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**‘ENTERING RESEARCH:
Collapsing the Personal, Teacher, Researcher Identity’**

**“All [people] should strive to learn before they die, what they are
running from, and to, and why.” - James Thurber**

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RESEARCH FOCUS:

“The treasure secretly gathered in your heart will become evident through your creative work.” (Dürer in Edwards:1989:7)

This inquiry sits within the parameters of arts education. My specific focus is on the art of teaching, a recognition of teaching as a creative act. Numerous theorists recognise the inherency of art to teaching: Elliott Eisner’s notion of ‘connoisseurship’ recognises “teachers’ ability to see and think about what they do”– their *art* of appreciation (in Woods:1996:3); Tom Barone talks of “the blur [of the teacher’s activity] becom[ing] a mosaic,” (2000:92) and how a teacher’s “work of art is his program.” (p93) Peter Woods claims:

The teacher’s art is expressed through performance...if curriculum is in fact a design problem, then by its very nature it is an aesthetic act. In many ways it is more like painting a picture than building a bridge.” (1996:3)

The argument for attributing art to the practice of teaching is confirmed for me by Robert Henri’s inspiring words. The word ‘teacher’ could be seamlessly substituted for ‘artist’.

When the artist is alive in any person, whatever [her] kind of work may be, [she] becomes an inventive, searching, daring, self-expressive creature. [She] becomes interesting to other people. [She] disturbs, upsets, enlightens, and opens ways for a better understanding. Where those who are not artists are trying to close the book, [she] opens it and shows there still more pages possible.” (in Edwards:1989:6)

RESEARCH QUESTION:

My research question is, ‘*who am I* in relation to my research?’ It is a question designed to enable me to *trace* my researcher identity. The focus here is an internal one; this report is a confrontation of the three strands of my identity: the personal, the teacher and the researcher. I consider this process an important one to undertake as a way of ‘entering research’ with honesty and with the aim to deepen my understanding, involvement and the outcomes of my future research (thesis) and teaching practice. I see this report sitting as a contribution to the literature on beginning teachers and beginning researchers.

It is my intention that this report be engaged with as a piece of art itself; that you, the reader, experience this report as an exhibition.

CONTEXT:

This report is located within an educational setting in the field of *emerging teacher* research. It is scrutinizing the period of transition from student to teacher, student to researcher, and more broadly the evolving confidence and understanding in the assumption of these roles.

RESEARCH METHOD:

In this report I utilise an *autoethnographic methodology* expressed through *personal narrative*. Autoethnography involves the ‘examination of self’ as well as a refocusing of this inspective gaze back outward to the world that surrounds the self:

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural...In *personal narratives*, social scientists take on the dual identities of academic and personal selves to tell autobiographical stories about some aspect of their experience in daily life. (Ellis:2000:739&740)

Two particular features of autoethnography are emphasised in this report:

- a. ‘*activating the spectators’ contemplative powers:*’ (see Taylor, 1996)
“Readers...take a more active role as they are invited into the author’s world, evoked to a feeling level about the event being described, and stimulated to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives.” (Ellis:2000:742) And,
- b. ‘*crystallization*’: “Crystals reflect, refract, change and grow. What we see depends upon the angle of repose.” (Richardson:1997:136)

It is through the telling of my own researcher’s story that I hope readers will, “feel the moral dilemmas, think with [my] story instead of about it, join actively in the decision points that define [the]...project, and consider how their own lives can be made a story worth telling.” (Ellis:2000:733)

This report is a *crystallization* of my visions of my research seen through poetry and writings. It is an exhibition. These visions are more a random collage than an ordered account. Some appear lucid and explicable while others are more ethereal, entangled. The broad theme that links these visions is my connection to education. This connection, as seen through the visions, can be at once, historical, hopeful or perplexed in nature.

I understand ‘vision’ to be a visual image seen through the ‘mind’s eye’, an invention of the imagination. My visions fit into a number of categories: *hope* - vision as a desire for the future; *perception* - vision as how I see the world, how I *construct* my world; and *creation* - vision as the initiator of art, the representation of ideas and feelings. I also believe that visions can be entities in themselves; they can be the initial signpost we encounter in the illumination of our ideas and feelings.

This report is an opportunity for me to chart these journeys of the *mind's eye*, it is a looking back. I am almost inclined to bold all the metaphors of vision. If you like, **notice** them, there are many.

Phillip Taylor notes the way in which the dancer, Martha Graham, 'scribbled down words, essays and poems, from which her dances ...somehow emerged.' (1996) It is my hope that by scribbling down my visions in the form of words, poems and journal entries the art of my teaching and research practice will emerge.

DATA and REPORT:

**“Ideas are in transformation; “facts” are interpretations “after the fact.”
Self-knowledge is reflexive knowledge. Poetic representation reveals the process
of self-construction, deferrals and transformations, the reflexive basis of self-
knowledge, the inconsistencies and contradictions of a life spoken as a
meaningful whole.”
(Richardson:1993:704)**

This report is constructed through the collection, interpretation and analysis of qualitative data in the form of poems, journal entries and a response to an interview. Each piece is introduced as a 'vision'; 11 visions make up the report. An introduction of explanation and analysis is given for each vision. I have been conscious of limiting the length of these in order that the reader can come to their own conclusions, *read into their own understanding*. The interview stands as a conclusion to the report; it is a discourse about the questions that remain. My response to it is a preparation for the future of my research and teaching practice.

I do not claim these poems and writings to be true or fair, they were not written for an audience but as an expression or release of the visions I saw. Now that I look back upon them I see that they illustrate my story of how I got to where I'm at with my research, and in my life. And why is it important to retrospect? I believe the more connected I am to my visions the more conscious or present I can be to what is really going on with my research. By facing my visions I am illuminating the dark corners of my research, where influential and important elements can lie hidden. This exercise in confrontation is designed to make my research a more profound, useful and pertinent piece of work.

Last year (2003) I completed the Graduate Diploma in Education. Before I began the course I wrote about my history and thoughts on education. This first piece is something of an introduction of me and where I am coming from.

VISION 1:

First day of school memory: The memory is of my fists banging against the door of the flat, such was my desperation to get out and on my way to school. This enthusiasm was rapidly replaced by the boring daily routine of waiting for the clock to hit 3:30. I experienced a similar naïve enthusiasm when I

began high school. I imagined I'd be taught amazing things; I imagined that I would be very engaged. I'm not sure where that assumption originated. Teachers at primary school had warned us that high school was serious and hard work, (as high school teachers also did when the transition from high school to university was about to be made). I think this inspired me rather than worrying me. At home I watched 'Welcome Back Kotter', Kotter was always fair; he treated the kids with respect as they generally did him. I think I thought I would be treated like an adult at high school, or at least that there would be some level of mutual respect, I thought we wouldn't be regarded as kids any more, that conversations would be less about what to do, as in, 'do this now', but more part of a discovery, a journey. I thought we'd work on projects, I think I thought I'd be 'professional', serious in my uniform, carrying heavy books and big folders, no more colouring in and animals on the front of my exercise books. I thought I'd be treated grown up.

I liked the smell of school, the corridors in the morning; I liked the institution 'feel' of the place, similar to what now draws me to Melbourne University. So I must have an innate desire or drive to learn, and no matter how mightily it has been quashed by boredom and unsuited teaching it is still there and the same thing attracts me as before; an idea that, through being taught, I will capture the 'something more' that is out there.

So, in a way I feel like I didn't learn anything of consequence at high school other than the obvious reading, writing and basic maths skills. Obviously these are the fundamental imperatives of teaching, the 'well at least she can read, write etc', however I can't help but wonder if my mum or grandma could not have taught me these. When I talk about reading, writing and maths I am really talking about them as 'technical' skills, I certainly do not refer to having learnt the 'art' of reading or writing. Therefore I am *able* to read, write and do basic maths, but I don't believe I was ever taught *how* to read in an analytic sense, or how to write creatively and I certainly have no concept of how to tap into the magic of maths.

And so to list the good memories; I think my drama class stands out. My initial reaction is that I didn't really learn anything in drama, I just had fun, but perhaps the word 'fun' is a key to what quality teaching is about, or at least an aspect of it. We played games - improvising, trust exercises; we wrote scripts; we performed. It was the only subject I loved and the reason I changed schools in year 11 – in order to pursue a more serious drama curriculum. So did it teach me anything?? In a broad sense, 'yes'. I don't think I learnt much about deciphering scripts or specific tools for getting into character, but on a personal level I learnt about stepping out of the mould, stepping into another skin, I learnt about feeling shy in front of people and yet wanting to perform regardless, and so I learnt about accomplishment and challenge. I learnt that I could be good at something that was solely my own creation, that I could make people laugh, and that I could be an alternative character to the average fifteen year old school girl I had become. I was proud of myself. And I remember my teacher; Ms Handoyo treated me like I was something special and only told me off when I was being 'childish'.

I am now 29 years old and have spent six years in tertiary education, a degree in sociology and a diploma in photography, high school was twelve years ago. What is this memory I have created, what has it been moulded by? I wonder about the general 'bad rap' that teachers and schools get; have I simply tapped

into that negativity and reminisced my experience of school within those narrow parameters? Is it perhaps more possible that, having my high expectations of both primary and high school dashed within days of enrolling I naively accepted the general mood that surrounded me and appropriated this view of education that it is something to grudgingly accept and simply 'get through'? I never imagined my teachers were attracted with passion to the profession and so I didn't allow myself to see them that way or experience them that way, to tap into their enthusiasm. Such an overwhelming thing, in high school especially is all the social stuff that goes on. Adolescence is a time when the image of self is supreme, and no one would sacrifice their well ordered identity by stepping out and approaching a teacher, not for help or advice, never for some sort of mutual connection, (let's not even speak of friendship.)

And so there are many factors that have (or haven't) affected my education and my memories of my education. Some are personal, some universal, some are imagined, and some, perhaps, true. It is however useful noting that much of my experience of education comes from my *idea* of education, and this is something deeply ingrained, it has a lot to do with my expectations, which, in turn, are effected by a range of perspectives; my parents', the medias', my peers', (and their parents' etc.) – and all of this too has a history, one that has built up over a long time.

- January 2003

This piece was written as an experiment; I wanted to document my thoughts and history so that I could chart their development over the year of the Diploma of Education. At the end of the course my ideas had shifted, they were more focused and more scathing.

VISION 2

life should be easy
it is school that makes it hard
it seems to me we start life and everything's
as it is
we learn without effort
we wonder
and we work it out
our learning is incidental
it runs parallel to living

and then along comes school
inhabiting the entire horizon
and funny that such a big space,
with so many hallways and corridors and outdoor spaces
has no room for wondering

suddenly we are told that everything we don't know
is everything that we should know
and our natural inquisitiveness
is blunted

our curiosity is maimed and withers
it becomes dried out
almost weightless
swept to the corner with the fluff and the chalk dust

we begin to frown
the environment, words and atmosphere
are so difficult to comprehend
who created these walls
 these words
 these tasks
where is my mother
 who laughs and
 cajoles, who
 explains in soft tones
 with her hand on my shoulder

they say school prepares us for the real world
but I can't help but wonder
does not school destroy the real world
does it not imprison the wondrous child
for 13 years
at the termination of which time
she/he is deposited back into the world,
a world where the inhabitants are also products of education
they too have served their long and arduous apprenticeship and are now
nothing more than 'masters in persistence' (see Down, 1989)
these are our fellow citizens
the world that surrounds them,
and now us, the architecture,
the ways of being, the very atmosphere
has all been created by the 'schooled mind'

it is the world of the dispossessed

what if we'd been left to roam free
what would the 'real' world be like then

without the hierarchy of the education system
what might the status of hierarchies be outside of school

without the institutionalisation of knowledge
what might the status of knowledge be

without assuming each child to be as a computer,
each lesson merely a transferral of information,
(equivalent to a simple software installation)
what then might our perception of learning and the mind be

might hierarchies be something

These sentiments exude heavy daubs of black and white. They speak of anger and an evangelist's vision. There is railing and cursing against 'the system', but where does this anger stem from? Is it perhaps an expression of grief about my own education?

VISION 3

What deaths occur to you in childhood?

What is hidden from you?

denied you?

What is chastised?

frowned upon?

Are there mountains you drove past everyday and never explored?

Are there books full of art on the highest shelf?

Are there stories and experiences that lie locked in the minds of your parents and grandparents?

Are there 'good pencils', too good to waste on the creations of children?

And all those skills and quirky abilities that no one ever shows you the secret of, like magic tricks that have you spell bound, that keep you only ever wondering 'how?' and nothing to give to *your* children.

I speak of a stuntedness. This vision is an expression of grief, or lost potential. Research is about passion for a subject and this passion comes from many places, it is the prime motivator. However, if this passion goes unchecked it can hide from us the 'shades of grey' that any meaningful research must include. It is important that these passions, griefs and beliefs are confronted.

My reading on research (Richardson, 1997 & 2003; Atkinson, 2003; Bamford, 2003; Krieger, 1991) gave me insights into the vacillating and multilayered nature of research.

"Stronach and Maclure (1997:98) paint a picture of the [researcher as a] 'responsible anarchist...standing against the fantasies of grand narratives, recoverable pasts, and predictable futures,' and Lather (1996:6) proposes a view of research as a way of being at risk. Rorty (1989) describes postmodern texts as 'writing that refuses to tidy up.'" (Atkinson:2003:39)

Atkinson argues that, "postmodernism is not a research method; it is more like a prism which refracts multiple images of 'reality,' reflects complexity, and fractures certainty." Richardson supports this view when she describes the notion of 'crystallization' as "deconstructing the traditional idea of validity (we feel how there is no single truth, we see how texts validate themselves)." (in Taylor:1996:44)

I saw how the sort of passion expressed in 'Vision 3' can hinder and limit the opportunity for research to be multifaceted, profound and significant.

Anne Bamford's article entitled, 'Form: An Alternative to Validity in Qualitative, Art-Based Research' (2003) elicited in me the following response, a poem that is a condensation of my understanding of the postmodern approach to research.

VISION 4

research needs to be fluid
research will sometimes suggest and sometimes absorb
it can only adhere to broad methodologies
it can not develop sequentially

there is no guide
becoming blind to the formula enables
the magic
the bigness
the 'more-than-the-sum-of-its-partsness'
to occur

it will create itself
it will become what it will become
the end will come at completion and there will not be an answer

[in pushing you destroy
in filling in you destroy
in filling out you destroy

only in imagination you create]

there can be no prescription

the pen will write
the hand will follow
the brain will read
the soul will touch it, sometimes

there will be no knowing
only rough connections

research is *only* creative
there is no truth
in research it is all 'reading' and 'sensing'

research is creation
like a painter takes from a scene and creates a landscape,
like a painter views the images in her mind
and creates an abstraction
so too the researcher takes from the pool of her observances
organises what her senses have experienced and creates a collage of these
moments
moments which at twilight/midday, when it's windy or rainy
would appear totally different (see Cassirer in Bamford, 2003)

I had started to create my 'toolbox' (Atkinson, 2003) for approaching my research. At this stage I was still unsure as to what it was that I would be researching. I knew I was interested in how people learn through art but it was no more developed than that. I was ready to go forward but a startling surprise awaited me. I sat and wondered about *who* I saw myself as, as a researcher. And I saw a woman, me, alone in a motel, in some small, dry country town. My imagined brief was to research the art program at the local school. This underdeveloped and separate vision of my self turned out to be one of the most illuminating of all.

VISION 5: ROMANTIC VISION OF THE WOMAN AT THE MOTEL

ACT ONE: FANTASY

a low counter top
faux wood laminex
bare except for
kettle
toaster
and a small wicker bowl that holds
tea bags and coffee sachets

an open laptop and dictaphone sit on a chair
and notebook too
(only its first page
is marked)

I'm
lying flat
my arms rest
on top of the sheet
beside my body

the fan above my head is still

there is only
the sound
of the clock
softly ticking

rising
an angle of morning sun
cuts geometry on the
bare wall

the day ahead is unknown
observances
quiet essence

-

in white and blue I sit
recording and
writing

my mouth is closed
I am unseen
there are no ripples of my presence

[In writing this piece I began to see the solitary and concrete nature of the character I imagined myself to be. I saw no other alternative but to confront what I had created.]

ACT TWO: CRITIQUE/DREAM

At this point I face the vision; I disturb the quiescence and create a ripple. My position in the corner of the classroom is unsettled. I can see my shell fragment.

The research process will be a series of moments, strung together by the precarious but unifying factor of my presence. My presence will engage with each moment; solely by 'being there' my presence will have an impact. From now I will witness the 'disquieting' of my self-image as a researcher, I will imagine different roles and moods and ways of being for myself. I will speak with this image and ask of it why it whispers in the corners and lies still in bed. I will help it speak and stand.

[The final act is a dream, a dream of the magic that can occur if it is made welcome, of how openness propagates openness.]

ACT THREE: MAGIC

walking across the motel car park at 4:30
I carry a bag of groceries
a cat sits on the gravel
I walk towards it and pat it
we walk beside each other to the door
I turn the key and push
the cat nudges the door
and walks in
I take off my shoes and
switch on the kettle
I unpack my bags
and settle
the cat sits on the bed
and watches

each day at the school
something happens

sometimes I take notes
sometimes I play
I speak

each afternoon I return to
the motel room
I have come to share
with the cat
it has slept on the pillow
it has scratched the carpet
it licks water from the shower recess

one morning I wake to find it
attached to the flyscreen
splayed across it
attached by its claws
it reminds me of a fruit bat
and casts a shadow on the bedspread

on the last afternoon
I cross the car park
and find the cat
sitting on the window sill
inside
between the blinds and the window pane
I unlock the door
and the cat jumps from the sill
and walks past me
outside

The cat represents the unknown and the uncontrollable; it also represents the freeing up of me. I allow the cat to be, as I hope I will allow the students I observe to be. My supervisor and I laughed when we read this poem. It was after this that my supervisor asked what it would be like if I 'joined the party'. If, instead of 'standing on the outside looking in', I became *part* of the research. I had known it all along, that this was where I was heading, but I was terrified. Involving my self in the research surely required that I become a teacher, that I *teach* 'through the language of art'. I had taught before, 75 classes over 3 teaching rounds during the Diploma of Education. They were not, in my opinion, successful.

VISION 6: JOURNAL ENTRY

I don't think it was in my first class that I became 'one of them', [a 'teacher' teacher] but by the end of the third round I certainly was. I just wanted to get through the lessons, I resorted to detention, moving kids around, teaching from the text book, *explaining* things to death; I taught subjects I wasn't passionate about and stood before them empty. My beliefs stayed strong but *who was I?* I am aware that you can't judge a teacher by their performance on teaching rounds but I know enough about myself outside of rounds to see that I will not

become the teacher I want to be just by having my own class. I *like* to explain, I like to show that I know: I like to control, this is a very problematic persuasion for a teacher to come from. Some may say that teaching, therefore, is the perfect profession for me, I flatly disagree. I want to become a *quiet leader*, I want to let go of that control and stay strong.

I was passionately aware of what I didn't want to be but I didn't know why I couldn't bridge the gap to becoming my 'dream' teacher.

VISION 7: TEACHER DREAMING

this poem is about a dream
it is uncomfortable
it is a place I've never been before
and this blank page is the place that I will see it

me as a teacher
I can only hear the old phrases
I am not comfortable
I have nothing to say
I don't want this responsibility
I have nothing to teach

[this is going nowhere]
perhaps I can dream of the ideal
fantasy
there's me with the kids
they're busy
I'm busy

[it's all about speaking and I don't have the words]
I don't have the words to encourage
[a feeling of tears]
or to open up their minds or to jolly them along, I don't have the depth
the knowing, - where they're coming from, what they need
I don't know what to do
how would I start
this is not me
I don't want to take control

[but why, when in other parts of my life I am controlling]
I am confident
why am I able to give my opinion left, right and centre
I know my controlling aspect is not helpful in this situation
but I have no other script
no other place to be

[did the dip ed teach me nothing?]
just the theories

just knowing that the teacher I am is wrong
but I don't know how to get to the one I'd like to be
or the one I'd like to have teach me

VISION 8

I was feeling lost, I was feeling untalented
I felt like I didn't want to teach
but I felt that 'just researching' was a cop out
I wondered if that is why I had chosen to do the masters, to cop/drop out
(again)
I was unsure about what I was thinking
I was confused
I felt my only way forward was to read a bit, watch a few videos
I was depressed
I watched one video about star educator Jane Sapp and I was even more
depressed
she has it all, even 'charisma' (it is noted on the back cover)

I felt like just raising my own kids
none of this responsibility for social change

and then I heard a friend's baby screaming over the phone
and wondered what I would have to teach even my own kids (!!!)

VISION 9

I have such high expectations of myself as a teacher
because I have such high expectations of my teachers,
I expect to be lead,
I expect them to know
I expect *too* much

having only ever had one good teacher
I compare myself to her but I don't even know how she does it
how she is so quick and so understanding of what people are really saying
how she can transform and reinterpret their words so quickly
how her responses are so spot on, so enriching, she shows such understanding

if I were to be a teacher that's the one I would want to be
but I have sat back and hated my teachers, been so bored by them for so many
years
I have opted out of their classroom time and time again, and just mumbled
along
and now, as I consider myself in this same role I am confronted by the
distance I feel between myself and them
it is as if I was challenging them to approach me in my surliness and laissez
faire attitude

and they never took up that challenge,
now I have to bridge the gap,
walk the distance between myself and them,
because that 'them' is soon to be me
I'm the one who has to approach them

draw nearer and turn back around and face myself,
the critical child
who is bored and surly and has no plans to listen or be engaged
only to argue and dismiss
who just wants to be left on her own, to potter and make a pretty picture,
something everyone, maybe even the teacher, can go oooh and aaaah over
when it's finished
something separate from them, that comes from nowhere but me,
that does not reflect anything of them, because
I can do it on my own
WITHOUT ANYONE

go with the flow
I have to let others do their own thing,
I have to be humble and open myself up to
others' ways
and be fascinated by the 'outside' of
me
(what goes on in that uncontrollable world?)
it is about being open, not resisting others and their input and energy and ideas,
not talking-a-hundred-miles-a-minute in dogmatic statements that disallow
another's input
it's about asking, what do you think?
about letting others enter

VISION 10: JOURNAL ENTRY

[My vision now is of myself as] someone who listens more than she talks, who provides what students want rather than what she perceives they need, someone who creates a space of camaraderie, confidence and challenge, but who does not hold *ownership* of that space. I want to be a *creative* educator/researcher; I want to make teaching/researching my art. It is about finding my way to 'practicing what I preach,' *doing* what I believe.

These visions had brought me to a very different place from the one I had started at. This internal churning had brought about an evolution in my relationship to myself as a teacher and as a researcher. But questions had grown out of these visions, questions that I decided to ask of a source outside of myself. The following is a description and discussion of an interview I conducted with a teacher ('D') who works in the field of teaching students to become teachers.

INTERVIEW

INTRODUCING THE INTERVIEW:

I was taught by 'D' over the course of the one year Diploma of Education, learning to teach. My experience of her classes was unlike any I had had before. I was happy to be there. Time flew when I was in her class, in that place I was *present*, not daydreaming of the day before or planning the evening ahead.

I was 'there'

PRESENT

2.15 to 5.15

just went

they say that when you think in the right hemisphere of the brain you lose track of time, it is the artful way of thinking

it is imaginative

and subjective

nonlinear and

holistic (see Edwards, 1989)

It was this that was going on for me. I could *feel* the learning happening.

cogs turning

ideas shifting

lights going on

illumination of patches of dark

not so that I could see *into* the patches of dark

but so that I could see that there *are* patches of dark

(and wonder about them)

realising that teaching is

anti-formulaic

anti hierarchical

and art

?

?

?

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To see teaching as art,

- an expression of self;

- a performance 'readable' in a multitude of ways;

- a moment in time like no other with all the freedom and constraints that encompasses;

- a pastiche of:

a. all that's been before, and

b. future visions, a *contemporary culmination*, coloured by the people of the classroom (the teachers/students), each brandishing their paintbrush, their voice, their crayon, chisel or needle and thread, or their eyes and hands, or even their silence.

Each writing/drawing/thinking/feeling their way into (or out of) the room.

This for me constitutes teaching as art. I consider D an artistic teacher.

I believe now that for teaching to 'work' or for learning to happen, formulas and hierarchies must be confronted. I believe formulas and hierarchies keep us all safe, they are life jackets. But in order to <i>understand</i> we must first <i>sink</i> . It is out of the chaos and confusion that understanding is created.

?
?
?

I was intrigued by the level of engagement D elicits in her students, or more particularly, elicited in me. I wondered at what was going on and how I could glean aspects of her practice to incorporate into my own.

Over the course of perhaps two months I collected a number of thoughts, ideas and questions, these were things I wondered at in regards to education. They were not the most important or pertinent things I could think of, but rather moments of puzzlement indicated by a frown or a sense of ‘but how?’, these were the signposts to the direction the interview would take.

D and I spoke for an hour and a half, at the end of which I was overwhelmed by words and stories. I slept and in the morning woke with a few words running through my head; these were the ‘emergent themes’. Just like the moments of puzzlement, I now had in my mind the moments (or notions) that I felt connected to, they spoke to me. I wanted to collect them, to place them consciously in a metaphorical ‘toolbox’. (Atkinson, 2003)

I believe that there are no rules for ‘how to be a teacher’; no textbook could ever tell you how. However, I know that for me, to participate and act to my potential I do well if I have catchphrases or guidelines, ‘tools’ if you will that I can call upon when I am planning, when I am stuck, tools to inform the way I behave, the way I ‘be’. These then are the six tools I attained from my interview with D. They are written as my reaction to the emergent themes with D’s comments as the exemplifiers, the elucidators. [D’s comments are in “”]. [For full text see appendix.]

NOTES ON THE INTERVIEW:

**“The people we study largely escape our descriptions of them,
the stories we write are always ours more than theirs.”
Krieger:1991:153**

THEMES:

1. The Construction of the Student/Teacher Relationship
2. Presence
3. Whose Power?
4. Open Talk in the Classroom
5. Teaching as Performance
6. ‘Teaching to Look After the Child I Was’

1. CONSTRUCTION OF THE STUDENT/TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

“30 students

you’ll have 30 teaching and learning relationships going on
at the same time

how they are constructed

is up to them”

As the teacher constructs her/his relationship with the student so too the student constructs his/her with the teacher. The most wonderful teacher in the world may still be considered woeful by one student. A class is made up of individuals. Each relationship is separate from the rest, it is its own. As a teacher I can never claim ‘to know’ what is going on for my students, I can ask, but I may not be answered, if I am answered it may not be ‘the truth.’ I may not understand the answer, I might *think* I understand but I may not. This is something to be mindful of. How do I know I know my students; I can’t. As a teacher I will make judgements, absolutely, these judgements will be as much about me as they are about them; at any moment I may be wrong. This is nothing to fear, it is, only something to be mindful of. Decisions are constantly being made about ‘what is best;’ what is decided will only ever be what I *think* is best, it is the best I can do, and it is fine. [I put this ‘fine’ bit in to soothe those who fret about ‘not knowing’, who are reading this thinking I am speaking of doom and gloom. Quite the contrary in fact, I speak of ‘not knowing’ as a kind of freedom, the freedom to *not get it right*, only to *try* to get it right.]

2. PRESENCE:

This theme continues on from the previous one: the construction of the teacher/student-student/teacher relationship. Here am I, the teacher, and who are these people before me? This theme speaks quite literally of the *presence* of students within the class, their bodies are before us, but where are their minds and souls, and if their minds and souls are in fact there before us then which particular bit of themselves are they presenting? As a teacher I assume that I am in a room of learners but how can I tell if students have chosen to *be learners* that day, perhaps there is not even one in the class who is operating in that mode. And what then? When I classify students as learners I think I am less likely to appreciate their diversity, to experience them as individuals, to negotiate each relationship separately. I want to be mindful of the notion that each person within the classroom is a person first, a ‘role’ second. I think relating to students as ‘only learners’ overlooks a wide and provocative range of experiences for both the teacher and the student.

3. WHOSE POWER:

“I want them to make their presence felt, to *feel* that it’s there.”

Where is power located within the classroom? Who holds the reins? I want to *empower* my students but how do I ‘give’ power to them? I think this is one of the most interesting discussions to have in regards to education, and it underpins much of what D talks about. D actively tries to step away from the powerful position within the classroom, she won’t tell people they are wrong, she will not be the one who

decides who is right and who is wrong, she does not discipline people; she plays the game from a different angle. [This is noted as much from the interview as from observations in her classroom.] The following perhaps best illustrates this point:

“I used to talk to my kids, and there were times when perhaps they were doing very little work, and just hanging out, just hanging out and I remember saying to them once, ‘I’m not going to be pushed into being a policeperson and have to tell you what to do, that you must get on with your work and I’ve asked you why you’re choosing this now and you can choose to do other work, change it, create it, construct it any way you like.’ ...Little kids, they have the power to shape what’s going on. ‘I’m not going to be that sort of teacher. So once you’re ready for us to have a different sort of relationship let me know and until then I’m backing out of this relationship. I’m leaving you on your own looking for a police person.’”

It is about believing in the inherent power of all, allowing them to step up and take the power that is there, creating the space to do that, calling them on their use, misuse or unawareness of their inherent power. I may have the role of teacher but I am no more powerful than any one else in the class, unless I believe that, I put myself on a pedestal and lose the chance to connect, I disempower. Most teachers want to empower their students but they do not seem to be willing to enact that belief, to truly give up the benefits of power: the detentions, the ‘sssh’, the delegating right and wrong, the insistence on students putting up their hand before speaking, etc.

4. OPEN TALK IN THE CLASSROOM:

D tells a story about a class she took on excursion to the city cemetery. During the excursion a number of students expressed prejudiced sentiments when confronted by graves of people from particular religious backgrounds. Sentiments such as,

“Well, you can see they’ve got money, look at the marble, this would *have* to be the Jewish section.”

“Oh you can tell these Catholics have got money.”

Or the reaction of one student upon seeing a photograph of a child who had died of encephalitis:

“God, if that was my kid I wouldn’t put the photo on the grave.” When confronted, the student reacted, “But she’s not normal, it’s not normal.”

D’s reaction, rather than to instantly challenge these students, was to use these sentiments as openings for discussion. She did not take the moral high ground and ‘correct’ the students but instead ‘kept her cool’ and asked questions such as, in relation to the remark made about the Jewish gravesites,

“Well it could be that they’re wealthy, what other reading might you have of this?”

Or in relation to the comment about the unacceptability of ‘abnormality’:

“Well what would your reading of normal be, which one of us here is normal?”

In other instances D kept quiet and allowed others in the class to respond:

“This child is, every child is beautiful, every single human being is beautiful.”

An Italian man responded to the comments made about the Catholic gravesites:

“This is a mark of respect, these people have saved all the money from their whole lives, my Nonna does this.”

This story highlights the way in which often so much of what is said in the classroom is what is considered ‘ok to be said’. As teachers and as students we know the script, we know what sounds right and what sounds wrong; but where then is the learning? Some of the sentiments expressed in the story above are obnoxious but these sentiments do exist. Is it not better to hear them and react to them than to stay in our comfortable, homogeneous environment where everyone knows the rules and only those who know they think the ‘right’ things speak? D’s technique of ‘not reacting’ is key to these exchanges, students seem to know that they will be listened to, they see that no one in the class has been chastised for their beliefs and that there is ‘space’ for them to put their thoughts out there. The role of the teacher is about ‘holding back’, as D says:

“There’s always holding back, there’s always holding back. I have a permanent groove on my tongue from biting it.”

5. TEACHING IS A PERFORMANCE:

And as with any stage play each performance is different.

“It is creative, it’s about having a sensitivity to what’s going on and reading what’s there and being aware of it. It’s very fragile.”

As a creative act teaching is not something I can plan, each moment will inform the next, it is dynamic and vital. A teacher’s role is one of the improviser; forever constructing their teaching, similar to the way in which students’ learning is a construction. (see Vygotsky)

6. ‘I’M IN TEACHING TO LOOK AFTER THE CHILD I WAS’

“I think teaching, I don’t think it’s got to do with anyone else, I think it’s something to do with yourself. I have this thing, ‘I’m in teaching to look after the child I was.’”

As evidenced by my poetry and journal writings I empathise with this view of teaching, to be in it to somehow regain the losses or satisfy the child I was back in primary school, or the teenager at high school.

The connection between ourselves as a teacher and ourselves as a student is always strong, and is made ever stronger by our acknowledgement of it. When I am being nasty to a student, who am I really being nasty to? What draws me to teaching and this endeavour to understand its underbelly? Is it not always an attempt to develop self awareness, to inform self knowledge?

OUTCOMES:

At the closing of this narrative I will take a moment to reflect on this piece as a whole, a moment to reflect on the story that has been constructed here.

VISION 11: THE METAPHOR OF JOURNEY: CONCLUSION

Reconstruct, by way of language, what you have come to know, think, and feel. Allow...yourself to experience research as a process of becoming, to experience the daily changes which arise in your thinking and understanding. Changes, which in and of themselves, often move in circular ways. Changes which turn in upon themselves – changes which repeat.
(Hesford in Ely:1991:222)

This report is a travelogue of a journey, the journey as I have made sense of it so far. It is not a conventional journey though, not one that has a distinct beginning and an approaching ending. It is more circular, circles upon circles – it continues around and around, revisiting. Sometimes the momentum is in a forward motion, sometimes backward – each movement though is a layer over what has happened before, what has already been felt/expressed/realised/wondered at. And the circle is nowhere ‘out there’; it is I. It is inescapable. But, although it is I, I can step off. I can step off onto smaller circles. These circles exist in orbit of me, they exist *because* of the larger sphere, but they are separate. I can move ‘outside of myself’ and look back (and notice). I approach my future research with this metaphor in mind, knowing that I will return. I know that the strands of my identity run parallel in this circle; they cross often, and now after confronting these visions there is a deepening of the connections between my researcher, teacher and personal identities. Each strand, each circle, speaks for and of the other.

This research has propagated numerous questions, such as: What impact will these insights have on my teaching and research practice? What alternate stories lie unseen in my mind, what contribution could they make? How can I develop my use of these methodologies to improve the viability and audience’s engagement with my writing?

POSTSCRIPT

The journey from this point is towards teaching a class of my own. I have recently signed a contract to teach a class in ‘Creativity and Photography’ at a local

neighbourhood centre. I will take all I have learned in this exercise of self reflection and channel it into becoming an aware and effective teacher. Research will again run parallel to this experience, documenting and informing the journey.

The following is the blurb for the program:

“As a student of ‘Creativity and Photography’ you will be given the experience of *engaging with your creative self*. Students will learn through a variety of mediums, including drawing, writing, music, group discussion, personal reflection, and engagement with the world that surrounds them. The class will focus specifically on ‘perception’ – how we see our world, and ‘vision’ – how we create our world. Students will be taught the technical aspects of photography in order to bring their ‘vision’ to life.”

Reflecting on these words I can see the meshing of the three strands of my identity: the personal, teacher and researcher. My opportunity here is to be an *artistic teacher* as well as to teach about creativity, to give the students the space to play and make art. As visions have informed this report I envisage talking with students about their visions and giving them chances to imagine, see and ‘bring their visions to life’.

EVALUATION:

**“All of us...lead storied lives on storied landscapes.”
(Clandinnin:2000:8)**

**“Teachers are best placed to tell their own stories,...
these stories are in fact the life blood of...teaching, its moral foundation.”
(Woods:1996:13)**

This story, like any other, is a creation. It is not the only story that could have been told, there are others, known and unknown. But it is this story, justified or not, that *has* been told. It is the one that was chosen. And this choice is as far and as close as I could get. It is my art.

A work of art is a transmutation of personal feelings and imagery into a unique sensible form, an objectification of the subjective. Objects of art...articulate and present ‘ideas of feelings’ for our contemplation. (Langer in Barone:2000:85)

Unlike a scientific report, if I were to live this or write this all over again it would be entirely different. (Next time will be different as each moment must be. How can one write again what’s already been said?) This report is in and of the moment. It is unique. To paraphrase Laurel Richardson: I have a ‘deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of this topic. I know more and doubt what I know’. (in Taylor:1996:44) And yet it is still powerful. It has been an evocative experience for me and in making it public there is the hope that it will resonate for others, swim, parallel to their experience and perhaps, touch it.

Finally, a note on autoethnography: it is a powerful tool. When used with honesty and courage it can intensify and extend one's research and simultaneously illuminate aspects of self that were hitherto dormant, unrecognised or ignored. In regard to this report, autoethnography as a methodology has been particularly helpful in tracing the links between the research project and my researcher identity. However, it has not been a journey without challenges. This type of methodology constantly calls into question one's integrity. I am constantly asking myself, 'is that right, do I really believe that, did I feel that?' The answer to these questions is found in living through the emotions and revisiting them. This has been as much an emotional enterprise as an intellectual one, my investment is considerably more than with a 'conventional' report. It is 'me' on the line here, and it is at once uncomfortable, affirming, precarious and educational.

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