily on the importance of reflexivity and emotion in the research process. They state:

> Acknowledging the significance of emotion is central to being a responsive researcher. By being aware of our own emotions and the emotions of participants, specifically the ways participants use emotions to tell their stories, qualitative health researchers can report a more responsible and reflective account of participants' live experiences without causing harm. (Herron & Skinner, 2013, p. 1704)

Likewise, they further articulate their emphasis on approaching research from an ethic of care when they state:

> Much of our responsive work takes place in the field, and yet research is often evaluated on the basis of contributions to a field of study rather than on our responsiveness to participants what the consequences of our actions might be. (Herron & Skinner, 2013, p. 1705)

Guided by two frameworks, Hill Collins' (2009b) Black Feminist Thought, and Dillard's (2006) endarkened feminist epistemology, Morton (2020) conducted a qualitative study on the role of spirituality in Black women's lives as they pursued their doctorates in engineering. Her focus was on applying the ethics of care found in these frameworks to her work in student affairs practice. In her work, Morton (2020) articulates the importance of "love, compassion, reciprocity, and ritual" in the recognition of participants' equality and dignity, as well as bridging the gap between the experiences of researcher and participants (p. 766). Likewise, Morton (2020) speaks to the centrality of dialogue, personal accountability and ethics of care as "inherent parts of the knowledge and validation process" (p. 766). In addition to asserting the implications of Black Feminist Thought and endarkened feminist epistemology for academic and student affairs practice, Morton (2020) suggests, "Finally, adopting an ethic of care encourages researchers to better understand and care for participants by embracing their own emotions in addition to those of the participants while recognizing participants' individually and attempting to see themselves in participant's lives" (p. 778).

Rabin and Smith (2017) applied ethics of care in their study conducted in a second-grade social studies classroom. Based on the idea that "many students consider social studies as a collection of dry irrelevant facts," the researchers set out to understand how approaching both the curriculum and the pedagogy from the perspective of an ethic of care could infuse academic interest and encourage moral growth in their students (Rabin & Smith, 2017, p. 326). In choosing genealogy as their lesson for observation, the researchers hoped students would make personal connections with their families as well as their peers. This was facilitated through personal stories shared with the class that allowed the students to become "primary sources of knowledge" (Rabin & Smith, 2017, p. 330). According to Rabin and Smith (2017), "Stories support

understanding of care ethics by making visible the primacy of the social and relational context of our lives" (pp. 327-328). Rabin and Smith (2017) state:

> The authors found that adopting the theoretical perspective of care ethics helped a novice elementary teacher revise his/her approach to social studies instruction. Care ethics led to the teacher coming to see himself/herself as a teacher of care ethics, focusing on dialogue over stories to teach caring in diverse contexts, and highlighting social aspects of the curriculum. The students' descriptions of their learning indicate that they perceived a larger purpose for their social studies lessons – in this case, participation in social life – and that this perception contributed to their engagement. (p. 325)

Perhaps most closely aligned with my own research is a (2020) narrative inquiry conducted by Caine, Chung, Steeves, and Clandinin. In their study of indigenous youth in an afterschool art club, they examine the effects of an ethic of care, as articulated by the work of Nel Noddings. The purpose of their study was two-fold. First, they wanted to "learn more about the educative experiences of Indigenous youth in their schools, homes and communities" (Caine et al., 2020, p. 269). Second, they wanted to understand how relational ethics connects with ethics of care in narrative inquiry (Caine et al., 2020). Applying the perspective of Noddings' ethics of care, the researchers assert it "allowed us to acknowledge researcher and participants as in relation, that is, the researcher as carer and participants as cared for" (Caine et al., 2020, p. 267). Through the lens of an ethic of care, the researchers were able to build relationships with their students characterized by what they call "relational ethics" in which there was a "shift to a 'becoming together' with responsibility to and for each other" (Caine et al., 2020, p. 272). They point to the work of Noddings as the basis for an ethic of care in research and as a starting point for narrative inquiry. They state, "It is necessary to begin the relational work of narrative inquiry

from an ethics of care as it is impossible to work from relational ethics until there is some kind of nascent understanding of the other" (Caine et al., 2020, p. 268).

In addition to these studies, other research has focused on varying aspects of ethics of care. Barton and Levstik (2004) address the ability of ethics of care to foster moral sensibility in social studies classrooms. Dillard (2006) speaks to intentional listening and observation to reveal participants' truth. Brown (2003) addresses the subordination and oppression within caring relationships, while Meintel, Fortin, and Cognet (2006) explore the benefits of doing care work. Sevenhuijsen (1998) asserts, "We contend that reflecting on research within a framework of care ethics has particular utility for studies that aim to understand and improve the care experience of others" (p. 1699). Other research calls on an ethic of care as a research methodology to understand dehumanizing political oppression and the indifference thereof (Havinsky, 2014; Porter, 2006; Robinson, 2019). For the purposes of my research, I draw most deeply from the work of Nel Noddings, Carol Gilligan, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins. It is their work I will examine in more detail in the following section.

Noddings: Ethics of Care as an Educational Philosophy

Perhaps the leading care theorist in education, Nel Noddings, published the first edition of *Caring* in 1984. Throughout her work, Noddings discusses the importance of care ethics in the school setting and shows how care ethics are carried out through receptive listening, critical thinking, creating a climate of caring and extending that moral climate into the world (Noddings, 1986a, 1986b, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2012). In terms of philosophy, Noddings' ethics of care falls on the opposite side of a priority for justice as a male-centric view, and it is this fundamental underpinning that calls for the education of moral human beings as the primary goal for schools (Noddings, 2002). Noddings speaks to the need to serve students over institutions. She calls for

schools to move away from a liberal arts curriculum where students are forced to swallow standardized, homogenous lessons that leave no room for individual exploration (Noddings, 2013, 2015). Furthermore, she asserts the obsession of American schools to rank their students based on test scores and grade point averages is antithetical to the move toward a cooperative global model of coexistence. Noddings (2012) argues that by remaining staunchly dug into a rank and file system of education, we damage our students in two ways. First, we create an environment of competition that pits students against one another. Secondly, we place judgement on the validity and importance of one academic discipline over another based on their earning power (Noddings, 2002, 2012, 2013).

Noddings (2005) defines caring in the classroom as the relationship between the one-caring, and the one-cared for. For caring to occur, there must be a reciprocal relationship between the two. Therefore, "Caring is a way of being in relation, not a set of specific behaviors" (Noddings, 2005, p. 17). She speaks to "motivational displacement," in which teachers are "seized by the needs of another" (Noddings, 2005, p. 16). The one-caring, therefore, does not come from a place of judgement, but rather from a place of support. The aim for the caring teacher is that "She meet him as he is and finds something admirable and, as a result, he may find the strength to become even more admirable. He is confirmed" (Noddings 1986a, p. 179). The one-cared for completes the caring relationship through receiving and responding to the one-caring. This act is heavily influenced by the attitude, trust, and relationship the one-cared for has with the one-caring. Noddings (1986a) states, "To the cared-for, no act in his behalf is quite as important or influential as the attitude of the one-caring" (pp. 19-20).

Gilligan: Ethics of Care as a Way of Articulating Women's Voice

Gilligan's (1982) *In a Different Voice* focuses on a shift in perspective regarding women's development and calls us to "begin to notice how accustomed we have become to seeing life through men's eyes" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 6). She speaks specifically to how norms regarding psychological developmental expectations are male-centered, and as a result, women's development is seen as defective (Gilligan, 1982). This developmental differentiation between men and women pivots on the concept of separation. Women define themselves through connections and relationships and therefore do not depend on the masculine ideal of achievement through separation. She states, "Thus, it appears that men and women may experience attachment and separation in in different ways that each sex perceives a danger which the other does not see—men in connection, women in separation" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 42). Gilligan refers to the work of Erikson and Kohlberg and points out the glaring absence of women's voices. She argues that with the inclusion of women in the conversation of developmental psychology, there lies within a fundamental change in its entirety (Gilligan, 1982).

Gilligan (1982) articulates ethics of care through relationships, "of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone" (p. 62). She centers ethics of care on love, democracy, relationship and voice. She asserts that women create webs of caring where we strive to be at the center of connection, whereas men view taking care as a hierarchical process where one strives "to be alone at the top" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 62). Gilligan argues against moral absolutes and the masculine concepts of universal logic and justice. Rather, she suggests, women's morality lies in seeking solutions to conflict where relationships provide an understanding that preclude judgement (Gilligan, 1982). This rejection of masculine justice ethics demonstrates Gilligan's belief that women's moral judgments are tightly entwined with compassion and empathy and a dismissal of the idea that

one can be caring and still pass judgement based on hypothetical as opposed to real-life situations. She states, "While an ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality—that everyone should be treated the same—an ethic of care rests on the premise of nonviolence—that no one should be hurt" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 174).

Hill Collins: Ethics of Care as Transformation, Healing, and Resistance

Patricia Hill Collins (2009b) cites, "lived experience as criterion of meaning, the use of dialogue, the ethic of personal accountability, and the ethic of caring" as the four dimensions of Black feminist epistemology (p. 286). Hill Collins refers to ethics of caring as "talking with the heart," and suggests it is a way of thinking and acting frequently used by African American women (Hill Collins, 2009b, p. 281). She rejects the binary thinking separating our hearts from our minds and proposes instead our emotional selves are vital to our ability to express our true selves in dialogue. She emphasizes the expressiveness of individuals, and the inclusion of personality in ideas as integral to the richness of a group. Additionally, Hill Collins (1989b, 2009) emphasizes the role of empathy in ethics of care as vital for the validation of knowledge.

Hill Collins (1989, 2009b) also speaks to ethics of care in terms of family, community, and resistance. She emphasizes the intertwining nature of feminism and African-influenced foundations of ethics of care. She notes that while Black and White women alike have access to the experiences associated with emotions and care, American social institutions fail to acknowledge the legitimacy of women's ways of knowing. On a more intimate scale, Hill Collins (1989, 2009b) emphasizes African American families and communities as essential for the maintenance and enhancement of an ethic of care. In particular, she speaks to the accountability that comes from extended kin networks, sibling relationships, the experience of being cared for, as paramount to the stimulation of ethics of care. Hill Collins (2009b) states:

> Community othermothers work on behalf of the Black community by expressing ethics of caring and personal accountability. Such power is transformative in that Black women's relationships with children and other vulnerable community members are not intended to dominate or control. Rather, their purpose is to bring people along, to—in the words of late-nineteenth-century Black feminists—"uplift the race" so that vulnerable members of the community will be able to attain the self-reliance and independence essential for resistance. (p. 208)

bell hooks: An Ethic of Love

While hooks does not define her work in terms of ethics of care, she closely mirrors the work of care ethicists with her ethic of love. For hooks (2000), the underlying characteristics of an ethic of love are "care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication" (p. 5). She expresses love as an action rather than emotion. She states, "Love is as love does, and it is our responsibility to give children love" (hooks, 2000, p. 30). She suggests, "We are not born knowing how to love anyone, either ourselves or somebody else. However, we are born able to respond to care" (hooks, 2000, p. 53). As such, she connects her ethic of love to an ethic of caring in which others are affirmed both spiritually and emotionally, through all of the various dimensions of love. In choosing an ethic of love, we are brought to a new awareness that "enables us to critically examine our actions to see what is needed so that we can give care, be responsible, show respect, and indicate a willingness to learn" (hooks, 2000, p. 94). hooks (2000) states:

> Commitment to a love ethic transforms our lives by offering us a different set of values to live by. In large and small ways, we make choices based on a belief that honesty,

openness, and personal integrity need to be expressed in public and private decisions. (p. 88)

Ethics of Care: The Relationship Over the Individual

Throughout the literature on ethics of care, there is an overarching theme of placing relationships over individuals. Noddings (1986a) states, "Virtually all care theorists make the relationship more fundamental than the individual" (p. xiii). Noddings also emphasizes the interdependence of individuals who grow in relation to one another in such a way that transformation occurs. Likewise, Gilligan (1982) describes the psychology of women in terms of the centrality of relationship that places context over judgement and demonstrates the uniqueness of women's moral understanding. For Hill Collins (2009b), the historical limitation on Black women's mobility has necessarily affected African American women's self-definition. Self, according to Hill Collins, is not defined by autonomy, but rather by the kind of connectedness that provides Black women with more meaningful lives. hooks (1994) likewise emphasizes "hearing one another's voices" and "recognizing one another's presence" (p. 8).

Within the context of placing relationship over the individual, several themes emerged in the literature. Central among these are apprehending another's reality, storytelling, and counter-storytelling, and community. Apprehending another's reality speaks to the authenticity of relationship in ethics of care. Within the context of education, Noddings (1986a) situates this apprehension of another's reality in the relationship between student and teacher. Noddings asserts apprehending another's reality as a prerequisite for teaching and learning. When a teacher cares, she displaces her own interests and reality for the reality of another. She speaks to a calling that says "I must do something," that serves "to reduce the pain, to fill the need, to actualize the dream" (Noddings, 1986a, p. 14). She also adds that apprehending another's reality

is nonjudgmental and hinges on a relationship of trust if the one-cared for is to receive what the one-caring is offering. Gilligan offers another angle from which to view the apprehension of another's reality. Gilligan cites the web of relationships girls experience as the ability to recognize the feelings and needs of others as one's own (Gilligan, 1982). She emphasizes the caring roles traditionally assigned to women as a conduit for recognizing and attending to the voices of others rather than their own. Gilligan (1982) states, "Now, she ties morality to the understanding that arises from the experience of relationship, since she considers the capacity to understand what someone else is experiencing as the prerequisite for moral response" (p. 57).

For Hill Collins (2009b), apprehending another's reality is viewed through the lens of the language of the mother and an underpinning of activism. Hill Collins speaks to bloodmothers, othermothers, and women-centered networks as relationships where apprehending the needs of another are carved out to resist intersecting oppressive structures (Hill Collins, 2009b). When applied to education, Hill Collins (2009b) refers to this as "mothering the mind" where deeply connected relationships exceed the focus on academics (p. 207). She also focuses on the political and activist nature of mothering in terms of caring for children in the African American community. For Black women, apprehending another's reality is founded on the survival of children living in a racialized world where unjust treatment is the norm and where "Mothering is preparation for the lack of care" (Raghuram, 2019, p. 20). As Hill Collins (2009b) states, "the relationship between mothers and children can serve as a private sphere in which cultures of resistance and everyday forms of resistance are learned" (p. 57). Noddings (1986a), and Gilligan (1982) also reference the language of the mother; Noddings states, "The language of the mother concentrates on relationships, needs, care, response, and connection rather than principles, justice, rights, and hierarchy" (p. xiv). However, from the perspective of Hill Collins' Black

Feminist Thought (2009b) and hooks' ethic of love (2000) and engaged pedagogy for the practice of freedom, it is essential to recognize the privileged positions of Noddings and Gilligan. Apprehending another's reality, for Noddings and Gilligan, is safely couched in the role of caring for another while suspending one's own privileged reality. For Hill Collins and hooks, when writing about the lives of Black women, apprehending the needs of another is about survival.

In order to apprehend another's reality, we have to be willing to listen and hear their story. According to Witherell and Noddings (1991):

> Story and narrative, whether personal or fictional, provide meaning and belonging in our lives. They attach us to others and to our own histories by providing a tapestry rich with threads of time, place, character, and even advice on what we might do with our lives. (p. 1)

Noddings (2002) relates storytelling to dialogue between the one-caring and the one-cared for. She asserts through dialogue, we come to know what students want and need and also how we can see the results of our acts. This dialogue requires receptivity from the one-caring and reflecting from the one-cared for, and is inexplicably tied to personal history (Noddings, 1986a). She likewise calls for "stirring stories" from both the one-caring and the one-cared for as a "situational starting point for critical thought" (Noddings, 2002, p. 43). For Gilligan (1982, 2014), storytelling is a methodology for recognizing a different, often silenced voice. Seeking recognition and liberation from dominant patriarchal categories of psychological interpretation, women's counter-stories are testimony for the existence of a legitimate alternate view of women's psychological development. Gilligan (2014) suggests the recognition of different voices is dependent on "becoming a society of listeners," where we begin to ask, "how might I

call forth a voice that is held in silence, a voice under political or religious or psychological constraint" (p. 104).

For Hill Collins (1989, 2009b) and hooks (1984, 2000), storytelling and individual voice are interwoven with knowledge, lived experience, sisterhood, and community. Like Gilligan (1982), Hill Collins (2009b) challenges the notion of whose voice is worth listening to. And like Noddings (1986a), Hill Collins (2009b) points to the importance of personal history as a vital contribution to relationship. But unlike either Gilligan or Noddings, Hill Collins and hooks speak to the unique knowledge found in the stories of Black women who have an understanding of the intersectional oppression of race, gender, and class. Hill Collins states, "Thus lived experience as a criterion for credibility frequently is invoked by U.S. Black women when making knowledge claims" (Hill Collins, 2009b, p. 276). The subjugated knowledge that is gained at these intersections is vital to rejecting the dominant view so a process of reclamation can begin (Hill Collins, 2009b; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The unique stories of Black women are testament to the premise that "Ideas cannot be divorced from the individuals who create and share them" (Hill Collins, 1989, p. 765).

Hill Collins' thoughts on storytelling and lived experiences are also unique in how they play out within the context of sisterhood and community. For Noddings, storytelling or dialogue occurs between student and teacher. For Gilligan, woman's voice is singular and juxtaposed against that of man's. Hill Collins conceptualizes African American women's voice as reaffirmed through daily conversations where stories are shared and similar experiences reinforce community (Hill Collins, 2009b). bell hooks (1994) also found this to be true in classrooms where there is community when she stated "To hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition" (p. 41). Hill Collins also

speaks to the significance of Black women as being the only true listeners of other Black women. She states, "For African-American women, the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by Black women's objectification is another Black woman… only Black women know what it means to be Black women" (Hill Collins, 2009b, p. 114). Interestingly, in a 1992 research study conducted by Brown and Gilligan where several elementary age students were interviewed, the issue of who can be trusted with one's story was examined. In the study, Sonia was one of only two Black students in a class of 27 second graders in a school where all of the teachers and administrators were White. In Sonia's first interview with the White researcher, she struggled to share her thoughts on racism in the classroom and within her friend group. Additionally, the researcher missed multiple cues where deeper questions could have been asked. Two years later, Sonia was interviewed again. This time the interviewer was an African American woman. Gilligan (1992) writes:

> This year, talking about relationships between friends who disagree, Sonia and her interviewer engage in a dialogue that has the signs of a real conversation in which two people seem genuinely interested in each other. Though Sonia and her interviewer do not talk explicitly about race, about what it feels like to be left out or drowned out because of skin color, there is, it seems to us, a palpable communication, a shared knowledge. (p. 73)

Sonia's story was only shared when it could be done so safely, with another person who understood her experience and had the insight to recognize her oppression.

For hooks, placing relationship over the individual is best expressed in terms of an ethic of love that emphasizes spiritual connections and community. She writes, "The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other" (hooks, 2000, p. 93). This, hooks would argue, is best accomplished in the context of a community where "Enjoying the benefits of living

and loving in community empowers us to meet strangers without fear and extend to them the gift of openness and recognition" (hooks, 2000, p. 143). These gifts, for hooks, are spiritual. They are manifested in a love that "lays the foundation for the constructive building of community with strangers" where a future built on an ethic of love "stays with us wherever we go" (hooks, 2000, p. 144).

hooks (2000) connects her spiritual approach to community and relationship in terms of service and her work with her students. She is particularly open concerning her willingness to address spirituality, often a taboo subject in education. She states:

> I began to speak more openly about the place of spirituality in my life when witnessing the despair of my students, their sense of hopelessness, their fears that life is without meaning, their profound loneliness and lovelessness. When young, bright, beautiful students would come to my office and confess their despondency, I felt it was irresponsible to just listen and commiserate with their woes without daring to share how I had confronted similar issues in my own life. (hooks, 2000, p. 82)

She allows her own experiences to transform her classroom into a space where "the place where we are broken in spirit, when accepted and embraced, is also a place of peace and possibility" (hooks, 2000, p. 80). She likewise speaks to the centrality of service and generosity as a way to express her ethic of love in the building of relationships and community. She states, "Generous sharing of all resources is one concrete way to express love. These resources can be time, attention, material objects, skills, money etc … Once we embark on love's path we see how easy it is to give" (hooks, 2000, p. 163). She suggests that by giving, we are brought into a community with others demonstrating "there is truly enough of everything for everybody" (hooks, 2000, p. 163).

It's Friday afternoon, and class will soon dismiss for the weekend. Slowly, but surely, students from my own classroom and the classroom of others begin to trickle in to see me. They are quiet and sweet. They ask me if I am going to go to the grocery store this weekend. They know that I have a large family to feed and they see that I keep a running grocery list on my desk that I add to as the days of the week pass by. They frequently ask me what I will be making for dinner. Almost all left-overs are packaged and brought for students the following day. My family is always wondering what happens to all of our Tupperware! But it's no worry, as Tupperware is cheap compared to the look on a student's face when I hand them a bowl of goulash or mashed potatoes. There is something sacred about feeding them… it feels like bringing my home to my students, feeding their bodies as well as their hearts. They know I am thinking about them even when I am not at school.

As a mother and a teacher, feeding others has always been a special time for me. Each of my children have their own special dishes they request. When our son came home from a deployment in Afghanistan, I waited up until 2 a.m. and had a heaping bowl of mashed potatoes and gravy waiting for him. For our daughter, also in the service, it is spicy Indian food, and for our other children it is chocolate cake, guacamole, rosemary roasted potatoes, and cheeseburgers. It's a labor of love, one I wouldn't give up for the world. So, feeding my students seems natural as it is way for me to express my ethic of love for them. Grocery requests come in and I add them to my list. Usually, they are inexpensive items… shampoo, noodles, flavoring for water, spicy chips, soda, etc. Such simple gifts make such a big difference. Sometimes the requests are more interesting. Once, I was asked to buy hair for a student at the African American beauty supply store. I had no idea what I was doing, so the student and I spent a very humorous time together teaching me the finer points of shopping for ethnic hair. Another time, I

found myself facetiming a student at a craft store, where I was tasked with finding the perfect foam padding for a drag costume. On both occasions, I learned something new, and the students learned that I loved them enough to learn.

The process of handing out requested items on Monday morning is joyous. It brightens the days of the students as well as my own. I don't question the cost as I know for certain God will always provide enough to go around… and I tell them that. "When you have enough to give to others, you must give." It's not always about teaching the curriculum that matters. Rather, it is about teaching them about generosity and kindness. The students never cease to share their requests with their peers. If I bring leftovers to a student, they will divide it up amongst each other, even if it means they get less. These are the lessons I teach, to share and to be generous with your gifts, that I pray will find their way into their lives long after they leave me. As hooks (2000) tells us, "Serving others is a fruitful a path to the heart as any other therapeutic practice" (pp. 216-217).

Ethics of Care: A Feminist Approach

As philosophies, ethics of care and ethics of love are decidedly feminist in nature. According to Noddings (1986a), "it is feminine in the deep classical sense- rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness" (p. 2). When viewed through the lenses of Noddings, Gilligan, hooks, and Hill Collins, feminism is articulated from four different perspectives. And while there are common themes among them, the differences are worth noting so as to illustrate each unique perspective. For Noddings (1986a, 1998, 2002, 2005), feminism is tied to the rejection of accepted male-centered cultural norms and the classification of what is referred to as women's work. Caring, as a cultural phenomenon, is assigned to women. Noddings argues this is not necessarily due to an innate ability of women to care better than men, but rather because care is

expected from women, and most often this expectation does not apply to men. She also posits that equality for women has been defined by male standards. As a result, she suggests many feminists are recognizing a superficial redistribution of wealth and political or cultural capital does not address the inherent value structures of patriarchal domination (Noddings, 2005). Likewise, women's work, according to Noddings (1986a), is undervalued. She points out that the separation between the public and private spheres provides men, who often appear as the bread winners, as having a greater value or worth. She also articulates the flawed rationale that considers women, as care-givers, are taken care of by men who provide for them financially. She states, "Our society often seems to put a higher value on what I have called "caretaking" than it does on genuine caring" (Noddings, 1986a, p. 127).

Gilligan's perspective on feminism is political in nature and heavily influenced by the concept of patriarchy. She states, "I see feminism as one of the great liberation movements in human history. It is the movement to free democracy from patriarchy" (Gilligan, 2011, p. 176). Gilligan intertwines feminism and ethics of care in such a way that women are innately endowed with certain gifts allowing them to protect humanity from the forces that would destroy it. In this way, feminism guided by an ethic of care, is the key to liberation for women and democracy (Gilligan, 2014). She uses the term moral injury to describe "the trauma that the gender binary and hierarchy inflict on our humanity, impeding our ability to love and compromising our ethics and our politics" (Gilligan, 2014, p. 127). Feminism and the ethics of care are the keys to healing moral injury and setting women free of the oppressive, hierarchical, patriarchal state.

Hill Collins (2009b) situates her perspective on feminism through the lenses of intersectionality and exclusion. While Hill Collins is clear about the unique understanding of Black women standing at the intersections of the feminist web, she is also clear they are on the

edge of the web. By being held on the margins, Hill Collins emphasizes the importance of not belonging in terms of what it means to belong (Hill Collins, 2009b). She speaks to this historical exclusion of women of color from the largely White, middle-class modern feminist movement and defines that omission as a pattern of oppression (Hill Collins, 2009b). She also speaks to the irony of Black women's exclusion as "It is more likely for Black women, as members of an oppressed group, to have critical insights into the condition of our oppression than it is for those who live outside those structures" (Hill Collins, 2009b, p. 39). She goes on to posit that if White women are unable or unwilling to acknowledge their unearned privilege, then they are necessarily aligning themselves with White male power. When we evaluate feminism through the lenses of intersectionality and omission, and take into account the ethics of care associated with feminism, we find that gender is prioritized, and race and class are secondary (Hankivsky, 2014). Hill Collins suggests all of these factors should be viewed in ways that acknowledge the multifaceted nature of feminism.

hooks (1994, 2000) addresses her feminist approach in terms of solidarity and love. Like Hill Collins, she speaks to the historical aspects of feminism that continue to divide the movement as a whole. She clearly connects the current divide between Black feminism and White feminism as one that was born from centuries of slavery and lack of solidarity between women despite their common subservience and abuse at the hands of White men. She states:

> Contemporary discussions of the historical relationship between white and black women must include acknowledgement of the bitterness black slave women felt towards white women. They harbored understandable resentment and repressed rage about racial oppression, but they were particularly aggrieved by the overwhelming absence of sympathy shown by white women in circumstances involving sexual and physical abuse

> of black women as well as situations where black children were taken away from their enslaved mothers. Again it was within this realm of shared concern (white women knew the horror of sexual and physical abuse as well as the depth of a mother's attachment to her children) that the majority of white women who might have experienced empathetic identification turned their backs on black women's pain. (hooks, 1994, pp. 96-97)

She offers hope, however, for a cohesive movement toward feminist ideals in actions despite a history fraught with divisiveness and hatred. She calls for White women not to speak and act from a place of fear, guilt or shame, but rather a place that recognizes personal responsibility for racist ideas that will allow for "equal footing" where they are not forced by Black women to "confront their racism" (hooks, 1994, p. 106). She warns us, "If black women and white women continue to express fear and rage without a commitment to move on through these emotions in order to explore new grounds for contact, our efforts to build an inclusive feminist movement will fail" (hooks, 1994, p. 109). As an alternative, she offers the following:

> It may be that we give up so easily with one another because women have internalized the racist assumption that we can never overcome the barrier separating white women and black women. If this is so then we are seriously complicit. To counter this complicity, we must have more written work and oral testimony documenting ways barriers are broken down, coalitions formed, and solidarity shared. It is this evidence that will renew our hope and provide strategies and direction for future feminist movement. (hooks, 1994, pp. 109-110)

In terms of viewing feminism and an ethic of love through a more modern lens, hooks closely mirrors Noddings, Gilligan, and Hill Collins in her focus on women as "love's practitioners" (hooks, 2000, p. xx). She emphasizes the personal experiences and testimony of

women as the basis for theory with the power to liberate both the individual as well as society (hooks, 1994). Certainly, she teaches from a feminist perspective by employing her ethic of love as the basis for her pedagogical methods. She is clear to point out that whatever work we do, we have the opportunity to transform ourselves through feminist practices that reject patriarchy and uplift sexual equality.

Ethics of Care and Education

Steeped in the roots of women's traditions and history, care theory, for Noddings, is the backbone of an equitable education. She asks us to speculate on the nature of the disciplines and curriculum had it been constructed by women rather than men. Noddings (2005) asserts that stripped of the power to implement ideas associated with female values, schooling has followed the male hierarchical values of a traditional liberal arts curriculum designed to ensure inequality. Likewise, Hill Collins (2009b), speaks to the false façade of equity in a White, male-centered liberal arts education that renders racial and socioeconomic oppression invisible. She states, "Under this new rhetoric of color-blindness, equality means treating all individuals the same, regardless of differences they brought with them due to the effects of past discrimination or even discrimination in other venues" (p. 297). Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan (1995) assert the patriarchal model of schooling for adolescent girls forces them to leave their true selves behind. They state:

> Girls are under pressure from without and within to shape themselves in accordance with the dominant cultural ideals of femininity and womanhood or of maturity and adulthood. This creates a tension when the ideals of womanhood are those of "selfless," and the ideals of maturity and adulthood are those of separation and independence. (Taylor et al., 1995, p. 23)

hooks' work on education, in particular, her theory on engaged pedagogy, is deeply rooted in her ethic of love and the power of education to transgress racism, sexism, as well as cultural and ethnic discrimination. She emphasizes individual voices and recognition of multiple perspectives. She describes her view on education as one that is the "practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994, p. 13). She states:

> To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (p. 13)

hooks (1994, 2000) also speaks to the centrality of dialogue and individual expression often found in storytelling. She advocates for a classroom where passion, emotions, creativity and joy are visible expressions of the learning process. hooks (1994) purports:

> Pleasure in the classroom is feared. If there is laughter, a reciprocal exchange may be taking place. You're laughing, the students are laughing, and someone walks by, looks in and says "OK, you're able to make them laugh. But so what? Anyone can entertain." They can take this attitude because the idea of reciprocity, of respect, is not ever assumed. It is not assumed that your ideas can be entertaining, moving. To prove your academic seriousness, students should be almost dead, quiet, asleep, not up, excited, and buzzing, lingering around the classroom. (p. 145)

My classroom is made up of students from a myriad of backgrounds. I have students from rural communities, small African villages, inner cities, and small towns. Donette is a student from Kansas City. Prior to coming to my classroom, she rarely left the few square blocks surrounding her home. I have another student, Paul, who is from Bangkok, Thailand. Donette and I were talking one day and she asked me about where Paul was from. Through our conversation I was able to glean that Donette saw Paul as a foreign student and therefore assumed he came from the same type of rural village-type setting that my African students came from. Paul, who had joined in the conversation, explained to Donette that his home was nothing like the rural villages of my African students. In order to show Donette what Bangkok was like, we decided to look at images on the Internet. She was shocked. I put the image up on the big screen in my classroom and Paul was able to narrate his early life in Thailand through the images we viewed. He showed us where he lived, the places he visited, where he bought his groceries, and the temple where he worshiped. Donnette had never seen anything like it and she was intrigued. The rest of the class was, as well. And for the next hour, we stopped working on our school work and each student, if they chose, had us look up images of where they came from. They told their stories about their homes and their childhood memories. Devin showed us the tree he fell out of when he broke his arm when he was six. We were a community of learners, learning about each other. We laughed, asked questions, and grew much closer that day.

I am always looking for ways to include diversity and student-led discovery in my classroom. This learning experience led me to realize that the majority of my students had very little understanding about what the world looked like outside of their immediate surroundings. Travel isn't cheap, and opportunities to explore the world were few and far between. The concept of going on vacation was a foreign one. And while I obviously couldn't take my students

on a real vacation, I could create a space where we could create a virtual one! The students would decide where we would go, and I would make the time for them to do so.

Each day, after lunch, a time that is usually accompanied by food comas, was brought back to life by going on vacation. Two particular vacations have stuck with me. The first vacation I remember so vividly was a trip to Scotland. We visited the fairy pools at the Isle of Skye, the castles in Edinburgh, and the architecture and museums in Glasgow. We talked about the interesting food dishes and we listened to Scottish bagpipes. We also discussed the Scottish independence movement and the Battle of Culloden where the Scottish highlanders lost their independence, their homes, their livelihood, and their lives to British rule. After 45 minutes or so, we turned off the classroom lights and watched an aerial video that flew us around Scotland, from the sea to the highlands. When that was over, we all talked about where we go next. It was an exciting, educational, and most of all fun experience for my students, and a joy to behold their faces as they looked upon a newly discovered landscape and culture.

On another occasion, a very courageous student from Rwanda took us on vacation to his country of origin. This time, there was less joy, and more questions. My student explained to our class how his family had left Rwanda following the 1994 civil war in his country. They traveled west to the Congo where they lived in a refugee camp. We were actually able to look at the exact camp where my student lived. He showed us where he went to school. He spoke at length, answering questions about what it was like, how he came to live in America, if he ever wanted to go back, why there was a civil war in the first place… Looking at the images of war-torn Africa was hard. We listened quietly and intently to my student's story about how he lost family members. We traveled quite far away from home that day, but we came much closer together. This may have not been the vacation we had thought it would be, but we learned so much. I

believe in the end we all admired my students' courage to share his home with us, and his story, as well.

I carry on the tradition of going on vacation at least once or twice a week. We have been all over the world. We have also been all over America, discussing the cultural aspects of different regions of our own country. Often times, a surprise vacation will pop up if a student is learning about something that lends us to set off on a voyage. Reading about the works of Steinbeck may take us to the Salinas River valley. Listening to Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young may take us to Laurel Canyon. Learning about the assassination of President Kennedy will find us at Dealey Plaza in Dallas. We go where our curiosity takes us. And it's never a dull trip.

Rejection of Masculine Ethics: Principles, Fairness, and Universal Truths

Noddings (1986a) juxtaposes the feminine ethic of caring against the masculine ethic of principle. She notes that ethics has largely been discussed in "the language of the father: in principles and propositions, in terms such as justification, fairness, justice. The mother's voice has been silent" (Noddings, 1986a, p. 1). For women, justice and principles are not sacrificial, rather, they are situational. She states, "The father might sacrifice his own child in fulfilling a principle; the mother might sacrifice any principle to preserve her child" (Noddings, 1986a, p. 5). Noddings rejects the notion that there are universal principles that provide for an omnipresent moral authority. Rather, she suggests that an ethic of care demands that we look beneath the surface, to listen to individual rather than hypothetical voices, and attend to the needs of others through genuine caring rather than artificial virtues and values (Noddings, 1986a; 1986b; 2002). She asserts, operating under the construct that universal rules apply to all human circumstances necessarily silences individual voices and erodes genuine caring.

Gilligan's (1982) approach to universal principles likewise rejects masculine adversarial systems of justice. She focuses on women's reluctance to judge as a feminist characteristic that seeks to show care and concern for others (Gilligan, 1982). Where men seek justice through systems of laws and logic, Gilligan asserts women seek non-violent solutions through love and relationship. She, like Noddings, speaks to real versus hypothetical human circumstances to point out that masculine ethics of justice do not promote equality. Rather, they fail to take into account the connections within an "elaborate network of relationships" where when one is hurt, all are hurt (Gilligan, 1982, p. 135). This necessarily speaks to the removal of any possibility of a universal solution to moral dilemmas through an ethic of justice that fails to seek truth and express concern "for the person on the other side" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 135). She states, "While an ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality—that everyone should be treated the same—an ethic of care rests on the premise of non-violence—that no one should be hurt" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 174).

Hill Collins (2009b) views masculine ethics from a position that examines the historical and political effects of the suppression of Black feminist thought. Based on White male standards, systems of ethics and justice have historically excluded, persecuted, and subordinated Black women through slavery, disenfranchisement, the inability to hold public office, and the inequitable treatment in the U.S. justice system. Hill Collins offers a different epistemology be used to evaluate principles, fairness, and universal truths that rejects unequal power relations where the dominant group maintains power through "a popular system of "commonsense" ideas that support their right to rule" (Hill Collins, 2009b, p. 302). In Hill Collins' ethics of care, ethics and emotion are not subordinated to universal truths. Rather, the ethical aim of a search for truth should be the guiding principle we follow in order to promote social justice. She calls for the

careful examination of who we trust, what we believe, and why we assume something is true, as a measure for whose truth will prevail. Hill Collins claims a shift in epistemological viewpoint will necessarily call into question the validity of a universal truth based on a male, hierarchical model that bolsters systems of institutionalized racism. Hill Collins (2009b) states:

> If the epistemology used to validate knowledge comes into question, then all prior knowledge claims validated under the dominant model become suspect. Alternative epistemologies challenge all certified knowledge and open up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth. (p. 290)

hooks addresses the patriarchal system as one that is antithetical to an ethic of love. She states, "A commonly accepted assumption in a patriarchal culture is that love can be present in a situation where one group or individual dominates another" (hooks, 2000, p. 40). She speaks to the damaging effects of patriarchy on both men and women. She calls to light the self-perpetuating systems of oppression fed by patriarchal masculinity, specifically how it "requires of boys and men not only that they see themselves as more powerful and superior to women but that they do whatever it takes to maintain their controlling position" (hooks, 2000, p. 40). She insists that "Domination cannot exist in any social situation where a love ethic prevails" (hooks, 2000, p. 98). As such, the patriarchal system cannot continue to be the accepted norm if we are to move past its inherent systems of oppression and domination.

Ethics of Care: Liberation and Social Justice

Noddings, known primarily for caring in education, is also prolific in her views toward authentic human liberation and social justice. She argues that both "can only be achieved by caring people in caring communities" (Bergman, 2004, p. 151). Noddings (1986a) defines the

process of moving beyond committed caring to social action as the construction of the ideal. She articulates her thoughts on achieving social justice both educationally and politically. For Noddings, the reduction of societal violence begins by "caring more effectively for its children" (Noddings, 2002, p. 25). She argues that children have the ability to withstand poverty and violence only if they have consistent relationships with others who genuinely care for them. Noddings (2005) views education as a process for full human growth, not simply intellectual gain, and she posits that this approach can "produce people who would live nonviolently with each other, sensitively and in harmony with the natural environment, reflectively, and serenely with themselves" (p. 12). She suggests that our focus in education should be to teach young people sympathy and empathy while helping them to understand their own propensities towards cruelty and violence. By doing so, we teach our students to examine the effects of their own actions on others' lives (Noddings, 2005). In regard to racial and ethnic discrimination, Noddings (2005) is critical of efforts to solve inequity through well-intentioned, but falsely informed methods. She states:

> In the United States today, many children are shifted about from year to year to achieve racial balance. This is morally wrong and irresponsible. We are using our children as means to achieve a desirable social end, but children—or any human beings—ought not to be used merely as means. Further, the people we are supposedly helping are rarely consulted about the means chosen. To achieve racial and ethnic harmony, it is not sufficient merely to expose children to different groups. They must have time to develop caring relations with particular others. (Noddings, 2005, p. 68)

Noddings also addresses racial and ethnic disparities in higher education and points to the increasing appeal on college campuses for ethnic and gender studies, and as a result, the fear

among traditional educators, that their hierarchical, patriarchal legacies may be lost. She goes on to argue that assimilating these studies into already existing studies is antithetical to their purpose, as the curriculum would become watered down and not held to its original standards (Noddings, 2005). Rather, Noddings posits that "if curriculum were designed around themes of care, women's issues and racial and ethnic issues would naturally fall within those themes" (Noddings, 2005, p. 114). She reminds us of the necessity of oppressed groups to claim their own heritage in education, as "The majority's attempt at inclusion always, by definition, threatens domination and usurpation" (Noddings, 2005, p. 115).

Noddings (2001) is also critical of the hypocrisy of politicians who insist on America's children as "our national treasure, the promise of the future, our most precious resource" who would then remove funding from programs that do not provide statistical data showing cognitive gains (Noddings, 2001, p. 33). She demands that real change will only come with a radical transformation in educational goals and America has never been willing to make those changes. Rather, American education has gone about the business of maintaining the status quo of patriarchal education, focused on the social reproduction of White male superiority that is anathema to democracy and social justice. Noddings (2005) is clear on this when she speaks to the need for our leaders to articulate their recommendations into the lives of real human beings when she states:

> Speak to me, if you must, in terms of dollars, of territory won and lost, of cities destroyed, of enemies overcome- but also speak to me in terms of shattered homes, crippled bodies, crazed minds, grieving mothers, and lost children. And ask me, make me think about, what would I do? (p. 119)

Finally, Noddings insists that the laws of a given society do not necessarily indicate morality, and often allow for the infliction of suffering in the forms of slavery, poverty, and war. She refers to this as "cultural evil," and states "that we have no ethical responsibility to cooperate with law or government when it attempts to involve us in unethical procedures" (Noddings, 1986, p. 55).

Gilligan (2011) speaks to social justice in terms of democracy, patriarchy, and resistance. The role of ethics of care, through relationship and voice, is to provide resistance to injustice. She considers ethics of care as central to democracy and the ability for our global society to function (Gilligan, 2011). Furthermore, as ethics of care are feminist in nature, they have the power to "free democracy from patriarchy" (Gilligan, 2011, p. 175). Along with the patriarchal order, hierarchy and the gender binary place privilege on the masculine and subordinate the feminine. By doing so, gender privilege directly negates democracy, which is synonymous with equality of voice (Gilligan, 2014). How then, Gilligan asks, "Can a democratic society sanction or turn a blind eye to the subordination of women in patriarchy?" (Gilligan, 2014, p. 101). She offers two possible solutions. First, relationships based on listening builds trust that is the foundation for talking about moral injury, which through an ethic of care, calls us to do what is right. Secondly, the recognition of the power of the hushed voices on the margins must no longer be silenced as "these voices may hold the power to transform the conversation" (Gilligan, 2014, p. 101).

Gilligan also applies ethics of care in social justice to the recognition of racism. She defines intersectionality in terms of race and gender, and adds another layer of patriarchy (Gilligan & Snider, 2018). This recognition of the uniqueness of Black women's voices was not present in Gilligan's early work. Hill Collins (2009b) aptly points out that her early research was

primarily conducted on White, middle-class subjects. In Gilligan's more recent work, she clearly recognizes and articulates the Whiteness of patriarchy (Gilligan & Richards, 2018; Gilligan & Snider, 2018). She shows that the White patriarchy is the explanation for continuing systemic racism and oppression as its power is found in squelching the relational capacities of women, and Black women in particular. Gilligan (2018), like Hill Collins (2009b) points out the hypocrisy facing Black women in terms of how they are defined stereotypically when she states, "the truth is we know that anger in women of color tends to be judged even more harshly, seen as more volatile and unacceptable" (Gilligan & Snider, 2018, p. 83). She cites ethics of care as the web that can be spun to foster resistance. Gilligan (2018) tells us:

> Under an ethic of care, Black Lives Matter, a movement started by three black women, and trans lives, challenging the gender binary, matter as well. The women and men of the #Me Too Movement exemplify as well a resistance based on an ethic of care. (pp. 124-125)

hooks speaks to social justice and liberation through engaged pedagogy and an ethic of love. She states, "Indeed, all the great movement for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic" (hooks, 2000, p. xix). She likens her concept of engaged pedagogy to political activism (hooks, 1994). She calls us to embrace conflict as a way to catalyze growth and understanding (hooks, 2000). In order to facilitate this growth, hooks (1994) suggests we, as educators and scholars, engage in a dialogue that enables us to overcome barriers and cross boundaries built on differences in race, gender, socioeconomic standing, among other differences. She likewise calls us to embrace radical change by holding true to and acting upon our individual morality and ethics. She states:

> No wonder then that we are a nation of people, the majority of whom, across race class, and gender, claim to be religious, claim to believe in the divine power of love, and yet collectively remain unable to embrace a love ethic and allow it to guide behavior, especially if doing so would mean supporting radical change. (hooks, 2000, p. 91)

Social justice, for Hill Collins, is much more than a quest. Rather, it is paramount to liberation and survival. Rooted deeply in community, Hill Collins' (2009b) Black Feminist Thought and ethics of care speak to the deracination of young Black lives from those communities when she states:

> U.S. Black working mothers' needs for child care, the chronically poor education offered to Black children in underfunded, inner-city public schools, the disproportionate numbers of young Black men who have arrest records or are incarcerated, and the large numbers of African-American children currently in government-run foster care all constitute new versions of some old problems of special concern to African-American women. (p. 192)

Like Gilligan (2014), hooks (1994, 2000), and Noddings (1986a), Hill Collins offers solutions to these problems based on the ideals of ethics of care. Hill Collins (2009b) suggests power in numbers. She calls for a "critical mass" of women with changed hearts and minds to come together to support "Black women's collective empowerment" (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 129). This coming together is reminiscent of Noddings' (1986) conception of caring as a way of being in relation, hooks' (2000) concept of community, and Gilligan's (2014) unsilenced voice. Hill Collins speaks to social justice as the outcome of resistance to intersectional oppression, Gilligan to healing moral injury, hooks to education for consciousness, and Noddings to attending to the other's voice. All four speak to the ability of ethics of care to open up spaces for radical transformation and change.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

"The stories we hear and the stories we tell shape the meaning and texture of our lives at every stage and juncture…they contribute both to our knowing and our being known"

– Witherell & Noddings

Kramp (2004) on narrative inquiry and storytelling:

If you think of story as "life as told," then it is through story that you come to know "life as experienced." It is in the telling that meaning is given to experience. It is in telling that we come to understand. (p. 110)

I am a teacher. But more than that, I am a listener and a keeper of stories. I am a student of my students, a participant in a decades-long narrative that illustrates and articulates my growth through an understanding of how I became the person I am today. I am a teacher. I am a deep vault of moments and memories, each one enriching my experience of being part of the story of so many lives. I am a teacher. My story does not run parallel to that of my students, but rather, it is intertwined, messy, intricate, and beautiful. I have been granted access to the hearts and minds of countless young people, and have found a common humanity in a vast sea of differences. I am a teacher, and listening to the stories of my students has given me "the ability to see the world through others' eyes" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2439).

The weight of carrying my students' stories can be overwhelming. At times, I find myself unable to separate my life at home from my life in my classroom. It is not a burden, but rather a blessing insomuch as I am certain that my students' stories, their lives, are inextricably part of who I am. My narrative, the story of my life, is tied deeply to my personal growth and awareness as a result of the connections I have made with my students. It is from this perspective that I have

chosen to seek a greater understanding of my students lived experience through narrative inquiry as it is informed through storytelling. To be certain, it is a daunting task to ensure that the stories I have recorded in my years of journaling, do indeed reflect the intention and individual truth at the time of their telling. In listening, I am not interpreting, but rather opening up a space where the story becomes embodied as a symbol of the caring relationship between my students and me (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kramp, 2004).

I have fought off the doubt, time and time again, that insists my experience is not worthy of the definition of research. As Kramp (2004) states, "As the researcher engages in narrative inquiry, one interprets experience and events as told by the storyteller. This is no simple task" (p. 108). That being said, I am certain that stories are powerful. They have the power to transcend time and space and allow us to understand the complexities of multiple realities. When we really know someone, we know their stories. The stories themselves are teachers. They bridge the gap between my understanding of truth and the truth of others. When deep connections are made, the floodgates of knowledge are opened and bonds are created based on shared understanding (Delgado, 1989). There is a magical thing that happens when experience is breathed life through articulation, reception, and recognition. In my classroom, in my experience as a teacher, it takes on the significance of the sacred.

Overview and Methodology Purpose

The autobiographical narrative I began with illustrates my methodology and thought process throughout my dissertation. "One of the starting points for narrative inquiry is the researcher's own narrative of experience, the researcher's autobiography. This task of composing our own narratives of experience is central to narrative inquiry" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 70). As such, choosing a methodology was a process born from both my research and my lived

experience. My goal as an educator is a better understanding of my students built on a foundation of caring relationships. I have found over the course of my career, the building blocks of that foundation are in the shared stories that punctuate the day. The most beautiful thing about stories, is that you never know when they will appear. Suddenly, from somewhere in the classroom, a laugh or a deep sigh will preempt the telling of a story. And we all stop what we are doing in the business of learning, and begin to learn from each other.

Throughout the course of my graduate career, I found every new piece of information, every new glimmer of knowledge I grasped, was in some way applied to the understanding of my students. From the start, I found myself in a place of discontent. The discomfort I felt, was a result of my own internal struggle to hold on to the vestiges of my past, which I knew could not survive if I was going to open my mind to a new thoughts and ideas. As my thoughts evolved, so did my understanding of the significance of my students' stories. I began to see how my growth, facilitated by my new knowledge, could enable a deeper understanding of how much can be learned by listening to students' stories. As Bell (2003) states, "This awareness made it necessary for her to take action. She could no longer remain innocent or uninvolved" (p. 21).

Countless conversations with my major professor led me to choose narrative inquiry and storytelling as my methodology. She is acutely aware of the centrality of my students' stories to my research. "Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told," and for this reason, I find my metaphorical home in this research space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 25). Ultimately, I want to tell the story of my collected stories. I wish to write a narrative of my experience as a teacher over time, searching for understanding that cannot be found in the experience of one individual, but rather in the polyphony of voices collected in my memories and enumerated in

my journals. In that search of narrative understanding, I believe there is no better method for studying the lives of my students than narrative inquiry (Freeman, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is underpinned by the complementary philosophies of Noddings' ethics of care, Gilligan's feminist care ethics, Hill Collins' Black Feminist Thought, and bell hooks' ethic of love and transformative pedagogy. I suggest when feminist ethics of care are informed by the call to activism, social justice, and resistance embodied in Black Feminist thought and the emphasis on individual voice of transformative pedagogy, a more comprehensive understanding of how we serve students will result. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore this premise through narrative inquiry and storytelling to better understand caring student teacher relationships and how these relationships are fostered.

Research Questions

The subsequent research questions inform my work as an educator and guide my academic research:

1. What is the potential for understanding caring relationships between students and teachers through the lenses of Nel Noddings' ethics of care, Carol Gilligan's feminism, bell hooks' ethic of love and engaged pedagogy, and Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Thought?
2. How does storytelling act as a medium for building caring relationships and community in the classroom?

Narrative Inquiry Through Storytelling

Narrative inquiry as a field of study is referred to by Connelly & Clandinin (1990) as "narratology, a term which cuts across such areas as literary theory, history, anthropology,

drama, art, film, theology, philosophy, psychology, linguistics, education, and even aspects of evolutionary biological science" (p. 2). Barthes (1977) describes narrative as "international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself" (p. 79). Narrative inquiry has been applied to psychology and human sciences by Polkinghorne (1988), storytelling and case studies by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998), and ethics in therapeutic fields such as education by Josselson (1996). Historically, in the field of education, narrative inquiry has been focused on teacher education, in particular, how teachers' narratives affect their practice (Bell, 2002). More recent research is focused on the reflective practices of teachers as well as the incorporation of voice through storytelling (Bell, 1997, 2002; Gallas, 1997; Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995; Kramp, 2004; Schön, 1983). Connelly and Clandinin (1987, 1988, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) have been at the forefront of using narrative inquiry as a method of educational research. Clearly, as a methodology, narrative inquiry has been defined and conceptualized with great diversity (Thomas, 2012).

As a method of research, narrative inquiry is driven by the interest of the inquirer based on wonder. It is, in part, defined by what it is not. Narrative inquiry is not research based on the western scientific tradition wherein research questions are hypothesized, observations or experiments are conducted, objective results are obtained, and conclusions are drawn. Rather, narrative inquiry carries an inherent understanding that truth is not found in the solution to a problem, but rather a deeper understanding of experience as a phenomenon that is continually evolving (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Thomas (2012) states:

> Narrative inquiry, then, signals a move away from traditional ways of knowing and telling in the social sciences towards multiple ways of knowing and telling, away from traditional quests for objectivity towards a celebrated acceptance of subjectivity, away

> from grand narratives towards local narratives and away from facts and towards meanings. (p. 211)

By moving away from traditional methods of knowing, we are more likely to choose "approaches that are especially sensitive to the unique characteristics of human existence" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. x). Clearly this calls us to question how we view truth in research in terms of objective facts versus human experience. According to Clandinin and Rosiek (2007), experience, for the narrative inquirer, is "the first and most fundamental reality we have" (p. 44). Lee, Hunter and Franken (2014) purport that it is through individual narratives we are able to understand this phenomenon of experience.

Mitzi is a 21-year-old African American single mother, previously incarcerated for assault with a deadly weapon. She has a history of drug use, homelessness, poverty, and mental and physical abuse. She dropped out of high school in the tenth grade, has previous gang affiliation, and a history of involvement with child protective services. According to the ACLU (2021), Black women represent 30 percent of all incarcerated women in the U.S, although they represent 13 percent of the female population generally. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), Black students dropped out at a rate of 5.6 percent as compared to 4.1 percent of their White peers. African Americans make up 13 percent of the general population, but more than 40 percent of the homeless population (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2020). According to the U.S. Department of Justice, 55.2 percent of gang affiliated members are Black compared to 11.5 percent of Whites. These are statistical facts, numbers that tell us percentages of human beings classified on their race. Nevertheless, they tell us nothing about the individuals who represent the numbers. Mitzi's story, her reality, however, does.

Resilient, intelligent, insightful, kind, and incredibly funny are the words I use to describe Mitzi. Every day, I look forward to spending time with her. She makes me laugh. She makes my day better. She is more than my student, she is my friend, and in many ways, my teacher. I hear her reach the top of the stairs, offering sweet greetings to her peers… "How you doing?" "Oh, I like your sweater!" "Mmm hmm…I see you, aren't you lookin' cute today!" The inflection in her voice is comforting, uplifting, and genuine. I anxiously await her arrival in my classroom. "Mrs. Eickhoff, those stairs got me!" I giggle, and she sits down at the table next to me and we talk. Mitzi's smile is infectious. She asks me about my day. I am eating my lunch late as I have spent my lunch hour working on paperwork. I am eating a hamburger and she grins… "Oh man, that sure looks good… but you go on, you eat. Did you make that yourself?" I can't help but laugh. And I ask, "You want half?" "Well," she says, "since you're offering." We share our lunch, enjoying every bite, and enjoying each other's company even more.

Mitzi pulls her work out of her backpack. Today, she is working on math. She's always very close to me. I believe we find comfort in being near one another. Her proximity lends itself to a constant dialogue, and inevitably a story or two. Today, she is worried about her son. There are paperwork issues she is having in another state. As we delve into the issue, she tells me her story. She tells me she doesn't want her son to have to endure the hardships that she has. This leads her into recounting what she suffered as a child. She tells me how when she was a kid, she didn't want to go to people's homes because her clothes weren't clean. So instead, she would just walk around until late at night. She tells me about how her momma left her for five years after leaving a note that said she would be gone for two weeks. She was in the third grade. Mitzi tells me about how she cried her eyes out, asking herself if she should end her own life. She wonders outloud… "Why don't nobody love me?" She tells me she asked God why he was

allowing this to happen to her. And she tells me that somehow, she still got up every morning, put a smile on her face, but that she was still that same person going to school with all that hurt in her heart, acting like it didn't even matter.

When Mitzi's mother came back, she moved her into a house where Mitzi describes, "there were big cracks in the boards." And she tells me about the spiders that scared her every morning, keeping her frozen in her bed. She recounts the many times she was hungry. She talks about letting the rich White people be mean to her just so she could be around them. When I ask her why, she tells me, "Mrs. Eickhoff, they have full pantries, and they let me fill up my backpack with food. But one time, a girl told her momma and she called CPS, and I got my ass tore up." We talk about her years in middle school, where she is beginning to lose interest in her education. She describes feeling smaller than the other girls because they had money, and how that led her to find a group where she could fit in. She talks about how it was hard to go to school because her momma would keep her up all night, screaming and hollering while she was drunk. She says, "I don't even want to go to school no more." "Who wants to get up early in the morning and have to catch a school bus and act like nothing is going on when they got to school? "Who wants to put all this learnin' in their head whenever they got all these problems at home?" "When I was in the classroom, I was looking at the work, some of it I was doing because I understand, but sometimes when I was doing geometry, I just looked at it and thought about when I could get high." She tells me about beginning of her casual drug use, and the subsequent journey into stronger, more toxic drugs. Mitzi speaks to me about her boyfriend and how they met and how he stuck by her when she had her child. But things got bad, out of control.

"Mitzi, how did you get back up?" "I went to jail." "I was doing stuff that I would never do in order to get high." "I went to jail and my son saw me through the glass, and he tried to

touch me, but he couldn't. And when I was sitting in there in jail, I saw myself just like I saw my momma." She went on to tell me how jail gave her the time to get sober, to clear her mind, and the chance to start her life over… and that is how she came to be in my classroom. And we go back to working on her math and I ask her what she thinks about school now. She tells me how she thinks school is an opportunity. She says, "Without school, you can't go nowhere. I want to give my son something I never had. I done tried everything… the street thing, the gang thing, sold my body then ran the hell out." And before we get back to math she tells me, "I'm a very strong person." "Indeed you are, Mitzi."

I can imagine that it seems peculiar that Mitzi, or any student would offer up her story, with all of its details, to a teacher who is in every way, her opposite. But we weren't opposites. We were, we are, friends. And it was our shared stories that brought us there. I can read statistics all day long and not understand for a second what they mean and how they affect the individuals that represent the numbers. Mitzi and her story made me understand.

Mitzi's story illustrates the object of narrative inquiry, namely, understanding and giving meaning to experience. Kramp (2004) states:

> As a qualitative research method, narrative inquiry serves the researcher who wishes to understand a phenomenon or an experience rather than to formulate a logical or scientific explanation. The object of narrative inquiry is understanding—the outcome of interpretation—rather than explanation. (p. 104)

Mitzi beautifully illustrates how story can translate knowing through telling. In this way, narrative inquiry is uniquely suited for facilitating understanding. I could never have obtained an understanding of Mitzi's life through observation. Only through Mitzi's personal narrative was I able to come to know her life as she experienced it. Her narrative did not just describe what

happened, rather, it gave me insight into her emotions, thoughts, and interpretations of the events (Chase, 2005; Thomas, 2012). I am not interested in Mitzi as an object of research, but rather as the narrator of her story (Kramp, 2004). Experience, then, is what I want to research, and that must be done narratively because narrative thinking produces articulated thoughts and therefore a way to write about them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Narratives can be found in many forms. They can result from written or spoken discourse (Bresler, 2006), as well as stories (Polkinghorne, 1988). They can also serve as method, product, and process (Clandinin, 2006; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). Mitzi's story, as gathered by me, is the data, or product upon which I will base my research (Kramp, 2004). As stated before, this is not observational research, rather, it is dialogic. As such, "Narrative is a conversation between the narrator and the audience, a 'dialogical conversation'" (Anderson, 2012, p. 17). As a result of this dialogic conversation, both the researcher and the participants engage in the process of making meaning (Sandlowski, 1991). Due to this collaborative nature of narrative inquiry, it is recognized as one of a perspectival construction that does not rely on the singularity of the researcher's voice or the telling of individual actions or events, but rather a holistic method that insists on the fluidity of all the voices in the story (Kramp, 2004). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state:

> It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social. (p. 20)

All meaning is constructed through understanding experience as a confluence of voices. As such, the conversation of all characters in the narrative story contribute to the emergence of new meanings (Barkhuizen, 2011; Lee et al, 2014). For the purposes of my research, this occurs through storytelling.

According to Kramp (2004), the term *story* can be used interchangeably with *narrative*. Clandidnin and Connelly (2000) state:

> Narrative has become so identified with stories, and stories have such a particular unique sense about them—often treated as things to be picked up, listened to, told, and generally rolled around as one might roll marbles around—that narrative inquiry has for some, become associated with story recording and telling. (p. 77)

There are a multitude of examples of the use of storytelling as sources of data in narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kramp, 2004; Paley, 1981, 1986; Smith, Prunty, Dwyer & Klein, 1987; Wood, 2000). Eisner (1997) purports that "humans have used storied forms to inform since humans have been able to communicate" (p. 264). By articulating the individual stories of people's lives, storytelling distinguishes itself from other forms of qualitative research (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007). While dialogue or conversation is often the medium for storytelling, there can emerge an experience that causes us to pause to recognize the expertise of the storyteller (Lee et al., 2014). Carr (1986) states:

> The real difference between [narrative] "art" and "life" is not organization versus chaos, but rather the absence in life of that point of view which transforms events into a story by telling them. Narrative requires narration; and this activity is not just a recounting of events but a recounting informed by a certain kind of superior knowledge. (p. 59)

This certainly lends itself to education, for while we may as educators consider ourselves the experts in our chosen fields, we are in no way experts on the lives of our students. According to Bell (2002):

> Narrative also offers teachers the possibility of understanding their students in new ways. Communicating through story is arguably less linguistically demanding than setting out propositional knowledge, increasing the chances of teachers' being informed by their learners. In addition, issues that directly affect the ways in which learners' experience immigration, settlement, and language learning are wrapped in the stories they hold. (pp. 210-211)

ESOL classes have been cancelled for the day. As a result, all of my African students are working in my classroom today. The chatter in the classroom is diverse and beautiful. The students alternate between French, Arabic, Kinyarwanda, Swahili, and English. I have my iPad close so I am able to click between images of objects and my translator application. I have spent months trying to learn Swahili as it is the language that the majority of my African students speak. Nevertheless, I am not very good at it and often the students and I laugh together at my mispronunciation of words. I believe, however, they appreciate my willingness and desire to honor their culture by learning their language. As I attempt to explain concepts in English, the students explain them back to me in their language. It is time consuming, but informative. We are all learning together.

One of my students is working on a child development class that is exploring the necessities for raising a child in a healthy environment. The conversation leads us into stories about our childhood homes. While all of my African students were born into homes in their respective countries, all of them ended up in refugee camps as a result of civil wars in their

native lands. Most of my students are working tirelessly to get their education so they can go home to different places in Kansas to help support their families. We are casually talking about the students' family members… mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles. There are smiles all around as the students tell stories about their loved ones, and I am hanging on every word. There is joy and reverence in the air. I have learned from my students that their families are typically comprised of an extended kin network. I have also learned they place nothing above the relationships and responsibilities they have for one another. Perhaps it is the strife of survival that has bonded them so tightly. Rarely do my African students speak to their journey from home to the refugee camps, and out of respect and care for their hearts, I do not ask. I often wonder about the differences between my African students and my American students regarding their differing perspectives on family. And I wonder about the lack of strife in my own life and the subsequent carnage that has emerged in my family as the result of the lack of appreciation of our privilege. These students are not just survivors, they are thriving, hopeful, and driven.

I am sitting facing a group of students on my right. When I turn to my left, I see tears in the eyes of my student, Peter, who stares intently at his computer screen. I am at once jolted back into reality from the joyous interlude into the familial stories of my students. "Oh my God, what is wrong?" I carefully place my hand on Peter's shoulder and ask what I can do to help. He says, "I miss my family." I ask, "Would you like to tell me about them? If you don't, I understand." The rest of the students become solemn. I suspect they already know what Peter is going to tell me. Peter takes a deep breath and tells me that for the past nine years, prior to his arrival in Kansas, he had been living in a refugee camp with his entire family. Unfortunately, if that word can even be used to describe this situation, Peter was the only member of his family

that was able to make it out of the camp and into the United States. He came to Kansas knowing he had friends who would host him, but ultimately, he felt very alone, and guilty for leaving his family behind. He continued to cry while he told me about his younger siblings and his mother and father, about how they were forcibly removed from their home and about everything they left behind. He worries about them every minute of the day. He wants desperately to be successful here in America so he can bring his family to live with him.

I gave Peter a huge hug and reassured him his family was grateful he had the opportunity to leave the refugee camp. I told him I wanted to learn as much as I could about where they were and how I could help him in any way in the future. It was the very least I could do. He genuinely appreciated my words even though I felt useless to alleviate his sadness. His knowledge and understanding of life from a completely different perspective than mine could only have been told through his story. And as he passed it on to me, my story changed in terms of how I viewed the world as seen through the lens of my individual students.

Tensions: Temporality, People, Action, and Certainty

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the boundaries between the grand narrative and narrative thinking as tensions that include temporality, people, action, and certainty. They cite Dewey's criteria of continuity and interaction as the key criteria of experience that lead to these specific tensions. In terms of my methodology, I use these categories as a framework from which I can define my context, my perspective, my purpose, and my process. Within each of these categories, I have employed Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) four directions of inquiry to find meaning through experience by looking inward, outward, backward and forward through the lenses of interaction, situation, and continuity.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state:

> In narrative thinking, temporality is a central feature. We take for granted that locating things in time is the way to think about them. When we see an event, we think of it not as a thing happening at that moment but as an expression of something happening over time. Any event, or thing, has a past, a present as it appears to us, and an implied future. (p. 29)

The nature of narrative inquiry requires that we let go of the notion that life stands still. Rather, we must assume "it is always getting in the way, always making what may appear static and not changing into a shifting, moving, interacting complexity" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 125). As a result, narrative inquiry requires that we do not understand people in terms of being, but rather as becoming (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Freeman (2015) purports:

> By invoking the idea of narrativity, we do not necessarily invoke the further idea that it must assume the classical beginning-middle-end narrative form generally found in our own culture. But amidst the vast multiplicity of ways of speaking, of reckoning with time, and of organizing the meaning and movement of one's life, there still remains narrativity, that is, "a basic human inclination to see actions together, as temporal patterns, configurations of meaning, and to situate these configurations within larger wholes – whether myths, histories, or what have you – that serve ultimately to organize and make sense of temporal existence." (p. 34)

The temporal nature of narrative inquiry insists that we as researchers understand "Narrative is essentially a representation of the human experience of time" (Thomas, 2012, p. 209). As such, current understanding is dependent upon recognizing the effects of the past and how it affects future outcomes (Bell, 2002; Carr, 1986; White, 1981). According to Bruner (1990), "People do not deal with the world event by event with text sentence by sentence. They frame events and sentences in larger structures" (p. 64).

Given that understanding of experience is my research goal, I must understand the collective nature of experience. By this I mean I must understand the retrospective nature of meaning making insomuch as it provides order and form to current narratives (Chase, 2005; Thomas, 2012). By doing so, I hope to recognize understanding experience in terms of people and events changing over time (Bell, 2002). Through my students' stories, told retrospectively, my hope is their retelling of events will help them to revisit and rethink their past, present, and possible future selves (Bell, 2002; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kramp, 2004; Labov, 1997; Moen, 2006; Sandelowski, 1991; Thomas, 2012). According to Kramp (2004), "Stories preserve our memories, prompt our reflection, connect us with our past and present, and assist us to envision our futures" (p. 107). The storied moments of my students' lives are narrative fragments of who they are today and how they have been shaped by their experiences. It is within these storied moments I seek to find understanding.

People, in terms of tensions in narrative inquiry, are seen as "embodiments of lived stories" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 43). They state:

> We take for granted that people, at any point in time, are in a process of personal change and that from an educational point of view, it is important to be able to narrate the person in terms of the process. Knowing some of the immediate educational history of a child—for instance, the lessons recently taught, as well as the larger narrative history of each child as that child moves from what was, to what is, to what will be in the future—is central to narrative educational thinking. (p. 30).

In choosing narrative inquiry as my methodology, I put the student, not the story, nor the interpretation or analysis thereof, first. The purpose of my research is understanding. My responsibility as a researcher is to my students as individuals. It is from the point of view of

understanding my students' narrative histories that I begin my research. Likewise, I understand there is no definitive end to my research as the stories of my students are continually evolving. It is this process of evolution and its subsequent meaning that interests me.

When I first meet a student, I always begin with open-ended questions that allow them to divulge as much or as little information about themselves as they would like. For my students, landing in my classroom usually comes as the result of a series of difficult, often tragic events. Their actions have been the stepping stones that led them down the path to me. Their actions, however, cannot be understood without context. Rather, they must be understood within the larger context of their narrative history. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) define the tension of action in terms of understanding experience when they state, "Without understanding the narrative history of the child, the significance or meaning of the performance, the sign, remains unknown. In narrative thinking, however, there is an interpretive pathway between action and meaning mapped out in terms of narrative history" (p. 31). The interpretive pathway between action and meaning is found in the voices of my students. Their stories, when brought to life through their individual voices, reframe actions and allow me as their teacher, and the other students as members of our classroom community, to understand their actions in context. And in the process of telling their stories, there are always common threads found amongst us all.

Of course, in the case of all human interactions there is always the possibility of uncertainty when it comes to an accurate understanding of what the other is trying to convey when telling their story. With regard to the tension of certainty, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state:

> In narrative thinking, interpretations of events can always be otherwise. There is a sense of tentativeness, usually expressed as a kind of uncertainty, about an event's meaning.

> Thus, the attitude in a narrative perspective is one of doing "one's best" under the circumstances, knowing all the while that other possibilities, other interpretations, other ways of explaining things are possible. (p. 31)

For me, this means I must listen to many stories over time to understand what my students are really trying to help me understand. I have to use reflective listening to ensure that I acknowledge the storyteller as the expert of their own experience. In doing so, I recognize their authority "as the one who knows and tells" (Kramp, 2004, p. 111).

Narrative Inquiry in the Context of My Classroom

"In narrative thinking, context is ever present. It includes such notions as temporal context, spatial context, and context of other people. Context is necessary for making sense of any person, even, or thing" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 32). For the purposes of my research, my context is my classroom. Over the years, the temporal nature of my classroom has been apparent in the passage of time measured by the entrance and exit of students through my classroom door. There is no specific day or time that my research began as I entered into it in the middle. My students had lives before they became mine, and their lives continued when they left. As such, my students and I enter "in the middle of a nested set of stories" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63).

There is an underlying rumble of voices in my classroom. They set the tempo for the day. And like the individual instruments that make up an orchestra, each voice is essential to the whole. As a teacher, claiming my classroom as a space where all voices are heard is my first priority. In my experience, I have found that listening to my student's voices has empowered them not only to learn, but to grow emotionally and spiritually. Often this is done not by listening only to me as the teacher, but rather by listening to all of the voices in the classroom.

hooks (1994) states, “Just the physical experience of hearing, or listening intently, to each particular voice strengthens our capacity to learn together” (p. 186). Oftentimes, the medium for this in my classroom is found in storytelling. When given the opportunity to express themselves through their stories, my students deconstruct, reconstruct, and learn from their own personal narratives, often in harmony with their peers. In this way, stories and narratives become “curricular activities” (Conle, 2003). Likewise, stories can become a means of teaching by delving into such topics as values, traditions, religion, and history as seen through the individual lives of my students (Coulter, Michael, & Poynor, 2007; Schram, 1994). Additionally, we can understand behaviors as the expressions of an individual’s story set within the context of our classroom.

Mike is having a hard day. He has just witnessed another student being removed from my classroom following the arrest of his parents for charges of drug possession. Mike knows the other student has no place to go and will probably end up in the foster care system. Mike has been there, too. After my other student has been removed from the classroom, Mike tells the class about the time his parents placed him and his two younger siblings in a room in their home with three bowls, three spoons, a box of cereal and a gallon of milk. They then proceeded to staple chicken wire around the door to the room, ensuring they could see the children, but the children could not get out. Shortly thereafter, several of Mike’s parent’s friends showed up for a weekend-long party where as Mike put it, “everyone was smoking meth and getting fucked up for three days straight. Me and my brothers just watched it all happen like it was the worst movie we’d ever seen.”

Earlier in the month, Mike had been suspended for ten days for breaking the glasses of a teacher who was restraining him from getting in a fight with another student who hurled a milk

carton at his head. I had asked myself why Mike couldn't stop fighting when he was restrained. Mike's story of his restraint by the people he trusted the most materialized its effects in the lunchroom. His memory was jolted into his present day brought on by the fate of his classmate. It screamed, "don't hold me down!" His story helped me to understand why Mike responded the way he did. When I listened, when I was let in to Mike's life, I was able to see through Mike's eyes. This was one of the earliest stories I remember that truly affected my perspective on responding to student behavior. The formula of antecedents, behaviors, and consequences I once applied so scientifically to my students gave way to story, response, grace, and growth. Like Delgado (1989) states, "Stories are useful tools for the underdog because they invite the listener to suspend judgement, listen for the story's point, and test it against his or her own version of reality" (p. 2440).

Mike's story illustrates hooks' (1994) thoughts when she says, "When one speaks from the perspective of one's immediate experiences, something's created in the classroom for students, sometimes for the very first time. Focusing on experience allows students to claim a knowledge base from which they can speak" (p. 148). By creating a space in my classroom for the expression of individual voices, we create a community where each personal experience "makes us more acutely aware of each other" (hooks, 1994, p. 186). Britzman (1991) states:

> Voice is meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community…. The struggle for voice begins when a person attempts to communicate meaning to someone else. Finding the words, speaking for oneself, and feeling heard by others are all a part of this process…. Voice suggests relationships: the individual's relationship to the meaning of her/his experience and hence, to language, and the individual's relationship to the other, since understanding is a social process. (p. 49)

The aspect of relationship that Britzman (1991) speaks to is integral to my ability as a narrative inquirer to gather the stories I have over the years. The relationships I form with my students are the underpinnings to my understanding of their lives and the subsequent growth in my own. According to Kramp (2004), "Narrative inquiry assumes "personal involvement" as the very condition that makes it possible for you, as a researcher, to gather and interpret narratives of participants in your study" (p. 114). This personal involvement implies an intimate knowledge of my students and their lives, not a categorical representation of some phenomenon or a fragment of research data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Hogan (1988) speaks to relationship in research when he states, "Empowering relationships develop over time and it takes time for participants to recognize the value that the relationship holds. Empowering relationships involve feelings of 'connectedness' that are developed in situations of equality, caring and mutual purpose and intention" (Connelly, & Clandinin, 1990, p. 12). These feelings of connectedness fostered in a caring classroom based on ethics of equality are what I wish to achieve in my own classroom.

The outgrowth of the relationships I have formed with my students are the stories they are willing to share. Lee et al. (2014) state:

> In relational terms, the sharing helped to develop caring relationships which provided a safe space for mutual disclosure. These outcomes suggest that there are significant benefits for researcher, and narrative research, if narrative research allows for and affords story sharing. (p. 145)

In addition to developing caring relationships, storytelling in my classroom has aided in developing a caring community as well as reduced the power difference between my students and I based on mutual disclosure (Lee et al., 2004). This mutual disclosure speaks to the "intimate coparticipation in the intermingling of narratives" that results in the building of trust

between me and my students wherein we all grow from the knowledge and understanding of each other's stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 66).

My students are very aware of my research. I often speak to them about what I have learned in my classes and how I am deeply intent on learning from their stories. They frequently ask, "Mrs. Eickhoff, are you going to write about me?" They want their stories to be heard. Clearly, "In telling their stories, they invited me into their lives" (Kramp, 2004, p. 113). There is a sense that if they are located in my research, then they are recognized, and thus found (Freeman, 2015). The caring relationships between my students and me resulted in a shared interest in the research itself (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Lee et al, 2014). deMarris (2004) speaks to the benefit for the participants in research when their knowledge is regarded as valuable. She states:

> They, too, may get a sense of satisfaction from participating in a study that leads to increased knowledge. They may also benefit from the experience of having someone listen to and appreciate their views or their experiences. They may also benefit from building a relationship with the researcher. (p. 61)

I have been tasked with demonstrating my knowledge on the theory of storytelling which I framed as a method for reconstruction and reconciliation of injustice through individual voice. In order to do this, I asked for volunteers from my class to come to my Curriculum Theory class to speak about their personal experiences in school and with their teachers. It's a beautiful fall day on campus. I leave our classroom to gather my students who have been dropped off to meet me. I see them, walking toward me across the lawn in front of Anderson Hall. I stop and realize in this moment, I am witness to the beautiful collision of my life as a student and a teacher. My two worlds come together as I usher in my students to speak before my professor and colleagues.

My students are nervous. They have carefully chosen their outfits and have spent time thinking deeply about the questions I have posed to them. Among these are how their experiences in school have affected their opinions about education, and how the relationships they have formed with their teachers have made a difference in their lives. They are puzzled by my genuine interest in the power of their stories. I cannot seem to convince them that their experiences are crucial to the understanding of the importance of relationships between teachers and students. They can't quite comprehend why a group of well-educated college types would want to listen to their stories. But it doesn't take long before they begin to speak about their lives and the relationships that have molded them into the people they are today.

It is in this moment that I see the outcome of relationship play out in real time, and it is powerful. Their voices represent the time we spent together building our relationships. There is a palpable sense of pride and validation on their faces. They feel important, respected, and appreciated. And we, as teachers, are captivated by their honesty and genuinely changed by their courage to share with us the stories that illuminate the importance of listening to all the voices that are so often silenced in our classrooms. Theory cannot remain abstract when viewed through the lens of individual voice. Stories change people. The faces of my students place an object-permanence to their existence, their experiences, and the significance of their being.

My Process

As our work progresses and as we fall in love without participants, the field, and then our field texts, we may tend to lose sight of questions of significance, meaning, and purpose. But as we make the transition from field texts to research texts, questions such as who cares, and so what? reemerge. How do we know that our inquiry interest is anything more than personal or

anything more than trivial? How do we know that anyone will be interested? Will our inquiry make a difference? (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 120-121).

I believe it is incredibly important to note that I did not begin my career as a researcher. Over two decades ago, I began teaching at a small, rural high school in northeast Kansas. I always thought I would teach history to high school students. My love of history is what drove me to teaching. Before I chose education, I wanted to be a musician, specifically, a classical pianist. I spent the majority of my young life on a piano bench. My father was particularly proud of my accomplishments as a musician, and I felt a significant amount of pressure to succeed in this field. However, upon entering college, I quickly realized that competitive music at the collegiate level was not for me. I found that the joy of music quickly evaporated in the face of cut-throat competition. I simply did not have the same ability or voracious competitive spirit that I found in my fellow musicians. I had to choose something else. So, I chose history. Unable to separate myself from my musical past, I left my home in Scottsdale, Arizona, for Kansas State University.

During my student teaching, I was assigned to teach U.S. Government to seniors in high school. On one very typical school day, I was giving a test to my students. I noticed out of the corner of my eye, a student looking down in his lap. He would glance between his lap and the test. Using the technique of proximity control, I nonchalantly walked towards the student to get a better understanding of his behavior. I had an idea that he was cheating, and honestly, I don't think I knew what I would do if I caught him. Upon getting close enough to confirm my suspicions, the student took his cheat sheet from his lap and ate it. Yes, he ate it. I was dumbfounded, but also intrigued by his dedication to not getting caught.

Not having a clue as how to react, I took the information to my supervising teacher, a brilliant teacher known for her unorthodox, yet incredibly effective teaching techniques. She suggested I take a walk with the student to see if I could figure out why he did what he did. Being a student-teacher, I quickly agreed. I approached the student and asked if he would take a walk around the building with me, and he immediately agreed. I got the feeling that he would rather be anywhere than inside a classroom. On our walk, I discovered that the student had no interest in history, or school whatsoever for that matter. He was a farm kid. He lived for the outdoors. He would have much rather been throwing hay or vaccinating cattle… really anything other than sitting indoors listening to teachers drone on and on about subjects he cared nothing about. His parents wanted him to be a successful student, but it was no secret that upon graduation, a post-secondary education was not in his future. He would work on his family farm and take over the operation when the time came for him to do so.

I was delighted by our talk. I got to know this student in a way that I never could have by keeping our relationship as teacher-student within the confines of our classroom. His story, his beautiful description of the work he did on the farm, allowed me to understand his actions. And even though he never really desired to learn what I was teaching; he did try harder to succeed in my class. I knew that was due to our walk. Somehow I was able to communicate my interest in him as a person, not just a student. As my student teaching progressed, my supervising teacher frequently assigned me to work with the "troubled students." I didn't mind. In fact, I enjoyed it. It was near the end of my student teaching that I decided to pursue a master's degree in Special Education. I knew that working with the ornery ones was where I belonged.

My first assignment as a provisionally licensed special education teacher was in the ball room of an elementary school. By ball room, I mean the room where they kept the balls for gym

class. The space was specifically chosen to keep my students away from the general population. The space was tiny, maybe ten feet by fifteen feet. The back wall was lined with shelves that were full of those giant red rubber balls used in dodge ball. I thought for certain I would be the first one smacked in the head and kicked out of the game. I did my best, however. I strung up Christmas lights, brought in my own books, and tried to teach the curriculum that was happening far away from where we were. As is typical for small group instruction, we were able to get through the required materials quite quickly. That left a lot of time for conversation and walks around the building. It was during this time that I began journaling about my experiences. Mostly, I did this for the purposes of reporting to the principal the events and progress that occurred in my ball room. But as time went on, I realized that by looking back on my journals, I found a deeper meaning in my teaching. I was beginning to build relationships with my students that led me to have a far better understanding of how they ended up in my classroom. Like Freeman (2015) says, "As history is unfolding, it may be virtually impossible to see what is going on" (p. 29). I guess, this is how it all began.

Often, I have struggled with the fear that I started the process of earning my Ph.D. too late in my life. I have sat in my classes and looked around to find I have children almost as old as my colleagues. It has been helpful to know that Dr. Taylor and I both approached our terminal degrees at a similar time in life, albeit for different reasons. All this being said, I realize the benefit of experience. Very few of my colleagues have logged as many years in the classroom as I have. This length of time in the field has proven to be an invaluable asset in my ability to examine my life as a teacher over a significant period of time. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) speak at length about the importance of working with individuals "for the long haul" (p. 87). They refer to narrative inquirers as ones who "settle in, live and work alongside participants"

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 67-68). Upon beginning my doctoral work, I have been working in a classroom setting where I have students for a period of years, not months, and for entire days, not class periods. This has allowed me to build relationships with my students in a way that may not be as feasible if I were teaching in a "regular-education" setting where my time with individual students would be far more limited. It has also allowed me to create more space for stories, and as a result, more thoughts and experiences to record in my journals. My process for journaling varied over the years, but most recently it is in a daily debrief that I write at the close of most school days. I may have jotted down a note of reminder concerning a specific event during the day, but the written details of my day are played out in my thoughts once the day is done. There are many occasions in which a particular idea or thought would come to mind that caused me to return to my journals at different times. In my line of work, the students and their needs do not end at 3:45, nor do they cease to exist on the weekends. At all times, on some level, my students are always on my mind.

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), "Journals are a powerful way for individuals to give accounts of their experience" (p. 102). Numerous studies in narrative inquiry have made use of field notes (Clandinin, 1986, 1989; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Hoffman, 1988; Kroma, 1983). For the purposes of my research, I have chosen to use my journals, or field notes, as a methodology for the creation of field texts. Unknowingly, my journals have closely mirrored the process of "turning inward, watching outward" described by Connelly and Clandinin (2000, p. 86). In my journaling, I have recorded the outward events describing time and place, and also my inward thoughts about the significance of the stories or events I write about. I believe the storied form of my journals reflects the storied lives of my students, and

therefore they are more authentic representations of who they are and how we can better understand the significance of their experiences.

Certainly, relationship and collaboration are pivotal to my research. "Researcher relationships to ongoing participant stories shape the nature of field texts and establish the epistemological status of them. We assume that a relationship embeds meaning in the field text and imposes form on the research text ultimately developed" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 94). To be clear, I do not define my students as participants. Rather, I consider my journals as reflections of a polyphony of voices, mine included, where our collaborative stories find themselves located in a research text. Noddings (1986b) suggests that too much educational research has been focused on participants as objects of research, and perhaps a more collaborative approach would lead to research "*for* teaching instead of simply research on teaching" (p. 506). From this perspective, "The question of who is researcher and who is teacher becomes less important as we concern ourselves with questions of collaboration, trust, and relationship as we live, story, and restory our collaborative research life" (Connelly, & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10). I do, however, understand the significance of my role in the process of the telling of others' stories insomuch as I am drawing upon my own body of academic knowledge that results in a degree of co-construction of the collaborative work (Barkhuizen, 2011; Lee et al, 2014; Thomas, 2012).

How then, do I choose what stories to include and which to leave out? I understand the personal reasons for my research, but I am also aware of its social significance. Freeman (2015) addresses the process of finding the significant in the details when he references Ricoeur's (1981) work. He states:

> Along the lines being drawn, Ricoeur (1981) has spoken of the episodic and configurational dimensions of narrative, the former referring to the various events of which the narrative is comprised, the latter to the poetic process of seeing-together so as to discern in and through these events a pattern, a larger constellation of meaning. (p. 31)

Likewise, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state, "It is a helpful reminder to those who pursue narrative studies that they need to be prepared to follow their nose, and after the fact, reconstruct their narrative of inquiry" (p. 7). It is in this following my nose in search of a larger constellation of meaning that I select from and include my storied journals in my research.

Criticisms of Narrative Inquiry

"In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research as whole has been constantly critiqued, if not disparaged, by the lack of consensus for assessing its quality and robustness" (Leung, 2015, p. 324). Narrative inquiry, as a methodology in qualitative research, has opened itself to many questions. Is it too narrow? Too broad? Are there enough participants to make the results of the research generalizable to a larger population? Are the participants authentically represented in the work, or is there an overrepresentation of the researcher? Are there rigorous criteria in place that ensure the legitimacy of the research? Atkinson (2009) states, "Narrative inquiry's interest in developing an epistemology and methodology for how teachers' experiences of practice are storied, indeed how all knowledge is storied, troubles and interrogates traditional conceptions of knowledge and what counts as knowledge production" (p. 93).

One of the strongest criticisms of narrative inquiry is that of the authentic representation of the participant. Bell (2002) asserts:

> More seriously, when researchers take people's stories and place them into a larger narrative, they are imposing meaning on participants' lived experience. Although good

> practice demands that researchers share their ongoing narrative construction, participants can never be quite free of the researcher's interpretation of their lives. The effect of this imposed re-storying can be powerful. (p. 210)

Bochner (2001) likewise points to the incapacity of narrative research to necessarily capture a factual representation of a participant's life. Hendry (2007) advises that interpretation of another's story can be considered "an act of colonization" (p. 494), while Barone (2007), suggests that narrative analysis is a form of "narrator abduction" (p. 457). Thomas (2012) states, "One of the greatest challenges we face in the analysis and reporting of our narrative studies is ensuring that we have been fair to our participants in our representation of them" (p. 215). Certainly, these concerns are legitimate when we consider the power and responsibility researchers are given to authentically represent their participants.

These criticisms point toward the role of the researcher in narrative inquiry. Lee et al., (2014) state, "Narrative research typically focusses on the voices of participants, wherein researchers seek to understand participants' experiences in a holistic and socio-culturally situated way. This, however, has left an under-explored side of narrative—the influential presence of the researcher" (p. 146). The collaborative nature between researcher and participant in narrative inquiry opens it up to criticism as the narrative itself as well as the subsequent interpretation thereof focuses on the researcher as much as the participant (Bell, 2002; Josselson, 1996). Some criticisms of the collaborative nature of narrative inquiry focus on the power differential between researcher and participant. Kvale (1996) speaks to the significance of power differences by pointing out that while participants may agree to be the subject of research, it is ultimately the researcher who is the primary beneficiary of the research, not the participant. Lee et al. (2014) note, "The initial relationship between the researcher and participants was that of knower and

not-knower" indicating the researcher hold the power in the collaborative relationship (p. 152). Additionally, the use of stories as a method for understanding in narrative research calls into question the subjectivity of the researcher due to the ambiguity and multidimensional nature of the stories themselves. Freeman (2015) warns us of the possibility that "We can extract plots when there really are none" (p. 32). As a result, critics question how to impose criteria for authentic assessment in narrative research in light of this subjectivity (Bell, 2002; Carter, 1993; Josselson, 1996; Lieblich et al., 1998; Peshkin, 1998). Lee et al. (2014) address this when they state, "There is however a lack of explicit empirical research in the way in which such knowledge is mutually constituted and the outcomes of such co-construction" (p. 145). They go on to address the subjectivity of the researcher by stating, "A person will choose what stories to tell depending on the audience in context" (Lee et al., 2014, p. 146).

Data Collection

My data is a culmination of all of my years as an educator. I journaled my experiences as a teacher through the written collection of observations, stories, and reflections I recorded throughout my career. Hobson (2001) states, "A journal can be a means by which we bring into fuller awareness, both for the student and for ourselves as teachers, some of the deeper processes through which we make meaning" (p. 18). Prior to my decision to use my personal journals as data, the record of my thoughts was primarily reflective and not subject to view through a particular lens. I refer to these as recorded memories. Many of these were written after a significant event or series of events. Some are records of personal moments of connection with students that had a significant impact on my life as a teacher and a person. An example of this is my journal entry about my student, Emmanuel, which I wrote about in Chapter 1. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) tell us, "Journals are a powerful way for individuals to give accounts of their

experience" (p. 102). My more recent data was gathered more frequently and with greater detail. By this I mean I purposefully wrote a daily debrief of the events and stories shared in my classroom over a period of 14 months. I purposefully record the existential components of time, place, and event, as well as my feelings about what occurred and what drove me to record it. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), "These ongoing, daily notes, full of the details and moments of our inquiry lives in the field, are the text out of which we can tell stories of our experience" (p. 104). Furthermore, I frequently return to my journals to reflect more deeply on my entries and to record further thoughts. It is through this process that I find deep connections. My purpose for recording my experiences changed when I made the decision to consider using my personal journals for data for my future research. As a result, the level of depth and detail changed as well. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write about a third-grade teacher researcher who had this same experience with data collection. They state,

> In Davie's case, we imagine that the journals written for herself as a reflection on her practice were not intended as research field text. However, we imagine there might have been a shift in her thinking about her journal as a kind of field text as she joined the teacher-research group. We imagine that these journals might have taken on a different tone, and perhaps she might have recorded different things in different ways. (p. 102)

My journaling provided me with a method of creating field texts by allowing me to puzzle out my experiences and find meaning within them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

I measure the trustworthiness of the data I have collected in my personal journals through three criteria. First, the data has been collected over a significant period of time. Burnaford (2001) tells us, "Teachers are typically engaged over long periods of time with the questions that inform their work. Data collected over time can affirm or challenge what you believe you are

finding" (p. 71). By extension, it thus is reasonable that themes and patterns that persist over a significant period of time, with a large group of students represents trustworthiness. Secondly, the caring relationships I have built with my students coupled with the understood respect for the stories they share suggests the presence of honesty and truthfulness in their telling. The mutual sharing of our experiences takes place in conversation without a script or power differential. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state:

> Conversation entails listening. The listener's response may constitute a probe into experience that takes the representation of experience far beyond what is possible in an interview. Indeed, there is a probing in conversation, in-depth probing, but it is done in a situation of mutual trust, listening, and caring for the experience described by the other. (p. 109)

Thirdly, I purposefully revisit and revise or amend my journals to reflect further thoughts or to make connections with events or ideas that inform previous ones. Hobson (2001) tells us, "Sometimes we realize this when we reread the journal and realize that we've been working on something for a long time without knowing it" (p. 18).

My data, gathered in my personal journals, suggests a significant level of trust and rapport with my students. The stories and narratives I collected are collaborative and evoke relationship. I do not see myself as an observer, but rather a participant in the process. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state, "Similarly, it makes a difference as we create field notes if we see ourselves as recorder of events "over there" or if we see ourselves as characters in the events" (pp. 105-106). The use of rich, thick description in my journals illustrates my attention to detail as well as an accurate description of the context and place in which my data is gathered. I am cognizant of the likelihood of bias within the data collection process as every story or event that

is journaled necessarily passes through my own personal thoughts and interpretations. I have chosen which stories to record and subsequently left out others. This has not been done for the purpose of the research, but rather out of time and my own personal decisions regarding the significance of the narrative. In all cases, I have been self-reflective about the accuracy of the events I recorded as well as my interpretation thereof.

Data Analysis

> The interpretations you reach and the conclusions you arrive at are not for all time; they are not necessarily generalizable, and they are not conclusive conclusions. They are for this time in this place; they are for your good and for your students' well-being, even though your learning will extend your practice and be useful for others. (Burnaford, 2001, p. 68).

I began the process of my data analysis by collecting my eighteen hand-written journals, containing 459 entries of varying lengths, and typing them into a single electronic document. This process constituted the first examination or analysis of my data. The journals I chose to include as data were based on their relevant content. By this I mean I did not include journals that contained only information regarding topics such as housekeeping duties for the classroom, or questions regarding classroom administrative problems to be solved. For example, I did not include journal entries that listed tasks such as the completion of an IEP or the creation of assignments. The journal entries I included were those that contained information or stories regarding my own or my students' experiences. These entries constituted the majority of my journals.

Once the journal entries were selected and typed, I revisited each entry and highlighted the content that resonated most strongly with me. In particular, I was searching for stories or

entries that evoked an emotional response to a memory, or left me feeling that there was more to the story than just the words I wrote down. The content in these entries called for additional thought and revisitation. Following the re-reading and highlighting of each entry, I wrote a reflection about the content of the journal entry in a different color of font. This process of reflection illustrates what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) speak to about the revisitation of journals when they state, "We return to them again and again, bringing our own restoried lives as inquirers, bringing new research puzzles, and re-searching the texts" (p. 132). After completing each reflection, I created themes in different colors of font. This process constituted the second examination of my data, and is where my themes began to evolve into a coding process. Part of that coding process included the years in which the journaling took place as well as the setting in which they took place.

Upon the completion of examining each journal entry and collecting the themes and subsequent codes, I grouped each narrative or story under their respective codes. I did this for the purpose of illustrating their ability to provide a lived example of the themes that emerged. Frequently, I found more than one theme in a given entry, and as a result, individual narratives were applicable to more than one category, theme, or code. These overarching themes then became a category of their own and are reported as such. Throughout this process, I was cognizant that based on my methodology of narrative inquiry, my purpose in the analysis of my journals was not only to create categories for my collection of narratives, but also to discover a way to represent lived stories in a way that connected them to socially significant constructs.

Importantly, through this process I found I accumulated more relevant data in terms of the amount and depth of description in my more recent years of journaling. Several factors contributed to this. First, in the past three years, I have been more interested in the possibility of

using my stories as possible data, and as a result, I have been more purposeful in my writing to include frequency, length, detail, and depth. Secondly, over the past seven years, I have taught year-round, whereas in the previous eighteen years, I taught for thirty-six weeks per year. This difference in time allowed for a greater number of entries. Additionally, I found I had more data in the years I experienced the greatest struggles in my classroom. These years are primarily made up of my nine years as a self-contained special education teacher for students with emotional and behavioral disorders as well as the past seven years at my current position. I found I had fewer entries for those years when my classroom struggles were few as well as when I had significant experiences happening in my personal life such as the birth of a child.

Taking the above into account, and upon the revisitation of my journals, themes delineated my career in education into three specific time periods. The first time period consists of my early years of teaching between the years of 1997 and 2006. The second time period, between the years of 2006 and 2015, encompassed the following nine years I spent as a self-contained special education teacher for students with emotional and behavioral disorders at the high school level. The final time period is composed of the last seven years of my teaching career at my current position. I speak more in depth to the possible reasons for this phenomenon in my findings.

Validity, Credibility, Reliability, and Verisimilitude

> The contribution of a narrative inquiry is more often intended to be the creation of a new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic than it is to yield a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42)

Definitions of validity, credibility, reliability, and verisimilitude vary depending on the type of research being conducted. For qualitative research, including narrative inquiry, findings are not the results of quantification or statistical procedures. Rather, results are based on real-life settings where events unfold naturally. This difference is illustrated by Golafshani (2003) when she states, "Unlike quantitative researchers who seek causal determination, prediction, and generalization of findings, qualitative researchers seek instead illumination, understanding, and extrapolation to similar situations" (p. 600). According to Golafshani (2003):

> Insofar as the definitions of reliability and validity in quantitative research reveal two strands: Firstly, with regards to reliability, whether the result is replicable. Secondly, with regards to validity, whether the means of measurement are accurate and whether they are actually measuring what they are intended to measure. However, the concepts of reliability and validity are viewed differently by qualitative researchers who strongly consider these concepts defined in quantitative terms inadequate. In other words, these terms as defined in quantitative terms may not apply to the qualitative research paradigm. (pp. 600-601)

As such, "reliability, validity, and triangulation, if they are to be relevant researcher concepts, particularly from a qualitative point of view, have to be redefined as we have seen in order to reflect the multiple ways of establishing truth" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 604). Therefore, terminology typically associated with quantitative research, including reliability, validity, and triangulation, are reconceptualized by qualitative researchers as rigor, trustworthiness, and quality (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Golafshani, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seale, 1999; Stenbacka, 2001). As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) tell us, "It is important not to squeeze the language of narrative criteria into a language created for other forms of research" (p. 7).

For the quantitative researcher, validity is defined as "the result and culmination of other empirical conceptions: universal laws, evidence, objectivity, truth, actuality, deduction, reason, fact and mathematical data" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 599). For the qualitative researcher, validity is defined as the "appropriateness of the tools, processes, and data" (Leung, 2015, p. 324). Therefore, validity in qualitative research embraces the exploration of reflexivity, subjectivity, and social interactions (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Golafshani, 2003). Leung (2015) states:

> While human emotions and perspectives from both subjects and researchers are considered undesirable biases confounding results in quantitative research, the same elements are considered essential and inevitable if not treasurable, in qualitative research as they invariable add extra dimensions and colors to enrich the corpus of findings. (p. 324)

For Polkinghorne (2007), validity refers to the "believability of a statement or knowledge claim" (p. 474). In narrative inquiry, and for the purposes of my research, "validity relates to personal meaning drawn from stories, not to an observable, measurable truth" (Thomas, 2012, p. 216). For the qualitative researcher, or narrative inquirer, the trustworthiness of what people say indicates validity and "does not have to be verified against traditional criteria in order to count as knowledge" (Thomas, 2012, p. 212). As such, the goal of the narrative inquirer is not to report facts but rather articulate meaning through the interpretation of experience (Thomas, 2012). According to Kramp (2004), "It follows, then, that narrative inquiry readily accesses such understanding, whereas impersonal research instruments reveal neither understanding nor meaning to the researcher, nor typically even to the one who had the experience and is telling the story" (p. 108).

Reliability, according to quantitative research is defined as "The idea of replicability or repeatability of results or observations" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 598). Taking into account the multitude and diverse paradigms of qualitative methodologies, "such definition of reliability is challenging and epistemologically counter-intuitive" (Leung, 2015, p. 324). Replicability in narrative inquiry is not applicable in that the research itself is fluid, changing, and temporal (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Schwab, 1960). Furthermore, "The purposes, and what one is exploring and finds puzzling, change as the research progresses" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 73). According to Eisner (1991), qualitative studies can help us "understand a situation that would otherwise be enigmatic or confusing" (p. 58). As such, the reliability in quantitative research serves the "purpose of explaining," and the level of quality in a qualitative study "generates understanding" (Stenbacka, 2001, p. 551). The certainty implied in reliability as conceptualized by quantitative research is anathema to narrative as "Emotion, value, felt experience with the world, memory and narrative explanations of one's past do not stand still in a way that allows for certainty" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 37).

The very complexity of people, their lives, including their continuously evolving stories, defies the ability stop time, rewind, and reassess to ensure the human experience plays out the same way time and time again. As a result, we must find other ways to address the quality of our work in qualitative fields such as narrative inquiry. Golafshani (2003) suggests we engage in "multiple methods" for the purposes of data triangulation (p. 604). Furthermore, he purports that "The methods chosen in triangulation to test the validity and reliability of a study depend on the criterion of the research" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 604). For the purposes of my research, my triangulation consists of a reexamination of my observations, records of stories and conversations as recorded in my journals. This is done to ensure the trustworthiness in the

authenticity of my research as it is narrated in my work. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to this as an "inquiry audit" (p. 317). Hoepfl (1997) and Golafshani (2003) suggest this is helpful in the examination of product and process for the purposes of evaluating research consistency.

Credibility in quantitative research is dependent on instrument construction. In qualitative research, however, "the researcher is the instrument" (Patton, 2002, p. 14). As such, "the credibility of qualitative research findings relies to a great extent on the researcher's skill" (Stewart, 2010, p. 293). Therefore, we are drawn to the credibility of the researcher herself. The nature of narrative inquiry, its interpretive scope, calls for reflexivity. By applying reflexivity, the researcher acknowledges "the importance of self-awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one's perspective" (Patton, 2002, p. 64). In doing so, the researcher must "undertake an ongoing examination of *what I know and how I know it*" (Patton, 2002, p. 64). This process is illustrated in the autobiographical nature of narrative inquiry, where acknowledging one's place within the research is clearly accounted for.

According to Kramp (2004):

> The researcher understands that each story has a point of view that will differ, depending on who is telling the story, who is being told, as well as when and where the story is told. Consequently, verisimilitude—appearance or likelihood that something is or could be true or real—is a more appropriate criterion for narrative knowing than verification or proof of truth. What the storyteller "tells" is what is significant for the researcher, who desires to understand the meaning of a particular phenomenon rather than to gather information about it. (Kramp, 2004, p. 108).

It is presumed then, the narrative inquirer, through the creation of texts, understands that readers will use the work to suit their own particular imaginations and applications (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Again, certainty of meaning, is not guaranteed. Freeman (2015) states:

> Will we ever know for certain why this happened? Can we ever put together a definitive account? The answer is clearly no. Narrative understanding is interpretive through and through, and although we can certainly hope for *better* accounts – more comprehensive, deeper, more fully able to accommodate the known facts – there is no final point of arrival. This may be disturbing to some. But there is no getting around the fact that, in the realm of narrative, we are always and inevitably reading for meaning, knowing all the while that our accounts are destined to remain provisional. (p. 29)

I compare this concept of verisimilitude in narrative research to that of a human library. Every new story adds to the collection of lived experiences. While the stories may be catalogued according to topic, each volume can stand on its own, and as such will be read by individuals who will interpret it through their own eyes. As such, "Any work of qualitative research, when read by the readers, is always a two-way interactive process, such that validity and quality has to be judged by the receiving end too and not by the researcher end alone" (Leung, 2015, p. 324).

Chapter 4 - Findings Section 1: Teaching and Learning 1997-2006

"the truth about stories is that that's all we are" – Thomas King

Introduction

For twenty-five years, I have recorded the stories of my personal experience as a teacher ranging from my earliest years as a novice special education teacher in a rural school district in northeast Kansas, to my current position at an alternative high school serving primarily students of color from marginalized backgrounds. It is an astonishing evolution of consciousness covering over two decades of intellectual and personal transformation. The decision to revisit and relive these years was daunting. For some, revisiting the past is a walk down memory lane. For me, it was a thousand-mile journey across a rugged, often brutal landscape filled with stories of joy, but more often, sadness. My stories and my memories found me living in their midst, entangled in their complexities, causing me to relive my past, examine my present, and imagine my future. In many ways, it was a cathartic exercise, allowing me to understand my life as a teacher from a deeply holistic perspective. I realized through this process, my stories were significant and meaningful. Lopez (1990) tells us, "The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed" (p. 60). It is in this place, at this time, I feel they are needed.

As I revisited and analyzed my journal entries, themes and subthemes emerged. Phrases and feelings surfaced that stood out as profound memories. Additionally, my themes were founded on research and are articulated as such. That being said, I do not claim the purpose of my analysis was to prove or generalize my findings. Rather, it was a rediscovery of a career-long

gathering of stories. It was a deep dive into my personal experiences over 25 years of teaching. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) clearly articulate this when they state:

> As we tell our stories as inquirers, it is experience, not narrative, that is the driving impulse. We came to narrative inquiry as a way to study experience. For us, narrative is the closest we can come to experience. Because experience is our concern, we find ourselves trying to avoid strategies, tactics, rules, and techniques that flow out of theoretical considerations of narrative. Our guiding principle in an inquiry is to focus on experience and to follow where it leads. (p. 188)

After an exhaustive review of my personal journals, I discovered my journey could be best understood by examining my findings in three separate time frames. The themes that emerged lent themselves to groups of findings that tied particular years together. A flow of themes became apparent as I revisited my journals, marked by substantial changes that mirrored my career in terms of teaching position, time and place. I have indicated the year from which journal entries were taken in the parenthesis following each excerpt. The first section of my findings encompasses the first nine years of my career between the years of 1997 to 2006.

Section 1: Teaching and Learning 1997-2006

"*Today I was given my new classroom, my first classroom. It is literally a ball room. When I met with the principal last week, he told me that I would be housed at the high school in a mobile unit. I guess that changed. Today, he took me to the elementary school gym. We walked through the gym towards a door that led into a small room that is lined with shelves made of plastic tubes that have a million balls on them. There are basket balls, volley balls, kick balls, balls, balls, balls. I didn't even know what to say. All I could picture was the most awful game of dodge ball in this history of the world, with me as the loser. I was told that there would be*

someone to come move them out. There is only one door and no windows. It is literally a closet. This is not what I had pictured for my first classroom.

The principal left, and I just sat there wondering what I had I gotten myself into. Pretty sure he wanted to get the heck out of there. I think I was in shock. Thankfully, someone showed up in the afternoon to pick up all the balls and move them. I was allowed to come and go as I pleased, so I went and picked up some stuff from the high school to decorate my ball room. I also went home and grabbed some personal things like pictures, posters and stuff I thought looked "schoolish," and some Christmas lights. I spent the rest of the afternoon trying to make my closet/ball room look like a classroom. I lined the tops of the walls with the Christmas lights, and the plastic tubes, too. I also found some books at home that I brought in. I get the feeling that they want me to stay in here most of the time. The only time I was told we can't leave is when the kids from the elementary school are in the gym for PE. Thankfully, there is a bathroom in the gym. I will only have one student starting tomorrow, and everything I have learned about him is from an IEP meeting I sat in on. I've only seen him once, and we have barely even spoken. I have no clue what I am doing. They told me that I can work on whatever I want with this kid. I have his IEP that has his ability levels and all the trouble he's been in. That's it." (1997)

According to the literature, novice special education teachers face unique difficulties upon entering their careers. As a result, about half of special education teachers depart within the first five years of their career (Bar, 2015; Billingsley, 2004; Swanson, Murri, & Murri, 2006). According to Barr (2015):

> Alongside the professional and personal challenges that face the new teachers, the beginning of the path in teaching is described in the research literature as one of the

> complex, difficult, and critical periods during the career of teachers, in which they are disturbed by problems of survival. (p. 378)

Having revisited my journals from the first nine years of my teaching career, the word "survival," to describe them seems fitting. Thankfully, I did survive and even managed to beat the five-year statistic that undoubtedly ended the career of so many qualified special educators. In my first years as an educator, the reality of what I did not know about teaching set in very early on. Only as the years passed did I begin to use my experiences to increase my chances of survival. The research confirms my personal experience as it suggests job retention and satisfaction of special education teachers typically increases with experience (Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Nelson, Maculan, Robers, & Ohlund, 2001). The evidence of the evolution of my experiences and their effects are illustrated by the themes that arose within my journals. Among these are my lack of preparation, experience, growth, and connections, and the defense of my students.

Theme 1: I Don't Know What to Do

My second research question, how does storytelling act as a medium for building caring relationships and community in the classroom, is preempted by a period of floundering that did not begin with an understanding that relationship was the precursor to successful teaching. Rather, the primary focus of my first three years of teaching was on my own survival. I began my teaching career on a special education waiver. I had not received any training in special education with the exception of one class during my undergraduate years. It was a two-hour course called The Exceptional Student in the Secondary School. Although I felt underprepared, I agreed to teach in a special education classroom under a waiver with the understanding that I would actively pursue my master's degree in the field within a two-year period. I was not alone.

Clark-Chiarelli and Singer (1995) found that nearly 43% of special education teachers serving students with EBD did not hold the appropriate credentials to do so. In revisiting my journals, I found a myriad of entries expressing my lack of preparedness for what I had been tasked to do. As I read, I found the following statements that illustrate my thoughts at the time:

"I have no clue what I am doing" (1997).

"I had no lessons, and I had no plan" (1997).

"I know how to teach high school history. I do not know how to teach elementary school math, or science, or social studies, or reading. I don't know what I am doing and I think I am failing them" (1997).

"I am alone, stuck in this classroom without anyone else who knows what they are doing, and I don't feel like I have anyone I can talk to" (1997).

"They treat me like a newbee, and because I'm so lost, I don't know what to say. I'm sure they think I am stupid" (1997).

"No one prepared me for this" (1998).

"How am I supposed to know what every kid is learning at every different grade level?" (1997).

"I feel absolutely lost" (1998).

"School is great, but learning about the characteristics of my students does nothing to help me handle them any better" (1998).

"They told me to use the state standards, but I don't even know where to find them!" (1999).

"I thought they were going to kill each other and me, too. I had no idea how to stop the fight. I ended up calling the administrator and when he showed up, they stopped fighting immediately. I felt so stupid like I didn't know what the hell I was doing" (1999).

"He's really sad and I don't know what to do" (1999).

These statements are taken from the first three years of my journals. They reflect my lack of preparation in terms of classroom management, curriculum development, and strategies for working with students with emotional and behavioral needs. They also convey a sense of self-doubt and a lack of connection with my colleagues. This sense of isolation was not only mental, but physical as well. The lack of support I received surely affected my feelings of insecurity. Perhaps, had I been given a mentor or even if my classroom was located in a place where I had the opportunity to connect with others, I might have felt more secure in the work I was tasked to do. If my experience was remotely close to those of other new special education teachers, it might explain the high rate of attrition in the field.

In terms of my job responsibilities, I was tasked with creating lessons to meet the needs of a small number of students whose academic and intellectual abilities varied from subject to subject. Their emotional and behavioral needs, however, were at the forefront of my concern as I discovered that learning could not occur if I could not control my classroom. It seems ridiculous that a classroom with a certified teacher and five students would be unmanageable, but rest assured, there were times when chaos ruled the day. It did not seem to matter how much planning or creativity I put into a lesson, as all it took was one student to refuse the work, or another to start an argument, to ruin my plans. On one occasion, I wrote:

> *I spent the weekend writing out this amazing lesson plan that I divided over the course of five days. I wrote it all out, day by day, and even wrote down the time I needed to complete each part of the lesson. I made sure that each student could participate and that there were engaging activities that didn't make them sit still and read. I had plans of going outside. I even had a movie built in. I borrowed all this cool stuff on "The Outsiders" from the English teacher. I thought they would like it. Well, they didn't. If this*

keeps going, I should be able to get through my lesson plan by the end of the year. On the bright side, no more lesson plans will be necessary. (1997)

When I re-read this entry, I could feel the defeat in my voice like it was yesterday.

A Shift in Focus

I had left the comfort and security of my classrooms at Kansas State University and my supportive student-teaching environment to find myself in a situation in which I was expected to have the experience and knowledge of a seasoned educator. I had neither. Barr (2015) states, "The terms of 'first year shock' or 'reality shock' are concepts that appear in different forms in the research studies that address the beginning teacher and address the gap between the beginning teacher's expectations and the reality he encounters" (p. 381). I was living in this gap between expectation and reality. In my second year of teaching, I wrote, *"I dreaded going to school today. I got up knowing that my day was going to be one conflict after another, and I don't know why I am doing this"* (1998). As time passed, I began to write more about the emotional and affective aspects of my days in the classroom. In retrospect, I find that this shift from a focus on the technical aspects of my teaching to my focus on the students and their individual lives marked the beginning of my understanding of relationship and its underpinning in the future of my success as a teacher. I had survived, and consequently, I began to ask questions, think more deeply, and act more courageously as an advocate for my students.

"*Today I got a new student. He's a tall, skinny kid who doesn't say much. He was brought into my classroom by the principal first thing in the morning. We had his IEP meeting last week. I got the feeling immediately that he didn't want to be there. The IEP was awkward and the family was not invested at all. His parents looked pissed the whole time. I don't think they like anyone at the school at all. I questioned their prior experience with the people in the*

room. There are only five other kids in the classroom now, but I think that makes a kid feel even more seen. Every kid knows each other in this tiny school. Before he came in, I think the kids knew he was coming. The other teacher I work with has talked a lot about his family. That seems to be a theme in these tiny towns. I think it's pretty bad how even the teachers perpetuate this. They say his dad is a drunk and his mom stays home and lives off welfare. There are a lot of people in town with his same last name, and they are all referred to as "trash." I imagine this kid is pretty pissed off most of the time about the life he is living at home and the way that people talk about him and his family. It was probably only a matter of time before he ended up with me. He spent the day with his arms crossed, leaning back in his chair, not saying much. The other kids pretty much left him alone. I tried talking to him several times, but he didn't really respond. He kept saying, "I'm fine. Just leave me alone." I think he needs time to adjust. I'll try again to connect with him tomorrow." (1997)

Upon a closer reading of this entry, I found my focus shifted from how to handle the student to a concern for the student himself. The mention of his family, his feelings about being placed in my classroom, his perceptions regarding his reputation in the community, and the desire to "connect with him" are in stark contrast to my prior entries focused on my frustration with classroom management and curriculum development. In a (2014) interview, Carl Smith spoke to the stigma of understanding students from an "ecological perspective." He makes reference to a student who "was carrying a lot of baggage that was literally his family baggage," and he calls us to "get to know the dynamics of a community and how things carry over from one generation to the next" (Smith, 2015). These words were applicable to my new-found relationships with students whose reputations in the community may have affected my presumptions regarding their desire and ability to learn. The stories I began to record were not

devoid of frustration, but the frustration began to turn toward a system that appeared pitted against my students. Perhaps this was due to my change in classrooms. In the fall of 1999, I took a new position as a self-contained teacher for students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders at an affluent middle school in a new town. I had a renewed sense of hope.

The program I would be in charge of was brand new to the middle school. I believe the increasing number of students diagnosed with EBD led to the creation of my position. According to Lane, Wheby, Little, and Cooley (2005):

> During the 1998–2000 school year, over 32% of students in the United States with EBD spent more than 56% of their school day outside of the general education classroom, with another 18% receiving service in some type of separate facility. (p. 350)

It is unclear as to whether this was as a result of the students' needs, or a rejection by the school community in general. As in my previous position, my new classroom was relatively isolated. I was located in a small classroom behind the main office of the school. The room had previously been used for students serving in-school suspension. All of my students were primarily served in this space with little opportunity to access general education classrooms. This time, however, I was not alone. I was given the opportunity to hire a para-professional to assist me. To my great delight, I found an incredibly gifted, empathetic, and intelligent woman to work alongside me. In retrospect, I realize that having someone to share my days with and to discuss the issues facing the students in our classroom made my work less stressful and more effective.

The students I served in this position were extraordinarily challenging. However, the support staff I had access to, including my para-professional, the school social worker, nurse, counselor, and outside mental health services, made my job significantly easier. I did not feel as alone as I had in my previous position. It is reasonable to suggest that this level of support

including the input of caring, educated others allowed me to focus more deeply on the needs of the students as opposed to my own survival. My journals, as a result, began to reflect my concern for individual students including their personal histories as well as their relationship with me. Still, I continued to struggle with behaviors that left me baffled and often saddened. Jonathan, Trevor, and Jimmy's stories help to illustrate these struggles.

"*Jonathan lost it today in class. Thank God Mental Health was there to help me. He refused to do anything and was being really disruptive and saying horrible things to the other students. It finally escalated to where he was shoving things off desks and turning furniture over. David from Mental Health was able to get him into the quiet room where he couldn't do anymore damage. They wrestled for God knows how long to get him in there and to get the door closed. It was awful. We gave him his lunch, and he rubbed it all over the walls. He tried climbing the walls to punch out the ceiling tiles. He was able to wedge his foot against an electrical socket and stretch himself out enough to get at the ceiling tiles. Once he had one, he tore it to pieces. There was pizza sauce and ceiling tiles everywhere. He was sweaty and filthy and it was the worst. Finally, the end of the day came and David was going to take him home. He said that Jonathan was too messy to put in his car, so he would walk him home. Today was a bad day. And I don't know what I could have done to prevent it. But I don't think all the other kids seeing Jonathan behave like that and our inability to help the situation was a good thing. I hate that room. And I hate that Jonathan's day was probably even worse than mine. I don't know what tomorrow will be like for him. But I hope it is better than today."* (2000)

"*The guy from maintenance came to the classroom today to fix the quiet room. I guess since Jonathan tore it up and had access to the ceiling where there are wires and things, that it isn't safe to keep kids in there. I wonder, regardless of the wiring, is it safe or even human to*

keep kids in there. They removed the outlet and put Plexiglas on all the walls so there is no way anyone could use anything to leverage themselves upward. They had me go in the room to see if I could find anything else that the kids could use to climb or hurt themselves with. When the guy closed the door, I panicked. It's hard to breath being so pregnant, but this made it even worse. I got myself together, looked around, and said it was fine. I wasn't in there for more than two minutes, but it felt like a lifetime. Jesus, what do the kids feel like being in there?" (2000)

Jonathan's story is exemplary of the shift in the focus away from my own feelings to the feelings and experiences of my students. Several quotes from this entry identify this shift. They include, "*Jonathan's day was even worse than mine*," "*Is it safe or even human to keep kids in there*," "*I wasn't in there for more than two minutes, but it felt like a lifetime. Jesus, what do the kids feel like being in there*." Being able to see the inner-workings of my own classroom from a perspective of one other than my own shows the growth I was unknowingly undergoing as a result of time and experience.

"*Trevor had a really bad day in class today. Any time any other kid says anything to him that upsets him, he just falls apart. Today, he started crying out of frustration. His head was in his desk, and he just started pounding his fists so hard that I thought he would break the desk. I was worried that this would end up going south. I know this kid is on the Autism spectrum but his parents won't have him tested. I don't get the stigma fear for parents when he could finally get the services he needs. I'm really frustrated working with him. He's really volatile and dangerous. I don't trust him. I don't feel like I'm doing anything to help him. I try to talk with him and he doesn't respond. I give him his assignments and he just sits there. I think he is in his own head all the time. I also wonder what it is like in his house. I feel like I'm not being very successful with most of the kids. It's really quiet all the time, and I don't feel like I'm making any*

connections. I'm doing something wrong. But I think it is because I feel so isolated. My kids and I are just stuck in my classroom all day. There isn't any joy. I need to come up with something new. Maybe something we can all do together." (2001)

Trevor's story illustrates an increased self-awareness of the effects of my own feelings on my students. Richardson and Shupe (2003) state, "Increased self-awareness involves a more accurate understanding of how students affect our own emotional processes and behaviors and how we affect students, as well. Self-awareness is particularly important for teachers who work with students with emotional and behavioral disorders" (p. 8). Statements including, "*I was worried*," "*I'm really frustrated*," "*I don't feel like I'm doing anything to help*," "*I don't feel like I'm making any connections*," "*I'm doing something wrong*," and "*There isn't any joy*," indicate I was identifying my own emotional reactions to situations within my classroom. Again, there was a shift from a solitary focus on my own feelings to a more holistic understanding of how we were all functioning as a classroom community.

"*Yesterday, Jimmy lost it in my classroom. Daniel said something to him under his breath so I couldn't hear it, and Jimmy went after him. I didn't hear what Daniel said, so I was totally unprepared for what happened. But Jimmy was vicious. He was punching Daniel in his head and I had no other choice but to restrain him physically. My belly is so big now, that holding on to him was nearly impossible. All the MANDT training in the world didn't prepare me for this. I finally got him restrained on my right side. I was able to get him to the floor and talk to him to try to calm him down, but it didn't work. He had on slick pants that allowed him to slide down and out of my restraint. He got to where my arms were holding him and he started biting me just above my wrists. He bit me so hard that I had to let go of one of my arms and then he started throwing blows at me with his elbow. At that point I realized that my baby was more important*

than holding onto this kid. After Nancy ran for help, the principal came in and just stood there watching the whole thing. I was mortified because as I was trying to hold onto Jimmy, my dress was slipping up and I was terrified that I was going to expose myself to everyone in the room, including the damn principal. When Jimmy got loose, he ran out of the room. I was told later they called the police and they found him hiding outside of the school. I called Dr. Patterson and told him I had been bitten. I had to go see him. He wrapped up my arms with several bandages. He did an ultrasound to make me feel better since I had been hit in the belly. Thank God everything is fine. I picked up John from school and went to file a police report. The police officer gave John a stuffed animal. It was an eagle that talked when you pushed a button. I don't ever want to see that kid again, but I doubt that will happen. I really can't wait to have this baby so I can have some time off." (2000)

Burnout

These journal entries illustrate the level of stress I worked under for three years. Despite the assistance from my colleagues, I found evidence within my journals that I was reaching the point of burnout. A thorough review revealed many more references to my frustration with my inability to connect with and help my students. This provides evidence of research suggesting teachers who suffer from burnout have a lack of student-teacher connection as well as inefficacious feelings about their teaching abilities (Burke, Greenglass, & Schwarzer, 1996; Chang, 2009). Significant statements from my journals illustrating this lack of connection and feelings of ineffectiveness include:

"I really think staying in this room all day is making us all crazy" (2000).

"No matter how much help he receives, he doesn't change, and I can't seem to help him change, either" (2000).

"She isn't learning because she is angry all the time. I have tried to make headway with her, but it doesn't seem to work. I tried working one-on-one with her, and joking and laughing with her. It worked for a minute, but then she just got angry again and wanted me to leave her alone" (2000).

"I don't know what to do about this classroom dynamic. Every kid seems to have a problem with every other kid in the class. And every day feels like a repeat of the last" (2000).

Isolation

Within the context of this first theme, a subtheme, isolation, emerged. Evidence of my lack of preparedness was obvious. My feelings of isolation were less so. Chambers (2008) states, "The design of special education delivery systems in many school leads to increased isolation when special education teachers enter their classrooms and close the door" (p. 27). Several quotes from my journals reveal my feelings of isolation. These quotes include *"I am alone," "They want me to stay in here most of the time," My kids and I are just stuck in my classroom all day,"* and *"I think staying in this room all day is making us crazy."*

Additionally, I found evidence I viewed myself in a sense of social isolation as well. I was an outsider from the city, and unknown in the community. To be certain, I was unaware of the effects of rural politics on students and teachers alike. I was often the object of awkward stares and whispers behind my back. Perhaps, just as I had made assumptions about my students based on their social standing in the community, so had my community made assumptions about me. I also found a pattern of isolation within my students. For students to be placed in my classroom necessarily meant they would have limited contact with their non-disabled peers in the regular education setting. My story about Jonathan in the quiet room depicts the forced isolation of students from their peers. Likewise, quotes such as "*I try to talk with him and he doesn't*

respond," illuminates the isolation my students may have been feeling within their own classroom, or perhaps our lack of relationship resulted in a lack of trust in terms of sharing what was really on our minds.

Theme 2: Experience, Growth, and Connections

While most of my journal entries, particularly in my first years of teaching, were overwhelmingly consumed with frustration and sadness, there were also many that expressed my personal growth as a teacher and person resulting from my growing years of experience. As I revisited my journals, I found my entries included references to personal connections with students. I found words of hope intermingled with words of desperation. Most often, these entries centered around a single experience. Each one illustrated lessons I learned as a result of being present with my students in situations that affected us all. These experiences relate much more closely to my research question regarding the growth of relationships and community through storytelling.

Among the entries I revisited that illustrated this theme, I found the following:

"Tracy told me about her dog that they had to put to sleep. She was so sad and I spent a long time with her today just talking about all the dogs I have had and how much I loved them and what they meant to me. We had tears together, and also shared stories about our favorite dog moments. We found a connection over her loss that we never had before. I think this connection may go a long way toward helping her to believe in me, that I want what is best for her, and that she can trust me." (2000)

"Today, Demi shared a really funny story with the class and we all laughed out loud! It was such a relief to feel like we were just a bunch of happy people. She told us how her dad slipped on a bottle of dishwashing soap her mom accidentally spilled in the Dollar Store. After

she was done with her story, we each told our own stories of embarrassing, funny things that had happened to us. No one felt embarrassed at that moment. It's like we were all human, and connected over something stupid like falling down in public. Today was a good day." (2001)

"Today we got to go to the gym and participate in the egg drop experiment. The science teacher brought our class in by ourselves and taught us the same lesson he taught his other classes. We had a blast. Every kid participated. I was amazed. I think the science teacher even had fun. The kids got to watch their egg drop contraptions ride up on the forklift thing and be dropped. They were so excited. I went last and my egg broke into a million pieces and all the kids laughed. Tabitha won the competition and everyone congratulated her. No harsh words were spoken, we just enjoyed our time. I loved today." (2002)

"Diana had a bit of a meltdown today, but I was able to sit very close to her and walk her through it. She told me that her sister had destroyed some of her things because she was mad at her. Diana had retaliated and she got in trouble with her mom. I asked her about her things and what they meant to her and I shared how I had had a similar experience when my sister had destroyed some of my things as well and how that made me feel. I think she felt better just knowing that I understood where she was coming from." (2002)

"Today was remarkable! I had Abigail's IEP meeting after lunch and there were a ton of people there. We were talking about what we were learning in class. In English, we have been doing our novel study on Frankenstein. The kids really love it. Abigail has been really contributing despite her struggle with communicating. She is so courageous to speak out to her peers about what her thoughts are about what we are reading. At the IEP, I asked Abigail about her thoughts on Frankenstein, and she said the most amazing thing… she said, "I love this book so much because it's about a person who is tortured by others for the way he looks. They don't

know how smart he is, or what he has to offer, or how badly he wants to be loved, because they can only see the way he looks on the outside. I feel like that a lot of the time, so I am really glad that Mrs. Eickhoff chose this book for us because I think it helps other kids see that people who look damaged like me are important and smart and nice." I swear there wasn't a dry eye in that meeting. Her mom was openly weeping and so was I. I don't know if I've ever felt better as a teacher in my whole life. I remember thinking that I was way in over my head working with a student with such profound disabilities. And now I realize that Abigail's disabilities are absolutely nothing compared with her amazing ability to learn and express herself from such a unique position. I am relieved to know that I will never operate from a position of fear again when it comes to people with physical disabilities. Today was a really good day." (2005)

Previously, I spoke about the relationship I had with my student, Emmanuel, who passed away from cancer and how it changed me. Throughout my teaching career, there have been only two other students who have had such a profound effect on my life. When I revisited my journal entries about Katie, I decided to combine them into a story. For me, her story represents the fragility of life, and the absolute joy that comes from building relationships with students. Like Emmanuel, Katie and I were extraordinarily close. Her story goes with me into every relationship I build. As such, "Living in the midst of these stories, and our interactions with them, they become part of who we are and who we are becoming" (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013, p. 215).

It's was the last day of 7th grade for Katie, and the last time we would be together the same way we had been for the last year. Katie was a tiny, beautiful little girl, with blonde hair and sparkly blue eyes. She was pure sweetness through and through. She didn't have a mean bone in her body. Everyone was her friend and she exuded kindness wherever she went. She had

a small voice that mimicked her stature, and a quiet presence that radiated joy and peacefulness. I simply loved this sweet girl. Katie was a constant comfort to others and she made a point to befriend those who were lonely or sad. She had the gift of empathy so rarely found in students her age. I recall a time when Katie asked if she could be the person who helped a blind student navigate the lunch room. Not only did she help the student get his lunch, but she also sat with him in the lunch room, as well.

Katie was quick to help others, and when she had grasped a concept that others were struggling with, she would step in and help explain things to her peers. She never felt sorry for herself, even though she had every right to. Her love of life overrode any historical trauma that might have otherwise turned her into a sad, angry, or bitter young woman. Katie had a learning disability, forged in the womb, stemming from her mother's addiction. Her father was a much older man who never claimed her, and who was living in a nursing home in Katie's home town. Her story had a sad beginning, one that seemed might be insurmountable, but also one of triumph insomuch as she had overcome all the odds stacked against her.

Katie was taken away from her mother three years ago, and brought to live with her brother who was stationed at the military base close to our school. Her brother, Mark, was married to a wonderful young woman, Mary, who had stepped up, along with her husband, to care for Katie. They had become awesome parents for Katie, incredibly supportive and kind. We were in contact at least a couple of times a week to discuss Katie's progress. She was truly blessed to have them. Both Mark and Mary worked jobs that made it hard for them to get Katie to school, so in her best interest, they moved to a home that made it possible for Katie to walk to school. Katie's learning disability was one that could qualify her for an extended school year should her IEP team feel her learning would regress significantly over the summer. After

meeting with the team, talking with Mark and Mary, and taking into account Katie would be home by herself during the day while they worked, it was decided that Katie would attend summer school. Ultimately, however, I felt like it was my recommendation that led to this decision.

On the last day of school, Katie and I sat knees to knees and told each other our favorite memories of each other, and we talked about how much we cared for one another. The tears flowed as we laughed together. She was sad that I wouldn't be teaching summer school, but she understood I had a baby girl at home to take care of. My daughter, Amelia, had been born the previous August. We gave each other a huge hug, and I walked Katie to the doors of the school and told her I would see her soon. I left school that year excited to spend my summer with my husband and children. I would work in my flower garden and enjoy the long evenings relaxing and dancing in the kitchen with my baby girl. On the morning of the first day of summer school, I received a phone call. It was my dear friend, the science teacher, on the other end of the line. She told me to stay calm. That morning, on the way to school, Katie was crossing the street and was hit by a car going 30 miles per hour. She was thrown in the air, like a tiny kite, and landed on the pavement, broken into what seemed a million pieces. But, she was still alive. Barely alive.

I immediately made arrangements for my babysitter to care for my children and I set off to meet my para, Nancy, and our principal at the school. From there, we made the two-hour trip to the trauma hospital where Katie had been life flighted. Along the way, there were constant prayers, both out loud and in the most-quiet places in our hearts. It was the only way to take our focus off the panic and dread we were all feeling. We were all in a place that called us to recognize our total inability to control the situation. We were swirling around in a storm of uncertainty. We arrived to find Mark and Mary in a heap in the ICU waiting area. I was

overwhelmed with their grief along with my own. Mark explained the situation. Katie had sustained massive brain injuries and multiple fractures throughout her tiny body. Her brain was swelling beyond the confines of her skull and her prognosis was not good. Mark and Mary told me that I could go see her and say my goodbyes in case Katie did not make it through this. I had no words, just a nod that I understood.

Nancy was with me, and we held each other's hands tightly as we walked into Katie's room. When I saw her, my stomach climbed into my heart. I think Nancy and I channeled all of our fear through the connection of our hands, parceling it out between two people instead of one, so we could make it through this moment. Sharing grief and fear sometimes makes survival possible. Katie was hooked up to several machines. She had a large plastic tube coming out of her skull. Her face was scratched up, but not so much that she wasn't recognizable. Rather, she was still her beautiful, tiny self, and I recall thinking that she looked peaceful. Under that façade of peacefulness, however, I knew Katie was fighting for her life. My friend, Nancy, had a tremendous faith and I was never so glad to be in the presence of that in my life. We stood on either side of Katie's bed and held her hands. Nancy prayed for Katie. I could not. I could not find words. All I could think about was my decision to send Katie to summer school. All I could see was her little body flying through the air. All I could feel was the hug that we gave each other the last time we said goodbye.

We stayed with Katie for about a half an hour. I remember sitting in a chair and resting my head against the cold metal rail on the side of her bed. I remember hearing the constant beeping of machines, especially the one breathing for Katie. In and out, in and out, in and out, swooshing like the sound of the deep breaths you take when you are in labor trying to push a child out of your body. They are the breaths you count … one, two, three, four. Before it was time

to go, Nancy prayed life over Katie. It was a guttural plea for her to continue living. Growing up in a medical family, I knew the odds of Katie's survival, and the likely effects of her injuries. I knew, acutely, of the suffering Katie had survived throughout her young life. She had shared her story of how she was found in her mother's apartment, dirty, hungry, and suffering while her mother lay passed out in a stupor brought on by drugs and alcohol. I knew she was loved for being the person she was despite her history. Her resilience was astounding, but this was too much. No child should have to suffer like this. I knew she would never be the same. So, I told Katie I loved her, so much more than she would ever know. Then, I told her it was okay to go, that she would be okay. I kissed her little forehead, squeezed her hand, and said I love you in a deep exhale that left me breathless. I walked out of Katie's room, and I never thought I would see her again.

Over the next two months, Katie miraculously made tiny steps toward survival. She was transferred to a rehabilitation hospital in our town. I went see her several days a week. I would bring baby Amelia and she would sit on the edge of Katie's bed. Katie would open her eyes and smile, but she wouldn't talk. I could see the toll it had taken on Mark and Mary. They were weary and battered. I worried about them being so young and so burdened by such tragedy. Summer passed and it was time to go back to school. I would still go see Katie, but with my workload and my own family, it wasn't as frequent. Her progress was slow, but her nurses assured me that my visits and the interaction I had with her helped. I wasn't so sure. I found myself growing angry at what happened to Katie. The man who hit her had passed a car that had slowed down for her. He never saw her. He had been to see Mark and Mary to apologize, and his life was torn to pieces knowing what he had done. No one in her life remained unscathed. Her accident was nothing more than that, an accident, and it made me shake my fist at God. Why

would He allow this to happen to someone as innocent and precious as Katie? It made going to see her even more difficult. I couldn't find my girl in there anywhere. She was gone. She was stuck in a body that wouldn't cooperate. I knew she would never be the same and it hardened my heart.

The next year, a month after school started, America was attacked on September 11th, 2001, the day before my 30th birthday. I was in my homeroom class with about 25 students. Our principal came over the intercom and said, "Teachers, please turn on your televisions. A national tragedy has occurred." We watched the second plane fly into the south tower. Only when the bodies were falling and landing on the street and cars, making that horrifying noise, did the principal tell us to turn off our televisions. I vividly remember telling the students that they will remember this moment forever. I shared with them my story of the Challenger explosion that occurred during my junior year of high school, killing all seven astronauts aboard the ship, and how Crista McAuliffe was a teacher. I also told them my mom's story of how she learned about President Kennedy's assassination while she was sitting at a hospital nursing station years before I was born. We talked about watershed moments. I told them we would forever be stuck in this moment together.

Our school was placed on lockdown. Arrangements were being made for parents to pick up their children early, but it was a time-consuming process. My classroom phone rang, and it was the principal again. He asked me to escort Sarah to the office, that her father was there to see her. I thought it was strange. Why would a father come visit his child at school on a day like today? I asked Sarah to come with me and we walked together through the silent halls toward the main office. We were still quite a way away from the office when I saw Sarah's dad. He was dressed in his military uniform, his dress uniform, and he was covered in ribbons and military

decorations. He was also draped in a cloak of fatherhood and sacrifice, and he walked towards his little girl, who knew right away that her dad was leaving. I could feel her little heart beat as she ran to him. Sarah and her father talked for a short time. I stood back and watched as Sarah said goodbye to him. He reassured her that her mom would be there to get her soon. As he left, I could sense his resolute purpose and duty rise up and carry him out of the school and away from his child. Sarah waited in the counselor's office for her mom to come to pick her up. I walked back to my classroom, quietly, unsure of how to process what I had just witnessed.

Lunch time came, and the students were escorted to the lunch room. I went to the office with Nancy to eat my lunch. Just about that time, President Bush came on the television to address the nation. It was surreal and I was afraid for my nation and my family for the first time in my life. We spent the rest of the day releasing students to their parents on a one-by-one basis. I was anxious to get home to my own children. I left school that day and drove to pick up my kids. We went home and sat by the television for what felt like a lifetime. It felt like the wheels had come off my life both at school and in my own personal life, and I was in a long skid. Tragedy and suffering were the themes of the days to come. I still went to see Katie as often as I could. Her brother was getting deployed as a result of 9/11, tying these tragic events together. Mary would be the only one left at home to care for Katie. Katie's accident and the senseless tragedy of September 11th left me in a sad, confused place. I was led to consider sacrifice and sadness as a regular part of life. In the end, I took the connections that were made on those tragic days as lessons for the future. The parceling out of pain, the shared spaces during times of tragedy, leaning on something bigger than yourself, hanging on to loved ones and resolute determination to persevere were my revelations. They have stayed with me all of my days. (2001)

A closer examination of my second theme revealed a subtheme of deep emotional connections to my work and my students. The literature suggests teaching is an emotional endeavor in which correlations can be found between teacher wellbeing, quality of teaching and teacher emotions (Brackett, Floman, Ashton-James, Cherkasskiy, & Salovey, 2013; Day & Gu, 2011; Frenzel, 2014, Frenzel, Goetz, Stephens, & Jacob, 2011; Hagenauer, Haschler, & Volet, 2015; Hargreaves, 1998, 2000). Words and phrases in my journal entries suggesting emotional ties include "*sadness*," "*tears*," "*embarrassment*," "*There wasn't a dry eye in the meeting*," "*overwhelmed with grief*," "*I could feel her heartbeat as she ran to him*," and "*I told Katie I loved her*." I also make reference to "*sitting close*," "*sharing*," and "*understanding*." I believe this is evidence of relationships with my students founded on deeply caring connections.

Theme 3: In Defense of My Students

Throughout my first nine years of teaching, I often found myself in a place where I felt my students needed to be protected. On occasion, I was obligated by my role as a mandatory reporter to file child in need of care cases on the behalf of students I felt were being abused. More often, I found myself advocating for my students who were often powerless to advocate for themselves. Noddings (1986a) states:

> It is not simply a matter of principle that compels us to defend one threatened or abused, to aid one who cries out to us for help, or to respond to one who addresses us. It is an attitude that pervades life and establishes the human bonds upon which we depend as upon a faith. (p. 112)

It was with this attitude founded on the bonds between my students and me as well as my belief that I was often my students first and last line of defense, that led me to become their advocate. Throughout my journals, I found entries that detail acts of advocacy that often worked in

conjunction with parents, social workers, and support staff, as well as efforts I pursued on my own. Among my journals, I found many examples of acts of advocacy. The following are examples of my findings:

"*I had a pretty terrible meeting today with Alyssa's parents. They really want her moved out into regular English and Math. They said she has been sad at home lately because her friends have asked her why she has to be with me for those classes. Alyssa is a really beautiful girl and she hangs out with all the popular kids. And her parents are very wealthy. I get the feeling that they are embarrassed by their daughter's learning disability. I know for certain that if Alyssa goes into those classes, she will not be able to keep up. She struggles in the modified classes, for goodness sake! They want me to put her in the regular classes and then reteach the information in her resource hour. I know there isn't enough time to accomplish this, but I didn't know how to tell them that. I think the principal is kind of intimidated by these people, so she, before even talking to me, encouraged it. I was infuriated. I felt really bad for Alyssa because I know she will be happy at first getting put in those classes, but when she figures out that she is in way over her head that she will feel bad about herself. I don't think there is such a stigma about being with me, but apparently, I am wrong, and that makes me feel like I'm not doing a good enough job protecting my students from whatever it is that is going on. For sure, I will have to modify the work ahead of time and have everything ready for Alyssa before she even goes to those classes. That way, the students won't see that she's getting anything different. I can also see if her parents will let her stay with me for extended school day if she falls behind."* (2005)

Three times in this entry, I use the words, "I know." I think this speaks to the evolution of my faith in my knowledge concerning what is best for my students academically. It stands in stark contrast to the feelings of incompetency I felt at the beginning of my career. Research

suggests awareness of individual needs, an understanding of behavioral and cognitive characteristics of students with disabilities, and a knowledge regarding effective pedagogical strategies is pivotal to student success as well as the prevention of negative attitudes (Appl & Spenciner, 2008; Bruns & Mogharreban, 2007; Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003; Kuyini & Desai, 2007; Sze, 2009). In addition to a better understanding and confidence in my own knowledge, I also found a sense of urgency in this entry to prepare for the consequences of situations out of my control. I realized advocating for my students didn't always mean giving them what they want, but rather providing them with what they need.

"*Today in class we re-wrote short stories from different perspectives. Cynthia re-wrote "The Giving Tree" from the perspective of the tree. I have never worked with a gifted-LD student before. She is really interesting. I feel like she has a million beautiful thoughts that she simply cannot get out. She has a brilliant mind trapped by a mouth that won't move. I need to do some research on how I can help her more. Cynthia expressed a lot of anger towards the boy who continued to take and take and take from the tree. And as she talked, I sensed that she was struggling to make me understand her frustration with the boy. She became so frustrated herself, she began to cry. She shut down after that, but we were able to make a beautiful breakthrough after class. I sat close to Cynthia and asked her why the story upset her so much. She slowly and methodically told me that she feels like the tree. That people take and take and take from her all the time. And because she struggles with her speech, she can't say no. I asked her to give me an example and she said, "Well, this one seems stupid, but at lunch, my friends ask me if they can have some of my lunch… my mom packs the best lunches, and even if I want to say no, I'm afraid they'll get mad, and that makes it even harder to talk, so I just nod my head yes." She also said that her brothers and parents don't understand how she feels a lot of the time. She feels like she*

can't express herself and as a result she gets taken advantage of, like the tree. I asked Cynthia if she felt like she could share her feelings with her parents. They are really great people, and I don't think they truly understand how she feels. I suggested she use the story to explain her feelings to them. It would be like explaining an assignment, and in the process, she would be able to tell her own story. Cynthia agreed, but I could tell she was somewhat nervous about it. I'll set up a time to meet with them. Today, I am grateful that the assignment meant more than just writing, it meant finding a way to get out what may have us trapped inside." (2005)

I am particularly fond of this entry. When I revisited this moment in time, I was instantly brought back to the closeness that Cynthia and I felt as we worked through her feelings. The relationship we had built is evident in both the feelings of care I expressed as well as my desire to help Cynthia find her voice, literally, so that she could express her thoughts to her family. I also found a beautiful sense of the marrying of pedagogical practice to personal connection. I think this is most evident when I said, "*Today, I am grateful that the assignment meant more than just writing, it meant finding a way to get out what may have us trapped inside*."

"*Well, today I walked out of a faculty meeting. I guess they are changing the rules about required math classes. There is no way that my students are going to be able to take regular algebra. So, I made an analogy, out loud, to the whole group asking the principal if it would make sense to ask all students with leg amputations to run laps in PE. It didn't go over well. I got a lot of angry looks. Mr. Jones told me that my comment was non-productive. I know parents are going to be as upset as me. Seriously, their policies make no sense to me. Sometimes I feel like I am the only defense these kids have. I don't even know if most of the people in this building understand how hard it is for most of my kids to keep up with their modified classes and they feel stupid in other classes. And when they fail, it's going to make it even worse. Ugh."* (2006)

As I re-read this entry, I recall the intense level of frustration I felt at administrative policies that made no sense to me whatsoever. There is no doubt in my mind that there are benefits to inclusion classes, but I believe they should be well thought out and created carefully so as to not to put undue academic pressure or a stigmatizing spotlight on students with disabilities. My students were to be mainstreamed into math classes beyond their abilities to fulfill a mandate handed down by people I was certain had little or no classroom experience. While Vaughn, Gersten, and Chard (2000) found that the use of learning strategies designed to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties were likewise beneficial for all students in the classroom, in many cases, the trend toward inclusion only changed the location of students with disabilities, not the attitudes or perspectives of the regular-education teachers serving them. The success of an inclusive education is dependent upon the attitude of the teacher, and therefore, their buy-in to the concept of an inclusion classroom was vital, and at the time this journal was written, I wasn't sure I had the support of the regular education teachers (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart, & Eloff, 2003). Furthermore, my frustration was motivated by an experiential understanding that my students' learning and feelings of safety were dependent on the care and respect shown by their teachers (Murphy, Delli, & Edwards, 2004). It was the concern over regular education teachers' attitude toward my students, their willingness to adapt, and the motivation for the change in academic requirements that caused me to stand up and walk out of that meeting.

"Today I got to spread a little bit of insider information! Tasha's mom is still upset that the district won't pay for me to go to the training I requested on Tasha's dyslexia. They have offered to pay for it themselves, but I think that is wrong. Her parents are writing a letter to the school board to advocate for the training teachers need to help their girl. So, today we found out

that they are installing automatic flushers on all the toilets in our building. My thoughts immediately jumped to wonder how we could afford automatic flushers but not training for teachers. I emailed Mrs. Hartner and told her about my news and told her that it might be an interesting fact to add to her letter. She immediately emailed back and thanked me for the information." (2006)

Recently, I ran in to Tasha and her mom in a restaurant. It was wonderful to see them again. Tasha is a nurse now, all grown up, and she is stunning, kind, and articulate. I hugged each of them and we talked about our time together so long ago. Tasha's mom brought up the automatic flushers in our conversation. She thanked me for being Tasha's advocate and her partner in her daughter's education. This entry illustrates my belief of my ability to affect my students' education even if I am acting as an "insider." It also demonstrates my belief that to question policies and practices is crucial if it has an effect on my students' ability to succeed. I believe it was during this time period of my career that I began to develop a personal commitment to my students that far superseded my adherence to arbitrary, ineffective, and unreasonable rules. As Noddings (1986a) reminds us, "the rules are not sacred to her" (p. 178).

"Today Mr. Pauls found Braden skipping class in the bathroom. It wasn't the first time. I think sometimes he just needs to get away and hide and it always makes me feel bad for reporting him. Usually, I can just talk to him from outside the bathroom and tell him he has 15 minutes to be by himself and then he has to return to class, and this usually works. But today, I didn't have time to go looking for him, so I called the office. Bad idea. When Mr. Pauls found him standing on a toilet, Braden refused to come out of the bathroom. Mr. Pauls pulled Braden off the toilet and put Braden's arm behind his back and walked him to his office. He was paraded in front of other kids which I'm sure made him even more angry. When he put Braden in his

office (more like threw him in) he told him to sit there and wait for him. Not surprisingly, when Mr. Pauls shut the door, Braden proceeded to destroy his office. It took three people to get him since he kept bolting around the office destroying anything he could get his hands on. His mom had to come get him and we had to have a meeting. I spoke up and told everyone that had he not been restrained and was instead just brought back to class, this wouldn't have happened. Braden and his mom were shocked that I said anything. Mr. Pauls was equally shocked and gave me the death glare. Oh well. Braden got suspended for destroying school property. I think this was wrong. Rest assured, I will never report him missing again without checking on my own first." (2005)

Braden's story represents the lack of tolerance and understanding so often found regarding students with challenging behavioral needs. Other references in my journals advocating for my students included the assurance that their IEP accommodations and modifications were being met in regular education classrooms. I also found multiple entries detailing the care of my students to include the ability to use the school laundry facilities, the purchase of clothing and hygiene items, as well as finding community resources that could assist students and families with medical and dental services. There never seemed to be a shortage of need. Advocacy, as an act of care, was a natural outgrowth of the relationships I built with my students. It strengthened our connections by illustrating my commitment to them in real-life situations.

Faith

As I revisited the journals in this last theme, I found a subtheme that went beyond a duty of protection and professional responsibility to my students. What I discovered was my faith. Noddings (1986a) tells us, "Here we may ultimately decide that some things in life, and in

education, must be undertaken and sustained by faith and not by objective evaluation" (p. 22). I have recently become more acutely aware of my connection to the spiritual in my work. I frequently tell my students they are in my classroom for a reason. I believe this dates back much further than the time I began to realize it. In my journals, I state, "*My belief that I was often my students first line of defense*," "*I sensed she was struggling*," and "*finding a way to get out what may have us trapped inside*." Perhaps these words may not convey faith to others, but I feel a spiritual and faithful connection to them in my gut when I read them. Eckert (2011) states, "For people of faith, the call to a vocation cannot be separated from the vocation, nor should it be" (p. 20). I believe my connections with my students are founded on my faith and the power it has to stand in the space that I am too small to fill.

My last three years working as an interrelated special education teacher were wonderful. I grew pedagogically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually as a teacher. My family had become complete with the birth of my last son. I loved my work and I had found my niche in our building. I built outstanding relationships with my fellow teachers and as a result was able to effect changes in their thinking about students with disabilities. At the end of the 2005-2006 school year, I was told that I had been chosen to fill the position of the EBD teacher at the high school. There are so few EBD teachers, that demand, not want, drives placement. This change was one I did not want. Nevertheless, I took on the task assigned to me and prepared for a new adventure at a new building with new students. I found out shortly after I was assigned the position, I would be housed in the old gymnasium of a hundred-year-old building. I found myself secretly hoping and praying that there weren't any balls to move this time.

Chapter 5 - Section 2: A Time of Connection 2006-2015

Having been thoroughly in love with my previous classroom, I found myself worried about my new position. Change is always difficult, but knowing that this move was one that took me back to a placement I knew was far more stressful, left me feeling both concerned and slighted by the decision made for my future with no input of my own. Nevertheless, I felt my previous nine years of experience had prepared me for this new endeavor. As such, I adopted a positive attitude and decided that I could handle whatever came my way. The following entry was the first of my journals for the 2006-2007 school year. I believe it illustrates my mindset as I returned to working with EBD students.

"*My new classroom is amazing. It is the old gymnasium that has been converted to a classroom. It is HUGE! I have beautiful windows, two back rooms, and a door that leads to the stage where there is a grand piano! I have a ton of storage and there was a lot of furniture left so I can really design the place however I'd like. I met the principal and he is wonderful. Several teachers have stopped by to greet me. This place is so much bigger than any place I've ever worked, and I don't know how I will find my way around. My caseload is reasonable at 12 students. Emmanuel will be coming back to me. I have all of my IEPs and I will start reviewing them and planning schedules. Typical… I have lots of boys and only three girls. I get to hire two paras, so finding them is first on my agenda. I met the custodian, Dave, and he is really nice. He offered to help me set up anything I needed help with. I'm excited to see what the year brings."* (2006)

For the next nine years of my career, I grew immensely. While my work was unbelievably challenging, I made connections with students like never before. For the most part, my students spent the majority of their day in my classroom. This certainly added to the

opportunity to get to know my students on a deeper level through the opportunity to hear their stories and to share mine as well. As a result, this time frame in my career began to contribute to answering my research question concerning the building of relationships and classroom community through the medium of storytelling. After close examination of my journals during this time frame, I found four themes emerged.

Theme 1: Too Young to Have a History

Familial Trauma

The majority of my students during this time were from 15 to 16 years old. They were fresh out of middle school and still stuck in a setting that forbade them the fulfillment of the longing for freedom so closely associated with the transition to high school. Furthermore, they were weighed down by the history they brought along with them. This is reminiscent of my earlier journals and experiences illuminating the connections I found between my students, their families, and their standing within their community. My journals overwhelmingly reflect the presence of familial trauma, exposure to drugs, alcohol, mental and physical abuse as well as involvement with the law, a history of mental illness, and violence. I found that nearly one third of my journals referred to the trauma my students faced in their own families. Among my journals, I found the following statements speaking to this:

"He was an orphan, found in Romania when he was two" (2006).

"He lives with his grandparents because his mother, who was a drug addict, gave birth to him and shortly after disappeared. But she came back, several times, taking him with her and then returning again, only to leave him behind. After a while, his grandparents adopted him and did not allow his mom to come back anymore. They have tearfully explained that they believe

horrible things happened to him over the years. The level of physical and emotional damage this kid has incurred is unimaginable" (2007).

"He doesn't have a mom. She left her abusive husband and her son a long time ago" (2009).

"Danny told me about when he was sent to a new home because he got into trouble for opening the Christmas presents that his foster parents had bought for their biological children. They sent him away on Christmas Eve" (2008).

"I think Jack is hard because his dad is hard. His mom left them a long time ago" (2008).

"He said that his mom sent him away to live with his dad, because it was his turn to "put up with your shit" (2009).

"It makes me wonder if he was hurt at some point before his parents adopted him. His mother abandoned him, and she was supposed to be the one protecting him" (2012).

Involvement with the Law

I also found numerous journal entries documenting my students' involvement with the law. These entries were heart breaking as most often, police intervention typically meant I would not see that student again. There were also cases in which I was called to testify on the behalf of my students. In either case, as I revisited these journals, I could feel how frightened I was at the prospect of having to deal with the police. Of course, over time, it became much more commonplace. I even found an entry documenting my relief at seeing my favorite police officer walk into my classroom. Perhaps, this illustrates the tendency we face as teachers to become numb to our previous fears or concerns. The unknown becomes the expected and certainty is replaced with the unanticipated. The following journal entries, or partial entries, illustrate my students' or my own involvement in situation where the law, in one form or another, was involved:

"Alan was arrested for driving without a license and was taken into custody. Thank God his parents can afford a lawyer" (2008).

"He was locked up for bringing a gun to school" (2009).

"I got to work and Martin didn't show up for class. I found out that he had been arrested, along with another one of my students, for possession of a fire arm. He was already on probation, so I'm sure they're going to make this stick" (2009).

"After work, I went to see him in jail. It was awful going through the screening to get in. I had to get searched from head to toe. When I saw him, he looked absolutely broken. I immediately started to cry. He told me he couldn't believe that I came to see him. I couldn't believe he thought that I wouldn't" (2012).

"He was arrested for aggravated battery and was placed in detention facility. Apparently, he was robbing people on campus with three other kids. I'll never get to see him again" (2013).

"He came into class very upset this morning. I left him alone to get settled. I could tell he wasn't in the mood to talk. After a little while, I had him come in the backroom pretending that I needed something off a tall shelf. I asked him what was going on with him today and he told me that the police had been called by the neighbors last night. His mom and step-dad were fighting and it got pretty loud. They made the step-dad leave for the night. I feel like that breeds a lot of uncertainty in his life. And it makes me wonder how often it has happened and how many times he has come to class carrying this weight" (2013).

"Today, I had to testify in Layla's parents' custody hearing. I was terrified to say the least. I know that her mom is the best place for her. It is where she wants to be, but she doesn't have the courage to tell her father that. She loves her dad, but she can't stand his new "life partner." I was put on the stand by the dad's lawyer first and I answered all of his questions. Mostly, he

asked about whether or not Layla was being successful in school. He asked if her dad ever contacted the school concerning Layla and her progress and I indicated that he did. I wasn't asked anything that would put her dad in a bad light. But Layla had told me plenty about the way her father trash talks her mom when she is around him, and the way that he talks about her with his new girlfriend. It's really hateful. So, when it was time to speak to Janette's lawyer, I was ready to tell the truth about what Layla had told me. I swear to God, he didn't ask me one single question that even opened the door for me to speak the truth. I was staring at him like I was willing him from my brain waves to ask me the questions I needed in order to speak up for Layla. He didn't. They granted joint custody to Layla's parents. When her mom came to see me, she thanked me for trying to do my best. I told her about how the lawyer asked me the wrong questions. She said she knew. I know Janette truly wants the best for her daughter. I just wish I could have helped her out more" (2014).

A deeper examination of these entries went beyond evidence of involvement with law enforcement. Words and phrases that indicate a deeper level of understanding included "*locked up*," "*broken*," "*I'll never see him again*," "*uncertainty*," "*carrying weight*," and "*I was terrified*." These are not observations, rather, they are deeply felt emotions. I was connected to these students, and as a result, what happened to them also happened to me. These journal entries do not illustrate an arbitrary application of the law, but rather potentially life-altering events that occurred in the lives of people I loved. The entries also represent the feelings of helplessness I felt as someone who was powerless to affect an outcome. Within the walls of my classroom, I had a sense of sovereignty. When my students left my classroom, and made decisions that surrendered their freedom, my ability to save them was rendered powerless. In this sense, we all lost out on the opportunity to be together and to grow from knowing one another.

Three specific journal entries speak to the profound effects of familial trauma, mental illness, and a history of violence in the lives of my students. The stories are singular, individual voices, but they speak to the overarching themes I encountered on a daily basis. The experiences and subsequent stories of Pratt, Ryan, and Corrie speak to the connections we formed during the time we had together.

"I'm not sure I even want to write this down. Pratt came to school today with his dad. He was gone all week last week. The only thing I knew is that it was because of a family emergency. They pulled me aside in the back room to tell me what had happened to Pratt's mom. I guess she had a horrible fever last week. They took her to the hospital where they diagnosed her with influenza and sent her home. Throughout the night, her fever got worse. When they tried to wake her up, she wouldn't wake up. They called an ambulance and they took her to the hospital. I guess they diagnosed her with spinal meningitis. Her fever cooked her brain. She is unconscious and they don't know if she will ever be conscious again. I didn't even know how to respond. Pratt's mom was the nicest person in the world. She would always pack a lunch for Pratt and even call to check on him during the day. When Pratt's dad was deployed, he struggled, and his mom went out of the way to make things better for him. Now, she is in a hospice and they don't know if she is going to live. Pratt doesn't want to come back to school, and I don't blame him. I will put together his work a week at a time and take it to him. His dad said they will spend most of their time with Pratt's mom at the hospice. His dad said he will help him with his work. I don't know if I can do anything to help other than deliver the work and offer any assistance I can. Maybe I'll get some snacks or something to deliver with his work. Anything I can find to cheer him up. I pray to God his mom wakes up, and if she does, she is at least able to be a mom again." (2006)

As I revisited my journals, I found I recalled emotions and thoughts I did not record. Rather, they were embedded in my memory and resurfaced only as I sat and reflected on my experiences. Pratt's story was particularly painful to me as I vividly recall placing myself in his mother's place. I had a new son just prior to writing this journal. He was only months old. The words, "*I pray to God his mom wakes up and if she does, she is at least able to be a mom again*," illustrate the mother lens I often used to view my students through. They also indicate prayer and a connection to the spiritual. Within my journals, I found examples of prayers I offered up on the behalf of my students. These prayers were present in situations where I found myself deeply affected by tragedies affecting my students' lives.

"Today in class, Ryan did a puzzling thing. He stood up and walked toward the white board. He grabbed one marker and put the rest of them in his pocket. He began writing on the board, and muttering under his breath. But he wasn't writing in English, or even with English letters. There were shapes mostly, squares, triangles, ovals, and squiggles. It was like he was having a conversation with himself. And this went on for an hour. He filled up both of my giant white boards. I didn't interrupt him. I'm not sure why. I think I wouldn't have known what to say. I was fascinated and I felt really awkward just watching him. When he did sit down. I asked him what he was writing about, and again, he wouldn't answer. I wonder, as I reflect, where does Ryan go when he leaves my classroom for a place in his mind where no one else is allowed? Will anyone ever get a glimpse of that place? Will he ever be able to leave it or will he even try to? I left the writing on the board. I wanted to show his grandmother when she came to pick him up. She was just as puzzled as I was. We just stood next to each other, staring at the board, wondering what it all meant. There is comfort in sharing confusion with another lost soul. Before

they left, I asked Ryan if he was okay with me cleaning the board and he nodded yes. And so, that is what I did. But it felt like I was erasing a story that I knew I would never understand." (2011)

This entry is reminiscent of my feelings of the parceling out of pain I felt when Katie was hurt. Ryan is a student I never figured out. I was never able to make any connection with him whatsoever. Perhaps I felt slighted by his refusal to give in to my personal and pedagogical magic. He existed in such a deep space, so far from my reach, that I was left completely ineffectual as his teacher. His grandmother and I bonded within this space. I have always felt there was a spiritual meaning to my work. Typically, it was realized in my connection with students. In Ryan's case, I believe it surfaced in my relationship with his grandmother. We both found ourselves in a place where we felt helpless, confused, and lost. I believe just having the daily connection between us made a difference in each of our lives, and perhaps somewhere in Ryan's mind, he found some comfort in that.

"Today was a really hard day. I had a lot of kids out with the flu, so I had some one-on-one time with Corrie. We were talking about all the kids that were sick and he told me a story about a time when he was sick as a little kid. He told me that when he was 7 years old, he was sick and he went into his father's bedroom to tell him. He said that when he went into his father's room, his dad got mad at him. He described the scene so vividly and I can only imagine that the details were burned into his brain. He said his dad was drunk and watching wrestling on an old television. that was on a stand in his room. Corrie made the error of standing in front of it. His dad told him to get the fuck out of the way and that he would be fine. When Corrie didn't move fast enough, his dad got out of the bed and shoved him so hard he fell down. Corrie told me his father was wearing a tank top and his white underwear. I'll never forget the picture that drew in my mind.

Corrie said he got up and went to his room where he packed a bag of his things in a Wal-Mart sack, went outside, and got on his bike. He was going to run away from home. He was only seven years old! He doesn't have a mom. She left her abusive husband and her son a long time ago. He had no one. He said it was cold and rainy and he didn't make it very far before he knew he had to go back. He said he was gone for at least a few hours, but when he got home, his dad didn't even know he had left. He said it wasn't long after that the school counselors called Child Protective Services because he was coming to school unclean and wearing filthy clothes. He was taken into foster care and has been in the system with several families since then. He's such a wonderful kid. He's a gentle giant. I worry about what it is like for Corrie to carry around all of those horrible memories. He certainly doesn't deserve the life he was given. This kid needs a lot of love." (2009)

Fast forward to 2016: *"I received a call at work today from a lawyer who works on death row cases in Kansas City. He is working on Corrie's case. I was incredibly shocked. Corrie raped, strangled, and murdered his co-worker in Kansas City. He left her body hidden in a swampy part of a public park. She wasn't found for a couple of weeks. Because of the weather, there wasn't much left of her to identify. They questioned the people she worked with and Corrie admitted to the crime. I guess they had a consensual relationship, but on this one occasion it wasn't, and Corrie lost his cool and murdered her.*

Corrie gave the lawyer my name as a person who could testify that he wasn't always a bad person. I can't help but remember the rage he spoke about on the day his father shoved him out of the way of the television when he was sick as such a young child. I remembered how Corrie had written me letters a few years ago from a detention facility where he was locked up for bringing a gun to school. He even sent me the newspaper clipping. He wrote me several

letters and I had kept them. I remember being shocked that this kid would do something as crazy as bringing a gun to school. Something tells me he felt he needed to protect himself. I re-read the letters and they were sweet. He talked about how much he missed me and how the time he spent in my classroom were his favorite years in school. He drew pictures in them, too. I told the lawyer that I still had the letters and that he was welcome to have them.

Corrie's lawyer came to see me today. He had a complete history of Corrie. He had pictures from all stages of his life. His collection was huge. He genuinely believed that Corrie didn't deserve to die for his crime. We spoke at length about Corrie's time in my classroom. He asked me if I remembered Corrie ever being violent in my classroom, and I told him about one occasion when Corrie shoved, there's that memory again, a kid who was talking smack at him. I think every other kid in the classroom felt like the kid had it coming. But Corrie was much bigger than the other kid, and the kid flew over a desk and was hurt pretty bad. Corrie got suspended for ten days, but he managed to make it back to my classroom without being placed in a different home.

Corrie was never angry or violent other than that one time. In fact, he was a calming force in my room. He was gentle, and broken. I told the lawyer about the story that Corrie told me about when he was sent to a new home because he got in trouble for opening the Christmas presents that his foster parents had bought for their biological children. They sent him away on Christmas Eve. He told me how awful it was to sleep in a strange bed on the night before Christmas. This story broke my heart. It made me think of my own children and how frightened they would be if they weren't at home in their own beds on Christmas Eve. I told the lawyer that I would be happy to testify on Corrie's behalf. We agreed that Corrie's life was one series of

unfortunate events after another. He never had a chance. I get the feeling that Corrie never left the heart or mind of that sick little kid who just needed someone to take care of him." (2016)

I believe Pratt, Ryan, and Corrie's stories illustrate the crucial importance of presence and consciousness in the work of teachers. Pratt lost his mother, Ryan lost his ability to exist in a world without confusion and pain, and Corrie lost his freedom, and possibly his life. The timeframes for this wreckage varied. In Ryan's life, it existed before I entered into the picture. But for Pratt and Corrie, I was part of it. Perhaps what resonates most deeply with me is that the time I do have with my students is precious. According to Huber et al. (2013):

> The transcendent and enduring nature of story shapes our understanding of our need to walk with extreme care as we interact with children, families, and communities. Understanding the transcendent nature of stories requires attentiveness to the resonance and dissonances shaped in the meeting of lives, to the gaps and silences created and opened up. (p. 235)

Pratt, Ryan, and Corrie taught me there is not a moment that goes by that I do not have the time to show a student that I love and care for them, because you never know when they will need even a small part of that connection to sustain them in their future.

Theme 2: All in a Day's Work

Any EBD teacher will tell you that no two days are alike. You must learn to predict the unpredictable, prepare for situations you never thought possible, and most of all, you must learn to trust your gut. A substantial number of my journals begin with the statement, "Craziest day, ever." These entries catalog a tremendous list of behavioral incidences that occurred in my classroom or somewhere within the school building. In all cases, I was expected to be the expert in situations where expertise rarely had a precedent. I also grew a sense of humor that I believe is

paramount to surviving as an EBD teacher. According to Berk (2014), humor in teaching "improves overall mental functioning, reduces the negative emotional consequences of stress, anxiety, and tension, increases instructor-student rapport, facilitates a positive mood and cooperative classroom atmosphere, and facilitates communication" (p. 81). I rely on humor in my classroom for all of these reasons and more. On one occasion, I wrote:

> *Seriously, this day was crazy. Parker got busted at school for having cigarettes. They fell out of his pocket in class. I wasn't there. But anyways, he got sent home. His mom couldn't pick him up because she was at work, so the school cop drove him home. I was out on the field later watching the kids in PE and Parker literally drove by in a car and was yelling out of the window for some other kids to get in. And they did! I couldn't help myself and I started laughing out loud, in front of everyone. That kid has no fear whatsoever. I reported it to Frank and he called Parker's mom. I don't know what happened, but I'm sure I'll find out tomorrow. I hope they had fun, and I hope it was worth it!* (2014).

A History of Behavior

As an EBD teacher, I became an expert on the people I was working with. Each individual experience provided me with lessons I would tuck away to save for future use. My journals indicated the presence of a behavioral history that followed my students wherever they went. The following list includes examples that illustrate both behaviors I encountered as well as my thoughts about them:

"When I observe him, when I talk to him about what he is doing, I can clearly see that he has no control over it himself" (2008).

"He truly doesn't know why he does the things he does. I don't care how many times he is asked why he did what he did. He genuinely doesn't know" (2008).

"He says incredibly mean, disrespectful, sexual things to the young women at school. I am certain this comes from somewhere long ago. But I am not sure where" (2010).

"His behavior gets in his way all day long. How is he ever supposed to learn anything?" (2010).

"We spend a lot of time talking about this, but the second our conversation is over, he goes back to doing the same thing" (2012).

"He started pacing around the room and he was breathing really heavy. I was pretty scared because I don't really know this kid at all" (2013).

"He has been pretty tough and scary from the get go. I don't think I can predict what he will do at all" (2013).

"I think because of the way he looks and his history, I was more afraid than I should have been" (2013).

"I guess he has been picking on this kid for a while. I don't know how I missed this" (2014).

"She runs. Every time I try to get to the root of a problem with her, she runs. I literally had to chase her when she ran out of the school today" (2015).

"Today, Erin ran out of the school and climbed the big tree by the lunch room. I couldn't get her down. It was a nice day, so I told the principal that I would just grab a book and sit under the tree. I knew she would come down when she was ready" (2015).

"I can't stand the holidays. They always seem to stir up behavior. There is an obvious stress associated with the holidays and my students. I don't ask the typical questions about how they will spend their holidays because something tells me they don't want to talk about it" (2015).

"She literally pulled the hair out of the teacher's head. How the hell was I supposed to defend that?" (2015).

I believed from the beginning of my career in special education that my ability to teach was entirely dependent on managing behavior. I learned there wasn't a lesson plan out there that was impervious to the ability of a student to derail it. The behaviors I documented above are a small sample of those I encountered in my time as an EBD teacher. What I discovered over the years was that I wasn't a teacher trying to teach despite behaviors. Rather, I was a teacher trying to teach in the space between the behaviors. The academic learning taking place in my classroom happened alongside the interventions designed to improve behavior. There was a constant moment-by-moment shift between classwork and behavioral intervention. One did not exist without the other. It took quite some time to understand there wasn't an end to the behaviors, but rather a continuum to exist upon. As a classroom community, we fluctuated between learning the curriculum and learning about each other and why we do the things we do.

A Target on Their Backs

As an EBD teacher, I found that my students appeared to have targets on their backs. I think it is reasonable to suggest that for many, the terms student and suspect were relatively interchangeable for my kids. During the first year at my new position I wrote:

> *Every time something goes wrong, something goes missing, someone gets bullied, or someone is in trouble, it's always assumed that it's one of my kids. Living with a target on your back for your entire life can't be easy. And because of their past, there doesn't seem any way to avoid it. At the same time, no one makes a big deal out of when they do something good. They only get noticed when they do something bad.* (2006)

Several of my journals illustrate this aspect of my feelings as a teacher. Among those are the following:

"It's 100% obvious that he is a target for every eye in this building" (2007).

"He only has to do the smallest thing wrong and he's going to get called out on it" (2007).

"I kind of feel like that with all my kids. They seem to have a target on their backs" (2008).

"I got lucky enough to get most of my kids into classes with teachers that will at least give them a chance" (2009).

"The enrollment sheets have my students flagged by color. I think the teachers see this and immediately make assumptions about the students before they even walk into their classrooms" (2010).

"He didn't have anything to do with the situation, but of course, he was called in and questioned about where he was, who he was with, and what he was doing at the time. Thankfully, he was with me and I could prove he didn't do anything bad. I think if he wasn't, he would have been found guilty of doing something he just didn't do" (2013).

"Mrs. Berg's keys went missing, and they immediately assumed it was my kid because he had her class the hour before" (2013).

Intervention

The combined effects of a history of problematic behavior and the assumption of guilt projected on my students led me in search of answers and interventions. In school, I was taught to analyze antecedents, behaviors, and consequences. This didn't always work. Recognizing the behaviors and consequences were fairly clear, but figuring out antecedents was key. It's fair to say that most EBD teachers spend their days trying to prevent and manage behaviors. Those

moments between those two things are magical, but fleeting. In my journals, I found examples of my search for answers and attempted interventions. Among those are the following:

"Why do the regular education teachers hand me my student's assignments instead of handing them to the students themselves? I spoke with the teachers and they said they didn't even realize they were doing anything wrong. I believe them. They've been conditioned to do this. They said they would do things differently" (2009).

"It is a battle to figure out what sets him off. But most of the time, I can tell whether we are going to have a good day or a bad day based on his attitude when he walks through my door. I have learned over time to gauge my own behaviors based on his first thing in the morning. I guess I follow where they lead" (2011).

"My biggest fear is letting them out of my sight. But this is an impossible task. Mrs. Evans walked in to find Heather in the bathroom during class and told her to get back to class. Of course, she didn't know anything about her and her tone of voice set Heather off in an instant. From there it turned into a fight. If she had asked Heather what class she was in, or just spoke to her in a kind manner, none of this would have happened. So many of these teachers have no clue how to approach students. I don't care if they are mine or not. But none of that will matter. The only thing that will matter is how my kid responded" (2012).

"I had a eureka moment today! Naomi has been refusing to go to classes again. Her anxiety is through the roof. A couple of days ago, she actually hid in one of my cabinets and I had to find her! I was in a total state of panic for a solid 20 minutes. It wasn't until she laughed that I found her. I think she feels incredibly safe and comfortable in my room. She never wants to leave. The only way she will go to class is if Ms. Ruiz goes with her. Even then, she may refuse at the last minute. Well, today, we were talking about why she doesn't want to go to class and how I can

help her to overcome her fears. She never really talks as much as she shrugs her shoulders. We were working on a puzzle at the table while we were talking. Naomi absolutely loves puzzles of any kind. And then it hit me! I asked my paras to come up with riddles… lots of riddles. But they have to be hard. I will take the riddles to each of Naomi's teachers. The only way she can get the answer, if she can't figure it out, is to go to the next class where that teacher will have the answer to the previous teacher's riddle and they will give her a new one. I know she might not be focused so much on what is going on in class, but she will be in class and that is a start. So, at the end of the day, I told Naomi about my plan and she smiled a very impish smile at me. I don't know if she loved the loved the puzzle idea, or if she could see right through my evil plot to get her into class. I like to give the kids time to adjust to any new ideas, so I hope and pray that Naomi thinks about this one this evening and gets used to it. She seems intrigued, anyways. I dropped her off at her dad's house tonight after school. She is such a wonderful kid. I really hope this works" (2012).

"I have learned to speak so quietly that he is forced to listen to what I say" (2012).

"If I sit really close to her, she calms down. I think it's a matter of feeling safe for her" (2013).

"I told them jokes, I danced, I used every ounce of humor I had, and it lightened things up" (2014).

"I stood up for him, and I think that made all the difference in the world. He trusts me now" (2014).

In addition to illustrating an undue focus on my students as the culprits of most of the wrongdoings in our school, these entries also illuminate the themes I found in the analysis of my first three years of journaling. For example, when I wrote, "*I can't find anything to change them*," "*I have no clue*," and "*It's a battle to figure out what sets him off*," I could have been

writing about my concerns during my first year of teaching. When I spoke to my eureka moment with Naomi, I found an example of my own experience, growth, and connections. When I wrote, "*I stood up for him, and I think that made all the difference in the world*," I could have been referencing the theme of defending my students. I think this illuminates the inevitable intertwining of all the themes I have found throughout my journals.

Connections with Caregivers

An added dimension of intervention I found was my connection with student's families. The relationships I formed with parents and caregivers were more often positive than negative. I have always felt that a team approach to serving students is best practice. I believe I came to this understanding as a mother and a teacher. Parenthood is difficult for most, let alone for the parents of my students who have been on their child's often difficult journey from the beginning. My journals reflect my attempts at forging strong bonds with my student's families. The following are examples of my connections with the parents of my students:

"I decided to call his grandma to see how his evening and night was yesterday" (2011).

"I have their number on speed dial" (2011).

"I know she is looking for answers that I do not have, but at least I can sit and listen and let her know that I care. I think that is really a lot of what she needs" (2013).

"In the end, we talked for a long time, and I tried to reassure him that he and his wife are doing everything they can to help their kid. They are really good parents" (2013).

"I know Todd's dad, and the apple didn't fall far from the tree. I think that for Todd, knowing his dad was coming was much worse than getting into trouble at school. When his dad got there, I reassured him that everything would be okay, and that I would stick up for his kid. I think this meant a lot to him. Maybe he didn't feel so alone or defensive" (2014).

"I sat with his mom for a long time in the office after the IEP. I could tell she just felt so defeated. I told her I felt the same way she did, but that we would make it work and in the end, I was going to do whatever it was her daughter needed" (2014).

"Her mom is so incredibly dedicated to her daughter's success. I love that she doesn't take no for an answer, and I told her that. She's pretty brave to stand up to a room full of people like she did" (2015).

"I visited his house to drop off his assignments. His mom came out on the porch to talk to me. I could tell she didn't want me to come in. I feel horrible thinking that she was too embarrassed of her home to let me in. I tried really hard to pretend that I didn't see the mess, and thanked her for letting me come to her home" (2015).

"At the IEP, I could tell that his mom felt she didn't have a voice in anything that was going on. Everything felt rushed. I asked her how she felt about the suggestions we were making, but she just nodded and sat quietly. I need to have some one-on-one time to talk with her about what is going on" (2015).

"I went to his house to drop off the IEP notice. I knocked a million times, and when his mom finally came to the door, she was furious with me. I didn't even know what to say. So, I thanked her for talking with me and smiled at her. It was really the only thing I could do. I think it would suck to have to hide out in your house when someone knocks. I'm sure there is a reason for that" (2014).

"His mom came to my classroom after the meeting and just cried. She is so broken. I only spend a few hours with her son a day. She has to endure this all the time. She must be exhausted. I know she is doing her best. I told her that I thought she was an amazing mom, and anyone who couldn't see that was just blind" (2015).

"She gave me a key to their house in case I needed to get his emergency meds. Then, she invited me to dinner with their family. I feel like I am a part of them" (2009).

There is extensive literature on the benefits of parent involvement in a student's education. Among these are improved attendance, positive attitudes, higher rates of graduation, and better behavior (Epstein, 1992; Garcia, 2004; Garcia & Hasson, 1996; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). In addition, it has been found that schools that promote parent involvement have higher teacher morale as well as greater student achievement (Chavkin, 1993; Garcia, 2004; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Sanders, 1996). The literature, however, was not my inspiration for making strong connections with my student's families. Nor was every situation of parent involvement a positive one. But on those occasions where I was able to make a real connection, like in the case of Ryan's grandmother, Katie's aunt and uncle, or Emmanuel's entire family, I found the benefits of our relationship were immeasurable.

Through a Mother's Eyes

Before I was a teacher, I was a mother, and being a mother is the most important thing in in my life. It changes you in ways only other mothers can understand. As I revisited my journals falling under this theme, I found a subtheme of motherhood running throughout them. So many of my students were profoundly affected by the absence of their mothers. My journals mention students who were orphans, abandoned by mothers who were addicts, who lost mothers to abuse, and who lost mothers to illness and injury. For decades, I have stood in this gap. Motherhood is not something you leave at the classroom door. It is a constant lens through which you view the world. Certainly, it has played a role in who I am as a teacher. I will never understand what my motherless students have been through. Nor, will I ever understand the severity of a situation in

which a mother would have to choose to leave her child. The space of a mother left unfilled, opens a place in a child that I have grown to understand through the stories I have gathered. They have called me to open a space in my heart, as a mother, to let in my students who need to stay there a while.

Theme 3: Safe Within my Walls

Expressions of Love, Care, and Affection

Perhaps one on the most important effects of the relationships I built with my students during this time was the feeling of safety and security they felt in my classroom. I believe they felt loved, as well. Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs would suggest these aspects of my classroom met my student's needs of safety and protection as well as love and belongingness. Within my journals, I found a multitude of references to words of care and affection I used to describe my students. I am profoundly grateful to my upbringing for teaching me the value of expressing love openly and freely. As a child, I was praised for my accomplishments and told I was loved every day. I believe this directly affected my ability to show love, care, and affection for my students. The following is a list of partial entries I found referencing these expressions of love, care, and affection:

"I love Andrew and I think he is a wonderful young person" (2006).

"Alan is incredibly intelligent, and I try to tell him that every day at least once" (2007).

"She is such a kind, thoughtful and generous kid. I tell her all the time how nice it is to have her around" (2008).

"This kid needs a lot of love" (2009).

"He's a gentle giant" (2009).

"He is a calming force in my room" (2009).

"He is just a little kid who just needed someone to take care of him" (2009).

"He said, "I'm sorry I let you down." I told him he just made a really bad mistake, but that he is still a really great kid and I still love him" (2011).

"She spoke up for the first time, and I couldn't have been more proud. Watching her find her voice has been amazing" (2012).

"I just love that kid" (2013).

"I don't think anyone else cares about this kid" (2013).

"I told her that she was learning so quickly and she had the biggest smile I had ever seen. I really warmed my heart" (2014).

"He is too young to have lived through so much. He just needs someone to be there and to care about him. He just needs someone to listen" (2014).

"We giggled and I told her I loved her to death" (2015).

In addition to the above references to my love, care, and affection for my students, I likewise found several journal entries that illustrated how my students felt about being in my classroom. Earlier, I spoke to the importance I felt regarding the welcoming, safe nature of my classroom. Upon revisiting my journals, I was pleased to see that I had recorded stories where this appeared to materialize.

Loneliness, a Safe Space, and the Kindness of Community

"Jodi has a diagnosis of body dysmorphic disorder and autism. She is a brilliant young woman who had a tremendous talent for writing. She cannot, however, write in the first person. She always writes in the third person and from the perspective of an animal. She frequently hides under desks when she is upset. She licks the backs of her hands and smooths down her hair. She won't look at me in the face. It takes constant encouragement and close proximity to get her to

go to any class outside of my classroom, and therefore, most of her instruction happens in my classroom. She is being raised by a single mom who is entirely invested in her education. She also has a little brother that has no disabilities and who is a social butterfly with many friends. He also participates in sports and other school activities. I think Jodi compares herself to him regularly. She doesn't have friends with the exception of her mother. Her father has no interest in Jodi, but does have a relationship with her brother. Jodi's mom is a strikingly beautiful woman with jet black hair and a bunch of 1950s style tattoos. She is visibly the center of attention when she walks into a room. Jodi, in contrast, doesn't want to be seen. She covers her entire body with clothing, including a hat, even when it is hot weather. But she lights up when she talks about her two cats. She seems unable to separate her life from her pets. When she is upset, she will sit quietly and cry requesting to go home to them. When this happens, I allow her to call her mom so that she can assure Jodi that the cats are okay and are waiting for her at home. I worry about her future. I don't know if she will ever be able to live independently. I shared this worry with her mother. I wish for Jodi to find a way to use her gift of writing to help her personally and professionally at some point. The other students in the classroom are fascinated by Jodi, but they are never mean to her. I find that frequently in my classroom. My students understand that each of them have unique, often troubling characteristics to the outside world. They don't feel accepted "out there." I think that is why they feel safe within the walls of my classroom. My question is, if I can't change the world out there, what can I do in here to prepare them for leaving?" (2008).

A closer examination of my entry about Jodi revealed to me a sense of loneliness that she must have faced. Specifically, my statement, "*She doesn't want to be seen*," tells me that Jodi was experiencing worry at the least and outright anxiety at the worst, in her day-to-day life in my

classroom. Literature suggests that students' peer relationships are linked to feelings of loneliness at school (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). My perception of Jodi's struggle to build relationships with her peers, an integral part of her disability, led me to believe she might have been feeling lonelier than I might have originally imagined. In conjunction with the safety within my walls, I found another connection in Jodi's acceptance by her peers. I recall the softening I observed in my typically tough students at Emmanuel's funeral. In a (2020) study, Morin found, "although the teacher may not directly influence students' feelings of loneliness at school they can contribute to reducing it by facilitating a positive social environment in the classroom" (p. 1700). I believe the relationships and community I have built in my classroom has provided a safe space wherein all of my students, regardless of how they are treated in the outside world, can find the grace to accept one another unconditionally.

"Throughout the day, I tried to reassure Jalen that Karyn and I would make sure he had a place to stay. He repeatedly said, "Yea, it'll be fine," and when I would get up and move away from him, he would put his head down on the desk and rock himself slowly back and forth in his seat. When the other kids came into the classroom, they could tell that something was really wrong. A few of them said, "You okay?" to him, and he said the same thing to them, "Yea, I'm good." It seems that when one of my students is really sad, the others pick up on it and they soften. It becomes painfully obvious that even though It's my classroom, it is their experience that binds us all together. I've never been homeless. Good news is that Karyn found them a place for the rest of the week and the weekend until something more permanent becomes available." (2012).

Jalen's story, like Jodi's, speaks to the kindness of peers not commonly associated with EBD students.

"He told me he is not leaving my classroom. He said if I want him to do any work at all, then I will have to bring it to him in here. I believe he knows that if he leaves my classroom, there will be trouble. I can respect that. At least he's trying to protect himself." (2013).

"Tina stands at my door and waits for all the kids to clear the hallways before she will even step foot outside. She is terrified of all the other kids. I offer to walk with her to class, and she takes me up on it immediately. She almost begs me not to go, and I feel awful asking her to do something that frightens her so. Most of the time, we end up getting her work and bringing it back to my classroom. I really don't see the point in forcing her to sit in a different environment if it only means her anxiety will go through the roof. Baby steps." (2014)

"He ran from the classroom he was in and hid in my back room. If I weren't being serious, it would be funny. I think he genuinely thought he could hang out back there and not be found. I felt like I was harboring a fugitive. When I went to talk with him, he told me that he knew I would protect him. I asked him what he was running from, and he told me his teacher was trying to look in his backpack. I asked him if he had anything bad in his backpack and he said no, but it was his business and no one needs to be in it. He knew that the teacher would call the SRO and he would get into trouble, so he came to my room." (2014)

"Today at lunch, I had at least six of my kids with me. I don't mind it. Otherwise, I'm just thumbing through Facebook. I think they feel safer here. The lunchroom is a crazy place and kids get in trouble there all the time. I think they also feel alienated or stared at when they are in there. I'm glad they feel comfortable in my room." (2015)

"Today, my student was given the option of serving lunch detention in the lunch detention room, or eating lunch with me. I don't know if this was an insult or not! Anyways, Garrett chose my classroom. While we were eating, he told me that he likes eating lunch with me and maybe he

will get lunch detention more often. Maybe this is because I shared my lunch with him! Anyway, he said he likes my room, it feels safe, and that how the other kids feel, too. That made my heart happy." (2015)

"Today we spent some time redecorating the room and our own spaces. I let the kids print out pictures of things they love or make them happy. We cleaned up our desks, put up pictures, some pretty lights, and decorated with the pictures and objects we had gathered. I want this place to be a safe, welcoming space for them, and I think putting in this effort and dedicating this time let them know that." (2014)

Intellectual Gifts

The safety and security of my classroom I found illustrated in my journals also led me to discover a subtheme related to the intellectual abilities of my students and my understanding thereof. My immediate recognition as I read my journals was the words of care and affection I expressed towards my students along with the kindness the students expressed toward one another. I believe this is as a result of my focus on these aspects of my work. In working with EBD students, it is often the case that we lose sight of the intellectual abilities hidden behind the behaviors of our students. Words I used in my journals include, "*incredibly intelligent*," "*brilliant*," "*talented*," "*gifted*," and "*unbelievably bright and intuitive*." For any of us, the thought of appearing stupid in front of our peers or colleagues is enough to shut down our willingness to participate. Perhaps, the safety and security of my classroom provided the environment necessary for them to express their intellectual gifts. For my students, the effects of the trauma they had lived through certainly heightened their fears of public humiliation. In terms of intellectual abilities, the research shows that cognitive ability can be the moderator between life stress, psychological adjustment, family adversity, and trauma (Breslau, Lucia, & Alvarado,

2006; Fergusson & Lynskey, 1996; Flouri, Mavroveli, Panourgia, 2013). I believe this is the case for my students. I also believe that in our current educational structure, we rarely have the ability to tap into the astounding intellectual potential students with EBD possess.

Theme 4: You Have Reached a Teacher Who Has Been Disconnected

Worry

Revisiting my journals, particularly in the last two years of this time period, caused me to return to a time when I was becoming increasingly overwhelmed, tired, frustrated, and burned out. I began to express a profound sense of worry for my students that weighed on me heavily. I realize now, that every story I heard I carried with me. I carried them into IEP meetings, into new relationships with students, and most importantly, I carried them home. My husband and my family noticed a difference in my mood. I was easily upset, quick to anger, and noticeably depressed. I expressed my feelings of resentment and dissatisfaction regarding my work with my husband frequently. During my last year at this position I wrote, "*This just isn't worth it to me anymore. I have to get out.*" Evidence of these feelings were very apparent in my journals.

"I worry about her future. I don't know if she will ever be able to live independently" (2008).

"I worry about what it is like for Corrie to carry around all of those horrible memories" (2009).

"He never had a chance" (2009).

"His story broke my heart" (2010).

"I just stood there without a clue what to do. I am out of ideas and I am out of any desire to figure it out" (2010).

"I just have no clue how this even happens to people" (2011).

"All I can think of is how worried Ramon must be. I've never known that kind of fear, and it makes me feel guilty and sad" (2012).

"I just worry about what will happen to him when he gets home. I'll never know. And there is nothing I can do about it" (2012).

"He is just one of my favorite kids in the world and I can't believe something so stupid like this is going to probably ruin his life. All that time we put in and it was for nothing" (2013).

"How could this have happened? There is nothing I can do to help him now. It just makes me wish we could go back in time. I don't think there was anything I could have done to prevent this, but I feel so helpless and sad for him" (2013).

"I don't know how the hell she is going to take care of a baby when she can barely take care of herself" (2014).

"It seems like she needs so much more than a high school diploma. But if that's all I can give her, so be it" (2014).

"Today I found Louis in the backroom. I didn't even know he had snuck back there. When I found him, his hand was covered with blood. He had been using a paperclip to try to remove his own tooth. He was in so much pain, that he couldn't stand to have it in there anymore. He nearly had the thing out. He was crying so quietly; I didn't even hear him. I took him to the nurse's office and we called his mom. The nurse says it looks like he has an abscess. His mom agreed to take him to the emergency dentist. I can't imagine how long he has been in pain, and I worry that I gave him things to do when he was in such pain" (2015).

"Today was a day of just putting out fires. I swear there was at least one every hour. I think the kids were ping-ponging off of each other. Maybe they could sense that I was tired and getting frustrated. Either way, I was not so successful today. Not much got done. I think I'm the one setting the tone here, but lately I have been feeling pretty down and wiped out. I need a break. Thank God the weekend is coming" (2015).

Administrative (Over) Intervention

Along with these expressions of being overwhelmed, frustrated, worried, and sad, was the presence of increasing administrative intervention. During the last two years of my teaching career in this position, a new lead administrator was appointed. His approach to all students, and mine in particular, was driven by strict disciplinarian standards. His one-size-fits-all approach to dealing with students significantly impacted my ability to protect my students and to provide them with the individualized care they needed to stay in school and feel like they mattered. Cancio, Albrecht, and Johns (2013), conducted a study to examine the effects of administration on EBD teacher attrition. They found:

> Characteristics of administrative support significantly correlated with intent to stay in the field, extent of support, opportunities for growth, appreciation and trust, job satisfaction, and positive views of their school. In addition, examination revealed specific administrative behaviors influenced the decision of teachers of students with EBD regarding longevity in the field. (p. 71)

Likewise, research suggests one of the greatest factors in EBD teacher attrition is the lack of administrative support (Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2013; Littrell, Billingsley, & Cross, 1994; Prather-Jones, 2011; Schlicte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005). Journal entries reflecting my resentment of invasive administrative intervention and involvement include the following:

"I swear I spend more time in the principal's office more than I do in my classroom" (2014).

"I was trying to resolve this issue on my own, but it got noisy and another teacher called the office. The principal called the Student Resource Officer (SRO). The SRO told him to calm down and Jared said to him, "What the fuck are you gonna do if I don't, huh?" Then he called him

some pretty fierce names. I think the SRO felt threatened, so they ended up putting him in handcuffs and taking him away. Chances are I won't see him again" (2014).

"Matthew got five days of out of school suspension. It's five days he won't get back. But I know he sees it as just a vacation. There was definitely a better way to solve this" (2015).

"He got kicked out because he refused to turn over a handful of condoms! It wasn't about the condoms; it was about the control and someone's ego. For sure, it wasn't about his education" (2015).

"There wasn't any listening to his explanation. Only a knee-jerk reaction. There was no discussion, no reasoning. He was obviously angry and tired of dealing with this kid. He even said that. He could care less what happens to this kid" (2015).

"I'd rather deal with this on my own rather than have him involved. It never turns out good" (2015).

"How is sending him home the solution when home is the damn problem?" (2015).

"He throws his weight around and treats everyone, especially the kid, like they better shut up and deal with whatever sentence he hands down" (2015).

"I was walking back from a horrible meeting with him and he told me to pick up a piece of trash in the hallway. He said, "Shannon, you should never miss an opportunity to make your school a nicer place. What a joke. How's that for irony?" (2015).

Eventually, the combination of weariness, worry, frustration, and sadness coupled with excessive, unrealistic, and unkind administrative interference in my work took its toll. As I reread the last of my entries in the 2014-2015 school year, I found several notations that led me to rewrite them in such a way that they could explain what would happen next.

It was towards the end of the year, and I was getting ready to walk into a manifestation determination for a student who had been suspended for ten days for a physical altercation with a staff member. This was not Tracy's first brush with suspension. He had been in trouble consistently throughout the year. His mom is a single mom, and she was absolutely exhausted with her son's behavior. She told me that no matter what she does, nothing changes. I get that because I felt like I had the same experience throughout the year. She really tries. She contacted me weekly and sometimes daily depending on what was happening in Tracy's life. I know there were occasions that she was worried she would lose her job if she had to leave to come pick up Tracy for one reason or another. I have spent enough time with Deb to know that she loves her son, and she was doing her very best to help him be successful. We had become friends, and I respected her for how she handled the situations she was brought into. She never yelled or belittled her son. Rather, she confronted him honestly and with a kindness and decency that spoke to the respect she had for her child. I admired her consistency and care.

This meeting was different, though. Deb has always been the first to admit when her kid did something wrong, but she has also been his advocate when she felt he was unfairly judged. This meeting was as a result of Tracy's physical aggression toward a staff member who restrained him after he went after another student who threw food at him in the cafeteria. The staff member, a person Tracy did not know, noticed Tracy heading toward another student. Tracy was yelling at the kid, making verbal threats, and daring him to throw food at him "one more time." The other kid was laughing at Tracy and that was probably the very worst thing he could have done. Sensing the imminent possibility of a fight, the staff member grabbed Tracy and held him tightly. Nothing was done about the other student who was laughing with his friends and taunting him from the table where he was sitting. In fact, according to what I saw on the

footage, the other student and his friends got up and left the lunchroom without any reprimands for throwing food or taunting my student. In the process of being restrained, Tracy reared back and hit the staff member in the face with his head. That is how we ended up here.

In a manifestation determination, the IEP team is called to determine if the behavior the student exhibited is directly related to the student's disability. If it is, then special education services are required to be provided to the student even if that student is suspended from school. This decision is a team decision made during the course of a meeting. The outcome is absolutely not to be determined prior to the meeting. Following a lengthy meeting with Tracy's entire IEP team, including his parent as well as the lead administrator for the school, a team decision was made that Tracy's behavior was a direct manifestation of his disability. Given the data gathered on the student as well as the input from the team members, with the exception of one, this decision appeared to me to be a sound one. The lead administrator was livid.

After the parent left the meeting, the administrator stood up, leaned over the table so that his hands were positioned directly in front of me, and looked angrily at me. He said, "The next time we have one of these, I would like to know the outcome before it gets started." Among other angry sentiments, he went on to say, "Mrs. Eickhoff, I think you need to do a little less pandering to the parent and try being more professional." My colleagues sat there, silent, eyes on the table, stunned to hear the way the administrator was speaking to me. I was mortified. I did not attempt to say anything as I knew it was a lost cause. Furthermore, I was so humiliated that all I wanted to do was get out of there. When the administrator left, the remaining team members apologized to me for the way I was treated. I left the meeting, went to my classroom, and cried. I had spent an incredible amount of time and care in working with Tracy and his mom. To have this dedication to my students and their families mocked and ridiculed was the worst form of insult.

I left work that day, went home, and sat down on the couch in the living room with my husband and told him what had happened. There were not enough words to express my anger and sadness about how I had been treated. While he was upset at my treatment, he wasn't surprised. This type of disrespectful, unprofessional, and unkind behavior was not new. My husband knew I was becoming increasingly unhappy at work. It was my opinion that the highest level of administration was lacking in respect and tolerance for students with EBD. It was also my opinion that these students were not treated as people to be listened to, but rather as problems to be solved. I made the decision to end my teaching career. I would attend real estate school and move forward in my life on a new career path. (2015)

Chapter 6 - Findings: Section 3: Rebirth 2015-Present

I was out of town visiting family when I received the call that would change my life. I had made the decision to begin selling real estate while I completed my final year of teaching. It was the end of summer break and I was not looking forward to returning to school. My boss called and told me a position had opened that he thought would be perfect for me. I was skeptical. The position was at an alternative high school, basically unknown to the rest of the school district. I had tremendous respect for Dr. Hugo, and as such, I decided to give his offer some consideration. I packed up the family and came home early so I could visit the program and make my decision.

It was late afternoon, and I had just arrived back in Kansas after an eight-hour drive. I met Dr. Hugo and he drove me to the school. We passed through a guard gate toward a century-old building. I remember thinking the campus was beautiful and mysterious. We walked into the building and climbed the stairs toward the 3rd floor. The walls were lined with photographs of the prairie fires we have become accustomed to in springtime. The fires burn off the old undergrowth and allow for the emergence of the new life hiding below. We arrived at my future classroom and I immediately felt at home. The students were older and far more diverse than any I had ever worked with before. I sat down next to one of the students, introduced myself, and started up a conversation. It was easy. I felt a sense of peace in this place.

On the way home, my boss explained the job in its entirety. Above all, it was his passion for the school and the work that was being done there that sold me on the position. I would be given the latitude to run my program based on my own philosophy. The faith Dr. Hugo had in my ability was refreshing as was the opportunity to work in an environment that served students with unique needs and stories. I'm not sure how I knew, but I was certain this opportunity would

allow me to truly make a difference. I told Dr. Hugo that I would take the position. The next day, I returned to my old classroom and cleaned out eighteen years of my personal effects and teaching materials and prepared to start teaching in my new classroom the following week.

I wish I could pinpoint what happened to change everything about my life as a teacher and a person over the course of my last seven years in education. Certainly, there have been a myriad of experiences that have resulted in a total transformation of my mindset. I have been given a fresh set of eyes through which to view the world. I have a sense of clarity and purpose that guides my steps. I no longer see myself as one teacher in one town in America going to work each day for the sole purpose of educating the students I have been assigned. Rather, I have come to recognize the work I do as integral to the web of teachers whose lives are inextricably tied to the future of their students and the future of education altogether. I have fallen in love with my work and the students I spend my days with. I have become a keeper of stories, dedicated to creating a physical, emotional, and spiritual space where every story has a place, and every voice has a chance to be heard.

Everything I have learned over the past seven years has evolved through relationship. Those relationships have manifested themselves in narrative threads that have woven together my career in the form of the stories I have gathered. Huber et al. (2013) tell us, "Stories are not to be treated lightly as they both carry, and inspire, significant obligations and responsibilities: stories must be cared for as they are at the heart of how we make meaning of our experiences in the world" (p. 214). In terms of my research, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest "relationship is key to what it is that narrative inquirers do" (p. 189). Therefore, as I begin to explore the themes that have emerged from my analysis of my journals over the past seven years, I will begin with the foundation for its entirety: relationship.

Theme 1: Relationship

Emotional Connection and Closeness

Evidence of the relationships I have built with my students over the past seven years is illustrated in my journals in the form of a myriad of themes. The emotional connections and closeness I feel toward my students is demonstrated in the following partial entries:

"We became extremely close" (2016).

"Each one of them knew how much I cared about them" (2017).

"I loved being included as a member of their squad" (2018).

"I seem to be the only person she will listen to. I think she knows how much I care about her" (2019).

"If I'm going to get her through this program, I'm going to have to keep her close to me" (2021).

"She came in in such a rage telling me that we had to talk or she was going to beat a girl's ass. I sat with her, very close, and we talked through it. In the end, she was sweet and thanked me telling me that I was the only one she trusted not to snitch. I laughed at her comment and she said, "No really, you're the only person I can trust. I know you care what happens to me" (2021).

The following four entries are longer and more in depth demonstrations of the relationships I have built based on deeply emotional and caring connections:

"Randall trusts me, and I think it is just because I listen to him. He gets into trouble sometimes for leaving his other classes to come see me. He ate lunch with me today. He told me he doesn't worry too much about anything. He said, "If I have survived what I have already survived, it can't get much worse!" He talked about how diamonds are formed under pressure. He

also told me he didn't go to school much, but when he did, he said he found a few teachers who cared about him enough that they gave him food to take home, and they let him take his books home, too. He said there were a lot of teachers who didn't trust him to take their things to his house. He said he thinks they thought they would get ruined or something. He also said that the other kids took their things home and that didn't seem fair. He thought that maybe those other teachers didn't think he could read, but he didn't know. He said that maybe they thought he would sell their stuff, and he said, "like, who was I going to sell a book to?" He told me that he always protected his school stuff. He said, "It kept my mind busy, ya know?" He told me that he knows that if I was his teacher back then, that I would let him take his books home. For certain, I would have." (2018)

"*I sat in my classroom with Beth for one last time today. She graduated and is moving back home. She has a job to go to and she is really excited for that. She is moving in with Marco. They've been together for quite some time now, and I'm really hoping it works out for them. We sat close to each other and reminisced about all of our fun times together. She was rubbing her feet because the high heels she wore to graduation killed her feet. Our conversation was so easy, like one between old friends. I am going to miss seeing her every day. She is just one of those students whose life you really dig in to. We call each other "best friend." I think this is a term reserved for very special people in her community. I am honored to receive it. We were both really melancholy and as the time passed, we knew that things would never be the same. We really love each other and respect each other, and I know there will be a giant hole in my classroom on Monday when I come to work and she is not there. We promised each other that we would keep in touch. But I know that the lack of in-person connection always takes its toll on the maintenance of a relationship. This is one kid I'll never forget. When we said goodbye and she got on the bus to take her home, we both cried. I'm a better person for knowing this beautiful soul."* (2019*)*

"*Today the sweetest thing happened. I was having a really bad morning and it felt like every student was jumping on my last nerve. Amelia and Eli are at each other's throats and I think I am carrying that with me into work. I set up the classroom like usual, but when I pulled my roster for the week, I was totally overbooked. I literally had to send students away because I didn't have enough seats. The only fair way to do it was to prioritize kids based on their closeness to graduation. Then, the scheduling people have a fit when you send kids to other places, and the students are pissed because they want their time in high school. So, during 2nd hour, Kami and Jojo got into a shouting match over something that happened in the dorm last night. I had just had it. I had just got the classroom settled down and working and this threw everything in a tizzy. I just put my head in my hands and started to cry. I wasn't loud or anything, I was just exhausted and felt like I couldn't handle anymore anger between people. The other kids in the class noticed this and everyone got quiet. Tony said out loud that they needed to stop because they were making me sad. Vicky and Cody came over to my desk and hugged me and told me they loved me and they were sorry that everyone was being loud and dumb. After that, everyone settled down and I felt better. I went out for lunch because I wanted to get off campus and relax. When I came back, Mr. Winston had already opened the classroom door. I went to my desk and there were at least a dozen sticky notes on my desk from all of my students with such sweet words. Allison wrote, "you're the best teacher in the world," Cody wrote, "we love you," Kami wrote, "I'm sorry for making you sad," Jojo wrote, "Thank you for being such a good teacher," Vicky wrote, "You're a bad bitch, don't let nobody make you cry," Carmen said, "I love you, Mrs. Eickhoff," Cindy wrote, "You're the best," Antwon wrote, "We were stupid, sorry, and be happy," and there were several others that just said "I love you, and you're a great teacher." My whole day was better and I cried again, not because I was sad, but because*

I was grateful that my students see that I am a human and that I get sad, too. And I saw both in word and action that they really care about me and even love me, too. Just goes to show that even the worst start to a day can end up with a really great ending." (2018)

"*I worked with Brittney most of the day today. She has three weeks to finish or she will hit her deadline and have to leave. God knows how she is going to finish two classes in 21 days. I swear she is the funniest kid I have ever known. We laughed together all day long. We were working on her geography and I said "Idaho," and she busted up laughing saying, "I know that's true, you-da-ho!" We both fell into that laughing fit where you just can't stop, and when we did stop, one of us would just bust out again. I think the other students must have thought we were crazy. It was just a wonderful day to spend with her. Her personality is so infectious and beautiful. She has this tremendous spirit about her. She always talks about the amazing women she has in her life, especially her mom and sisters. I think I'd really like to meet them and I told her that. She promised me that I will get to meet them at graduation and she says she has told them about me. She has a giant personality that attracts people to her. We slipped easily in and out of conversation between her work and the details of our lives. And it was beautiful just getting to know more about her. And she had questions about my life and I felt totally comfortable about sharing them with her. I told her about all my kids and she said that she was right, that I was the ho! Today, I realize that I am so blessed. That it really could have been any one of my students that I got to know even better, to laugh with, to love on and to teach. But today it was Brittney and I'm so glad it was."* (2019)

Along with illustrating the relationships I had formed with my students, these stories also demonstrate the underpinnings of those relationships in the form of care, trust, finding common ground, laughter, faith, and the beautiful effects of entering one another's lives. The reciprocal

nature of our relationships show how our need for human connections are fulfilled. They speak to love. According to hooks (2000), "To truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients—care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication" (p. 5). I have found that these are the qualities that define the community that is my classroom.

Acts of Care

In addition to the emotional closeness I found in my journals, I also found evidence of specific acts of care both for my students and from my students that are representative of the relationships we formed. It is difficult to say whether the acts of care helped to build the relationships or if they grew directly from the relationships. I think they worked in unison to affirm our commitment to each other as valued people in each other's lives. The following journal entries speak to specific acts of care that communicated that commitment:

"*When the refugee students come here, they are given a seemingly free flight to get here. Their language barrier certainly make understanding any future financial obligations difficult to say the least. About one year after arriving, the refugee students begin receiving letters that require repayment for their flights. Most of them cost around five hundred dollars, an amount none of them have access to. I have had to call and set up payments for the students. The lady on the phone was friendly and was willing to set up a plan. Nevertheless, the letters seem threatening, and the students don't understand payment plans. And on top of this, every penny my students earn, they send back to their families. Jacob didn't have any money. His first payment was thirty dollars. I pulled out my wallet and paid for it. Jacob was overwhelmed and cried. I couldn't make him understand that thirty dollars was not significant, and that my ability to help him was the real gift. I don't know if he cried because he was embarrassed or grateful.*

My prayer is that he knows that there are people in this world who are willing and able to help. And I hope he finds these people throughout his journey." (2019)

"*Jenna has not been doing her work at all. Quarantine is not being very kind to her. So, I put on all the protective gear and went over to see her in her dorm room today. They had just moved her really quickly because there was an exposure in her other dorm. They didn't even bother to get all of her things delivered to her. When she opened the door, her room was dark, but I could see that it was a total disaster in there. She looked like she hadn't showered in days and the room smelled awful. I still struggle with understanding what Jenna goes through as a trans kid. No one on campus picks on her, though, thank God. In fact, she has many friends. Her back story is a really sad one. She was kicked out of her home by her parents when she revealed that she identifies as a woman. I guess she came from a fairly prominent, wealthy family here in town. I wonder if that makes a difference, you know? Like are rich people more afraid of social rejection. It must be. I just can't imagine how hard it would be to be thrown out of your home for being who you are. Jenna is one of seven students who had to stay on campus when we shut down because she had absolutely no place to go. She has known so much pain in her life. She openly talks about it and I find myself in awe of her courage. I think being in that dark room, with no human contact has allowed Jenna to get in her head and become so deeply mired in all of her sadness that she can barely move, let alone do school work. Jenna has had hygiene issues a lot in the past. I have been in meetings with her where she has spoken openly about her hatred of showering because she doesn't like her own body. When you realize things like this, it makes hygiene and taking care of your own body far more complicated. I told her I wanted to take a walk with her outside thinking that some fresh air would do her good. She told me she couldn't until she shaved. She said they hadn't brought her her razor and I could just feel her shame.*

Maybe shame is my word, but what I felt was utter sadness for her. She said she had asked for one several times, but no one helped get her one. We get so wrapped up in making these kids continue their school work, but we forget how fragile they are, all locked up in their little rooms, in the dark, alone, with all the time in the world to think about things that I can't imagine. All Jenna needed was a razor and some damn human contact. She needed someone to listen to her needs and actually do something to meet them. She just needed someone to care about her. I went down to wellness and found her a new razor and shaving cream. I gave it to her and told her I'd text her in an hour to see if she wanted to go for a walk outside. When I texted her, she said she was too tired to go today, but maybe tomorrow. But she thanked me for getting her the things she needed. It was so simple. It took me no time at all, and it made all the difference to her. I hope we get to go on that walk tomorrow." (2020).

Written in my journals are specific references to acts of kindness shown to me by my students. They include the following:

"She made me a bracelet out of beads and gave it to me with a note attached saying that she loves me!" (2016).

"He told me that if I ever need anything, he will be there. He is very protective of me and if any students get rude or mouthy, he always shuts them right down. He refers to me as "his teacher." I love that he claims ownership of me in that way" (2017).

"He left me a note thanking me for helping him. It said I was patient and understanding. He told me I was good because I can get through to the students that no one else can. My heart was filled" (2021).

In addition to notes within my journals, I have received post-it notes, drawings, and what I call letters of love from my students. They are acts of kindness and care in tangible form. Earlier, I

spoke to the post-it notes left on my desk by my students following an altercation that occurred in my classroom. I saved them all and keep them in a special box in my classroom as a reminder of the love and care I have received. I also keep letters I have received from students, most of which are written when a student has graduated and is getting ready to transition out of our program. The following are two of the letters I have saved and re-read frequently:

"Dear Mrs. Eickhoff,

I remember pretty early on when I first go into your class, I had asked how long all this was gonna take and how fast I could get done and you had told me something along the lines of "as fast as you want it." From there on I was determined to overcome my obstacles that I had built for myself. Every morning I would walk in your class determined because you were determined with me. You believed in me and you were so confident that I was gonna graduate that I eventually started actually believing it myself! Then the day finally came when I walked up to your desk and you announced that you had a new graduate! And I wanted to literally start crying my eyes out, not only because I just accomplished something that I never thought I would and what people said I couldn't do, but because you never left my side, you stood by me every step of the way and cheered me on it didn't matter what was going on you never hesitated for a second if I had a question or needed help or if I just felt so low, you were there. I will never forget that and I will forever share it. You are amazing and beyond incredible. You help change lives and you are impacting them! I was way beyond blessed to have you.

Love,

Thomas" (2019).

"Mrs. Eickhoff,

The first time meeting you I felt like I already knew you. You've had my heart since I heard about you through my brother seeing how much you cared for him and wanted to help him. That meant the world to me and then meeting you was the icing to the cake. You have the biggest heart and genuinely care to teach and help us learn and become better. You even allowed me to bring my daughter to night class and you'd help me in anyway with her. I will always be so thankful to have been part of your life and classroom! I've never had a teacher care so much or go out of their way to help me learn the way you did. We've cried many tears together. You have also left a lasting impact on my life.

Love,

Vanessa" (2021).

These letters represent the best of me as a teacher, yet they do not speak to my ability to teach, or what the students received from me academically. Rather, they are letters of love reflecting the joy that grew from our relationships. Certainly, graduating from high school was our goal, but it wasn't the sole focus of our time together. I believe the education they received was important, but it wasn't their academic success they left me with. Instead, it was their words that told me what had meant the most to them, that I never left their side, I cheered them on, I stood by them, I never gave up, I earned their trust, and I cared.

Theme 2: What Brings You to My Classroom?

When a new student comes to my classroom, I get a rush of excitement. I start with opening a conversation that usually begins with me asking, "What brings you to my classroom?" This conversation must take place in close proximity for a couple of reasons. First, I want to maintain the privacy of the words we share. This is the beginning of our story together, and I want it to be personal. Secondly, I believe closeness is paramount to a solid beginning fostering

comfort and safety within my classroom. All of my students have dropped out of high school. Their experience within the realm of education is imbued with negativity. I tell them I want this time to be different. Most importantly, I tell them that we are in this together, we will create a plan together, we will execute this plan together, and whatever comes our way, we can handle it together.

At first, I was surprised with the candid nature of my students' responses to my questions during our first meeting. Although every path to my classroom is unique, they are all typically tied to a series of unfortunate, if not tragic, events. I listen very carefully to their stories and in the end, hopefully reassure them by telling them that I believe they were brought to me for a reason. My reaction to my students' stories has changed over time. I assume it is because of the level of numbness I spoke to earlier that dulls the shock of new, often painful experiences. After so many years, I rarely hear a story that doesn't resemble one I have heard before. Nevertheless, I am acutely aware that individual stories are uniquely owned and experienced by each student differently and it is within that space that we begin our story together.

The following are examples of responses my students have shared with me when I have asked what brought them to my classroom:

"I want to raise my baby better than I was raised. I want to start a new life, someplace new, where no one knows me" (2016).

"Jane has a significant learning disability and she told me that it was the reason she dropped out of school. She felt like help wasn't available to her and she was too embarrassed to ask for it. It leaves me wondering how someone didn't pick up on this and make an effort to help her. She's very quiet and if I were to guess, she probably just slipped through the cracks" (2017).

"I spoke with Kelly about why she came here and she told me it was because of her daughter. She said that she was the only reason she is here because she didn't know how she could take care of her if she was stuck in her old life. She was tremendously grateful I would allow her to bring her little girl to night school since she didn't want to be here any longer than she had to be. Still, she shared that she is worried because she doesn't know where she will go when she finishes school because she cannot go back to where she came from. In her words, "I can't go back because I know I'll end up getting messed up in all that stuff I tried to leave behind" (2017).

"When I asked why she came here she told me, that girls kill girls where she comes from, and she can't go back home. She told me her brother and father are both in jail for murder and she said she was next if she didn't do something different. I am struck by the courage this kid has. Her decision to come here must have been a hard one. Her whole life has been a struggle. She is really tough, but really sweet, also. I think I'm really going to love this girl" (2019).

"Today, Cara arrived in my classroom. She was open about her time in school before coming to me. She said she hated school, but not her teachers. When I asked her why, she said that she didn't know them and maybe it would have made a difference if any of them tried to get to know her. She told me that she had "fucked up her shit, but that there was always time for a second chance." She said she didn't want to be here, but that she had to because she wasn't going anywhere if she didn't. She's a very spicy little chicken. I like that about her" (2019).

"When I asked why she was here with me, she said she just kept moving around and never earned any credits. She spent most of her time taking care of her siblings, so she just quit. The school started the process of filing truancy on her and her family didn't want that kind of trouble. So, they sent her here. I get the feeling she is glad to be here, though. I'm glad for that. I

wonder who is taking care of the little kids now, but I didn't ask her that. I'm sure that is something she worries about" (2020).

"She said, "I had to get away from home, I needed to be free." I think there's going to be a lot more to her story. The word "free" is pretty powerful. I didn't press too hard today. I'm certain she will explain in her own way as time goes on" (2020).

"She told me she came here because of her nieces. She told me that she wants to have someone they can look up to. She tells me that she wants them to have someone that can do things for them like take them to sports games and help them in school so they can be eligible to play sports. I asked her about the sports thing because I could tell it meant a lot to her. She told me about how when she was in school, she was really good at sports but wasn't allowed to play because of her grades. That made her mad and so she gave up. She said something really interesting to me, that she thought it was ridiculous that she had to have good grades to do something she loved and something she was good at. She asked why someone else got to decide what was good for her. She told me that her life would have been better if how she lived it was up to her. This made sense to me. I think the rules that made her conform to someone else's standards are the reason she quit school. I'm glad she's here with me now" (2021).

"He said he is here to show his family that he could make something of himself. I think that is true of so many of my kids. They all seem to have something to prove" (2021).

"I met Nina today. We had a beautiful conversation about what led her here and to my classroom. She was pretty philosophical about the whole thing. She saw her place here as a second chance at life. She was able to understand and articulate that if she weren't here, she would still be a high school dropout and probably addicted to the drugs that were a plague to her friends and her community. She really sees this as an opportunity and I was so glad to hear

her say that everyone here has been supportive and helped her to realize that she has a lot of potential. She reminded me that just having a place to sleep is a luxury for a lot of my kids. I have to constantly remind myself that their lives are so very different than mine. What I take for granted, they see as a luxury. Our wants and needs are worlds apart. I'm never too far away from a reality check when I don't even know I need one" (2022).

"I met Leon today. He's a bright, funny, upbeat kiddo. He told me he has had a hearing and vision loss since he was a little kid, but that he never received any help until he got here. He told me that he struggled to hear or see his teachers and that is why he failed in school. I can't imagine a school missing something like this. Maybe they didn't and his parents just didn't do anything about it. Whatever happened, it shouldn't have. He was really funny when we talked and he told me that his dad was half deaf and so his family spoke really loudly in their home. He guessed that was just the volume everyone spoke in. That kind of cracked me up. He was so matter of fact about it. He struggled all the way through school and made it to the end of his sophomore year. When I asked him what made him give up at that point, he told me that on the day the students were enrolling for their junior year, his teacher did not give him a form to fill out. When he asked him why, the teacher told him, "You don't need one. You're just going to drop out anyway." I told him that when he graduates, we are going to call that teacher and let him know how wrong he was. I think it made him feel good to know that I was on his side and was mad that he was treated that way. You have to wonder what in the world is wrong with a teacher who would do that to a kid. I'm grateful he is here and we can turn what happened to him into another reason for why he should succeed" (2022).

Leaving Home

As I revisited these journals, I sought to understand more deeply what made my students leave their homes and choose to return to school. I was struck with the words I wrote in my 2021 journal when I said, "*It always amazes me that my kids can see out of a place they've never left*." I found there were four themes emerged as I reread these entries. First, many of my students indicated they wanted a new and better life. This was often referred to as a second chance. The understanding that returning home was not an option was prevalent in my journals. Some of the reasons for this were severe, as in the entry where a student told me, "*girls kill girls where I'm from*." There was an understood presence of not wanting any part of their past in their future. This feeling or belief diminished over time, however. Many of my students have never been away from home, away from their families, in their entire lives. And regardless of how hard the struggle was to survive where they came from, it was still their home. For many students, the longer they were in the program, the more homesick they became. The dangers associated with returning home were overshadowed by their need to be surrounded by the familiar.

In some cases, my students are sent home for disciplinary reasons. When this happens, the reality of returning home and what that means is swift and frightening. I have tried to help my students understand the precarious nature of their behavior when the consequences thereof lie in the hands of people who are not so considerate of the long-term effects of their decisions. On one occasion, I wrote, *"He was kicked out for pushing a kid who was provoking him. These rules should not apply when we take into consideration the consequences of what will happen to him if he returns home. They didn't even stop to consider his story"* (2021). I wrote the following journal entry after one of our students was sent home after a verbal altercation with another student:

"*Last night it started snowing and it didn't stop. The road crews were out, but the roads were pretty dicey. Thankfully, I made it safely to work. It was a rough start to a Monday morning. My attendance roster was a mess because of students who are quarantined. I only had three kids in my classroom, Zander, Katie, and Ty. Zander said, first thing, "Mrs. Eickhoff, did you hear that Camilla was shot and killed this morning in Topeka?" I asked him what was he talking about? Katie and Ty joined the conversation confirming that they had heard the same thing. Immediately, everyone turned to their social media to see if anything had been posted about her death. There were words posted on her social media sites from her friends indicating that she had indeed passed. There is no information about what happened. Two of my students told me they have a Snap Chat streak with her that she never misses. She missed it this morning.*

Camilla used to be our student. She was a stunning young woman. She also had a very spicy personality. She was working on earning her high school diploma when she got involved with a young man on campus. Their relationship was rocky and they ended up breaking up. In the process, angry words were exchanged, social media got involved, and the two ended up in a horrible fight. Nothing physical happened, but the verbal aggression ended up getting both of the students thrown out of our program. That was last week. One week ago, she was going to class, hanging out with friends, working on her future career, and now she is gone. She would have turned twenty-two years old in just a few weeks.

When Camilla was kicked out of the program, she said she didn't have anywhere to go. According to one of her teachers, she was taken to a friend's house. And that is the last we saw of her. Everyone at school is quiet. There are rumors swirling around on social media about how she passed. I reminded each of my kids that until something is known for certain, speculation is a bad idea. We are in a weird space right now. The presence of the fragility of life has moved in

and sat right down in the middle of my classroom. I realized I needed to tell them just how precious each one of them are.

Several hours passed and when I returned from lunch, I found half of my classroom ceiling had collapsed due to the massive weight of the snow. There was water pouring out of my ceiling. The maintenance person came in and told me that the it is in such a state of disrepair that I have to switch classrooms. Once I got into my new space, one of my other students came in to tell me that she found an online news report about Camilla. She was shot to death in her friend's car. Her friend survived. We still don't know why, and while we may find out the facts in Camilla's death, we probably won't ever understand why. I told my student how sorry I was for the loss of her friend. She said to me, "Shit like this happens every day, it is what it is." (2022)

Other themes I found upon revisiting these journals include the lack of help or care my students received in their previous schools. Several students pointed out their disabilities as being the precursor to academic failure, others claimed they weren't seen, or if they were, they were ignored. For many of my female students, the decision they made to return to school was based on their need to care for their children. I connected deeply with these young women on our shared experience of motherhood. For many of my students, the desire to prove themselves was the impetus for returning to school. Although retribution was the driving factor for their decision, I found those students ended up with greater pride in their own accomplishments than a desire to prove someone else wrong.

Theme 3: Backstory

According to Coulter et al. (2007), "Becoming a teacher is a process situated in a multitude of social, cultural, political, and historical contexts" (p. 119). As such, my work as a teacher is dependent upon understanding those contexts in the lives of my students. In particular,

when a student enters my classroom, I must begin to understand their history in order to step into their place in time as we move forward together. In the beginning, my students are what Freeman (2015) calls "stories that have not yet been told" (p. 35). Freeman (2015) also speaks to "good hindsight, which looks backward in the hopes of discerning connections that can only emerge after the fact" (p. 29). As I read my journals, I found countless entries illustrating the backstories of my students. Within those entries, I found subthemes that emerged, revealing common threads in my student's histories.

The common threads I found binding my student's past together are not happy ones. Rather, they are permeated by violence, gang affiliation, poverty, troubled relationships, and loss. It is not my purpose to paint the lives of my students as ones without times of happiness and joy. What I have recorded over the years are those stories that seem to have affected my students most deeply. Perhaps, I chose to record these stories as a result of my own reaction to their severity as seen through my privileged lens. That being said, the entries I have gathered are evidence of historical commonalities in terms of what my students have experienced throughout their lives.

Historical Violence

Within my journals I found multiple entries depicting the historical violence experienced by my students. The following are examples of these entries:

"He shared with me that he had to save his mom from his dad when he would beat her" (2018).

"He told me that he finally got up the courage to confront his grandmother about her abuse" (2018).

"I was broken from hearing his stories. I really don't know how he survived. He told me that his mother chained him to his bathroom sink because he was afraid of the dark" (2019).

"She told me how her first adoptive dad was in the military and she said he was very quick to anger. He thought that physical consequences would make her learn. She said there was constant yelling that often went too far. She told me about the time she got a D in a class and her father told her she was a bad fucking student. She said she wrote BFD on her wrist, because in her words, "It broke me when he said that and I wanted to feel how angry he was every time I looked at it." She told me she always felt like a burden in her home. She also said that as time went on, the abuse became worse both physically and sexually. She was very matter of fact about what happened to her. I only wonder how she has survived" (2020).

The Affiliated Life

Several other entries spoke to a history of gang affiliation in the lives of my students. Having no understanding of affiliated life, I first learned about it after recognizing a common tattoo on several of my students. I asked my student about the three tiny dots he had tattooed on his hand in between his thumb and index finger. He told me that his dad had one, too. I recorded our interaction in my journal.

> *He called it a "my crazy life" tattoo. He told me about how he went to visit his dad in prison his freshmen year and that is when he started teaching him about his future in the affiliated life. He told me that he thought it was something that he wanted. He told me about how he was jumped into the gang on Thanksgiving. He said he dad was there. Looking back, he said, he realized that his dad was a piece of shit father.* (2021)

The following is a journal I wrote following a lengthy discussion with several students about affiliated life. It started after my student told me he had to go home because there was a person who had a beef with him and his little brother, and as a result, they shot at his mother's house.

"*They told me that once you are their age, from 17-21, you're already too deep in to get away. There are only two roads out, getting jumped out, or dying. Me- I just wish there was a way to be safe… Them- you mean, you wish there was a safe way to be Black. The conversation started with me trying to understand a reference made in a text message a student showed to me wherein he was inquiring how to purchase a gun from a friend. I didn't know what the terminology meant. The person my student was talking to indicated he could purchase a nine millimeter for $250.*

We talked about what it would take to live a life where you didn't need a weapon to feel safe. My obvious lack of understanding rang through. I realized that I have never been so frightened that I thought I needed a gun to protect myself. The students indicated that a fight may just be a physical fight, but you never know if the person you are fighting has a gun, so you have to be prepared. My student showed me a picture of his brother who had died from gang violence. I found myself really angry and helpless at trying to understand or offer advice. Like there isn't any probable possibility that they will ever get away from this history. It's a plague, a terminal existence that resembles the least fortunate birthright one could receive.

They told me that when you grow up without a family, the gang offers you one. They give you money, all the stuff you need, but in turn, you have to give them what they need. And my question was, what if what you have to give them is your life? And they all just smiled and shrugged their shoulders. I had nothing more to add to the conversation. No more questions. I think they could see that I was defeated, but they told me they appreciate that I talk to them and ask questions and they think it is good I'm trying to understand. I could tell through their facial expressions and their body language that they appreciated having the space to tell their stories,

to explain to me what their lives at home are like. They smiled at my questions, and laughed at a lot of them. I must seem very naïve.

I told them about what previous students have told me about how it is to live an affiliated life. They know so much about the history of their organizations. But what they don't have, is a way out. How do you even conceive something as possible when you don't know any other way? They tell me they can't go to the White side because it's even more dangerous over there. I wonder… is my way the White way? Am I trying to make them act or live White? I don't want that, but I feel like that is what I am asking. And I don't have the words to express that I just want them to live a normal life! But what is normal to me is not normal to them. I want them to be safe. Is safe "White," and dangerous, "Black?" I'm not about normalizing violence, or even glorifying it as a way of life. I guess it is just a matter of trying to better understand where they are coming from. Is there a safe way to be Black in America? Where are those neighborhoods located? What happens to those who never get out? What will happen to my student when he goes home to settle up with the people who are after him? Will he come back? I just don't know. (2021)

Poverty

In addition to a history of violence and gang affiliation, I found a preponderance of poverty in the lives of my students. This comes as no surprise as students from impoverished homes struggle academically as well as drop out of school more frequently than their economically advantaged peers (Brown-Nagin, 2018). This necessarily points to the connection between economic oppression and educational inequality (Portes, 2005). Brown-Nagin (2018) addresses familial entrenched poverty when she states:

> Typically, these parents living in profound poverty face numerous challenges: joblessness and underemployment, inadequate education and language barriers, malnutrition and illness, social dislocation and violence, arrest and imprisonment. These disadvantages define life in distressed communities, and they do not usually give rise to educational practices that facilitate learning or achievement. These parents cannot—and do not—invest as much time and as many resources as wealthier parents on activities and experiences that facilitate the educational preparedness of their children. The opposite is true: parents pass their distress to their children. (p. 197)

Evidence of all of the challenges Brown-Nagin lists can be found in my journals. The following are entries I found that illustrate the effects of poverty on my students:

"He said that where he used to live, if your family had money, you were looked at differently. The rich kids got away with everything and the poor kids were left out" (2018).

"Today we were talking about holiday traditions, probably not a good idea since the holidays always seem to bring out the worst in us. Danni said the most amazing (probably not the right word) thing. She said, "Traditions can become obligations when you can't afford them." I had never thought of it that way, but she is spot on" (2019).

"Gwen is dropping out of the program and I am sick about it. She has to go home and work because her family cannot afford to claim her grandmother's body" (2019).

"Today, I was working with Lillie and I asked about the scar on her face. She told me that when she was little, she would dig in the trash looking for toys that people had thrown out. She said she fell into the dumpster and cut her face on a piece of glass. I felt horrible having reminded her of that. I apologized to her and she told me not to worry about it, that all of her life experiences are important, even the bad ones" (2022).

Troubled Family Relationships

A third theme I found entrenched in the backstories of my students is troubled family relationships and loss. Embedded within this theme are subthemes of incarceration, abuse, and violence. These stories are the hardest to hear, particularly because I listen to them from the viewpoint of a mother. These stories typically surfaced in groups, with students comparing their stories with one another. In these instances, I was a bystander with little to add other than my ability to listen and learn. For the students, however, these stories provided an understanding that they were not alone in their past. Their shared experience, regardless of how awful, forged a bond between them that only they could understand. The following are excerpts from my journals illustrating their stories:

"His dad got out of prison when he was in the 6th grade. He was living in a house with his mom and her boyfriend. When his dad got out of prison, Toby said he tried but that "people don't fucking change." He said he gave him a chance, but he was little and didn't understand who his dad really was. He kept doing the same things…drugs, violence. His dad eventually went back to prison and he is still there. Toby said he visits him sometimes, but he hates doing it" (2019).

"Tamara was talking about her family today. I didn't realize she had so many siblings, 14 of them. She said that when you have 14 kids in the house, no one pays any attention to you. She talked of abuse happening and being swept under the rug. No one talked about what was happening to her" (2020).

"I had an interesting conversation with my boys today. We were talking about our families. Arturo said that if he had a father around, he wouldn't have ended up in the streets. He said he doesn't have any idea where his father is and he doesn't care and he doesn't need "some fucked up explanation." He has two other children now that he calls Arturo's replacement. He told us

his big brother was like his father and that he taught him to play basketball. His father left him, his twin brother, his little sister and brother with their mom when he was just little. He shared that his father was always beating on his mom, and had put her in the hospital. He attributes his refusal to hit women to his father. Gilbert jumped in on the conversation and said that if his father was around, he would be different, too. I asked how he would be different and he told me that a woman cannot raise a boy to be a man, at least not a real man. He said a man is supposed to teach his son how to care for women. He described father love as different, especially to boys. His tried to explain this to me by saying that it was like growing up in a White family that tried to teach you to be Black. Gilbert was taken away from his mom and grew up with his grandmother" (2022).

Loss

In addition to the troubled relationships my students had to navigate in their lives, there have also been instances of profound loss. Many of my students have lost friends and family members to gun violence as well as accidents and illness. It is fairly common when a student brings up the loss of a friend or family member, others will share their experience of loss as well. The following are excerpts from my journals that describe the loss my students have had to endure:

"He talks so much about his mom and how much he misses her. He said she died of diabetes when he was a teenager. After that, he said he didn't care too much about school and so he started selling drugs to get by. School was just not a priority" (2017).

"He said he found his mother dead on the kitchen floor. He promised her that he would finish his education and that is why he is here. Against all odds, he is here" (2019).

"She told me her father passed away from Covid and her mother died of heartbreak the next day. She says she was so close to her dad, but he wouldn't take his medicine. She talks about how she remembers the day he died like it was yesterday. She showed me his picture on her computer. She smiled and she was visibly moved by the photos. She tells me how he liked to sing, he couldn't sing, but he liked to. This made us both laugh. She said her parents were high school sweethearts. She went on to show me a picture of her mom on her 60th birthday. She was wearing a beautiful suit. She told me that she was buried in that suit" (2021).

"Abe's brother was murdered. For the last week, they thought he was missing. Turns out, he was murdered and they found his body not too far from the police station on the reservation. He says he can't go back there because there is a price on his head. He came to class today and he had cut off all of his hair. He said it is tradition for his family when someone passes to cut their hair. He told me that late last night, he put his hair under a tree with some other offerings. He is inconsolable. When I ask about the situation, he only tells me that it is so easy to make someone disappear on the reservation" (2021).

The loss I have described thus far, occurred retrospectively to the time I came to know my students. We had not experienced loss together. I recorded the following story in my journal months after it occurred. At first, I could not bring myself to write about it. When I was done, I gave it to my colleague to read to ensure its accuracy as well as its due diligence to the emotional effects of the day. I did not watch her read it as being together to relive the moment seemed too much. In this case, the parceling out of pain required we be in two separate places. When she came to my classroom to return it, I asked if she thought it was okay. She nodded, set the papers on my desk, and walked out. No more words were necessary. Previously, I spoke of the influence Emmanuel and Katie had on my life as a person and a teacher. This story, likewise, had a

profound effect on my life, but in a different way. This is my story about a student I lost, that I continue to feel was some fault of my own. I waivered on its inclusion, but in the end felt that its significance outweighed the pain.

"*This is not a normal journal entry. This is the story of the worst day of my life as a teacher. The day started off like any other, except it was a holiday and I got up early to prepare my costume. Jay and I were both dressing up as students. I was wearing my hoodie, and too much makeup. Some of the kids came dressed up as well, so the day at work began with a lot of laughs. My classroom was full and the mood was light. The students were productive and in good spirits. I remember what a beautiful fall morning it was. The sun was shining and there were giant fluffy clouds in the sky. The air was soft but crisp… like it was hanging on to the last vestiges of the warm days of summer. Days like this heading into the winter months were a gift. I wanted to let the day in, so I wandered to the window and opened it up wide so the breeze would blow in. I stood there for a minute or two with my eyes closed, just soaking up the day and counting my blessings. There is a beautiful tree outside my window that is typically home to a bird nest or two. I looked for one that morning, but I didn't see one. The branches, covered in red and golden leaves, were undulating in the wind and the fresh air blew through the classroom, washing over the students and me, and I was happy.*

The first two hours of the day rolled by smoothly. I was having wonderful conversations with my students. Shanice was there. She was an especially close student of mine, and we were laughing with one another. She was wearing pink scrubs with cupcakes on them and her hair was parted down the middle with two adorable afro-puffs on either side of her head. I remember telling her how beautiful she looked that day, and she told me that I looked ridiculous. She said, "that eyeliner, though!" We laughed for a long time. Pretty much every desk in my classroom

was full, and the environment was alive. Ms. James, my para, was putting packets together and answering student's questions. Kids were signing in and out, going various places on campus. I was busy, but not distracted. I was focused, but not unaware. I was part of a well-oiled machine, helping students in a rapid-fire fashion. There was a beautiful flow, a groove if you will, to the classroom that day. It was just another really good day to be a teacher, and I was happy.

The bell rang for break and the students filed out of my classroom in a rush. For fifteen minutes, there was a bit of quiet. I took this time to attend to the tedious duties of my day… filling out evaluations, taking the attendance I was too busy to at the beginning of the hour, and sending emails. The break flew by and the students filtered back in, taking their places and settling back into their work. Still, there was movement all around me. I could see students out of the corners of my eyes, and in front of me. Mrs. James was at her desk about thirty feet away from me towards the front door of my classroom. Nothing was out of place. There was nothing strange, nothing off, or ominous, or uncomfortable, or even different from the previous hours of the morning. I was sitting at my desk looking at student progress on my computer and chatting with Shanice at the same time. I remember feeling the bandana on my head fit too tightly around my glasses. At that moment, I heard a noise, a quiet crack, and an instant feeling of emptiness to my right where Andy had been sitting. He was gone. Just disappeared. Instantaneously, I knew what had happened, but in that moment, I could not comprehend it. It was not possible. I stared for a single second in the direction of the window and then I looked at Shanice and said, "Shanice…" And my eyes were open wider than they had ever been before. Shanice nodded her head. I looked at Mrs. James and she had both of her hands clutched over her mouth. Still, I did not believe it.

Mrs. James walked towards me, towards the window, and I just said "no, no, no… I can't look." Mrs. James approached the window, she was as white as a ghost, she leaned over the sill without touching it, sucked in that beautiful breeze I had let in, and gasped behind her clutched hands. She turned to me and nodded. I told her, "Call 9-1-1," and I ran out of the room not even sure where I was running to. I ran the circle of classrooms, closing all the doors and telling the teachers that they were not to let their students out of their classrooms for any reason whatsoever. I ran to the office of one of the managers and I grabbed her hands, looked into her eyes and said, "Andy just jumped out of my window." She said, "Shut up, that's not funny." I pulled her with me and ran to my room. It wasn't long before the police and the ambulance showed up. I don't remember much after that for at least a few minutes. This was not happening.

The next thing I remember, I was sitting on an office floor and the secretary was saying to me, "What do you want me to do?" I told her to call my husband and she did. I spoke with him for a minute or two, then I walked out in the hallway towards another classroom and a trade instructor was there. I just froze where I was standing. He was wearing those clear glasses you wear on a construction site. I don't know why, but I grabbed his hands and I fell apart. I just kept saying, "He jumped, he jumped, he was there and then he was gone, he jumped, he jumped, I didn't know, I didn't know." He held my hands and stared into my eyes in a way that no one had ever done before. He said, "You're okay, you're okay, you're okay, just breathe, just breathe." I could see the veins in his face and his eyes were full of tears, and all I wanted to do in that moment was to tell him what happened. I'm certain I was in shock.

I was taken to a conference room where all of my students were seated around a giant table. There was no sound. No voices. No crying. It was empty like all the air had been sucked out of the room. It was heavy, ugly, and scary, and by now, I was angry. I sat there in silence

with the kids for a few minutes. And all of a sudden, like a terrified mom, I said, so loudly, in a guttural broken voice, "Do you know how much I love you? Do you know what you mean to me? Do you know how much I care about each and every one of you? Do you?" I was crying now from that place in the pit of your stomach where only the most desperate cries come from. It was that place where you can't escape, where you have no control, where panic lives, where all you want to do is turn back time. It was that place where death sets in and you are left with absolutely nothing. I had been here before with my Katie and Emmanuel. I wasn't making much noise, just lurching from my guts. I stared at each of them one at a time and as each of our eyes met, they nodded back at me. Some said, "I love you too." And then I looked at Shanice and she said, "It's okay Mrs. Eickhoff, it wasn't your fault." I watched little tears run down her beautiful, sweet face.

I looked out across the conference room through the windows to see a swarm of people walking around campus. These people did not belong here. A moment later, my boss showed up and he hugged me and said, "You're okay, kid." There were counselors, ministers, and police officers, all milling about, talking to students and staff. The students were huddled together in small groups outside. The scene was surreal. People kept coming to check on me, hugging me, and holding my hands. I was taken into a small office where there was a police officer waiting to talk with me. As I walked in, I saw myself in a mirror. All that stupid eyeliner I had put on that morning had run down my face and I looked terrifying. My face was red and swollen, and my eyes looked like they were on fire. I wiped my face with the back of my hoodie sleeve and sat down. I apologized to the officer for looking so awful. He was a kind man who spoke to me very gently. I told him exactly what happened. He asked me to write a statement and he left me in the room alone while I did so. I couldn't write very well, so it was more like a list of events. The

officer came back in and I gave him my statement. I was told I was free to go, but I didn't know where to go to.

My friends walked me back to my classroom to get my things. I realized that I had class that night and I knew I couldn't do it, so I went to a storage closet and called Dr. Taylor. I was comforted by her voice and given the grace to do what I needed to do. I was supposed to do a book circle that evening on Nel Nodding's centers of care with my peers. I had worked so hard on it and was looking forward to presenting my lesson. I had found matches from my grandparents that they had collected when they played music for the German Prisoners of War Camp in the 1940s. I was going to show how you could teach using found objects. All good plans are subject to change. I drove home in a daze to find my home empty. Everyone had things to do. So, I sat in the silence for a while and realized that I had to move, to get out, to get anywhere where I wasn't alone with my thoughts. So, I washed my face, changed my clothes, and went to class.

I arrived early and met my friends in the classroom. I shared what had happened and they poured out such love and care for me that I was overwhelmed. Dr. Taylor arrived, surprised to see me, and she gave me a huge hug. I remember thinking that she was so stoic and powerful. I felt this vibe coming off of her that was saying, "You're okay, Shannon, you are here, now let's do this lesson." I don't know if she remembers, but I remember that she stuck pretty close to me throughout the entire class. After class, it was dark, and my dear friend walked me to my car. He likewise gave me a giant hug before sending me on my way. When I arrived home, I sat in my car for a little while. I didn't want to talk about this anymore. My kids didn't know what happened and I wasn't going to tell them. My husband hadn't a clue what to say. He poured me a glass of wine, told me there were leftovers in the oven, and sat quietly on the couch. I didn't want to talk

to him, either. I didn't want to be alone, and I didn't want to be with anyone else. I just wanted to go to sleep.

The next day, I arrived at work and found they had set up a make-shift classroom for me in the conference room. I grabbed a laptop from the cart and sat down at the giant table. The air in this space had returned, but it was a foreign place for me to be. The students slowly trickled in and I hugged each one of them much harder than I ever had before. They each took a computer and began the process of getting to work. It was quiet, sad, and lifeless. I was so incredibly unhappy. It took only a second for me to realize that if I didn't reclaim my space, not just for me, but for my students, that we might never get it back. I told them, "put these computers away, we're going back to our classroom." They looked shocked but did what I asked.

Quietly, we walked together up the flight of stairs to our classroom. I opened the door and turned on the lights. The window with the big beautiful tree behind it was closed tight. We all took a collective breath and walked in. I walked to my desk, put my purse in the drawer, and turned on my computer. I looked to my right, and sitting on my printer were Andy's glasses. I felt myself get dizzy and I could not, for the life of me, remember how they got there. I know it must sound stupid, but I told myself that God or Andy put them there. I told my students, "None of this is okay, but we are okay, and I am here, and I love you. We will get through this together." And we were okay. We were much worse for the wear, but we had each other, and we were close. There were tiny smiles of acknowledgment for each other's sadness throughout the day. There were small physical connections, a squeeze of one's hands, a gentle resting of heads on each other's shoulders, and reassuring hugs.

I went over what happened in my head a million times a day. Andy had chosen to stand up, push the screen out of the window and jump head first three stories to his death. He fell past

two stories of classrooms where students watched him fall. His broken body left a bloody mark on the pavement where he landed. My dear friend and colleague was the first one there to attend to him. She, like me, will never be the same. I remember a long time before this happened, I had been working with Andy and I had reached out and touched his wrist where he had a semicolon tattoo. He flinched, which is not typical for my students. I asked him if that was in honor of someone, and he said no. I didn't push. Perhaps I should have. Perhaps then I would have been watching more closely. Maybe I would have checked in more frequently, or made a regular effort to talk with him about what that tattoo meant to him. I could have found a connection if I had only looked more deeply. What had I missed? I will never know. What I do know for certain, is I will never again miss the opportunity for making a connection with each student, every day.

As the days passed, I wondered when this would hit the news. But, it never did. Looking back and having thought deeply about this event, I have some thoughts that may seem compelling, but, I admit, are purely conjecture. I believe that had this even occurred at a different high school that served different students, dare I say primarily White, affluent students, it would have made the headlines. Perhaps being at the center of this has left me feeling that this event was monumental to our awareness of the precarious emotional stability of our students in America. Conceivably, however, the value we place on young people's lives may be equivalent to the value they represent in terms of affluence and social capital. I do not suggest that the people I work with purposefully hid this event to protect their own interests. Rather, I submit the lives of the marginalized are viewed as not worth the ink it takes to print their stories. I confess I often wondered what it would be like to be known as the teacher who had a student attempt suicide in their classroom. But this story was, and is, not about me. I was witness to an act of desperation born of such pain and sadness that I will never be able to comprehend its magnitude.

Nowadays in my classroom, there is a giant wooden desk that sits in front of the window where Andy jumped. The beautiful tree beyond it still sways back and forth in the breeze like nothing ever happened in its presence. In the spring, it grows beautiful, white, flowering blossoms that bring out the bees. The birds still nest and raise their babies there. On days when it is hot in my classroom, I refuse to open that window. Instead, my fellow teacher will come in and open another window that is directly behind my desk. I am often asked by students why I refuse to open the window, and I tell them that there is no screen, and it is unsafe. Once in a while, a student will somehow know about the story and they will tell it to their peers. I tell them that the story is true, but that I don't speak about it. Rather, I only tell them that I love them and they mean the world to me. The divider that holds Andy's name and work remains in my file cabinet to this day. It serves as a constant reminder of the fragility of life and the importance of the work I do. This job is not to be taken lightly. The relationships I build with my students are not frivolous, they are integral to survival. And while I may be haunted by that day and its events, I am comforted knowing that I have come away knowing the utter importance of caring for my students each day, without reservation, and with an unadulterated belief in the power of our connections. This is what Andy's story has taught me. (2018)

It would be easy to assume that as a result of all the tragedy my students have experienced that our classroom would be a sad, morose place. Nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps this is what is so astonishing about my students. Despite all of their hardships, they are quick to laugh, happy to be alive, and so easy to love. So often I speak of keeping my students close to me. When I first learned about proximity control, it was explained as a strategy used to control behavior. Now, I use my proximity to encourage connection. Le Guin (1980) states, "As we huddle closer, the stories we tell one another bear witness to our lives" (p. 194).

Having borne witness to each other's stories, our relationships have grown much deeper, and as a result, we are able to celebrate the joy we find by just being together.

Theme 4: My Girls

I find it difficult to articulate the relationships I have built with my girls. The connections and relationships we have built are so complex and so beautiful, they defy explanation. I am drawn to those young women who have struggled, and they are drawn to me. I am captivated by their strength. They trust me with their secrets and their stories like one would entrust a treasure for safekeeping. They are spicy and even dangerous, lovable and fierce, brilliant and bossy. They refuse to follow the rules, and so easily fall prey to the whims of their hearts. On the outside, they are impenetrable, but once you crawl into their deep spaces, they are fragile and delicate, capable of so much love and affection. They are quick to laugh and they hate to cry. They are the owners of my heart, and I am their merciless guardian when I need to be.

Many of my girls have a brutal past. When their stories are shared with me, they know I won't judge them. I have always been a bit of a rebel myself, and I think they recognize that in me. Perhaps we see ourselves in each other. They come to know quite quickly I will refuse to allow arbitrary rules or red tape stop me from helping them achieve their goals. I am certain our relationships are built on an understanding that I don't want anything from them other than their willingness to realize their potential and to find their own voice.

Intimidation, Fear, and Assault

Having built a relationship on trust, many of my girls share stories with me that speak to the emotional and physical abuse they have sustained at the hands of men. These stories are some of the hardest to hear. Nevertheless, they are important to acknowledge and to understand. This common thread shared between so many of my female students is representative of so many

young women who may or may not have shared their stories with someone they trust. In my journals, I recorded some of the stories that were shared with me, as well as my thoughts about those stories. The following are examples of those thoughts and stories:

"Loretta tried to talk with me today about her relationship with Lee, but I could tell she was so intimidated by him that she was too afraid to speak. He knows that we spend a lot of time talking, and I think that intimidates him! I'm certain he tells her to keep her business to herself and that I'm going to get them both in trouble if she talks. He gives me horrible looks when I see him and I'm sure that is why. I pray she finds the courage to dump this guy" (2017).

"She told me that he has private pictures of her, and if she breaks up with him, he will show them to everyone. She is being blackmailed into staying with him and she doesn't know what to do. I tried to help her figure out a way to solve this problem, but I don't know if there is one. She can't get the pictures back. She is totally at his mercy. I want to have someone take his phone and delete the pictures, but I don't know how to do that either" (2020).

"She said he makes her apologize to him for providing him when he hurts her. We spent a lot of time reasoning through this. I know she understands things in her mind, but her heart just keeps giving him chances. Deep down, I think there is a place in her that tells her she deserves to be treated like this. This goes back a long way, I think. I told her that and we started digging into her past and what may have led to her believing this lie. There is a lot of stuff there, a lot of trauma, and a lot of watching the women around her being treated this way. I think that made a connection for her. That connection was the best thing that happened today" (2021).

"Della angrily shared that she had lost her virginity to a 35-year-old man that she had known since she was six. He assaulted her when she was drunk. She said, "Men, they're little bitches. Am I right?" and the entire group agreed with her. She talked about wanting to get out of "an

endless cycle of toxicity and abuse," but because that is all she knows, she really doesn't know how to do that" (2022).

Research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) states that nearly one in five women have experienced attempted or completed rape in their lifetime, and one in three female victims of rape experienced it the first time between the ages of 11 and 17 years old. The following two stories speak directly to these statistics in the lives of my students:

"Josephine spoke to me today and said the most profound things. We were talking about her relationship with Nelson and how they have a sold commitment to one another. I asked how she came to this and she talked about how "she was a fast little Black girl who wasn't raised right." Her words were, "My mom didn't raise me to stay a virgin." She told me her mom was violated sexually more than once. She also said that when you are assaulted sexually, like she was, that "there is a spirit on you that attracts more men like that to hurt you again and again, and you will let them." She told me that a part of every man that has hurt her is in her, both physically and spiritually. I cannot understand how she is so aware and strong having gone through this. I asked her how she or any girl can get rid of this spirit. She said, "deliverance." All I could say to that was "Amen" (2021).

"Terra told me that when she was a child, around four years old, she began getting urinary tract infections. Her adoptive mother blamed it on the other boys, but it wasn't them. She knew it was her husband and Terra said that she didn't want to help her. Instead, it only made her mad. She told me that her adoptive mother only picked her to try to impress people. She said when they finally took her away from them, the last thing her mother said to her was, "I knew we shouldn't have adopted you. We should have built a swimming pool instead." This hit me like a punch in the gut. I told her there weren't enough swimming pools in the world that could measure up to

the amazing young woman she is. We both had big tears and gave each other a hug. I just don't know how she has survived and persevered for so long knowing what she has had to endure. I simply love this girl" (2021).

Motherhood

As I begin writing this morning, I am especially drawn to the issue of motherhood in my life, the lives of my students, and women as a whole. Yesterday, the Supreme Court reversed the *Roe v. Wade* decision, triggering a ban on women's reproductive freedom across the United States. The day before, the same court struck down a New York law restricting the carrying of firearms in public places. The hypocrisy of these decisions leads me to believe that for many, life is only valuable prior to birth. My son, who is away at a music camp, texted me asking how I was doing today, knowing that I would be upset. He said, "I'm sorry that for today, you have less rights than guns. America has never been more disappointing." Out of the mouths of babes. I told him I was going to a rally at the courthouse and he asked if his dad was coming with me. When I told him he wasn't, he was disappointed and said that he wishes he could stand with me at the courthouse. Perhaps there is hope in future generations.

After the decision was announced, I had a conversation with my girls about what they thought. There was unanimous consensus that every woman should have bodily autonomy and that no one, especially men, had any business telling us what we can and cannot do with our bodies. Each of my girls shared a story of a tragic event in the lives of someone they knew intimately who had made the decision to seek an abortion. I told them that as women, we are all the keeper of stories and those stories teach us that there is no black and white, and every decision we make as women is multifaceted and deeply affected by our connections to the past as

well as the present. Shana said it best when she said, “Why do those people get to decide what happens in my life, they don’t even know me.”

To be certain, the lives of my students who are mothers demonstrate the profound effects of parenthood, and in particular, single-parenthood. They are living examples of the lack of resources provided to young, single mothers. Their children likewise demonstrate how quickly these precious babes are forgotten when it comes time to pay for the programs that provide them with their most basic needs. Their right to life is qualified by standards that do not remotely approach equality. Time and again, I have watched my mommas struggle for survival. They are among the strongest, most dedicated women I have ever known. The following are excerpts from my journals that speak to the mommas I have had the privilege to work with:

“I got a call late last night from Mitzi. She told me that she and her son were stranded in a bus depot in Houston. She was in tears and said she would never contact me if she had any other choice. She had made the trip to Texas to attend the court date with her baby’s father, who was suing her for custody. We tried to deal with it from here, but she had no other choice but to go. Of course, David’s father was not awarded any custodial rights whatsoever. He has never paid one ounce of child support. When Mitzi called him to ask for money to help her get a hotel room, he refused, even though he knew that she was going to be left all night alone with his child in a bus depot in a horrible part of town. She asked if I could loan her the money to get a hotel room and I said I would. She said if it were only her, she would never ask, but because she had David with her, she was scared to stay where she was. I told her it was no problem, that I was happy to do it. I could never imagine what I would do if I were in her shoes. I found a hotel within walking distance and convinced the lady to take my credit card information over the phone. She only did

this because I told her Mitzi's story. I have to wonder how many other mommas there are out there sitting in bus depots with no one to help" (2020).

"I had an amazing day today. Mae got approved for housing. She and the girls finally have a place to live. Trouble is, she has nothing for the girls other than their clothes. She came to me terrified when she found out her new apartment was totally unfurnished. She was in tears thinking that the girls wouldn't have beds to sleep in. She has been so scared about being totally on her own. She has no one else to help her. She has worked so hard to get to this place only to feel like her little ones will be sleeping on the floor. I put the word out, and sure enough, a ton of people offered to help out. We found beds, toys, a dresser, and all the stuff she needed for her kitchen. I gathered all the stuff and brought it to her apartment. Other people dropped off things as well. I think they wanted to meet Mae. Her story is pretty powerful. She was in tears every time someone showed up with an item for her. Someone even brought her food to stock her pantry. It was truly amazing. Interestingly, it was all women who showed up to help Mae. I think this shows the power women possess when another one of us is in need. I think we can all see ourselves in each other. I love that so much. Most of all, I hope this shows Mae that she and her children are loved and there is help out there for her. It was a really, really good day" (2021).

Mitzi and Mae's stories demonstrate astonishing resilience and strength. These are the two qualities I would attribute most frequently to all of my girls. I have seen them put others before themselves, especially their families and their children. It is true they are tough, having survived such traumatic events, but if you are given the opportunity to get to know them and hear their stories, you will find the lessons they offer are staggering. Most importantly, they offer beautiful examples of the strength of women and the powerful connections they have with each other.

Theme 5: Staying, Not Living

Earlier I spoke to the initial conversation I have with my students when they first arrive at my classroom. As part of that conversation, I usually ask them where they are from. A couple of years ago, I picked up on a word they use to indicate this. The word they use is "staying." I recently had a conversation with my students about this word choice. I told them that if they asked me where I am from, I might say, "I used to live in Arizona, but now I live in Kansas." I pointed out to them that when I ask them the same question, nearly all of them state something to the effect of, "I stay in Kansas City," or "I stay at my aunt's house in Wichita." When I asked, what was the difference between living and staying, they couldn't agree on a specific answer. But as we dug deeper, we found that "staying" conveyed a lack of permanence. One student said, "I have stayed a lot of places, but I've never lived anywhere for very long." Another student said, "It's like being on the move, you may stay somewhere for a while, but sometimes you gotta go." As we came to this realization together, I recognized my privilege was, again, staring me in the face.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), there were 1.2 million homeless students during the 2014-2015 school year. Of these students, 957,053 were living in doubled-up or shared housing, 82,187 in hotels or motels, 180,302 in shelters, transitional housing, or awaiting foster care placement, and 39,327 living unsheltered altogether. At least 215,630 of these students were young people with disabilities. These are my kids. I have heard many stories from my students about their living conditions. The following entries illustrate those stories:

"He told me he was living the "park life." He stayed in different parks all over town. He told me he came here because he was tired of park life" (2016).

"She said that once her mother found out she was pregnant; she didn't want anything to do with her. She said she just wanted her out of her hair. She didn't have anywhere to go, so her school counselor referred her to us. I wonder what it would feel like to not have any ties, especially when you are going to have a child. I remember my parents being an instrumental part of the celebration of the birth of each of my children. She won't have that. And I hope and pray that her baby's father really does come through for her, because having a baby with no support emotionally would be terrifying. A child's birth should be the greatest of celebrations, not one surrounded by fear" (2019).

"Cade is a brilliant young man who spent most of his life homeless. He has the worst case of meth mouth I have ever seen. He cannot stand the pain involved in the dental work they provide for him. I know that his appearance will hold him back for his entire life. He tells me about the horrible things he had to do including stealing from cars, eating food thrown out in the trash, and sex work. He lived with his mother in their car until "he was old enough to find a car of his own." He says he slept outside most of the time and because of his history, he swears he can endure anything. I am incredibly surprised by his philosophical nature and his sense of hope for his future. His perseverance is beyond my comprehension" (2019).

Extended Family

While many of my students were homeless and living in desperate situations, others were living with extended family members who stood in the gap when it was needed most. The students that spoke of these situations were for the most part positive. They formed bonds with the people who loved and cared for them. They were eager to speak to me about their families and how even though the conditions they were living in might not have been the best, they were a home nonetheless. The following journal entries depict a few of the stories shared with me:

"He said there were so many of them that they all had share beds. I guess there were three family's worth of kids living together with their grandmother!" (2016).

"Lonnie graduated today and his whole family showed up to see him. He has a beautiful extended Hispanic family and they were all so proud of him. They reminded me of my friend, Alicia, in elementary school. Every single member of his family hugged me and told me that Lonnie had told them that I was his favorite teacher ever. He never called me Mrs. Eickhoff, he only called me Miss. He invited me to his home town where they were going to have a graduation party for him" (2017).

"She showed me pictures of many, many people… she called them her God relatives. She had a huge extended family… many other mothers, God family members, etc. She even showed me a picture of her great-great grandmother. She names each one of them for me. These are the people who will take care of her since her parents passed last year" (2018).

"He said he didn't have any contact with his parents. He lived with his brother who had 8 kids. He has been away from his parents since he was 10" (2021).

"She has spent the last five years living with her sister who was in and out of the hospital. She felt like it was a good thing because she was able to help raise her nephew. You could see how happy she was when she talked about him" (2022).

Theme 6: Awareness

I have found that my students possess an awareness unique to their circumstance. Perhaps they have been endowed with a distinct understanding of others and themselves by virtue of their intimate relationship with struggle. Throughout my journals, I found examples illustrating a sense of knowing among my students demonstrating their ability to speak truth. Their awareness of the world around them, despite a lack of exposure to neighborhoods outside their own, is

profound. They are quick to share their experiences, and in doing so, they provide real life examples of what it means to be aware of the needs of others, their needs as students, their culture, and the racism that has pervaded most of their lives.

Awareness of the Needs of Others

I am often struck by the ability of my students to see the needs of others around them and their willingness to give despite having so little themselves. Scarcity seems to be an inescapable reality in the lives of my kids. An inequity in resources, particularly financial, has left them with a sense of the precarious nature of having their most basic needs met. Surprisingly, this has not led them to hoard their resources. Rather, they are giving, willing to share whatever they have with others around them. If a student has a candy bar, they will happily break it into pieces so that others can have some. If a student is down to their last cigarette, they are still willing to "share their square." The generosity of those with the least to give, giving everything they can is a powerful testament to the goodness of these kids. Among the journals entries that speak to this awareness and generosity are the following:

"He said that every day in high school, he would go to lunch but give it to a kid who couldn't afford it. He said there were kids that were far worse off than him and he knew it might be the only time they might eat in the entire day" (2017).

"We had the "what if you had a million dollars?" question come up today. Alexa said she would apply for college at KU and be able to pay for it. She said after that, she would take the rest of the money and give it back to charities to include animal shelters, foster homes, and homeless centers. She wanted to give back to the community. I think she recognized that if someone had done that when she was homeless or in foster care, it might have helped her" (2018).

"Such a beautiful conversation in class today. Shelley shared her story about a person giving their family one hundred dollars for Christmas one year. She said they weren't rich, but they knew their family didn't have much at all. She told us that showing love to others doesn't mean that you have to do something big for them. She reminded us that you never know what is going on in someone's life and that you don't have to be rich to take care of other people. And then she said, "It seems like the people with the least money, give the most. That you cannot judge a book by its cover because if you think someone has a lot, that doesn't mean they care about anyone else but themselves. And, if you think someone has nothing, that doesn't mean they don't have a lot to give. Helping others helps you out, too." I couldn't have said it any better myself" (2021).

Educational Awareness

In addition to possessing an awareness of the needs of others, my students likewise understand their own needs in terms of their education. Over the years, my students have spoken to me at length regarding their thoughts on teachers. They have shared stories about individual teachers that have had an impact on their lives, both good and bad. Typically, a student will tell me about one teacher in particular they remember that truly cared for them and made them enjoy their time in school. In my journals, I have recorded the words my students have used to describe good teachers. They show up time and time again in my entries about specific statements or stories my students have shared with me. Those words appear in the following journals depicting the beliefs my students have regarding teachers:

"They think things like, "Oh he's failing, so I don't really care". But there's always a few that care. They understand" (2017).

"We had a great class discussion today about good teachers and bad teachers. It all began when the students were complaining about a certain teacher that they say makes them feel stupid. He's

had many complaints about this. They said many things, but a few really stuck out to me. They talked about how important a teacher's approach is. They said that a good teacher looks deeply into their humor. Bad teachers judge them by the way people see them, like they are ghetto, or they judge their accent or persona. They want teachers to know that the background they are from does not define them and that they are not victims or suspects" (2017).

"She told me that when kids act out, they need to look deeper, they might be abused, mistreated, they can't just flip a switch" (2018).

"He said that teachers can't just teach one way. Some kids learn differently, like hand-on" (2018).

"She was clear that some teachers are racists" (2018).

"She said that teachers need to listen. When people go through something, they just want to be heard" (2019).

"He told me about his favorite teacher. He said, "There was one teacher, Mrs. Dean. I loved her because she cared about me and she always looked out for me. She loved me, and I didn't have that at home. I think that is why I was an A student in her class. I never got into trouble and my grades were excellent" (2019).

"Today Collin said, "I think it's fucked up that judges get paid more to lock people up than teachers get paid to teach, because teachers are the ones who are fighting for our education." I had to stop and write this one down, it was so good!" (2019).

"She told our group, "I think that as a teacher, you should have a personal relationship with each student to get an understanding of them and how they work" (2020).

"These are the things she said about Ms. L, her favorite teacher: She liked being in her class because she was a great person to be around. She made her laugh because she was funny and

she was the only person she could talk to. She knew she could go to her classroom and she would brighten her day and keep her from being distracted by her worries. She said her classroom smelled incredible, like pumpkin spice, and it made her nose happy. She said she related to her" (2021).

"He talked about his middle school science teacher and said that they grew a relationship that he had never had with a teacher before. He felt like she genuinely believed in him and that he could do great things, and she was always positive" (2022).

As I revisited these journals, what stands out to me is the focus on the characteristics that define relationships. The words that the students use to describe their teachers include care, understanding, looking deeply, helping everyone equally, open-minded, trustworthy, honest, happy, funny, relatable, and always there. These are the words we use to describe the people we care about the most. These words illuminate the importance of connection for students. When I ask my students about their teachers, rarely do they talk about their pedagogical skills or their personal knowledge on a subject. Rather, they tell me about the caring relationship that they built with a teacher that in some way fulfilled them and sustained them during their time in school.

Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness is also prevalent among my students. It is something we discuss regularly. I am cognizant of the different cultures within my classroom, and through conversation and storytelling, we get to learn about each other's cultures in meaningful ways. We often delve into our different cultures through our "going on vacation" activities. I believe seeing the roots of our different cultures inspires students to ask questions and cultivate a greater understanding of who each student is individually. It is also a way for my students to see the world, literally in terms of the videos we watch, and personally through the eyes of the student

whose origins we seek out. Within my journals, there are numerous entries that speak to the focus on my students varying cultural backgrounds:

"He is from Guam and he loves his culture. His vocabulary is rich and he gives us a lot of things to look at on YouTube. We looked at the places he grew up, the traditional foods he ate, and for him, it is incredibly personal and you can feel that in the way he speaks of these things and how he smiles when he talks about them" (2018).

"He wears beautiful tribal tattoos on his arms that seem to exude his cultural pride" (2019).

"He was adopted from Samoa and he hates that they changed his name. He uses his given name on all of his social media accounts. We spent our vacation today in Samoa and we talked about the differences between Samoa and American Samoa, and that lead us into a beautiful, interesting conversation about colonialism and what we do to maintain our heritage in a new place when we feel alone" (2019).

"He messaged me after he left and told me about how our talks had inspired him to ask questions about his heritage. He said "I found out some pretty sick shit, man!" (2019).

"He had to leave his family behind in Singapore and he is so passionate when he talks about how he misses his country. Tomorrow, our vacation will take us there and he can tell us all about it" (2019).

The following entry illustrates the difficulty that can arise when two cultures collide. It tells Anne's story of trying to fit her old world into the new. It came from a very thought provoking conversation causing me to reevaluate the way I view my rights as a woman, and how that view is not universal. This entry was written during the time I was discovering my love for Carol Gilligan. My focus on women and our rights and roles was in the forefront of my mind.

"*Today I had a really tough conversation with Anne. She had never opened up about her concerns for her life following graduation until today. She told me that she knows she won't be allowed to get a job in her trade field. She has been one of the star students in her trade. We don't have a lot of female students in the hard-hat trades, and so when a female student chooses one, they usually stand out. She really shined and her instructor found her multiple job offers in her field. But, Anne told me that in her culture, a woman working in construction is not acceptable. She said she would be expected to move home and help care for her siblings and her parents. I am really upset about this. How are things ever going to change when we operate in a system where women are kept in their place?*

I am reminded of all the reading I am doing now, especially Gilligan. I need to be mindful of her cultural background, but I find myself wanting to tell her that this is bullshit, that she can be anything she wants to be. But if I were to say anything like this I know I might insult her family and her culture. There appears to be such a fine line between pushing for progress and sticking my nose where it doesn't belong. And I know that I cannot understand her story because I haven't lived it. Thinking about what I have learned in school, I question myself as to whether I am asking Anne to take on my White viewpoint? Is women's autonomy a White thing? I don't think so, but what if I am projecting my values on her? What if I am saying my way is the right way, and her culture's way is the wrong way? I guess I just wish she had the choice. She obviously wants to choose to work in a field that isn't traditionally one women work in.

All I could do was listen and talk with her about how she might handle the difficult conversation that might come if she chooses to defy her family and do the work she wants to do. Her beautiful little eyeballs burned a hole in my soul as I could feel her struggle. She just kept shaking her head and saying, "I don't know what I am going to do." Anne has a profound faith

and I told her to lean into it. I know God has good plans for her. I hugged her, told her I loved her, and I was very proud of her. She hugged me back and thanked me for helping her and that she felt better. I just have this nagging feeling that she won't be able to break out of the where women belong bubble. And there is nothing I can do or say to fix that." (2019)

Racial Awareness

I have spoken about my evolution of consciousness in terms of my own White racial identity. Without a doubt, my understanding of systems of oppression leveled on students of color has grown immensely since I began my doctoral education. Among the characteristics of marginalized people I was learning about, the effects of racism stood out most vividly in the lives of my students. In my own classes, I learned about racism from historical, analytical, and theoretical perspectives. At work, I learned how it affected the students I care for on a personal level. The two together were transformational.

The effects of my new knowledge about racism has resulted in a shift in my thinking about the observations I make and the questions I ask. It is as if I have had a critical filter installed in my mind that causes me to view the world differently. I would never claim I was color blind prior to the pursuit of my doctorate. Rather, I would say I was comfortably unaware of the severity of inequality connected to the color of one's skin. Perhaps this is in part due to the time I spent teaching in primarily White schools. Certainly, my time spent teaching students of color and the ensuing relationships we have built has affected my understanding. More importantly, my new knowledge has caused me to reevaluate my purpose as a teacher. You might say my motives have become subversive. While I am committed to teaching the curriculum, I am also committed to helping my students to evaluate the curriculum critically. I

have created additional curriculum ensuring the inclusion of the histories, literature, arts, and contributions of people and cultures that are relevant to my students.

To be certain, the depth and frequency of my conversations with my students regarding issues of race have increased. As a result, the sharing of stories and thoughts regarding race in the lives of my students has increased as well. The following are excerpts are taken from conversations or stories recorded in my journals:

"Racism is not something you are born with. It is taught and can be untaught" (2017).

"Everything we say just gets ignored" (2018).

"He told me about a time when he and his sister were walking home from school. A car full of White kids pulled up next to them and yelled, "fucking niggers, KKK." He said he threw a rock at their car and they drove away" (2018).

"Morris told us that when he was in the second grade, he heard another mother in his school telling her son, "stay away from them, and she was pointing at us." He told me we were just a bunch of colored kids. He said, "That shit was definitely racist and fucked up." At the time, he said he didn't know it because he was too busy being the class clown. He knew it was racist, but it didn't affect him. He told me he couldn't believe it was 2019 and it is still going on" (2019)

"Today we were talking about being stigmatized in school and I asked Ramiro what stigmas he thinks people assume of him. He told me that he sells drugs and that he will never grow up to be anything. At the end of our conversation, he said, "It makes me want to laugh because people are fucking stupid" (2020).

"I heard a new term today. It was pretty awful. Grady told me he came from a sundown town and he doesn't want to end up in one. When I asked him what a sundown town was, he told me it was a place where Black people get killed after dark. It left me speechless" (2021).

"Brandi is a very astute young woman who is acutely aware of her cultural background as well as the centuries of persecution her heritage has endured. She is well versed in African American literature. She knows DuBois, Angelou, King. She can articulate her understanding of social injustice and she enjoys doing so. This week, she is in charge of my daily quote for our classroom board. She always chooses a good one. And her handwriting is beautiful. You get from Brandi's stories that she was brought up by her grandmother and her grandmother was wise. She speaks to her time at a primarily White school where she was one of only three Black girls, and she tells me that she was treated differently. She points to one example where she was suspended for wearing shorts that were too short. But she tells me that they were the right size, but she is curvier than the White girls. And she also tells me that she thinks her shape made the White principal feel uncomfortable. She simply felt singled out… that the White kids could get away with anything, but she was constantly under the microscope. This pushed Brandi away from school and she says it definitely played a part in her ending up here" (2021).

"He told me that his bus driver called him the "N" word, so he beat his ass. Nothing happened to the bus driver, but he got kicked out of school. That was the last straw in his home school" (2021).

"Today we talked about the confirmation of Justice Jackson, and Griffith said to me, "What difference does Judge Jackson make?" He said that Black people never make it that far to be heard. We had a long discussion about politics and racism and everyone listened to each other and no voices were raised. We discussed new vocabulary I had never heard, specifically about references to weapons and drugs. In the end, Griffith said to me, "We need to have more of these discussions, because they never happen." He went on to say that the discussion needed to

happen much earlier in kids' lives if things were going to change. He said these things are important and there must be a reason that "they don't teach us this stuff" (2022).

This next entry speaks to my hidden curriculum. Research suggests the implementation of curriculum is a cultural and political undertaking with the purpose of achieving the goals set forth by the institution (Daly, Schall, & Skeele, 2001; Longstreet & Shane, 1993; Small, 2020). As such, if the implementer of the curriculum shifts their thoughts on culture and politics, it will likely be reflected in the goals set for the institution (Daly, Schall, & Skeele, 2001). I am the implementer of the curriculum, and my classroom is the institution. This part of my curriculum is not built in, but rather finds its place in particular situations. My commitment to a critical, equitable education feeds on opportunities to use my knowledge to empower my students. When these opportunities arise naturally in my classroom, I must be ready to seize them.

"*Today I got myself into some good trouble. It all started as a response to a rule that students aren't allowed to wear do-rags or wave caps in school. I have to address my students, particularly my African American students, regularly to take them off. Finally, one kid had the courage to speak up, and thankfully, I listened. He pointed out that the Black kids, in fact all kids, never get to go to the barber. He also said that even if they could go, most of them could not afford it. Isaac told me that because he has dreadlocks, he needs to take special care of his hair. He also told me that a lot of his Black peers' wear do-rags and wave caps to cover their hair because they are embarrassed that it is not taken care of. As a policy, wearing wave caps and do-rags, has never taken this into consideration. Neither had I. I have always thought that the wave cap/do-rag rule was very arbitrary and inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. But then again, that is how I feel about most rules. Things got real when Isaac asked me if I had ever heard of the Crown Act. I had not. He told me it was an act to protect people with certain types*

of hair. I wanted to know more, so I got my lap top, sat down amongst my students and we began to do some research. The Crown Act is a piece of legislation that was introduced to Congress on March 21, 2022 (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair Act, 2022). The purpose of this act is to prohibit discrimination of a person based on the style or texture of their hair. It has passed the House of Representatives and is currently sitting on the floor of the Senate for approval. I set about reading the particular components of the bill with my students which highlights historical racism and states, "Like one's skin color, one's hair has served as a basis of race and national origin discrimination" (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair Act, 2022).

Reading this with my students was a game changer. We knew we were on to something here. This was so exciting for all of us. We also knew that we had to take this information and make it work for us. In order to do this, I spent time going over the entire act and discussing each section with the students. I wanted them to be able to articulate how this act applied to them in their particular situation and how they could use the information to address a rule that they felt was discriminatory. So, we began with a discussion of discrimination at its most basic level. When I asked them, what constituted a discriminatory act, they agreed that it was something that targeted one group and one group only based on their color. I asked them if color was the only basis that determined eligibility for discrimination. My girls were the first ones to speak up and say "No!". They said women were discriminated against all the time. Others offered up their opinions on discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and how much money you made. Our class was diverse enough that we could all relate to having been the recipients of some form of discrimination in our lives.

From there, we talked specifically about why rules against wearing hair coverings to include do-rags and wave caps was discriminatory. It didn't take long for the students to articulate clearly how the rules violated their rights. I sat in awe as they talked it out. Even the White students were interested in how this all played out. Isaac pointed out that he understood that it made sense that wearing hoods over our heads or ball caps was not allowed because that would apply to everyone. Patrick pointed out that "You don't ever see White kids wearing do-rags or wave caps." Then, Myron said, "If the rule only applies to the Black kids, how is that fair?" I asked them if it was unfair or discriminatory, because there is a difference, and I asked them to explain the difference. It took them a minute to think about this. Lillie spoke up and said, "Well, if you asked me to arm wrestle Myron, that wouldn't be fair because he is bigger and stronger than me. I asked her, "How is that not discriminating against your size or sex?" She said, "Well, it is if you expect me to win but you aren't giving me an opponent that is my equal." I said, "So, Myron is not your equal?" Tamara jumped in and said, "He's her equal, but it's not a fair fight. Myron is bigger than her. We are all equals, but Lillie shouldn't be the loser because she didn't stand a chance." So, how was the wearing of wave caps and do-rags different? Another minute went by. Isaac said, "If only the Black girls had to arm wrestle men bigger than them and the White girls got to arm wrestle girls their size, then that would be discrimination because it's different standards." Another student cracked a joke that any girl would beat Myron in an arm wrestling contest anyway. Everyone laughed, including Myron.

So, I asked, "A difference in standards indicates discrimination?" Everyone said yes. I asked again, "Why is the rule prohibiting wave caps and do-rags discriminatory?" A simple, but beautiful explanation emerged. Isaac said, "It's discriminatory because the rule only applies to Black people, and that is against the law." We revisited the details of the Crown Act and applied

those to our discussion. Heads were nodding and smiles were forming. A huge connection had been made. Then, we needed to decide to do with our new knowledge. One student said we should refuse to wear them because they had no right to tell us not to. He proposed a protest, if you will. I asked them what the likely result of that would be, and for the most part, they all agreed that it would only get them in trouble, and me as well, for not enforcing the rule. I asked them for other options. They agreed that the rule needed to be changed and the only person who could change it was the person who made up the rule. This meant going to the top.

Options were thrown into the ring including a sit-in in front of the office of the director. Again, the students realized that aggressive measures would only result in them looking like they were trying to start a fight. Finally, LaTisha said, "We could start a petition." Yes! I told them that if they wanted to do that, they had to have something to back up their cause. They agreed that it was the Crown Act itself that was the back up. LaTisha said, "We could write a letter to the director that we could give to her with the petition." Now we were getting somewhere. So, I opened up a word document and we began to write. We cited the legislation in addition to the personal feelings of the students, and it was beautiful. The students were ecstatic. They felt like they had really accomplished something. I printed out the letter and attached it to a blank sheet where they could gather names. To my surprise, nearly every student on campus and multiple staff members had signed it all over the course of the lunch period.

It's no secret on campus that I am a bit of an upstart when it comes to defending the rights of my students. And it was probably not that hard to figure out that the young people who handed over the petition were all my students. It's also not all that surprising that writing letters citing legislation might be right up my alley. This letter had the potential to cause ripples and resentment among the staunch rule adherents in our midst. I guess I didn't care. I didn't care

because it was the right thing to do. Dr. Taylor assured me of that when I told her I was probably going to be in trouble. This was good trouble. In the end, the rule was revoked to a certain extent and it is still being considered as a campus-wide change. I am very proud of this project. It came about so unexpectedly, like so many of the best things do. It reminds me that learning opportunities are swirling around us all the time, in the most unlikely places. It was a team effort and we effected change. That was the real lesson. My students need to know that they have the ability to change the rules when the rules do not serve them and particularly when the rules discriminate against them. I think this project helped to teach them that this is possible." (2022).

My research question asks how storytelling acts as a medium for building caring relationships and community in the classroom. I would posit the nature of my classroom, with its focus on creating a safe, welcoming atmosphere, lends itself to the telling of stories. These stories, often shared with the entire class, evoke a togetherness and understanding of our shared connections in the form of individual experience. The closeness we feel is built on respect and trust. I have been entrusted with the stories of my students. Their stories are the foundation for our relationships and our relationships with one another are inextricably linked to each other in the form of community. This web of connection nearly defies explanation. I wish I could write down the tears that have been shed, the laughs that have been shared, and the changes that have emerged in our lives from having known one another. We are different people as a result of having spent our time together. Huber et al. (2013) tells us, "It is through relationship that the co-composing of new lives for both becomes possible" (p. 220).

Each individual story I have been gifted has given me a greater insight into the next.

They, like my students, are teachers. Clandinin, Huber, Huber, Murphy, Murray Orr, Pearce, and Steeves (2006) tell us,

> Stories to live by are multiple, fluid, and shifting, continuously composed and recomposed in the moment to moment living alongside children, families, administrators and others both on and off the school landscape. Teachers' stories to live by offer possibilities for change through retelling and reliving stories. This retelling and reliving is a restorying that changes their stories to live by. (p. 9)

As I try to answer my own question, I am struck by the power that stories have to connect us, to find our common ground, to stir our collective concern for one another, and to bind us tightly together. From this place, no one is left alone. The stories of my students become part of my own when I carve out a place in my life for them. The intentional, caring act of listening to every voice, every story, becomes not a burden, but a gift. For those of us who share and receive one another's stories, we are forever changed.

In the following chapter, I will speak to the connections I found between the stories I have recorded and the philosophies of Nel Noddings, Carol Gilligan, Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks. I will show how the individual experiences of my students and me illustrate the various tenets of ethics of care, feminisms, engaged pedagogy, ethics of love, and Black Feminist Thought. In particular, I will show how using these philosophies as a framework, we are better able to understand our students in a way that acknowledges their struggles, honors their differences, and places them in a web of connections where they can learn in a safe and loving environment.

Chapter 7 - Discussion

"In essence, depending on where you stand, American democracy constitutes a reality, a promise, a possibility, or a problem" –Patricia Hill Collins

This chapter seeks to illustrate the powerful effects of caring student teacher relationships as seen through the combined lenses of Nel Noddings, Carol Gilligan, Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks. I suggest the blending of ethics of care, feminism, ethics of love, engaged pedagogy, and Black Feminist Thought will result in a comprehensive and holistic understanding of how we can connect with our students in a way that acknowledges and affirms their struggles, honors their differences, and places them in a web of care that ensures a safe and equitable education. As I converge upon writing this final chapter, I am acutely aware of the significance of the words *safe* and *equitable*. Two months ago, nineteen students and two teachers were murdered in a school shooting in Uvalde, Texas. Through the direct actions of our current Supreme Court and a large faction of legislators, we can plainly see a greater value is placed on weapons than school children. Furthermore, inequity in education continues to plague our nations wherein school districts serving Native American, Latino, and African American students receive $1,800, or 13 percent less per student funding than schools primarily serving White students (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018).

The combined effects of violence and inequality in schools necessarily calls us to critically consider our historical models of education based on masculine ideals. If we are to affect real change, we must consider the possibility of reframing our educational institutions based on feminist thought wherein the ideals of democracy, love, voice, and relationship permeate our pedagogy as well as our philosophical frameworks. The masculine justice ethics of

our current system of education have proven themselves ineffectual. In contrast, if we were to adopt the feminist ideal of placing relationship over the individual through the apprehension of another's reality, we would see a growth in student teacher relationships as well as a catalyst for activism that has the potential to change education altogether.

Having waded through the beautiful, yet murky waters of 25 years of teaching, I have discovered connections between my findings and my chosen theoretical frameworks. The stories I have collected and analyzed provide living examples of the individual philosophical tenets articulated by Noddings, Gilligan, Hill Collins, and hooks. The experiences and voices I have gathered breathe life into concepts too often overlooked in terms of how our students are faring in American schools. They illustrate the need to reassess the fundamental values we build our schools upon.

I began with the following research questions:

1. What is the potential for understanding caring relationships between students and teachers through the lenses of Nel Noddings' ethics of care, Carol Gilligan's feminism, bell hooks' ethic of love and engaged pedagogy, and Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Thought?
2. How does storytelling act as a medium for building caring relationships and community in the classroom?

It is these questions I will use to illustrate my discussion.

The Centrality of Relationship

Noddings (1986a) tells us, "The virtue described by the ethical ideal of one-caring is built up in relation. It reaches out to the other and grows in response to the other" (pp. 80-81). Throughout my findings, I have articulated my belief that building relationships with my

students is a precursor to learning. My journals reflect my first encounter with a student as a time to reach out, get to know them, listen to their stories, and find the spaces where we can connect and grow together. This is an intimate space where students, whose stories and backgrounds are entirely different from mine, begin to know that I am an ally. It is also within this space that we begin to build a foundation built on trust. These immediate connections illustrate hooks' (1994) thoughts when she states:

> To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, and class, professional standing, and a host of other differences. (p. 130)

My initial question, *What brings you to my classroom?*, is a genuine offering of my willingness and desire to listen to one's story. Hill Collins (2009a) reiterates this when she says, "Here, the possibilities of engaged conversations are endless. I have been teaching for more than thirty years, yet individual students always say or do something that surprises me. I continue to learn from them" (p. 99). By making these immediate connections, building trust, and communicating genuine interest, I not only build a foundation for our relationship, but also confirm what Gilligan (2011) suggests when she states, "The threshold of adulthood thus becomes a prime time for educating the capacity to care by demonstrating what it means to pay attention, teaching how to listen, and exploring different ways of responding and their ramifications" (pp. 172-173).

The effects of my relationships with my students are illustrated in my journals. Statements elucidating these effects include my relationship with Katie when we *"sat knees to knees and told each other our favorite memories of each other, and we talked about how much we cared for one another"* (2001). Likewise, my journals reflect the feeling of safety and security built on our relationships. In 2014, I wrote, *"I stood up for him, and I think that made all*

the difference in the world. He trusts me now." And in the aftermath of Andy's story, I wrote the following:

> *I told my students, "None of this is okay, but we are okay, and I am here and I love you. We will get through this together." And we were okay. We were much worse for the wear, but we had each other, and we were close. There were tiny smiles of acknowledgement for each other's sadness throughout the day. There were small physical connections, a squeeze of one's hands, a gentle resting of heads on each other's shoulders, and reassuring hugs.* (2018)

Noddings, Gilligan, Hill Collins, and hooks speak to hearing and recognizing individual voices, of the interdependence of one another, a connectedness, and the ability of these actions to result in a transformation (Gilligan, 2011; Hill Collins, 2009a, hooks, 1994c; Noddings, 1986a). I would argue, if we are truly invested in the lives of our students, not just as learners, but as individuals, we must begin with an intentionality that speaks to that investment. We must show care before we teach.

The centrality of relationship is the bedrock upon which to build a foundation for the remaining concepts pertaining to my research questions. Caring relationships as defined by Noddings, hooks, Gilligan, and Hill Collins, and illustrated by my personal experiences combine to show how a personal investment is pivotal to a students' belief and faith in a teacher's ability to recognize, respect, and care in such a way that they will be entrusted with their education. In order for this to occur, we are called to apprehend another's reality as a reality for ourselves. This is achieved by listening deeply to the stories our students tell us. It is this apprehension that I will discuss in the following section.

Apprehending Another's Reality

In the process of building relationships, we are called to apprehend another's reality as a possibility for ourselves (Noddings, 1986a). Noddings (2005) speaks to this as a "motivational displacement" in which teachers are "seized by the needs of another" (p. 16). She likewise points out, "To confirm another, we must know and understand that other's reality. Given the structure of today's schooling, this may be asking the impossible" (Noddings, 1986a, p. xix). I would suggest I have been able to build deeply connected relationships in my classrooms due to the length of time I spent with my students. This would indicate a level of truth to Nodding's ideas about teachers spending multiple years with one group of students. I speak to this long-term connection when I talk about my relationship with Beth, who was leaving our program after graduation:

> *She was rubbing her feet because the high heels she wore to graduation killed her feet. Our conversation was so easy, like one between old friends. I am going to miss seeing her every day. She is just one of those students whose life you really dig in to.* (2019)

hooks (2000) also speaks to apprehending another's reality when she calls us to have "a willingness to learn" from others regarding their unique knowledge as a result of personal experience (p. 94). Just as Noddings indicates the necessity of reciprocation between the one-caring and the one cared for, hooks (2000) also illustrates the centrality of vulnerability and the possibilities of connection when she states, "The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other" (p. 93). On one occasion, I wrote about my connection with a student who had similar experiences to mine regarding our love for our pets. I wrote:

> *We had tears together, and also shared stories about our favorite dog moments. We found a connection over her loss that we never had before. I think this connection may go*

a long way toward helping her to believe in me, that I want what is best for her, and that she can trust me. (2000)

Gilligan's apprehension of another's reality is tied to the idea of recognizing a different voice. She cites the feminine web of relationships built on women's relationships as having the ability to recognize the needs and feelings of other's as one's own (Gilligan, 1982). She insists we are called to listen "in a way that creates trust," as it is "essential to hearing a "different" voice, meaning a voice that didn't make sense according to the prevailing categories of interpretation" (Gilligan, 2014, p. 91). Certainly, I found an absolute beauty in the voice of my student, Abigail, whose literal voice was compromised due to her cerebral palsy. My apprehension of her reality was, at first, overshadowed by her disability. Only after building a relationship with Abigail over time, were we able to build the trust in one another allowing her to express her voice without fear. I wrote about Abigail's voice when she spoke at her IEP meeting about our time reading Frankenstein and how she felt about the story. Abigail said:

I love this book so much because it's about a person who is tortured by others for the way he looks. They don't know how smart he is, or what he has to offer, or how badly he wants to be loved, because they can only see the way he looks on the outside. I feel like that a lot of the time, so I am really glad Mrs. Eickhoff chose this book for us because I think it helps other kids see that people who look damaged like me are important and smart and nice. (2005)

Hill Collins (2009b) illustrates the apprehension of another's reality within women-centered networks and relationships as a place where we can form resistance against intersecting oppressive structures. I have seen this perspective on apprehending another's reality play out in the lives of my students. The confinement of my student, Jonathan, because of his disability

called me to question the safety, and even more importantly, the humanness of placing a student in an isolated, locked space. After being placed in the same space as Jonathan, I wrote, "*I wasn't in there for more than two minutes, but it felt like a lifetime. Jesus, what do the kids feel like being in there"* (2000). Also from this lens, I was able to recognize the effects of rural politics and classism in the life of my student whom I believed must have felt *"pretty pissed off most of the time about the life he is living at home and the way that people talk about him and his family"* (1997). I also found examples of intersecting oppression of race and sex in Brandi's story when I wrote the following:

> *She speaks to her time at a primarily White school where she was one of only three Black girls, and she tells me that she was treated differently. She points to one example where she was suspended for wearing shorts that were too short. But she tells me that they were the right size, but she is curvier than the White girls. And she also tells me that she thinks her shape made the White principal feel uncomfortable. She simply felt singled out… that the White kids could get away with anything, but she was constantly under the microscope.* (2021)

Finally, I suggest that bearing witness to another's story, thereby apprehending their reality, allows us to more clearly understand the historical significance of trauma in the lives of students. In particular, I speak to the inequalities perpetuated on young people based on their socioeconomic, racial, sexual, and ability status. In 2007, I wrote about my students having targets on their backs and how it indicated others might define my students in terms of suspects. Corrie's story, painted so vividly in my memory, reminds us that when we view another's actions, we must use the lens of apprehending another's reality so that we understand much more deeply how the present is a result of the past. As Noddings (1986a) tells us, "We may legally

punish one who has stolen, but we may not pass moral judgement on him until we know why he stole" (p. 93). Corrie's crime, when viewed through the eyes of a child shoved to the ground by a drunken father for standing in front of the television takes on a different meaning. Jenna's story, also illustrates the oppression faced by LGTBQ students. During the Covid-19 lockdown, I wrote the following:

> *Jenna has had hygiene issues a lot in the past. I have been in meetings with her where she has spoken openly about her hatred of showering because she doesn't like her own body. When you realize things like this, it makes hygiene and taking care of your own body far more complicated.* (2020)

I am certain apprehending another's reality through an extended period of time, with a willingness to learn, an attention paid to individual voice, and an understanding of intersecting oppression will provide a foundation for understanding, a space to build relationship, and a catalyst for change. The revisitation of my journals has shown that it was through storytelling that I was able to apprehend another's reality by hearing and understanding as closely as possible the events that have shaped the lives of my students. In the next section, I will discuss storytelling as the conduit for building caring relationships and community in my classroom.

Storytelling

Storytelling is defined by Noddings as dialogue between one-caring, and one cared-for in such a way that students and teachers are able to articulate their wants and needs. This dialogue is inexplicably tied to personal history and what Noddings calls "stirring stories" (Noddings, 2002, p. 43). Gilligan (1982) indicates storytelling as a method for recognizing and acknowledging the often-silenced voice. For Gilligan (1982), a woman's voice and her lived story is juxtaposed against that of mans. For Hill Collins (1989, 2009b), individual stories are

woven together within a sisterhood and community that is imbued with unique knowledge and lived experience. hooks (1984, 2000), relates telling stories as part of building a classroom community, where to hear each other is an act of recognition. Both Hill Collins and hooks speak to the unique knowledge found in the stories of Black women, who possess an understanding of the intersectional oppression of class, gender, and race. As such, women's voices are reaffirmed through stories and conversation where similar experiences reinforce one's community. From the perspective of my methodology, narrative inquiry, story lends itself to the articulation of racism, sexism, poverty, and classism through the understanding and meaning of lived experience. Each of these perspectives indicates the validity of storytelling as personal knowledge imbued with the possibility of becoming the foundation for genuine, caring, relationships.

In my classroom, I have found my students' stories to be the truest representation of who they are as well as a place where we can connect. To simply receive a student, count their credits, and pass out classes, would be antithetical to understanding why they came to me in the first place. I need to understand their history with their own education in order to shift their understanding of the potential benefits of giving school another chance. Students just don't suddenly arrive in my classroom. Rather, they arrive weary and broken from a long journey in education that has left them feeling defeated and incapable. How am I to know this unless I know their story. Mitzi's story is a beautiful example of what we can learn about a person from their willingness to share. After a long conversation with Mitzi, I wrote the following:

> *She talks about how it was hard to go to school because her momma would keep her up all night, screaming and hollering while she was drunk. She says, "I don't even want to go to school no more." "Who wants to get up early in the morning and have to catch a*

school bus and act like nothing is going on when they got to school? "Who wants to put all this learnin' in their head whenever they got all these problems at home. (2020)

These words helped me to understand that Mitzi's education was cut short not because of her lack of desire to learn, but by her personal circumstances. Mitzi went on to tell me about her path to my classroom. I wrote what she told me in my journal:

I went to jail and my son saw me through the glass, and he tried to touch me, but he couldn't. And when I was sitting in there in jail, I saw myself just like I saw my momma." She went on to tell me how jail gave her the time to get sober, to clear her mind, and the chance to start her life over… and that is how she came to be in my classroom. (2020)

From this part of Mitzi's story, I discovered her profound love for her son. We shared the same bond of motherhood. We found each other in her story.

I have also been gifted the understanding of my student's hardships through their stories of survival. I am a protective mother figure in my classroom. As such, I am constantly worried about their survival outside of my classroom. Often, when a student has a problem at home, they tell me about it through story. Such was the case when I wrote the following entry:

They told me that when you grow up without a family, the gang offers you one. They give you money, all the stuff you need, but in turn, you have to give them what they need. And my question was, "What if what you have to give them is your life?" They all just smiled and shrugged their shoulders. I had nothing more to add to the conversation. No more questions. I think they could see that I was defeated, but they told me they appreciate that I talk to them and ask questions and they think it is good I'm trying to understand. I could tell through their facial expressions and their body language that they appreciated

having the space to tell their stories, to explain to me what their lives at home are like. (2021)

In these examples, storytelling is articulated in relationship, the recognition of voice, and the acknowledgment of each person's unique lived experience. They are stories to be cherished and learned from. As such, I can think of no better way to build a classroom community than upon a foundation of shared stories, solidified through recognition and connection. The concept of community, built on the sharing of stories is what I will address in the next section.

Community

The metaphor of community is often articulated in my journals in describing my classroom. Noddings (2002) describes community in the classroom as providing "a sense of belonging, of caring for one another, of sharing in a coherent tradition" (p. 70). Gilligan (1982) speaks to an interdependence and "cumulative knowledge of human relationships" (p. 74). hooks (2000) describes a classroom community as spiritual in so much as "Enjoying the benefits of living and loving in community empowers us to meet strangers without fear and extend to them the gift of openness and recognition" (p. 143). Hill Collins (2009b) articulates the concept of community when she states, "Self is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from other. Instead, self is found in the context of family and community" (p. 124). Although each scholar defines community differently, they all agree on the importance of community for a cohesive sense of wellbeing.

In my journals, I have found many examples of how my classroom demonstrates a sense of community. Following the death of my beloved student, Emanuel, I wrote about the community of young men in my classroom and how they came together to honor their friend:

> *I remember looking up and seeing the tears in my students' eyes. Those ornery, big boys of mine were there, honoring their friend. Their true selves were present. Afterwards, each of them gave me a big hug. Our classroom was not the same for the rest of that year. We had all grown so close and I believe Emmanuel was the conduit for that connection.* (2011)

I also write about the unique bond and acceptance between my students that defines us as a community of caring individuals. In 2008, I wrote *"My students understand that each of them have unique, often troubling characteristics to the outside world. They don't feel accepted "out there. I think that is why they feel safe within the walls of my classroom."* Years later I wrote *"It seems that when one of my students is really sad, the others pick up on it and they soften. It becomes painfully obvious that even though it's my classroom, it is their experience that binds us all together"* (2012). When my students and I gathered together the morning after Andy jumped from my window, we were a broken, yet cohesive community, holding tightly to each other. When I wrote about our decision to reclaim our classroom, I wrote:

> *Quietly, we walked together up the flight of stairs to our classroom. I opened the door and turned on the lights. The window with the big beautiful tree behind it was closed tight. We all took a collective breath and walked in.* (2018)

Perhaps it is my focus on the safety and security of my classroom that provides the opportunity for us to build a community. Perhaps it is the freedom we offer each other to be ourselves, free of judgement. My experiences mirror that of hooks (1994) when she states, "It has been my experience that one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice" (p. 8). Additionally, while we have the ability to observe a community, we are unable to understand the deep emotional connection that comes from being a

part of a community unless we are a part of it. It must be felt. Concepts including genuine care, feminism, anti-racism, and love may be exhibited physically, but they are received spiritually and existentially. It is this connection to the spiritual and existential I will address next.

Connection to the Spiritual and Existential

I found within my journals many connections with the spiritual. I do not suggest that I am leading prayer or advocating for a particular religion in my classroom. I do, however, find that sometimes I find myself in situations with students that are too traumatic or painful to understand. When this happens, I have often called on my faith to see us through. I certainly believe there is a reason my students come to be in my classroom, and I share that belief with them. I believe it helps them to realize how much I value their presence. Noddings (1986a) tells us:

> The school, ideally, is a setting in which values, beliefs, and opinions can be examined both critically and appreciatively. It is absurd to suppose that we are educating when we ignore those matters that lie at the very heart of human existence. (p. 184)

Likewise, hooks (2000) states:

> When we begin to experience the sacred in our everyday lives we bring to mundane tasks a quality of concentration and engagement that lifts the spirit. We recognize divine spirit everywhere. This is especially true when we face difficulties. So many people turn to spiritual thinking only when they experience difficulties, hoping that the sorrow or pain will just miraculously disappear. Usually, they find that the place of suffering—the place where we are broken in spirit, when accepted and embraced, is also a place of peace and possibility. (p. 80)

Gilligan (1982) speaks to the spiritual in terms of humanity, morality, and interconnection when she states, “The stranger is still another person belonging to that group, people you are connected to by virtue of being another person” (p. 57). Hill Collins (2009b) describes the spiritual in terms of dialogue and “talking with the heart” (p. 281).

Certainly, my experiences with Katie, Emmanuel, and Andy called me to cling to my faith. On occasion, as with Katie’s accident, it caused me to question everything I had ever believed. But, with the passage of time, I found that it returned again, to sustain me through another day. When it comes to the articulation of my faith in action in my classroom, I am most drawn to hooks’ (2000) description of how she came to put a voice to her spirituality. She states:

> I began to speak more openly about the place of spirituality in my life when witnessing the despair of my students, their sense of hopelessness, their fears that life is without meaning, their profound loneliness and lovelessness. When young, bright, beautiful students would come to my office and confess their despondency, I felt it was irresponsible to just listen and commiserate with their woes without daring to share how I had confronted similar issues in my own life. (p. 82)

Within my journals, I found examples my expression of faith, and on occasion, an outright prayer. The following partial entry articulates my feeling about my journey to see Katie after her accident:

> *Along the way, there were constant prayers, both out loud and in the most-quiet places in our hearts. It was the only way to take our focus off the panic and dread we were all feeling. We were all in a place that called us to recognize our total inability to control the situation. We were swirling around in a storm of uncertainty*. (2000)

When I wrote about Pratt's mother, I wrote, *"I pray to God his mom wakes up, and if she does, she is at least able to be a mom again"* (2006). And in 2019 when I was gifted with the ability to help a refugee student pay a meager bill, I spoke to *"My prayer that he knows that there are people in this world who are willing and able to help."*

Without a doubt, I believe my classroom is a sacred space where we are all filled by stories and the spiritual, and where we are all connected by something beautifully cosmic, and certainly larger than ourselves. I likewise believe my ability to recognize this is as a result of my feminist perspective. The very philosophical tenets of Noddings, hooks, Gilligan, and Hill Collins are built on the foundation of feminist ideals. It is this feminist approach I will address in the next section.

A Feminist Approach

The centrality of relationship, apprehending another's reality, storytelling, community, and connection to the spiritual, as I have described thus far, are feminist approaches articulated by my chosen scholars who describe them as such. Noddings (1986a) references a feminist approach as one that rejects male-centered cultural norms, as well as the classification of women's work. She rejects male standards of equality and suggests feminists have begun to recognize a false redistribution of political, monetary, or cultural capital does little to dismantle the patriarchy. She states, "A different sort of world may be built on the natural caring so familiar to women" (Noddings, 1986a, p. 46). With this in mind, I have strived to create a classroom built on feminist caring wherein an essential part of providing an education is creating a safe, comfortable space where students feel welcome. Additionally, Noddings (2005) speaks to the possibilities of curriculum built on feminist ideas when she states, "One can only speculate on what the disciplines might have been and how the curriculum would have been constructed if,

for example, women rather than men had designed them" (p. 61). In my classroom, I have pushed back against the mainstream, masculine curriculum through the addition or substitution of materials addressing the racial, ethnic, class, and sexual relevance of my students.

hooks (1994) defines her feminist approach as one built on solidarity and love. She teaches from a feminist perspective through employing her ethic of love as the foundation for her pedagogical methods. Clearly, she emphasizes that in whatever work we are doing, we must use our power to transform ourselves and others in ways that uplift equality and reject the patriarchy. Within my classroom, I am drawn to my experiences with my girls that lead to conversations and stories where we are given the opportunity to discuss what it means to be a woman. To be sure, when these conversations happen, they draw others in around us. There appears to be a sisterhood that dissipates through the air, like a magical perfume that calls us together. They have shared stories of intimidation, fear, and assault. On one occasion, I wrote:

> *Deep down, I think there is a place in her that tells her she deserves to be treated like this. This goes back a long way, I think. I told her that and we started digging into her past and what may have led to her believing this lie. There is a lot of stuff there, a lot of trauma, and a lot of watching the women around her being treated this way. I think that made a connection for her.* (2021)

On these occasions, when connections are made, there is growth. I find it crucial that as women, we recognize our commonalities and love each other unconditionally. In particular, we must suspend all judgement if we are to hear what is being spoken to us. My girls also share with me the gift of motherhood and feminist solidarity. As such, I am reminded of the overwhelming support by the women of my community to uplift my student, Mae, and her two beautiful

daughters. As hooks (1994) reminds us, a feminist ethic of love is most visible when it is demonstrated in action.

Gilligan (1982, 2011, 2014, 2018a, 2018b) asserts women are uniquely gifted with the ability to protect humanity from the oppressive hierarchical, patriarchal state. She posits feminism and ethics of care are the keys to do this. Gilligan (2011) states:

> A feminist ethic of care is integral to the struggle to release democracy from the grip of patriarchy because it roots that struggle in the exigencies of survival, the evolutionary need to put children's well-being first (ahead of concerns about women's chastity and the perpetuation and augmentation of male lineages). A feminist care ethic encourages the capacities that constitute our humanity and alerts us to the practices that put them at risk. (p. 177)

From this perspective, I recognize my ability and calling as a teacher who operates from a feminist perspective, to protect those in my care. In my journals, I wrote extensively about defending my students. Certainly, it is from this place of womanhood I draw this instinct.

Hill Collins (2009b) points to the exclusion of Black women from the White, middle-class feminist movement. She speaks to issues of intersectionality as being unacknowledged and calls White women to recognize their unearned privilege. For Hill Collins, feminism must represent gender, race, and class. As a teacher who works with many young women of color, I am committed to acknowledging my privilege. I have stopped telling my students of color that "I understand," because I do not. Now, I begin with "I have never experienced what you are going through, but I recognize how important it is to you." Just by telling my students that I am unable to fully understand their struggle has made a significant impact. In fact, I have found my students

of color will take the time to educate me on those experiences and ideas that I have never encountered due to my privilege. hooks (1994) found the following:

> Talking with black women and women of color I wanted to know what factors distinguish these relationships we have with white feminists which we do not see as exploitive or oppressive. A common response was that these relationships had two important factors: honest confrontation, and dialogue about race, and reciprocal interaction. (pp. 105-106).

This type of interaction is what I strive for. Kids are smarter than you think. They know who is there for the right reasons, and who is not. It is only through honest dialogue spoken and heard in genuine relationships that I have been given the opportunity to learn from my students, and grow as a teacher and a person as a result.

The very presence of a feminist approach to education as articulated by Noddings, hooks, Gilligan, and Hill Collins, insisting on the necessity of caring relationships and community, necessitates the rejection of our current system of education built on masculine ethics, principles, fairness, and universal truths. The very assumption of a universal truth is antithetical to the uniqueness of every voice shared in every story. In my experiences, I have found those masculine attributes to be ineffectual and often cruel. I have never seen a student respond to threats or universal applications of justice in such a way that their lives were improved. It is the rejection of these masculine ethics I will discuss next.

Rejection of Masculine Ethics: Principles, Fairness, and Universal Truths

Central to a feminist approach is the rejection of masculine ethics, principles, fairness, and universal truths. Noddings (1986a) articulates her views on this when she juxtaposes a feminine ethic of care against the masculine ethic of principle. She rejects sacrificial principles

and justice. Rather she asserts that an ethic of care demands we look beneath the surface of universal principles and attend to individual voices. She states, "The frequent insistence on obedience to rules and adherence to ritual contributes to the erosion of genuine caring" (Noddings, 1986a, p. 117). Gilligan (1982) rejects a system of justice based on masculine adversarial principles. She argues the feminine characteristics that seek to show care and concern call us to reject universal judgement. She juxtaposes men's systems of justice through systems of laws and logic against women who seek non-violent, equitable solutions founded on love and relationship. Hill Collins (2009b) calls us to recognize the systematic racism built into systems of ethics and justice that have historically subordinated, persecuted, and excluded Black women. According to Hill Collins's ethics of care, the search for truth should be guided by principles aimed at promoting social justice. hooks (1994) asserts the patriarchal system of justice is antithetical to her ethic of love. The presence of domination of one group or individual over another denies the existence of love.

In my classroom, the students come before the arbitrariness of rules. It has taken some time, but I have come to a place where I will not back down from any fight where my students' lives hang in the balance. Historically, they have been raised in a system that left them defenseless. As a result, their education has suffered. I reject canned, arbitrary rules and consequences. This has led me to be a fierce advocate. In my journals, I have recorded my thoughts on standardization of rules. On one occasion, I wrote, *"Seriously, their policies make no sense to me. Sometimes I feel like I am the only defense these kids have"* (2006). On another occasion, following what I believed was the unnecessary use of restraint on a student I wrote the following:

I spoke up and told everyone that had he not been restrained and was instead just brought back to class, this wouldn't have happened. Braden and his mom were shocked that I said anything. Mr. Pauls was equally shocked and gave me the death glare. Oh well. Braden got suspended for destroying school property. I think this was wrong. Rest assured, I will never report him missing again without checking on my own first. (2005)

My historical involvement with the law and my students has been a series of losses. I documented multiple instances where my students never returned to my classroom as a result of being involved with the law. I can say with absolute certainty; I have never been asked about my students' stories or possible reasons for their behavior. Perhaps, if the feminist ethic of care approach was taken with young people from the very beginning of their education, their lives may have turned out differently. After spending time with my former student's death row attorney, I wrote the following:

I told the lawyer that I would be happy to testify on Corrie's behalf. We agreed that Corrie's life was one series of unfortunate events after another. He never had a chance. I get the feeling that Corrie never left the heart or mind of that sick little kid who just needed someone to take care of him. (2016)

Likewise, my experience with the administrator who tried to humiliate and belittle me clearly shows the detrimental effects of a strict, one-size-fits-all disciplinary approach to working with students. My journal indicates this when I write:

It was my opinion that the highest level of administration was lacking in respect and tolerance for students with EBD. It was also my opinion that these students were not treated as people to be listened to, but rather as problems to be solved. (2015)

Ingrained in the rejection of masculine ethics, principles, fairness, and universal truths is the goal of liberation and social justice. You cannot have one without the other. If I am trying to answer my own research question regarding the power of understanding and caring relationships through a medium of storytelling and community, I must recognize the absolute necessity of individuality. When Noddings, hooks, Gilligan, and Hill Collins speak to liberation and social justice, it is founded on the crucial understanding of the individual, their story, and their experiences within society. There is no one-size-fits-all masculine approach that has the ability to apprehend the vast individuality of our society if liberation and social justice are to be achieved.

Liberation and Social Justice

Living in this time, it has become obvious that my rights as a woman, and the rights of all those who do not fit into the male, patriarchal hierarchy are in jeopardy. As such, I find the inclusion of social justice issues pivotal to the education of my students. Hill Collins (2009b) speaks to Black feminist thought's identity as a "critical" social theory committed to justice, both for U.S. Black women as a collectivity and for that of other similarly oppressed groups" (p. 12). As a classroom teacher, I subscribe to this theory and subsequent commitment to justice. Noddings (2002) argues that the end of societal violence and the achievement of social justice will only happen when we as a country begin "caring more effectively for its children" (p. 25). She is clear that American education, based on patriarchal norms and social reproduction of White male superiority, must change if we are going to achieve real democracy and social justice for those on the margins. Gilligan (2011) asserts the role of ethics of care is to provide resistance to injustice through the recognition of silenced voices. She asks, "Can a democratic society sanction or turn a blind eye to the subordination of women in a patriarchy?" (Gilligan, 2014, p. 101). She, like Hill Collins, defines intersectionality in terms of race and gender, and adds

another layer of patriarchy. hooks (1994) suggests engaged pedagogy and an ethic of love, imbued with political activism, has as its goal social justice and liberation.

As a privileged, White, middle-class woman, I have not had the same experiences as my students of color. What I do have is a wealth of historical knowledge about social injustice and over two decades of teaching experience. Armed with the knowledge passed on to me by my own teachers as well as my students, I have the ability to facilitate lessons, discussions, and activities that speak to social justice. I also have the responsibility to listen and grow from what I learn from my students. In my journals, I have recorded stories of single mothers who struggle to provide their children with their most basic needs, while living in a country that claims its children are its greatest treasure. I have recorded stories of young people, raised in abject poverty that has left them with the deepest fear of not having a place to live, or food to eat. The realization of social justice issues actualized in the lives of the students I work with everyday demands we talk about it. Racial inequity and violence is a mainstay in the lives of my students. When I told my students, *"I just wish there was a way to be safe,"* and they respond with, *"You mean you wish there was a safe way to be Black,"* I am called to investigate my own privileged space and dig deeper into their lives for a better understanding of what it is like to be a young Black person in 21st Century America. Most importantly, when I have the opportunity to facilitate a lesson on social justice issues facing my students, as in the case of the Crown Act, or the music of Childish Gambino's (2018) *This is America*, I must take it. My subversive game has to be on point, and ready to go on a moment's notice.

The only way I know how to show my solidarity it through an absolute determination to show my students that I care about the issues they face in their lives. In order to do this, my philosophy as well as my pedagogy must be the conduit for an equitable education aimed at

dismantling systems that perpetuate racism, classism, and sexism. Education, itself, must make room for curriculum, philosophy, and pedagogy seeking not only to educate for the acquisition of knowledge, but also to educate for the purpose of liberation and social justice. If this is to be done, we must embrace those ideas as expressed by Noddings, hooks, Gilligan, and Hill Collins that call us to shift our thinking to an educational system imbued with feminist ideals of caring, love, individual voice, and equity.

Ethics of Care and Education

All of the connections I have made thus far culminate in a discussion of the effects of ethics of care in education. Each of my theoretical frameworks defines ethics of care in education from a different perspective. When layered upon one another, they become a perfect combination of holistic ideals for how we should view education philosophically and facilitate education ethically and practically. Noddings' (2005) focus on ethics of care in education asks us to reevaluate our insistence on perpetuating the male, hierarchical, traditional liberal arts curriculum. Not unlike masculine ethics, she argues that a liberal arts curriculum, built on a fabrication that guarantees equality in education for all, is a falsehood. Gilligan (1982) argues the patriarchal model of education forces adolescent girls to sacrifice their true selves to the hierarchical race to the top. hooks (1994) asserts her ethic of love and engaged pedagogy has the power to transgress racism, sexism, and discrimination through the recognition of multiple perspectives. Hill Collins (2009b) mirrors Noddings' (2005) thoughts on the negative effects of a male-centered liberal arts education on equity in education and adds that it goes even further to render racial and socioeconomic oppression invisible.

As these four philosophies become intertwined, the focus of an equitable, engaging, and liberating education becomes sharper. Throughout my journals, I have documented instances

where students were left behind because their strengths were not recognized or their disabilities overshadowed their abilities. Noddings might argue my students fell off the conveyer belt of a liberal arts curriculum, and were left to perish on the cutting floor. My student, Layla, spoke directly to this when she shared her thoughts with me:

> *She told me about how when she was in school, she was really good at sports but wasn't allowed to play because of her grades. That made her mad and so she gave up. She said something really interesting to me, that she thought it was ridiculous that she had to have good grades to do something she loved and something she was good at. She asked why someone else got to decide what was good for her. She told me that her life would have been better if how she lived it was up to her. This made sense to me. I think the rules that made her conform to someone else's standards are the reason she quit school.* (2021)

I have also recorded stories and thoughts brought about through my conversations with my female students that illustrate Gilligan's thoughts on how young women are forced to deny their true selves. Often times, my girls will tell me about how they have had to become fierce in order to survive, indicating those attributes associated with women were viewed as a weakness. I have been told that to survive amongst men, you have to act like men. The effects of a supposed color-blind view of education, wherein differences and oppression are ignored, permeates the lives of my students who went unnoticed, unrecognized, and uncared for. When a student tells me he was called a racial slur, and he reacted and was subsequently kicked out of school, but nothing happened to the bus driver who said it, I am called to question the whole system.

I believe my journals indicate the necessity of an ethic of care in education that affirms students for their differences, shines a light on social justice, and cares for its teachers. When my student states, *"I think that as a teacher, you should have a personal relationship with each*

student to get an understanding of them and how they work," I believe them (2020). When having a conversation with my students about race, I was told, *"We need to have more of these discussions, because they never happen,"* and he went on to say that *"These discussions needed to happen much earlier in kids' lives if things are going to change, but because these things are important, there must be a reason they don't teach us this stuff"* (2022). Students are feeding us the solutions to our problems, but we are totally immobilized by our inability or unwillingness to change. I believe the start to an entire shift in how we view education is dependent upon the deracination of the patriarchal and masculine roots of a liberal arts curriculum whose only goal is to perpetuate the existing structures of White-male superiority.

Conclusion

A primary aim of my research was to show how caring relationships built on storytelling facilitates the building of community in the classroom. In particular, I wanted to illustrate how the philosophical lenses of Nel Noddings' ethics of care, Carol Gilligan's feminism, bell hooks' ethic of love and engaged pedagogy, and Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Thought have the ability to create a framework for understanding and addressing the emotional as well as academic needs of our students. I believe the evidence provided by my journals shows the above philosophical constructs are indeed illustrated in the lived experience of students. Individual stories provide a web of connection between students and teachers when caring relationships are the starting point for building the web.

In the process of my research, indeed throughout my doctoral education, I have grown immeasurably in terms of my understanding of the systemic inequality pervading the system of American public education. Hill Collins (2009a) states, "Sometimes practicing resistance as an educated person feels like being at war with American society" (p. 130). When Hill Collins

(2009a) speaks to educators who are committed to social justice and high standards of education she tells us:

> They need teachers who possess a culturally sensitive understanding of the obstacles their students face; who are not afraid of their students, no matter how big they are or how aggressively they talk; who set high, attainable standards for students, push them harder to reach them, and then celebrate when kids accomplish what they thought was impossible for them, to their amazement. These are teachers who refuse to patronize African American kids but who will treat them like they are just as smart as any kid in an affluent, white, suburban district. This is very difficult work, and each individual who takes on this kind of commitment needs to be honest about whether he or she *can* do it or, more importantly, *wants* to do it. Being African American within this population of skilled, committed teachers is a bonus, not a qualification for practicing resistance (p. 132).

It has taken me 25 years and an eye-opening education of my own to bring me to this place where I feel I am able to make this commitment. Without a doubt, my desire to do this work is stronger than it has ever been.

It is my hope, then, that this narrative inquiry contributes to the knowledge and practice of education based on the feminist ideals of ethics of care, engaged pedagogy, ethics of love, and Black Feminist Thought. To illustrate the power of combining these individual philosophies with the purpose of building a framework for classrooms that encourage caring relationships and provide for the resistance of social injustice would be my greatest contribution. As my own story illustrates my growth as an educator over the past 25 years, I hope the reader would recognize and find solace in the ability of time and dedication to carve out a space where students and

teachers can reach their full potential. As I have revealed so much of my own personal history, beginning with the hateful roots of my family of origin, I hope to have illustrated the possibility of change. To be certain, this research has caused me to investigate my own life as much as it has examined my life with my students. Ultimately, what I have found, is the truth. Change is possible when a willingness to learn drives our motives. Our students are no different. Places in our hearts that remain cut off and darkened by historical fear or hatred, are the same places where liberation is possible through united resistance, love, and reconciliation. This is the intersection where we meet our students and begin anew.

Noddings (1986a) tells us:

> Perhaps it is time for a new wave of feminism—one that will continue to press for women's equality in occupational and political life in our male-dominated culture—but, more than that, time to work toward a world in which women's experience is used to guide humanity to richer, more peaceful ways of life. Well-educated women have learned much from their male predecessors. Perhaps men can now be persuaded to learn from the rich store of female experience. (p. 208)

It is from this place that I suggest an additional opportunity exists to hear the voices of teachers and students alike who have the ability to contribute to the conversation regarding the possibilities of feminist thought when applied to education. hooks (2000b) argues, "Radical/revolutionary feminist politics bring a message of hope as well as strategies to empower women and men of all classes. Feminism is for everybody" (p. 110). As educators, we often fall prey to defeat and complicity when it comes to making real change. hooks (1994) tells us:

> To counter this complicity, we must have more written work and oral testimony documenting ways barriers are broken down, coalitions formed, and solidarity shared. It is this evidence that will renew our hope and provide strategies and direction for future feminist movement. (pp. 109-110)

The possibility for change will increase with a contemporary, burgeoning focus on educational philosophies based on feminist ideals and social justice. I suggest there are a multitude of teachers out there who have a wealth of knowledge and stories, that if shared, would offer us not only more strategies for working with students but also insight into their experience with storytelling and relationship. There are invaluable truths and lessons to be learned from the stories playing themselves out in classrooms across the world. Certainly, there are a substantial number of feminist scholars and philosophies that could be explored in order to contribute to the literature, knowledge, and practice of a liberating education. I call on the words of Nel Noddings (2004) to suggest a beginning. She states, "We shouldn't need social scientists to tell us that; if we listen to our students, we hear how lost and miserable many of them are, and we understand that we must try to change the system" (p. 157).

I believe the significance of this research is its potential to benefit teachers, administrators, and all those who work with students. My study has examined the lives of students who have experienced some of the worst of what schools have to offer. Certainly, it illustrates their resiliency. Perhaps it offers a new lens through which we view our own philosophy and pedagogical practices. Most importantly, it offers us the ability to recognize the powerful ability of students' stories to take us to a much deeper place of understanding. I humbly submit this research as an exercise in storytelling… mine and theirs. And our stories, well, that is what makes us who we are.

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