

The Implications of Childhood Divorce on the Teaching Practices and Perspectives of a  
Substitute Teacher: a Self-study

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## **Abstract**

This self-study examines the personal and professional implications of being raised in a single-parent household as a result of parental separation. Specifically, the research seeks to identify the personal and professional implications of being raised under such circumstances and the impact they might have on the researcher's practices and perspectives as a present day substitute teacher. Data was gathered using two sets of journal entries, one taking the form of a memoir and the other post-teaching field notes. Using these data sources, a number of key themes were identified, including valuing and supporting reading and writing, active identification with particular students, gravitating toward challenging students, and engaging with extended literacies. The overwhelming conclusion, supported by a review of current literature as well as the experiences documented in the included journal entries, is that, though there are clear and identifiable points of connection between the researchers past experiences and present practices and outlook, students should be addressed and educated as individuals without the bonds of stereotype and preconception based on household type.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Statement of the Problem**

Darius (all names are pseudonyms) sat in the back of the class with his head down, his eleven year old feet kicking the legs of his desk. His homeroom teacher, Mrs. Simmons, stood at the front of the class, hovering over an overhead projector, writing carefully on a laminate. She was delivering a lesson on grammar and using an error-ridden model as an example. On the screen behind her, the other students looked on as she added a comma and a period to the middle sentence.

“Very good, Sarah,” she said approvingly to the girl who had volunteered the last answer. “Who can find another correction?”

The usual co-teacher, Mrs. Drake, was absent that day, and I was filling in as her substitute. Mrs. Simmons had asked me to tour the room and support students who needed extra help. Most of the children seemed to be handling the lesson well, but not Darius. He had been a challenge all day, disrupting class by shouting out and picking on students close to him. It was apparent that he was struggling, so I knelt down to offer some extra help.

“Why don't you try to find a correction? I bet Mrs. Simmons would be impressed,” I prompted in an encouraging voice. He loudly kicked the leg of his desk, causing the teacher to pause and motion for me to move away. As the newcomer, I deferred to her judgment but made a mental note to talk to her after class.

She told me that Darius was troubled. “He has a lot going on at home,” she shared. “Mom left and is living down the street with her boyfriend. She seems him every day but doesn't want anything to do with him. Dad is at work most of the time, even though he seems to care. [Darius] spends most of his day with his grandmother. He has issues like this every day. Most of the time it's best just to let him be.”

Though I was troubled at Darius' marginalization, I decided to dig deeper. I asked Mrs. Simmons how he was progressing academically. She shared that he routinely performed below grade level standards, especially in reading and writing. Most of the time, Darius refused to do either leading her to feel lucky when he tried at all. I asked about his motivations, if he checked out books from the library, drew pictures, or wrote in his journal. Each of these was met with the same answer: only when adults prompted him or threatened him with punishment for not completing his schoolwork.

The next day was my last with Mrs. Simmons and Darius. As we broke into small groups for reading, she pulled me to the side and reminded me not to count on him. His participation was unlikely and if he became disruptive I was to send him away to sit by a locker. As we read *Anne of Green Gables*, Darius acted out but revealed much as he did so (Montgomery, 1976).

“That's lies,” he said interrupting a scene with Anne and her family. As the other students turned to look at him, he bristled and slammed his book shut. “I'm not reading anymore,” he said turning away. “It's stupid.”

The next year, I had the opportunity to teach Darius again. This time, as I recalled Mrs. Simmon's admonition, the palpable lack of faith in his potential as a literacy learner, I smiled to myself as he buried his nose in *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* upon a scribble and doodle-marked notebook (Kinney, 2007).

Though our upbringings were vastly different, I identified with Darius. Like him, my childhood home was one of separation and single-parenthood, shuttling between two households and two sets of expectations. I too was raised in part by a paternal grandmother. Like Darius, I felt marginalized by my teachers. I couldn't fathom that they really understood me. During reading, I was ushered off into a Banana Splits club for children of divorce, a place where instead of reading and writing we talked about our feelings and what we felt about our parents. I resented being there.

Yet for all of the ways in which Darius' path aligned with my own, they were also quite different. My mother wanted a relationship with me, and I stayed with her every other weekend before being uprooted in the summers. My mother and father each dated and had second children. For whatever my father lacked in time as a working parent, my grandmother made up for. She was the town librarian and helped me to develop a love of reading and writing. My family supported literacy and I swam in its deep waters, reading new books and writing short stories, both finding and forging gateways to places I could only imagine.

My path is not typical, but nor is it atypical. As a substitute teacher, I travel between dozens of classrooms a month, seeing students from every walk of life. No child

of divorce is like another; they are as unique and varied as students from two-parent households (Pong, Dronkers & Hampden-Thompson, 2003). What unifies them is that they *are* children of separated homes. They face challenges other students do not and, in many ways, are called to overcome.

This poses a problem for classroom teachers. As the rates of divorce increase, the prevalence of these students will also rise ("Marriages and divorces," 2012). The variety of backgrounds and behavioral issues, or lack thereof, in this population can make it hard for teachers to accurately anticipate their needs. Many, such as Mrs. Simmons, fall back on negative stereotypes and unintentionally marginalize these students by holding lowered expectations of their academic potential. As my own history shows, a child living through divorce is not easily classified, but is often stereotyped. As educators, the impetus is upon us to accurately diagnose and meet the needs of every student, even if they are exacerbated by household turmoil and emotional upheaval.

### **Significance of the Problem**

Divorce is on the rise in the United States. According to the 2012 national census, nearly half of all marriages end in divorce ("Marriages and divorces," 2012). Although the implications of this statistic are troubling enough for school-age children, it does not capture the full scope of the issue. While examining divorce rates begins to paint a picture of the amount of fragmentation in America's families, it does not include unmarried single-parent households or those fractured as a result of separation. Taken in

context, the amount of students progressing through the education system in separated, divorced, or step-parent families is higher than might be expected.

All across the country, teachers are being faced with students like Darius. Research has shown that students in single-parent homes are more likely to lag behind their two-parent peers academically (Amato & Keith, 1991; Pong, Dronkers & Hampden-Thompson, 2003). Many teachers understand from first-hand experience the challenges these students face. Still others are unfamiliar and see these students by stereotype: troubled, unattended, and unsupported. They are unaware that the impact of separation can be mitigated through family literacy support and home-school connection programs (Pong, 1997; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Another factor that often goes unconsidered is the remaining or burgeoning strengths of families following divorce and separation. It is possible that some families, previously in turmoil, may actually experience more stability following the severing of unhealthy parental relationships.

Now more than ever, it is important that educators understand the academic implications of divorce and separation for their students. Parallel to that, they must also understand that no two students are alike. Students adopt their funds of knowledge through family literacy across family types (Heath, 1983). They draw from their social structures and cultural influences to develop their identities as readers, writers, and people (Compton-Lilly, 2006). These elements are the fluid, dynamic substance of auspicious studentry. Though the rates of divorce and separation are on the rise, our

answer as educators must be all the more informed, responsive, and differentiated in return.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this study was to examine the potential literacy experiences a child of divorce might encounter. As I have already explained, attempting to generalize the experiences of these students is disingenuous at best. Instead, this study documented my experiences as a child growing up in a household of separation. In this way, the work presented here seeks to provide a portrait of a child under such circumstances: the literacy experiences I experienced and the support I received, how family literacy influenced my own, and how living between two sometimes tumultuous households helped and hindered my academic progress. I also examined how such experiences have impacted my perceptions and practices as a teacher today.

The central question driving this study, then, is as follows:

*How have the literacy experiences I experienced through my upbringing in a separated household influenced my teaching philosophies and pedagogical practices with my students?*

This question ties into a number of subareas important to the field of education. One of the most pivotal is family literacy. This is a multi-faceted term that captures far more than it might imply. The first facet includes the direct interactions and support of parents to their children, often in the form of school-driven programs (Handel, 1999). The second describes inter-generational literacy within families, cycles of literate and

illiterate behavior handed down from parent to child. As Paratore describes in her book *Opening Doors, Opening Opportunities: Family Literacy in an Urban Community*, this has been the subject of much debate (2001). Family literacy in the inter-generational sense has repeatedly been tied to cycles of poverty, achievement, and social status; though, noted scholars such as Denny Taylor and Elsa Roberts Auerbach contend that such conclusions are founded in a deficit view of students and families and are therefore fundamentally misguided (Taylor, 1993; Auerbach, 1989). Handel suggests a third facet, which is foundational to this study: literacy interactions which occur naturally within the home (1999). Together, these three elements capture the incredible impact of literacy interactions within the home.

With this in mind, it should come as no surprise the cooperation between the school and home is also important. As the study of family literacy naturally implies, parents and close family members of students play an influential role in their academic achievement. When schools implement programs designed to partner with parents and families, positive results abound (e.g. Epstein, 2005; 2007; 2010; Epstein, Gallindo, & Sheldon, 2011). Using Epstein's six types of parental involvement as a model, teachers and families can cooperate and benefit affected children even in the face of divorce, separation, and step-parentage.

The fragmentation of the family has been shown to negatively impact students' academic achievement but the reasons are varied and the outcomes far from absolute. Research shows that the resources available to the family make a substantial difference

in how students adapt to their changing conditions (Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003; Cooksey, 1997; Parcel & Dufur, 2001). The work of Hanson also draws into question the impact of witnessing pre-separation conflict with mixed findings (1999). It is clear that separation and divorce are by no means solid predictors of how students will perform, but instead represent risk factors and important considerations for classroom teachers.

Best practices teaching demands that we understand our students. Before an effective lesson plan can be written, we must understand our students' needs. This is especially true in the field of literacy. When Compton-Lilly advocates for a view of students which incorporates their whole identities rather than just that of the classroom, she is in fact aligning with numerous other researchers who support teaching to students' interests, needs, and curiosities (Compton-Lilly, 2006; Calkins, 1994; Johnson, 2006; Routman, 2003). This truth rings no more true than in Fountas and Pinnell's seminal work, *When Reader's Struggle*, a nationally embraced literacy program based on reactive, differentiated teaching based on the students' unique strengths, needs, and identity as a learner (2010). Carol Lyon's suggestion to engage in meaningful, personalized conversations seems especially meaningful to children of separation and divorce so that these identities can be thoroughly uncovered (Lyons, 2003).

Differentiation is foundational to effective teaching. Exploring the unique personalities of these students is paramount to discovering their unique needs. Some students may enter the classroom from positions of high resources and strong family

support. Others may find themselves wanting, returning home each day with little motivation to pursue literacy. They may act out or be the model student. It is this variety that demands educators avoid stereotyping students. It is not enough to understand the challenges children of divorce face. Educators must seek to understand the children themselves and build strong partnerships with their families.

### **Study Approach**

This study has been conducted in a qualitative self-study format. Current research informs us that self-study is an effective method of improving our teaching practice and growing as professionals (e.g. Loughran & Russell, 2002; Samaras, 2010). As a teacher-researcher, I have examined my own history and how that impacts my theoretical perspectives and pedagogical practices in delivering effective literacy education to elementary age students. This self-exploratory process began with a series of journal entries.

In order to answer my research questions, the journaling practices was highly structured. I began by breaking my approach to producing entries into two specific domains: those related to my own literacy history and those based upon my modern day teaching experiences. My personal history took the form of a memoir. I began by writing about my earliest literacy memory and then moved forward in a series of milestone moments; put another way, I recalled especially meaningful literacy events and described those to the best of my recollection.

Since this study examined the implications of divorce and separation, it was important for me to document the familial and environmental context of my literacy experiences. Due to this, multiple entries focused entirely on context, though they did not make up the majority of those included; however, during the analysis phase, it became clear that the context provided by these recollections was of paramount importance due to the wider implications of household stability on my academic engagement and achievement.

The second category of journal entries were field notes focused on my substitute teaching experiences between the districts of Northville, Midtown, and Weston. After each day of literacy instruction – this was not every day since I only substitute teach two-to-three days a week – I wrote about the teaching practices I used, how I approached the teaching encounter, and sought to answer “why” when reflecting on those field notes. I probed into the context of my decision making, using the events of the teaching encounter, as well as my beliefs and perspectives which motivated each teaching choice made. The goal of these entries was to bridge the gap between personal history and current teaching. In an analysis of the data produced by these entries, I identified and categorized five key themes rich with connections to my history as a child of two households.

As an educator, it is important that I alter my teaching practices as a result of self-reflection. Since this study was rooted in such self-exploration, my thought processes and approaches changed over the course of the study. Where once I might have reflected

shallowly on an encounter with a particularly challenging student, by the end of the data gathering process, I was reflecting deeply on my interactions and how I identified with their him. My evolving thought processes are documented extensively in the post-teaching field notes.

The production of field notes also included gathering other forms of data. Context is pivotally important when considering teaching practices, perspectives, and beliefs, and proved to be monumental in the teaching encounters being documented. Seeing this, I endeavored to capture as much contextual data as possible within the field note format. I included descriptions of classrooms and schools, as well as materials lists, existing behavior management practices, student groupings, and the availability of outside resources. These additional data points drove a number of entries as I reflected upon them, but also allowed me to correlate contextual cues, such as the availability of resources or the presence of a rich classroom library, with my practices and reflections on those days.

Once I had completed the data gathering process, I examined each data source using a constant comparison method (Hubbard & Power, 1999). My goal was to identify common themes and trends in my teaching choices and subsequent reflections and then to categorize them for further analysis. Once this process was been completed, I did so, using my memoir entries as points of comparison and contrast, juxtaposing these data sets to identify points of connection, influence, or relationship. Having completed the analysis, there can be question of the revelatory nature of my findings. My past,

unequivocally, influences my present decision making and sense of identification with certain students.

The post-teaching reflections often discussed how much I seemed to “reach” certain students and before beginning my interpretations of these encounters. In the course of my substitute teaching, I am often made aware of particularly challenging students and those who have troubled home lives before I ever work with them first-hand. While gathering data for this study, I made a point not to inquire on the backgrounds of the students I taught but chose to let that information come naturally, so as to avoid pre-dispositioning myself or being subject to bias; these considerations I deemed important enough to safeguard against to avoid engaging in teaching practices I worried would be “artificial” or otherwise not take place. It is important to note that there were no student participants in this study and no child generated data themselves. Instead, all data was derived from the interactions, the contextual circumstances thereof, and my own interpretations recorded in the field notes.

### **Rationale**

I chose to research this topic through self-study for a number of reasons. The first and most important is that it is appropriate for my position as a teacher-researcher. Currently, and likely throughout the entirety of this study, I will be a substitute teacher operating out of three separate school districts. This position affords me the opportunity to work with a diverse array of students from many home-life circumstances. At the same

time, acting as a substitute teacher makes it unlikely that I will encounter the same students on a reliable basis or that their families will ever come to know me as more than just a name. This poses several challenges for alternative methods of approaching this study, such as acquiring parental consent from enough families to make a participant study an appropriate choice. In its current form, this proposal allows me to connect my own work and history to existing research and then to use that as a point of connection with the students I work with every day.

Current literature embraces self-study as a means of teacher improvement (Samaras, 2010; Loughran & Russell, 2002). Utilizing its practices in this study affords a number of opportunities for growth as both a teacher and teacher-researcher. Self-study is more than just an exercise in reflection and is instead a collective task requiring collaboration with other professionals (Samaras et al., 2007). Collaboration in self-study involves working closely with critical friends – trusted colleagues who support and validate through a co-commitment to shared inquiry – which allows for new perspectives and avenues of thought otherwise unlikely when working independently (Samaras, 2010). Self-study is a form of “situated learning” wherein the teacher-researcher examines his work from the periphery of his reflections and negotiates his way into self- and professional understanding, increasing his effectiveness as a teacher (Samaras, p. 3, 2002). In the context of this study, examining a topic so personal as the impact of divorce and separation, Jeffery Kuzmic's description of self-study teacher-research as the finding of one's professional voice seems especially apt, yet his enthusiastic embrace of advocacy

resonates even more so: self-study is a means of self-exploration, without doubt, but it can also be an empowering tool to advocate for others (Kuzmic, 2002).

Reflective journaling is a natural means of data collection for this study. It allows me to remain contemplative about the impact of single- and step-parent home-life in my own upbringing as I teach. Further, it naturally incentivizes deep reflection after I work with students and iterative, evolving teaching strategies. Through these journal entries, I will be able to consider the connections I'm making with students, how I am addressing their needs through my teaching practices, and what theoretical perspectives I embrace to deliver effective teaching. Just as importantly, reflection encourages changing behavior, trying new things, and ultimately, provides a record of improvement and growth as an educator.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have presented a number of ideas that will support my investigations. Topics such as family literacy and Ruth Handel's three-faceted definition of what it (intergenerational literacy, organized programs, and naturally occurring literacy events within the home) and are foundational (Handel, 1999). Joyce Epstein's work on home-school partnerships support the concept of parents and family members acting as influential contributors to students' funds of knowledge (Epstein, 2007; 2008; 2010; etc.). Gay Su Pinnell and Irene Fountas advocate for differentiated teaching (Pinnell & Fountas, 2010). Before an educator can adequately differentiate, he must first understand the unique needs of his students.

Studies show that these children are more likely to struggle than those in two-parent households (Amato, 1987; Amato & Keith, 1991). Then again, with proper familial support, school partnership, and available resources, the negative academic implications of divorce may be mitigated to inconsequentiality (Pong, 1997; 1998; Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003). There is no “golden rule” for understanding children who have experienced parental separation. They are as wide and varied as any child that enters the classroom.

To conduct this study, I will share my own history as a child of divorce. I will engage in narrative-self-study as described by Anastasia Samaras in *Self-Study for Teacher Educators: Crafting a Pedagogy for Educational Change* (2002). In doing so, I will explore my literacy experiences with a critical friend, engaging his thoughts toward meaningful reflection and improved teaching. I will question my own views and practices within the classroom. I will journal to collect my data. After teaching and interacting with students, I will document my perceptions and practices. I will also converse with the meaningful family members of my upbringing, journaling my reflections with a focus on family literacy and the experiences I engaged with. By gaining an improved understanding of myself, I will be able to meet the needs of my students more than ever before through reactive teaching. Finally, in conducting this study, I hope to provide an example to the education community of one child's navigation of a literate single-parent childhood.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

In order to identify how my literacy experiences have shaped me as a teacher today, I have identified several key themes to guide my research. These themes are: family literacy, the home-school connection, and the academic implications of divorce and separation. Together, these research areas represent what happens at home, what happens between the home and the school, and what happens following the instability of a shift in family structure. In the matter of this study, they are pivotally important in providing the necessary context to understanding my past experiences as well as my present teaching decisions and perspectives on education. As a body of work, the studies included help paint a more reliable picture of family literacy inside and outside of the home.

### **Family Literacy**

#### **Definition**

Family Literacy is a multi-faceted term that simultaneously encompasses multiple ideas: parent involvement programs designed to enable parents and guardians to support their children's literacy development; intergenerational literacy programs wherein the abilities of both parents and children are at the forefront; and the naturally occurring literacy events taking place in the home without any outside intervention or prompting

(Handel, 1999). Each facet of this definition is important and considered within this study.

Emergent Literacy is directly related to Family Literacy. Whitehurst & Lonigan (1998) define Emergent Literacy as the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that precede conventional reading and writing, as well as the environments that support them. Just as importantly, however, the term has also been used to describe “a point of view about the importance of the social interactions in literacy-rich environments for pre-readers” (p. 849). The authors posit that literacy development occurs in a developmental continuum that begins before the onset of formal schooling. The core components of Emergent Literacy are: language, conventions of print, knowledge of letters, linguistic awareness, phoneme-grapheme correspondence, emergent reading and writing, and print motivation (1998). Literacy events occurring within the third facet of Family Literacy actively influence emergent and developing literacy processes.

### **History**

The field of Family Literacy is rooted in developmental psychology. In her historical overview, Doyle (2012) asserts that the work of Piaget and Vygotsky was especially pertinent in driving initial inquiries into how young children develop language and literacy. Years later, she describes these theories being followed upon by Durkin and Clark who found that parental interaction accounted for the early reading development observed in children before they had received any formal instruction. As Doyle continues, she relates the work of Clay, which demonstrated that children theorize about print and

represent their understandings in their early writings. He cites Chomsky, who published work on children's invented spellings, and the research of Paley and Holdaway which began the exploration of their meaning-making process. Later, Doyle describes the growing movement toward conceptual models and cites further studies such as those of Whitehurst & Lonigan (1998), Evans, Shaw & Bell (2000), and Roberts, Jurgens & Griffin (1998) which drew connections between emergent language growth and conventional reading development.

In the 1990s, there was a burgeoning focus on intervention, driven by a federal mandate to fund early intervention programs (Doyle, 2012). Many of these programs, he says, were based on the “delivery of programming to children” (p. 88). They were also unified in a deficit perspective on families. This characteristic Head Start, on the other hand, still in existence today, attempted to address a wider array of family needs and provide a wider range of social service supports (Doyle, 2012). Though many of these intervention programs failed to live up to their potential, Doyle concludes that “the programs resulting in the greatest effects . . . were those that involved parents and considered the child's literacy development in the context of the family” (p. 89). Though there was a lack of research, the intervention movement had begun.

These programs are all unified in at least one way: they are also based upon the deficit viewpoints of children and their families. The deficit perspective views low income and often minority families from a perspective of disadvantage (Taylor, 1993). In her classic article, “Resisting Deficit Models,” Taylor (1993) cautions readers that “sex,

race, economic status, and setting cannot be used as significant correlates to literacy” and that “there are more similarities between the ways in which people use print than there are differences” (p. 551). Deficit model views hinder teachers' ability to adequately value the funds of knowledge of each family and bridge the gap between the school and outside life (Taylor, 1993). Deficit views buck modern perspectives on literacy education.

### **Parental Beliefs and Expectations**

The literacy practices which take place within the home are likely to include the parent or guardian. Families assess their resources and allocate time to produce commodities such as wealth and skills and materials; through invested time, effort, and finances, education is also considered a commodity (Becker, 1991). This is an important consideration for literacy professionals as families who value literacy less may allot less time and fewer resources toward its development.

Parental beliefs about literacy and the educational expectations they hold for their children, both before and during formal schooling, can play an influential role in students' academic achievement. One study occurring in India found that literacy levels within the home were better predictors for educational engagement than either wealth or financial resources (Chudgar, Miller & Kothari, 2012). Classic research shows that parental beliefs positively correlate to the amount of reading which occurs within the home (Halle, Kurtz-Costes & Mahoney, 1997). Other research indicates positive beliefs and expectations have also been shown to increase the amount of literacy-supportive activities occurring within the home in other ways, such as supportive conversations (Martini & Sénéchal,

2012). Interestingly, this correlation does not prove true for how much parents *value* literacy. Though the study is admittedly out of date and in need of revisiting, the research of Fitzgerald (1989) indicates that parents with lower personal literacies may place a higher value on developing it in their children.

In the realm of expectations, educators are also important. Students spend hundreds of hours under the care of their teachers. Their influence on students is well known, therefore, how their expectations are interpreted might also play a role in the academic achievement of their students. However, research shows that though teachers are positioned to draw more accurate conclusions about students' ability levels, they are ultimately less influential than parents when assessing children's beliefs about self and future development (Gill & Reynolds, 1999). Expectations and beliefs about students are deep processes that involve a complex relationship between academic achievement and interpretation of expectations. They are defined and redefined over the course of education and are highly influenced by student's prior academic achievement (1999).

These are, then, important considerations. Parental expectations of their children, separate from lone beliefs and personal abilities, have been shown to influence children's academic performance (Martini & Sénéchal, 2012). The high expectations of parents, as measured at the Kindergarten level and re-assessed in eighth grade, not only resulted in heightened educational engagement at home, but also raised students' expectations for themselves, resulting in higher test scores (Froiland, Peterson & Davison, 2013).

## **Organized Family Literacy Programs**

Sjuts, Clarke, Sheridan, Rispoli, and Ransom (2012) describe organized family literacy programs as a system of developmental literacy support which involves targeted parental participation within the home environment. These programs encourage practices which support the development of language and literacy skills (2012). These programs can also take the form of targeted interventions as part of Response-to-Intervention programs (Vaughn et al., 2003).

Studies demonstrate the effectiveness of family literacy programs. Padak and Rasinski (2003) identify four key groups that benefit from such organized efforts: children, parents, families, and society. Children, Padak and Rasinski demonstrate, achieve higher on both reading and outside-subject assessments; develop oral language, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and decoding skills; and have higher attendance. Parents develop better attitudes about education; become better readers and writers; and tend to enhance their employment status and increase their job satisfaction (2003). Families, they continue, learn to value education; become more involved in schools; read and take part in more literate at-home practices; and develop emotional closeness beyond what existed before the program. Finally, Padak and Rasinski show that society benefits through higher school achievement rates and fewer drop-outs; less social alienation; a decreased rate of home and community violence; and positive affects on nutrition, health, and teen parenting.

Family literacy programs have also been shown to have a positive impact on the development of English Language Learners. In attempting to define a system for determining the effectiveness of family literacy programs, Purcell-Gates et al. (2012) discovered that immigrant and refugee families taking part in such a program showed significant growth in reading conventions, meaning, and alphabet. Another study detailed a series of mothers recently immigrated from Mexico who also took part in a family literacy program (Toso, 2012). Each of these mothers was able to develop her English language skills to pursue her own educational goals, increase her family role, and become a more active member of society (2012). A recent report for the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families, and Schools came to a similar conclusion. Their research, however, encourages family literacy programs that are individualized and focused on shared engagement rather than simply providing activities (Sjuts et al., 2012).

Programs come in many different forms and are often based on the needs and resources of participating schools and families. The National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) has acted as a guiding force for thousands of these schools in the United States by providing program suggestions, research, and advocacy (Elfert & the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2008). In their 2008 report, Elfert and the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning identify a number of important components family literacy programs should include; these are: children's education, adult education, parenting education, and interactive literacy activities between parents and children. Together, these components represent the elements any comprehensive family literacy

program must address. The authors note, however, that the configurations of these elements vary.

One approach often used by schools involves organized classes for both parents and children (Elfert & UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2008). In this arrangement, children are taken to a separate room while parents engage in center-based classes. During this time, parents are provided instruction to improve their own literacy and parenting skills; afterward, adults and children are reunited and take part in interactive literacy activities together (2008). Purcell-Gates et al. (2012), suggest that these programs be grounded in real life activities to enhance their effectiveness.

As demonstrated previously, family literacy programs can greatly benefit English Language Learners (ELLs) of all ages (Toso, 2012; Purcell-Gates et al., 2012). Like most such programs, those focusing specifically on ELLs can also take many forms. In the United States, the federal government currently supports the Even Start Family Literacy Program (“Even start,” 2012). This program embraces the four core components and emphasizes parent education and interactive activities that encourage bonding and shared learning through school-based activities (Toso, 2012).

Family literacy programs are often intergenerational. Internationally, many programs emphasize family literacy beyond parent-child interactions and often involve grandparents and other guardians (Elfert & UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2008). This is an important consideration since illiteracy has been shown to run in generations; it is with this in mind that the Family and Child Education (FACE) program

approaches its goal of ending family illiteracy (Tippeconic & Jones, 1995). FACE serves children from ages 0 to 5; at ages 0 to 3 parent volunteers conduct home-visits and educate parents on childhood developmental needs, as well offer monthly networking meet-ups for participating parents; at years 3 to 5, however, parents are given the option to attend school meetings and engage in supervised literacy activities with their children (Tippeconic & Jones, 1995).

Family literacy programs need not be so formal. Schools can host a number of activities outside the bounds of traditional organized programs. Literacy nights are one way this takes place. Epstein (2013) suggests regular evenings where parents can come and watch their children read their original writing. Morrell and Bennett-Armistead (2013) add to this and suggest that pre-service teachers hold activity nights for parents and students as part of their university training. Teachers can also contribute in the course of normal teaching by sending home activity packs for parents and children mid-way through literacy units (Hammack, Foote, Garretson & Thompson, 2012).

### **Literacy Practices Within the Home**

Family literacy events which occur within the home are not scripted and occur naturally through parental interactions. These interactions provide a context for literacy learning (Johnson, 2010). This type of family literacy is a continuous act of impartation: parents and family members share their literate selves and reveal their beliefs and values through their words and actions (Taylor, 1983; Heath, 1982). Through interaction, parents

teach their children the oral traditions of their family and culture and bring them into the discourse styles used within (Heath, 1982).

Once more, parental beliefs come into play. In her book, *Family Literacy: Young Children Learning to Read and Write*, Taylor (1983) asserts that family literacy styles are rarely taught through specific learning encounters; instead, they are most often shared through storytelling, modeling, and personal biographies. Through an in-depth observational study, she found that the personal histories of parents tended to shape how they presented literacy to their children. Rituals and routines arose and acted to preserve or dismantle family traditions of language use (1983). These rituals, handed down between generations, proved to be foundational to how Taylor's families practiced literacy with their children.

Numerous studies link home literacy to culture, beliefs, expectations, and available resources (e.g., Taylor, 1983; Handel, 1999; Johnson, 2010). Indeed, the complex relationship between these elements have, in the words of one research team, allowed “deficit models [to] prevail” when analyzing the struggling readers from low income households (Grieshaber, Shield, Luke & MacDonald, 2012, p. 121). Yet in their discussion of the home literacy environment, they suggest that the availability of literacy supportive materials, such as the print resources and environmental text, proved to be much better indicators of developmental outcomes than race or wealth.

Sampling their participants across three separate Australian schools and triangulating their data with test scores, teacher and parent surveys and questionnaires,

and interviews, Grieshaber et al. (2012) came to several interesting conclusions. First, that financial resources did not equate to the print resources available. Second, that income was unrelated to if and how those resources were utilized. And finally, that the availability of print resources did not positively correlate to those resources being used, thus challenging the notion that lower income households are necessarily disadvantaged (2012).

Another study emphasized the importance of culture and intergenerational relationships when assessing home literacy. In a 2010 study, Johnson analyzed the Jones family and presented a striking portrait of African Americans living in the rural southern United States. African Americans' family constellations, she says, feature a breadth atypical to most European American families. European American families, for example, traditionally follow a nuclear structure featuring two parents as heads of household and one or more children in a single home; conversely, African American family structures tend to span several households and include aunts, uncles, and extended relatives in a greater capacity; children are no longer members of a single household and instead belong to many (Johnson, 2010). As such, Jones argued strongly for families to be viewed as valuable cultural contexts for literacy education. This work builds on the ideas suggested years earlier by Taylor (1983), but reinforces the cycle of meaningful family rituals, such as bedtime stories, shared reading, and the telling of family stories.

As culture is imparted, children take up the oral traditions practiced by their families. These traditions culminate in forms of discourse that are foundational to

children's developing literacies. Gee (1989) examined this in his work on sociolinguistic theory. He posited that the building of one's discourse is tantamount to the building of one's identity. Language acquisition and reading, under this model, and one which informs this study, are actions rooted in the context of their development (Gee, 2001).

In her study of the Roadville, Trackton, and Maintown families, Heath (1982) found that the form of discourse used within each town impacted their ability to succeed at school. The Trackton children came from a working-class African American neighborhood that practiced a narrative-centric form of discourse. This, she found, was at odds with the forms of academic questioning they would later encounter at school. Their “ways of taking [meaning from text]” were not adapted to traditional educational settings (p. 72). Though these children were no less intelligent and likely had better oral storytelling skills than their Maintown and Roadville peers, the discourse used within their home environment enabled a linguistic gap through which their discourse styles were not being addressed.

The experiences of the Roadville families were also unique. There, children did not “learn to talk” but were “taught to talk” (Heath, 1982, p. 57). Early in life, parents provide their children with literacy supportive materials and engage them in talks and bedtime stories (1982). As children grow older, the interactivity of shared reading decreases (1982). The at-home literacy practices of the Roadville families are based on coaching and rewards; parents instill specific values and beliefs in their children, often the same they learned in growing up (1982).

Heath draws two important conclusions from these observations. The first is that strict definitions of oral and literate progressions are not able to accurately capture the many differences between home literacy environments (Heath, 1982). The second, and perhaps most important, is that a unilinear model of language development and use does not adequately acknowledge the culturally diverse ways of acquiring language and knowledge and thus cannot service the needs of each and every student (1982).

The literacy practices which take place in the home can take many forms. Clark, Picton, and the National Literacy Trust (2012) report that nearly 83-percent of children taking part in their survey reveal that their mother actively encourages them to read; conversely, 33-percent of respondents indicate that they receive no encouragement whatsoever from their father. The authors go on to describe parents being seen reading as another developing literacy support and report that nearly 80-percent of students whose mothers read “a lot” also read at or above grade level standards (p. 12).

Shared reading is another literacy event which takes place in the home. Using the ASPIRE program (a Student-Parent Initiative Revitalizing Education) as a means to conduct their study, Bradley & Donovan (2012) examined the implications of regular shared reading experiences with parents and their children. ASPIRE is an out of school program emphasizing literacy and education out-of-school educational experiences for parents and children (2012). Read-alouds, they suggest, cultivate emotional connections between parents and children. Shared reading also educates children on the structure of stories and encourages children to practice fluent reading practices (2012). Another study

adds to the benefits of shared reading, concluding over a long-term period that children who had been read to were more prepared for school and achieved better results in national reading tests than their peers who had not been (Mullan & Daraganova, 2012).

The benefits of shared reading are so profound that it is also a common practice within schools. Yet in the growing climate of high stakes testing and cramped curriculum planning, Fox (2013) disdainfully concludes that many teachers are abandoning shared reading. In a series of teacher-submitted vignettes, she makes the case for its effectiveness. One school administrator describes test scores in her school raising an average of 13 points after implementing organized shared reading (2013). A New Zealand teacher states that by spending more time reading with her struggling students, they raised five to seven levels in just three weeks (2013). When children and parents read together, they are more likely to adopt the beliefs, discourses, and values of their parents (Heath, 1982; Bradley & Donovan, 2012). At-home shared reading allows parents to bond with their children, model effective reading practices, and gain important knowledge on the form and function of stories to prepare them school learning (Bradley & Donovan, 2012; Mullan & Daraganova, 2012). As Bradley and Donovan and Fox make clear, parents who find time to share in meaningful reading experiences with their children are making an investment in their success.

## **Home-School Connection**

Galindo and Sheldon (2012) identify the home and school environments as the most influential contexts for childhood learning to occur. Many educators naturally recognize this fact and can often be heard in break rooms and during off hours discussing their students' home lives and the relatively few hours they spend in the classroom. The gravitas implied by these conversations is borne out in research. For more than a decade, study after study has reinforced the benefits of schools and families working collaboratively, sharing resources and time, toward their children's education (e.g., Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Epstein, 2008; St. Clair, Jackson & Zwieback, 2012).

When the family structure is altered and resources shift, there is little research, if any, that demonstrates these connections become any less important. In fact, the work of Pong (1997) and Pong, Dronkers, and Hampden-Thompson (2003) indicates that academic achievement is highly influenced by how resources, particularly time, are allocated to support the child's academic growth in this way. By becoming more involved at school, parents are better informed about the educational practices being used in their child's classroom, the different stages of their development, and the different program options which may be available and of benefit to their child, regardless of their own background (Epstein, 2008).

Other studies have explored the use of home-school connection programs as well. In 2005, Sheldon and Epstein, intrigued by an achievement gap between middle-grade

students in the United States and same-age students in Europe and Asia, found that little research explored formal partnerships between schools and families. Using Epstein's six types of parental involvement as a model (consisting of parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community), they found that though parents were not always comfortable with the increasingly complex processes used in their children's math classes, and that teachers were not necessarily prepared or able to teach adults as well as their own students, that they could in fact become involved in meaningful ways (2005). Each school participating in the study implemented three key activities to bolster this connection: 1) providing students with contact details for math instructors; 2) scheduling regular conferences with parents of struggling students; and, 3) providing parents with information on their child's progress and struggles. When teachers acted as a support for parents by teaching vocabulary and clearly communicating what was being expected of students, teachers reported greater academic outcomes (2005).

Sheldon and Epstein (2005) also revealed that school characteristics play an important role in determining the effectiveness of home-school collaboration programs. In an analysis of participant districts already engaging in home outreach efforts, the researchers found that larger student communities, and those with greater populations of students of low socioeconomic status, tended to have higher amounts of Cs, Ds, and Fs on report cards (2005). Teachers implemented strategies based on singular types of Epstein's forms of parental involvement (2005). The resulting data indicated that

connection alone, and addressing lone involvement types, was not enough to address the needs of a diverse school population; rather, the quality of program implementation and its ability to address the needs of parents and family types proved to be the best predictor of academic progress (2005).

The educational benefits to the implementation of dedicated connection programs can be profound. One recent study tracked the progress of students who participated in a home-school connection program from kindergarten through sixth grade and resulted in noteworthy findings (St. Clair, Jackson & Zwieback, 2012). Twenty-two migrant families participated in this study and attended twenty-five family education sessions as part of a Migrant Education Even Start program; these students, compared against a control group of their non-session-attending peers, scored consistently higher on reading assessments at first, fifth, and sixth grade levels (2012). While the purpose of Migrant Education Even Start programs is to compensate for lingual-cultural achievement gaps between immigrant and American-born students, the implications for wider application cannot be ignored.

Other research has examined the implications of different types of family involvement, as well as how school outreach facilitated that participation, and how each impacted kindergartener's gains in reading and math (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012). The study identified three types of family involvement: that occurring at home, at school, and the impartation of parental expectations. Using a sample of nearly 900 schools, the researchers concluded that school outreach efforts resulted in more family participation

and positive associations between that participation and student cognitive gains. Parents who were more involved at school tended to have higher expectations, which resulted in increases in both reading and math (2012). Interestingly, family involvement at home remained “non-significantly associated” with progress in these areas (2012, p. 97). The authors note, however, that their study examined parents’ at home participation as a quantitative “set of basic activities” and that they “could not determine the extent to which all family involvement at home is related to children's achievement gains in kindergarten” (2012, p. 98)

Home-school connection programs can also benefit students outside of pure academic gains. If children are to succeed at all, they must first be present in the classroom. Truancy is not only a problem due to the consistent negative ramifications experienced by students, but also because, as Sheldon & Epstein (2004) put it, represents “several important indicators of student failure and poor adjustment to school” (p. 40). Put another way, one that I believe reflects a less deficit view of students, it could be stated that truancy represents the school's failure to meet the needs of students and enable them *to* adjust to school. The authors also conclude that dropping out entirely is “merely the culminating act of a long withdrawal process from school” (2004, p. 40). These are issues that educators desperately seek to address. Since family processes are also natural factors in student absenteeism, involving the family in potential solutions is an important step. Using a sample of 39 schools, the researchers found that implementing practices addressing the six types of parental involvement, with particular attention to strong

communication, resulted in “significantly lower levels of chronic absenteeism” despite precedents set during the prior year (2004, p. 44).

The positive implications go on. In a report for the National Civic Review, Epstein (2010) lists a series of practices implemented by school administrators and the positive impact of each. To reduce absenteeism, one Missouri school organized an attendance reward program with parents delivering treats; those parents then went a step further by arranging after school and weekend hours for appointments usually requiring children missing school (2010). Another school in Washington arranged a “Young Author’s Night” where student writers read their work aloud to an audience of over one hundred parents; these students, while improving their writing and speaking skills, helped educate their parents on the school’s language arts program (2010). Another study suggests sending home “family literacy packs” with students midway through literacy units (Hammack, Foote, Garretson & Thompson, 2012). These packs, filled with reading materials and literacy activities for parents and students to complete collaboratively, encourage the telling of “family stories” by promoting discussion around literature and stories (p. 106, 2012).

### **Teacher Preparedness**

Despite the wealth of encouraging research surrounding home-school connection programs, many teachers report feeling unprepared to forge these connections (Epstein, 2008). Worse still, many teacher educators find that a large number of their students enter the field with deficit views of parents and families, notably those who speak languages

other than English, or are of lower socioeconomic status (Epstein, 2013). These views are problematic not only because they are antithetical to the positive outlook teachers should hold for *all* students, but also because they undermine the necessity for mutual respect and trust required for positive collaboration.

Epstein (2013) places the blame for this lack of preparedness at the feet of modern teacher preparation programs. These programs, as she describes, often lack dedicated coursework on home-school partnership program development. Despite understanding the importance of future educators being able to develop their own outreach and collaboration systems, Epstein states that “there is a big difference between knowing and doing” (p. 115). Her solution begins with a revision of current collegial coursework.

Epstein (2013) suggests that all students be required to take a “comprehensive course” for planning, developing, and implementing partnership programs that embrace relationships with the home, school, and community (p. 116). Such a program, she explains, should embrace the concepts of teamwork and distributed leadership; it should support equitable partnerships with all families that break the bonds of family-type stereotype (i.e. socioeconomic status, nationality, etc.); and it should be goal-oriented so that teachers, parents, and administrators can work toward shared outcomes (2013). Just as importantly, such a program should allow pre-service teachers to “hear from and interact with parents” (2013, p. 117).

Morrell and Bennett-Armistead (2013) suggest Family Literacy Nights as a way to prepare new teachers while also promoting positive at-home literacy practices.

Traditional teacher preparation programs, they note, often rely on fieldwork to bring prospective teachers into contact with families. Rather than wait for such an event to occur, if it does at all, their work indicates that universities and local school districts can both benefit from allowing pre-service teachers to plan theme-based literacy nights and inviting families to take part with their children. Using their own program as an example, Morrell and Bennett-Armistead advise that teachers work in groups and select books which are readily available at local libraries, as well as using materials that cost no more than one dollar to reproduce so that parents are more likely to take part. With the support of university staff, these soon-to-be teachers gain first-hand experience in working with parents and encounter issues that they would otherwise face for the first time in the field of professional work (2013). Using post-event surveys of parents and their students, teacher educators are able to teach directly to needs and interests of their students (2013).

Administrators also play a role in creating an environment that engenders positive home-school collaboration. Research shows that schools offering more activities to engage families tend to have parents that are more engaged with the school (Epstein, Galindo & Sheldon, 2012). As school leaders, administrators play an important role in determining the culture of their buildings. Epstein, Galindo & Sheldon (2011) recommend that administrators form Action Team for Partnership (ATP) committees responsible for planning and overseeing the development of school, home, and community partnership programs. Schools with well-functioning ATPs and support from

school management report better outcomes and “higher quality programs of family and community involvement” (2011, p. 467).

Epstein, Galindo & Sheldon's (2011) study of the impact of district leadership on the implementation and effectiveness of partnership programs revealed several important results. First, with background variables controlled, principal support for partnerships and the district's assistance proved to be more important than the district's demographics for explaining the differences in the quality of program implementation; second, that district and principal support were reliable predictors for the outreach efforts of such programs, factors which are influential in the long-term maintenance of such programs; and finally, that schools with actively maintained ATP committees were more likely to support and implement a wider range of basic and advanced activities to involve families and communities than schools without (2011).

There can be no question that strong connections between the home and school are important. By becoming more involved at school, parents gain added insight into the educational process and the development of their children (Epstein, 2008). Informed, participating parents are also more likely to hold high expectations of their children, which can lead to heightened academic outcomes (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Martini & Sénéchal, 2012). Most importantly, a strong home-school connection allows teachers and parents to build a relationship of shared goals, empowering them to collaborate toward the betterment of that student (Epstein, 2013). The impetus is not solely on parents and teachers, however. District leaders must also support their staff and create a school

culture that fosters the growth of home-school connection programs (Epstein, Galindo & Sheldon, 2011). Universities and teacher educators must craft high-level curriculum that prepare new teachers to forge these connections. Working together, families can be brought into the fold more than ever before to enhance student learning.

### **Divorce, Separation, and Academic Implications**

More than half of all marriages end in divorce (“Marriages and Divorces,” 2012). This is a fact that teachers often encounter when children of divorced families surface in their classrooms. Some of these students, often those that earn negative attention by acting out, find themselves viewed through a deficit lens by their teachers. As a substitute, I have been introduced to the circumstances of many these with words of warning. The refrain is often the same. “His mother just doesn't have time for him” I am told conspiratorially; or “she wants any kind of attention she can get because she doesn't get it at home.” I have been reminded to be prepared time and again and told not to expect much, to be happy if these children simply participate. In these cases, the teachers naturally attribute single-working-parenthood, and often the presence of siblings, as the primary cause of students' struggles. Conversely, children in separated houses without similar behavioral issues go unremarked, the circumstances surrounding their own achievement no more noteworthy than children of any other family type.

Research has long studied the implications of separation on affected children, both in emotional and psychological adjustment, but also in academic achievement.

Much of this work spans the last two decades and represents a gap in recent study. From my experience, it seems evident that many teachers hold negative stereotypes of single-parent households, but only when the results of this situation complicate daily teaching. It raises the question, “what are the real implications of single- and step-parent households?” and “what separates the struggling student from the successful?” Is there truth to the stereotype that children of divorce are more likely to lag behind their two-parent peers?

Classic studies seem to indicate that these stereotypes have some basis in research. The work of Duncan and Hoffman (1985) suggests that divorce lowers the economic standard of living for single mothers once in two-earner relationships. This somewhat antiquated viewpoint is buffered by the nearly thirty years of separation from modern day, however, the common-sense implications of income loss remain true, as do the remaining inequities in income still existing today. Two parent families benefit from greater economic resources with which to provide for their children (Parcel & Dufur, 2001; Foster, 2002). Yet in a meta-analysis of 37 relevant studies of the time, work which encompassed 81,000 subjects, Amato and Keith (1991) found that the adult well-being of children of permanent separation tended to be much lower; psychological and behavioral issues were more prevalent, occupational and familial satisfaction were lessened, and overall academic achievement was lower than children of stable, two-parent homes. However, in their review, the authors note that many of the clinical studies previously conducted on the topic were inherently flawed through bias; since participants

were already suffering from symptoms “severe enough to bring them to the attention of mental health practitioners,” it is no surprise that the clinicians' findings were negative (1991, p. 55). Amato and Keith factor this into their results when drawing their conclusions, those of which include boys experiencing greater adjustment problems than girls, white children experiencing more problems than African American children, and that low educational attainment is more common among women than men (1991).

In the more than twenty years since Amato and Keith conducted their analysis, more work has been done to expand what we understand about divorce and separation. There can be little doubt that negative effects are associated with divorce. Children living with single parents, and even those with a second step-parent, face a higher likelihood of academic hardship than their two-parent peers (Pong, Dronkers & Hampden-Thompson, 2003; Pong & Ju, 2000; Entwisle & Alexander, 1996). The home life, so important to childhood well-being, is often disrupted by bouts of inter-parental conflict eliciting a lack of household stability (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001; Hanson, 1999). Economically, single-parents often find themselves unable to provide same-level time and resources to their children as prior to the separation (Parcel & Dufur, 2001; Pong, Dronkers & Hampden-Thompson, 2003; Pong, 1998). These are important obstacles for parents to overcome.

Another consideration is the level of conflict children are exposed to preceding divorce. Research shows that children experiencing parental separation are exposed to more adult conflict and instability than children whose parents remain together (Amato,

Loomis & Booth, 1995). Few studies have examined the implications of conflict over household and financial instability; however, the work of Hanson (1999) indicates that this is not a reliable indicator of childhood adjustment. In a survey of nearly 13,000 subjects, Hanson analyzed respondents' answers in the areas of parental conflict, the amount and severity thereof, and child well-being including school performance, delinquency, health and human behavior, and psychological welfare (1999). The results of the study indicate that nearly half of all couples who divorced experienced high levels of conflict to which the child was exposed; however, when measuring the influence on school performance, the results were varied (1999). Children whose parents did not remain married tended to receive lower marks but did not report disliking school, were no more likely to repeat a grade, and did not bear disproportionately high suspension rates (1999). In a comparison of analytical models, Hanson also concluded the pre-separation conflict only accounts for some of the results, but not all (1999). Even these findings, however, do not capture the full scope of the issue.

One powerful study conducted by Pong, Dronkers, and Hampden-Thompson (2003) does much to dispel the myth that divorce dooms children to a life of disadvantage. Though the authors acknowledge that affected students face many challenges, their work revealed that many of these can be overcome with enough resources (2003). Examining the issue internationally, Pong et al. identified social and financial capital (time and money) as the single biggest determinants in the academic success of students from separated households (2003). Internationally, the availability of

governmental support through financial assistance varies, as does societal perception of such programs, but it remains true that welfare-aid assists single-parents in providing for the basic needs of their children and allows them to spend more time at home instead of the workplace (2003). These findings are supported by the work of Parcel and Dufur (2001) who found that, comparatively, financial resources benefit children more when received by the family rather than the school.

Earlier in her career, Pong (1998) examined the effect of higher school-wide densities of single- and step-parenthood on the reading and mathematics achievement of tenth-graders. Her work included an examination of socioeconomic status, parental networking behaviors, and parents' social relationships across 654 schools with a range of twenty-five to fifty-percent of students attending from single-, step-parent, or guardianship contexts (1998). In selecting these schools, she drew several important conclusions: they have higher concentrations of students receiving free lunches; higher populations of minority students; tended to be large and located in urban settings; have lower measures of school based capital (measured in part through surveys of students reporting on their parents' inter-personal relations with other parents); and have lower levels of parental participation within the school (1998). She also found that schools with higher concentrations of single-parent households held an overall lower level of academic success; when controlling for socioeconomic status, minority, parental social capital and participation, however, the impact of higher densities of single-, step-parent, and guardianship families was negated almost entirely (1998). This indicates that, as in the

2003 study previously, the negative implications of divorce and separation are much more dependent on available resources than single-parenthood or step-parenthood itself.

These findings are in line with the theory of household production proposed by Becker in 1976. When analyzing human behavior through the lens of economic theory, he postulated that families allocate resources in the production of commodities by perceived market value (1976). In this context, homes are best viewed as “little factories” in which parents maximize their time in the pursuit of leisure, education, or additional finances (Foster, 2002, p. 1905). Less tangibly, characteristics parents want their children to adopt are also commoditized, subject to utility constraints, such as time spent in other engagements (2002). In essence, resource allocation, be it financial or social capital, is subject to a value proposition on the part of s parents, as dictated by their own beliefs and abilities.

It is through this system that children are adopted into patterns of living without formalized, overt instruction. Gee (1989) relates to this with his work on discourse acquisition. “A discourse,” he says “is a sort of identity kit” where children learn to take on a role that other people will recognize (1989, p. 7). A gap exists in modern research regarding the variations of discourse present between single, two-, and step-parent households, but logic dictates that discourse, and in turn identity, might be altered when one contributing parent is removed or their contribution drastically changed; the same might be assumed when a child is subject to two discourse styles instead of one. If cognitive processes such as language acquisition and reading are “situated actions,” then

a shift in familial situation could certainly be seen as an impactful transition (Gee, 2001, p. 715).

The effects of remarriage must also be considered when assessing the long-term implications of divorce. Since many of the negative effects discussed thus far seem to derive from a lack of financial and social capital, adding a surrogate parent seems like a natural solution for children who might otherwise struggle. This is not always the case. The work of Amato (1987) suggests that step-fathers, when compared with their biological counterparts, provide overall less support to their non-biological children. This can be attributed to a number of different reasons, including an uncertainty about household processes and the uncomfortable issue of punishment and discipline, but just as importantly a sense of reticence or even guilt from children who may still be loyal to their non-custodial parents; the result is an increased standard of living which raises academic outcomes, but perhaps not to the extent of active biological parenthood (1987). Children whose parents re-marry have also been found to skip school more than those whose parents remained single following separation (Hanson, 1999). These conclusions are supported by Beller and Chung (1992), who found that, while time and financial issues simplify, the decision to enter college often becomes more complicated.

There is no question that divorce, separation, and remarriage impact children. Their well-being – academically, psychologically, and emotionally – comes into question. However, the research proves that there should be no foregone conclusion about students of divorced families. While there are many negative outcomes associated with separation,

these can often be buffered through financial and social capital (Pong, Dronkers & Hampden-Thompson, 2003). Schools with higher concentrations of separated families face unique challenges, but when controlled for outside factors, their performance compares with their lesser-concentrated counterparts (Pong, 1998). Even the notion that single-mothers must remarry is challenged when the child-step-parent relationship is examined in detail (Amato, 1987). So while classic research might support children of separated households facing more struggles, taking a deficit view remains misguided and detrimental to the educational process.

### **Summary**

As a child from a single-parent household, understanding the context of my personal history is important. While it might be easy to identify what is readily available from my own emotional experience, it is also important to recognize the wider context of the issue. Divorce and separation are widespread and, just as I entered the classroom as a young boy, countless others do the same every day. Teachers must understand the importance of literacy events which occur inside and outside of the home. They must value strong connections between the home and school. Most importantly, they must recognize that every child is an individual with their own strengths and funds of knowledge; they are valuable and capable of learning, no more doomed to disadvantage than any other student. Children of separated households face unique challenges, it is true, but they can overcome with the right support. As a teacher, I must view my past and

present through the lens of research if I am to understand either outside of my own perspective.

### Chapter Three: Methods and Procedures

As an educator, it is important for me to understand the unique needs of the students I serve. This can be a challenge in a number of ways; the diverse populations of students making up the classrooms in which I teach are defined not only along racial and cultural guidelines but also socioeconomic status, family type, and academic support. Another consideration is whether the family is single-parent, two-parent, step-parent, or of any of type of make-up. This differentiating factor might be considered negative but in reality the academic outcomes of these students are far from predefined. Research shows that students from single- and step-parent families with greater resources and strong family literacy support can achieve alongside their two-parent peers (Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003; Pong, 1997). Yet the households and conditions these students grow up in are as varied as the students themselves. Defining their needs and potential literacy experiences is a challenge for any teacher or researcher. Through the course of this six-week study, I explored my own history as a child of a single-parent, maternal visitation household and endeavored to discover how my own literacy experiences have shaped me as an educator. The guiding question for this study was:

*How have the literacy experiences I experienced through my upbringing in a separated household influenced my teaching philosophies and pedagogical practices with my students?*

## **Context of the Study**

This study has been conducted across three public school districts. Since this project is a self-study, none of these districts represent participants, but rather environments in which I reflected upon my practices and perspectives. It is important to understand the differing environments and population make-ups of each school as the context of the school environment is influential on how I approach teaching and interacting with students. This does not represent a blanket approach per school. Rather, the circumstances of the teaching environment and the needs of individual students based upon the demographics of their community helped to inform my decisions during the teaching process.

Two of these districts Northtown and Midville, are suburbs of a mid-sized city in Western New York. The third school resides in the small city of Weston nearly an hour west of Rochester. The Northtown and Midville communities are each small with populations of 5,974 and 3,601 respectively (“State and County Quick Facts: Northtown”, 2013; “American Factfinder: Midville”, 2010). Weston is larger and bears a population of 15,399 (“State and County Quick Facts: Weston”, 2013). The per capita income of both Northtown and Weston are well below the state average with Northtown being \$25,822 and Weston \$21,246; each representing a five and ten-thousand dollars gap to median New York income levels (“State and County Quick Facts: Northtown”, 2013; “State and County Quick Facts: Weston”, 2013). The per capita income of Midville was not available. Based upon observations made while teaching, the majority of students

in each district are Caucasian but African American, Latino, and Asian American populations make up the minority.

The classrooms where this study took place spanned from first through eighth grade. Historically, I have spent the majority of my teaching hours between grades five through eight; however, I accepted positions as they were available so the grade level varied from week to week. Nearly all of the classrooms I taught in were inclusive and featured a range of ability levels and special needs; however, I occasionally substitute taught in self-enclosed special education classrooms as well. Most of these classrooms were small but featured some variance. Weston, for example, featured a higher teacher to student ratio with greater than twenty students in the average classroom. Both Northtown and Midville tended toward fifteen to twenty students but, again, there was no set number for each individual classroom. At the elementary level, Weston, Northtown, and Midville classrooms regularly included at least one teaching assistant. In Weston, this assistant was usually mandated to a single student rather than acting as a classroom aide. Assistants at Midville and Northtown were more common and were frequently non-mandated; however, again, there was such variety between placements that I never entered the classroom with the expectation of having assistance. At the middle school level, the presence of aides was much less common for each district.

Students in these settings each had free access to literacy materials. Most classrooms, even those not designated for literacy, had books and magazines available for students to read during their down time. Each school also featured a fully stocked library

that the students borrow from regularly. Each school was also featured active literacy programs, such as DEAR: Drop Everything and Read, Core Knowledge, and Expeditionary Learning. Another program that was unique to Northtown was “One School, One Book” where the entire school reads a single text over the course of one month (“One school, one book,” 2013). Each school also made use of Fountas and Pinnell’s Guided Reading program for early childhood literacy (Pinnell & Fountas, 1996). Classrooms and hallways were text-rich and encouraged students to “read around the room.”

Modern technology was also prevalent in each district. Nearly every classroom had multiple computers available for students to use. In my substitute experience preceding this study, however, teachers often used computer access as a reward for good behavior and allowed students to play games and listen to music. Students also used computers for math and science but the same tendency toward game-based reward was also observed. This does, of course, vary by teacher and but many of the students I worked with throughout this study bore the expectation of computer or tablet time as a reward for positive behavior. Smart Boards were also present in most classrooms and were often used to elevate lessons with electronic media and online materials. A number of assistive technologies were also available, such as touch-to-talk systems, voice-to-text computer software, and microphone and receiver units for students with hearing impairments, but were not utilized in the course of this research.

## **Participants and Positionality as a Researcher**

Since the research presented in this project draws from self-study methods, I was the only participant. I interacted with students and reflected on those interactions but no children provided data to be used in this study. As such, understanding and clearly stating my positionality as a researcher is of the utmost importance.

I am a Caucasian middle-class male. I grew up in the small town of Lyndonville, New York. The population of my hometown is less than 1,000 people (“American Factfinder: Lyndonville”, 2010). The community that I grew up in was primarily working class, white, and included many farmers and farm workers. My parents separated, but never divorced, when I was nearly one year old. I have no memory of their ever being together and both parents entered into other relationships during my primary and elementary school years, providing me with a half-brother and sister who are now 21 and 16 respectively. I lived with my father and grandmother in a split duplex before visiting my mother and step-father every other weekend and every summer. Though my mother and step-father remained together, my father ended his relationship after only two years and remained single until I moved out years later.

Though both of my parents supported my reading, my grandmother was the town librarian and I spent many long afternoons in the library after school reading, using the computer, and completing homework. It was there that I learned the joy of searching full bookshelves for hidden literary treasures.

When I graduated from high school, I nearly avoided college to enter the workforce. I did not believe in my academic abilities or my family's ability to pay for my college tuition. At the prompting of my high school counselor, I applied to Genesee Community College (G.C.C.) and, to my surprise, was accepted and received full financial aid support. I found that I loved college and began earning higher marks than I ever had previously. I am the first person on my mother's side of the family to graduate from college.

At G.C.C., I earned my Associate's Degree in Teacher Education and took several extra classes in computer hardware, networking, and repair before transferring to the College at Brockport State University of New York. I attended Brockport to pursue my undergraduate degree in Childhood Education with a specialization in Inclusive Education (students with special needs). My Bachelor's Degree is in English and I took part in the Creative Writing track. While there, I developed an interest in writing a children's book for elementary age students. After acquiring my teaching certification for grades 1-6, I took one year off before re-enrolling at Brockport as part of the Childhood Literacy graduate program.

I began substitute teaching in 2009 with the urban district described earlier in this study. I also worked part time as a telephone banker until 2010 before graduating with my Bachelor's Degree and branching out into the following two districts. I choose to take only positions up to the eighth grade level because children and literacy are my passion; I

have worked with older students and enjoyed it but found that earlier grades better align with my professional goals.

As a teacher, I am a firm believer in the power of positive early literacy experiences. I believe that children have a natural desire to pursue literacy. Teachers, then, must facilitate that desire and provide the necessary support for students to overcome their unique challenges and develop on the path toward literate adulthood. Positive literacy experiences in early childhood allow children to feel successful and begin making meaning from what they read. When I think back to my childhood, I remember late nights staying up under the covers with a book and a flashlight. I believe that this was a result of teachers, parents, my grandmother, and other caring adults who loved reading enough to show me how to love it too. This was through learning the individual skills and having the opportunity to find books that I enjoyed and never being dissuaded from my interest. The same can be said for me as a writer, and I have many fond memories of reading my own scary stories and self-made comic books to my mother and father who still have them to this day.

I believe that children construct knowledge by engaging in shared learning with their peers. Two of my favorite activities when substitute teaching are shared reading and read-aloud. I also believe in shared and interactive writing. When children write, they should have the opportunity to share their work with their classmates. By keeping literacy education social, children can adopt and integrate knowledge from one another which not only makes the learning more impactful but also makes the experience more memorable

to individual students. On the same level, this also makes it that much more important that these experiences be positive.

### **Data Collection and Tools**

This study endeavored to examine the implications of my personal history on my current teaching perspectives and practices as an educator. In order to accurately answer my research question, I gathered data using two forms of journals: memoirs and field notes. The field note entries also included classroom material lists, as well as descriptions of classrooms and schools as they were relevant to the day's reflection. Both forms of journals were written with the intent of capturing the context of my past and present with an aim toward identifying key themes for further analysis.

#### **Journals: Post-teaching Field Notes and Memoir**

Two sets of journal entries were generated during the data collection portion of this study. The first were field notes. Following each of my classroom teaching experiences throughout the six weeks of the study, I engaged in active reflection documenting the literacy and general teaching experiences which took place, how I completed them, and the events which took place throughout the day, most particularly with individual students or small groups of particular, identifiable impact. Additionally, these entries documented the elements within the teaching environment which stood out to me, both positively and negatively, many of which influenced my practices and perceptions within that day. Formal materials lists are included with each recorded entry.

The most important part of the post-teaching field note entries were the reflections I engaged in. The data here not only captures the context but also how each of the elements of the teaching day impacted me on a personal level. These reflections detailed my relationships with students and the wider classroom. They explored the emotional resonance of particular teaching events. Further, these field notes allowed me to actively explore my past and present relationships, creating a track record of shifting thought as I grew to understand myself better. These entries feature an increasing level of depth as the study proceeds, allowing for a more gradual understanding of how my own past experiences have shaped my views, interpretation of best practices teaching, and student motivation, behavior, and ability.

The second set of journal entries took the form of memoirs. These entries focused on my own literacy development and upbringing between two households, one for each parent, and the subsequent memorable impact that had upon me growing into adulthood. I began with my earliest memory and then progressed forward in milestone moments. As I generated the data from this source, I explored what the forms of literacy that took between my mother and father's house, their similarities and and their differences; the role of my grandmother and how she, and my parents, individually supported me; how I believed parental separation to have affected my literacy development; and how separation was addressed in the context of formal schooling. The memoirs gathered for this study are distinctly emotional, documenting the deep-rooted implications of the experiences of my youth, even as they are recalled here, many years after the fact. They

are not overtly negative, a contrast to the stereotype of divorced children being inherently disadvantaged an emotionally less stable and well-supported than their two-parent peers, and an important point for scholars seeking to typify the experiences of children of separated households.

A total of thirty entries were collected over the six-week data gathering process of this study, fifteen for each type. Post-teaching field notes were collected after every day of teaching during the collection period. For convenience and inclusivity, memoirs were also gathered on these days, including five entries each for early childhood, middle-childhood to adolescence, and adolescence into adulthood.

### **Material Lists**

At each of the locations at which I taught, I documented a materials list at the bottom of each field note journal entry. In these lists I documented the literacy resources available to student, as well as the presence of technology and other resources with potential to aid in the educational process or learning atmosphere, such as examples of student work or supportive wall decorations. These lists were used comparatively and reflectively in the journaling process. Like the teaching encounters themselves, the accumulated materials lists acted as a reflection point for my beliefs about teaching, most notably about providing a positive, resource-filled learning environment and creating an atmosphere which supports learning. My consideration of the available resources of each class also allowed me to consider how my perceptions might have been impacted by the availability or resources (or lack thereof).

## **Descriptions of School and Classroom**

Each post-teaching field note also included a description of the classroom and environment, as it related to the reflection point for that day's entry. These descriptions often included elements such as classroom layout, grade level structure (open floor plan versus enclosed classroom, for example), the presence and prominence of technology, and the walls which encompassed the learning environment; like materials lists, embedded within each field note these written descriptions act as reflection points for the days teaching, as well as how my beliefs, perspectives, and practices were influenced by them. These descriptions also included important information such as the availability of literacy materials and their utilization by students, environmental text, and the availability of adult support. These descriptions, in conjunction with the wider field note, also document the teaching practices requested by the teacher for individual groups, students, and the whole class and how their own subsequent influence despite not being in the classroom. Like the options above, these descriptions provided me with another rich data source for reflection.

## **Data Analysis**

The data collected in this study was analyzed using constant comparison methodology (Hubbard & Power, 1999). This involved my comparing reflections and categorizing them based upon common themes. Following the categorization process, I analyzed the surfaced trends to answer my research questions. This was accomplished

through the identification of key themes in answer to my research question and the subsequent discussion under each.

### **Journals: Post-teaching Field Notes and Memoir**

I analyzed my journal entries by re-examining them after the data collection process had concluded. Having already separated entries into two groups, I reviewed each. I searched for trends or patterns in my teaching practices or perspectives on literacy education and students in my post-teaching field notes. When looking at my memoirs, I attempted to identify common themes in the practices that took place between households, key support systems I had, and pivotal moments that shaped how I viewed literacy. These were then cross-referenced with the themes identified in my teaching reflections in an attempt to find relationships.

### **Materials Lists**

I then compared and contrasted my collected materials lists in an attempt to correlate environmental cues with my reflections. I investigated these correlations, or noted a lack thereof, in order to understand how the classroom layout, practices, and available resources related to my teaching practices therein. I sought to draw connections between these elements and my wider beliefs about literacy and teaching to come to conclusions on the influence of available materials and resources on my own practices and perspectives when in the act of teaching.

## **Descriptions of the Classroom**

I analyzed my descriptions of classrooms by comparing and contrasting them against one another. I then cross-referenced their qualities with my recorded perceptions in my journal entries. Elements such as student grouping were also analyzed and compared against my reflections for that day, citing specific teaching practices and inquiring into how my beliefs, perspectives, and personal history might have informed these.

## **Criteria for Trustworthiness**

It is important that the collected data and the analysis that follow be credible and trustworthy. The patterns and trends I identified through my above data sources were based on what occurred in the classroom as documented at the time and journaled soon thereafter. I gathered my data from a variety of sources in order to increase the credibility of my findings through triangulation. This process was bolstered by collecting data from many different classrooms and schools across several different school districts.

I also reinforced the trustworthiness of this in a number of other ways. First, the study took place over six weeks of data collection ensuring that there was a prolonged engagement of research. I also worked closely with an advisor, as well as a research partner, who checked my work and challenged my thinking by asking questions, suggesting new possibilities for the gathering and interpretation of data, and reviewing my findings to ensure that they are credible and valid. I have also thoroughly disclosed the context of the study and my positionality within, as well as each step of the research

and analysis process, thereby increasing the dependability and potential transferability of my research. Finally, all of my data is available for review increasing its confirmability.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study does face several limitations. The first is that the primary data source, journaling, is also the most inherent to bias. As a single researcher and author of this journal, certain trends or themes may go unrecognized and bear further review by colleagues in the field of education. It is also possible that during the journaling process I may have unintentionally excluded information that does not seem, at the time, relevant.

### **Summary**

Engaging in thorough reflection is one of the most important practices of effective teaching. By collecting the data required for this study, I have not only reflected upon my experiences but also analyzed my practices and perspectives deeply and thoroughly. The reflective process which has always been a part of my educational practice has become even more prevalent; this study has allowed me to reflect on a daily basis and even in individual moments of teaching, better informing me about myself as a teacher and individual. I believe that children construct knowledge socially and are shaped by their environment and experiences. As a child of a separated household, examining how my own history has brought me to the field of education and the implications that now has have proven foundational for my future practices while also providing an example for other aspiring literacy teachers.

## Chapter Four: Results

The purpose of this study was to examine how growing up as a child of divorced parents has influenced my teaching and day-to-day work with students. The research was conducted over a six-week data gathering period and set out to answer one primary question:

*How have the literacy experiences I experienced through my upbringing in a separated household influenced my teaching philosophies and pedagogical practices with my students?*

The original research plan was to document six weeks of instruction on available substitute teaching days. Data gathering began on Jan. 27, 2014 and had an anticipated completion date of March 7, 2014; however, research was interrupted during the final week for the study due to mid-winter recess. Data gathering concluded on March 14, 2014 with a total of fifteen post-teaching journal entries. Fifteen memoir-based entries were also produced during this time, organized into ten entries spanning early- to late-childhood and five from upper-adolescence into early adulthood.

Five major themes surfaced in the gathering and analysis of the associated data. The first two themes are based upon core reading and writing experiences within the classroom and practiced by individual students. Specifically, these themes focus on the teaching behaviors I engaged in, encouraged, or facilitated, as well as those I observed students engaging in independently and reflected upon. The third theme is related to my heretofore unconscious tendency to relate to individual students and to have them relate

to me. Theme four, closely related to the last, focuses on my tendency to gravitate toward students demonstrating particularly high needs, especially those with behavioral issues. Finally, the last theme centralizes on alternate literacies including technological, numerical, and musical forms and my practices valuing, or devaluing, each. Similar sentiments run through each of these themes and, notably, there is a recurring presence of overcoming challenge.

All names and locations described in this study are pseudonyms.

### **Theme 1: Valuing and Supporting Reading**

One of the consistent themes that was evidenced throughout the data set was my repeated demonstration of valuing reading in the classrooms in which I would teach. In a general sense, if the classroom valued reading, in either student behavior or environmental factors, then I was more at ease and felt better prepared to meet the challenges of substitute teaching. In individual students, I found myself supporting them to look through the classroom library instead of spending time on netbooks or iPads. In the case of one student who would read at inappropriate times, I was both impressed and a little apprehensive to stop her from reading, internally conflicted due to my strong sense of admiration for the child's tenacity. The connection to my own childhood is apparent.

In my memoirs, I wrote time and again about spending hours with my favorite books. Thirteen out of fifteen total entries feature commentary on my boyhood and adolescent reading, the fourteenth instead focusing explicitly on writing, though in that

Feb. 26, 2014 entry, I noted, markedly, “I was still playing [The Final Challenge] MUD,” a text-based multiplayer roleplaying game operated over the internet (“The Final Challenge,” 2013), “reading fantasy stories, and coming up with my own,” even then having long established the importance of regular reading in my own life. In fact, this value already seemed to be taking root by the time I had started formal schooling at age four. In the memoir written on Jan. 28, 2014 I wrote:

[O]n [my grandmother's and my] walk home, as early as kindergarten, we would often stop at the library so she could help me find books I would enjoy and then sit in the children's section and read to me.

Just a few short years later, I would be doing this on my own without any provocation from adults. “When I was old enough to walk to my babysitter's, about age eight, I would go to the library every day before going home” the Jan. 28, 2014 entry continues, “I would spend hours each week poring over the shelves, searching for the perfect book” (Memoir). I had, by third grade, discovered the value of reading and developed a passion for it that maintained, and shaped, my life each year that was to come. Reflecting on my adult life in the memoir of March 14, 2014, I revealed that “reading began to empower me in a brand new way” and that “it began to shape who I was as an adult. . . that journey is still taking place”.

My post-teaching reflections reveal what approximates a sense of pride when encountering similarly devoted readers in the classroom. When encountering a particularly tenacious reader on Feb. 27, 2014, I recalled that she “was the most

voracious reader I have ever taught (Field note). All throughout the day, if there was a minute of downtime, and I mean a *minute*, this girl was reading!” (2014). More than half of this entry is devoted to my reflections on this student and the entire reflection bears an exceptional sense of energy. On Feb. 5, 2014, in the presence of a classroom more dependent on iPads and interactive storybooks than any other I had encountered, I reflected on my actions with one student, a girl devoted to reading *Goosebumps* instead of playing with her tablet, and about how proud I was of her, audibly praising her before the other students (2014). This embrace of the literature extends to the classroom environment, both in my beliefs and aspirations for my own classroom, but also how the environment influences my perceptions of the classrooms in which I teach.

Later that month on Feb. 24, 2014, I reflected in a post-teaching field note with the greatest enthusiasm of any of the post-teaching journal entries: “Today was another amazing day!” I stated, quickly following that statement with revelations about the classroom environment:

All around the room the teacher had hung examples of student writing. One poster described the writing process. Another declared that “everybody is a reader!” In the front of the room, a poster hung covered in sticky notes under the heading “A Successful Classroom Is . . .” The post-it notes had been written by students and some were downright surprising: “beautiful,” “respectful of others,” “has a supportive atmosphere,” “allows everyone to take part and learn.” What fifth grader writes such things?

In that same room, I noted the presence of a large quantity of literate material. A large bookshelf housed an extensive classroom library composed of fiction and non-fiction. A rotary filled with on-level paperbacks was placed next to it. Behind the teacher's desk was a display of young adult and adult fiction and non-fiction, demonstrating that the teacher herself had been a reader. I reflected, "Literature seemed to be in every corner of the classroom. . . I was enthusiastic before the students even entered the room" (Field note, 2/24/14). Modern research repeatedly emphasizes the importance of a text-rich environment that supports student exploration (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009); furthermore, with the inclusion of the teacher's own reading materials, she is more apt to be seen as a reading role model, supporting a classroom atmosphere which embraces and supports reading (Routman, 2003).

Even in the context of entries where I was facing extreme adversity in my attempts to teach, my mind would turn to literacy. On Feb. 10, 2014, I wrote, "Teaching was a problem . . . [the students] acted as if I wasn't even there. I would try to teach a lesson and they would shout and laugh and throw papers at each other" (Field note). During downtime, despite students who clearly had no desire to engage, I still made efforts to support their engagement with literacy by encouraging them to read or free-write (2014). I was dismayed at this time to find a lack of classroom library, but still presented a particularly troubled student with a magazine and reflected upon my available options (2014).

Reading is a recurring theme throughout the recorded post-teaching reflections. It is a common thread which binds together much of my contemplations about the day gone by. In my analysis of the collected data, it is clear that I not only value literacy but that I also encourage it in the students I work with on a daily basis.

### **Encouraging Reading**

The value I place upon reading in the recorded data is regularly accompanied by my attempts to encourage students to take part in this activity in the classroom. Just as in the case of the troubled teaching day described previously, I repeatedly referenced the in-class libraries of the classrooms within which I was working. At times, I would encourage students to make use of resource themselves. At other points, such as that reflected in the Feb. 10, 2014 field note, my mind turned to these libraries as a teaching resource for myself. Finding nothing on that day and faced with a student who reminded me so much of myself – “I have lived that life,” I stated -- I sadly noted that there was no classroom library, “no alternatives to provide him with something interesting he might *enjoy* reading. I let the issue rest,” I continued, “despairing at the lack of resources available to these students” (2014). The desire reflected in that piece of data is to provide literate material; to kindle a fire in a student who desperately needed nourishment for a spark that had begun to dwindle. That theme, one of turning to physical books, is repeated again and again in the data set.

The data reported in the Feb. 5, 2014 entry exemplifies this. On that day, the students had been trained to “use their iPads for virtually everything” (Field note). During

their down time, they would play educational games and read interactive storybooks, even going so far as to email assignments to their homeroom teacher who was out sick that day. “ I routinely toured the room asking students about books they had read recently . . .” I wrote on that day (2014). “I encouraged them repeatedly to look through the classroom library and reminded them that they might find something they'd like” (2014). My journal entry for this day also notes that I made multiple efforts to model this behavior, “making audible commentary about the available selection of books” (2014).

The field note written on Feb. 20, 2014, illustrates an encounter with another student who lacked reading support outside of school. This student, Martin, a boy who routinely failed to turn in his homework and read at a level significantly below his peers, reported that his father did not read with him because he was “too tired” and when he comes home from work, “watches the races” (2014). Research indicates that shared reading within the home is an important educational experience for children to have that also supports parental bonding (Bradley & Donovan, 2012; Mullan & Daraganova, 2012). Understanding this, the data indicate a quick and significant teaching response, even before I was made aware of the entire context surrounding this student's home life. After informally assessing the student during guided reading, I “made it my mission to help Martin feel successful” (2014). I also made use of the resources in the classroom, directing him to utilize an extensive word wall, as well as a self-made dictionary-thesaurus kept by every student. At the end of the day, I encouraged him to exchange his books for new ones that might be more interesting to him.

This is similar to the role my grandmother fulfilled for me. On Jan. 28, 2014, I wrote that my grandmother would accompany me to the library to assist me in finding interesting books (Memoir). I noted that this practice continued well into high school, far after shared reading had ceased to become a regular event between she and I:

This is how I discovered one of my favorite books series, *Harry Potter*, as well as the perennial classics of Roald Dahl. It was a reminder to keep reading. It was a gentle nudge that said “reading has value, so value it.” Even when I would drift from my own searches of the library's shelves, this action would remind me of how much awaited me between those covers. How much lay in wait, to be learned or drunk in like the finest form of entertainment.

The actions reported in my post-teaching reflections approximate those adults took with me as recorded in my memoirs. Shared reading, something the data and current research reinforce time and again, was a means for me to bond with my parents and grandmother (Mullan & Daraganova, 2012). It was a way to fill time before my father would return home from work and I reported in to the babysitter. It was meaningful. The work of Bradley & Donovan (2012) reveals that shared reading also imparts the beliefs, discourses, and values of parents to their children, so it is unsurprising that imparting similar values is also a feature of my teaching pedagogy. The same message I wrote as coming from my grandmother could be ascribed to me: “reading has value, so value it” (Memoir, 1/28/14).

## **Reading for Enjoyment vs. Reading by Mandate**

In reviewing the data set, one subject is noticeably absent from my reflections. Though I report reading while in school, the only time I expand on this fact is during the primary grades when the class would gather for read-alouds (Memoir, 2/5/14). Two other entries make note of particular texts during the elementary grades, *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Rawls, 1961) and *The Hobbit* (Tolkien, 1966); however, both of these texts are in direct connection with the reading experiences with my father and mother, respectively, and were shared with me at an early age. This is noteworthy for three other factors. First, these books are clearly categorized within a parental context which other entries clearly illustrate to carry emotional bonds. Second, both of these books are *fiction*. And finally, only these two are recalled despite surely reading a wide array of other in-school texts throughout the rest of my formal education. That I did not recall any of what must be hundreds of textbook and required educational reading experiences indicates a lack of memorability and meaning compared to other, more enjoyable, reading.

The post-teaching journal data reflect this. Though I recorded repeated attempts to encourage students to read leisure materials, my connections to academic texts – most notably textbooks – are much more limited. In fact, the only post-teaching field note dealing explicitly with academic text is that of Jan. 27, 2014. On this day, the students were using their textbooks and their own critical thinking skills to analyze and assess the degradation and preservation of the seven world wonders. Between the four periods of fifth grade social studies recorded in the day's data set, my teaching practices remained

largely the same: re-orienting the students to the text and having them draw conclusions based on what the author has actually written.

In other struggling groups I found my reaction to be the same. What does the text say? If you're off task, open your book and find a fact. Talk with your group about what you found. What do you see in the photograph next to your wonder? Always reorienting to the text.

That there are no other references to textbook-based reading despite their appearance in nearly every materials list is important. The use of textbooks in the average school day is expected, so the lack of focus in the recorded data does not indicate they went unused. Instead, the data, and the inclusion on the materials list, indicate the opposite: textbooks were regularly used but my work with them remained, to my reflective self, unremarkable.

On Jan. 27, 2014, I wrote a particularly revealing paragraph which began, “In the back of my mind, I found myself thinking about formal testing. Even as a substitute, state tests wear on my mind” (Field note). I continued, adding that, “they need to refer to text because the test will demand they refer to the text” (2014). Yet, as the entry makes clear, this is not particularly interesting teaching. The data reflect a clear value for informational reading but, just as in my own elementary and secondary years, education purely for assessment remains uninspired and without lasting positive impressions.

The gathered data indicate another important detail: when I am able to participate in whole-group reading, I contribute to the meaning-making process in a much

heightened manner. On Feb. 13, 2014 I described a day free of behavioral issues and steeped in such whole-group literacy (Field note). This entry reflects a building upon process. As I grew more familiar with the source material, I was able to ask more of the students and push their understandings. Rather than simply asking students to refer to the text, I referred to it *with* them and then asked them to think critically about the author's message. In this instance, I modeled how to make use of an informational text and my own thinking before asking them to engage in guided practice.

Later that month, on Feb. 24, 2014, I was present with a different class with a very similar positive result. This was a classroom that embraced literacy more than most I taught in during the data collection period. The students were active readers and writers, having regularly scheduled time for each in their daily routines. While working with this class, I had the opportunity to engage the students in a read-aloud (Field note, 2014). During this time, I taught the students deeper lessons than I am often able; topics such as authorial intent and the real life applicability of the relationship between the two main characters, arose and we were able to talk and relate over the text and our own connections to it (2014). This field note, combined with that of Feb. 13, 2014, represent some of the most lively and exuberant of all the collected data.

One of the paramount details illustrated by the data is that fiction-based small- and whole-group reading exercises involve much more active teaching. This research also indicates that I utilize and support many more active literacy strategies when working with these texts. When I teach based upon textbook-based readings, on the other hand,

while I certainly value them, my experiences with strategy-use remain less. My closing statements within one entry capture the heart of this lack of memorability:

Reading, I believe, is the work of students but it should also be one of their great escapes . . . Growing up, it was quite a juxtaposition: reading as something I loved to do and reading was something I was made to do. When I was made to do it, I didn't like it. Now, as a teacher, I wish I didn't have to make students read things they didn't like. I wish it could all be enjoyable *and* educationally rich . . . It may not always be fun, and we may have to read things we don't like, but it is important to try new things and find value in *all* reading. (Field note, 1/27/14)

Reading has played an incredible role in my life. As a child, I was encouraged to read. My parents supported me by providing materials and acting as reading role-models (e.g., Memoir, 1/27/14; 1/28/14; 1/31/14). Reading has developed into one of my favorite hobbies and has served me well both personally and professionally. As a teacher, I carry this value with me into the classroom. Through active encouragement and specific strategy-use, the data reflect a specific effort to support my students in their reading efforts. During the data collection period, I noticed a trend toward supporting fiction over non-fiction, remarking far more often on teaching encounters involving read-aloud or read-for-pleasure texts. That I value all forms of reading is without question, though what this indicates is certainly important for my future instructional decisions.

## **Theme 2: Valuing and Supporting Writing**

Another common theme reflected in the data set was my value for and support of writing in the classroom. At numerous points, I engaged in teaching actions that supported the students' attempts at writing, both creative and academic. Of fifteen post-teaching reflections, eight describe teaching decisions that reflect my value for this endeavor and my attempts to support it as an educator. The deep-grained nature of this is apparent throughout the recorded memoirs as well. Eight of fifteen entries directly discuss writing and form a central thread of embrace from childhood through adolescence and into my adult years. If, in these memoirs, one were to consider reading and writing as the intertwined entities that they are, all but a single entry would act in support of my developing literate self.

In the classroom, the data reflect my active support for writing through verbal encouragement and the provision of materials. In a post-teaching field note drafted on Feb. 5, 2014, I wrote:

As I taught, I engaged the students with the written word as much as possible. Instead of allowing them to play games on their tablets, I asked them to free write in their composition notebooks. Unfortunately, they didn't have writer's notebooks! Instead, they had been using a set of netbooks available to the whole cluster . . . Their writing thus far . . . had been all about particular topics or for assignments they had been given . . . I asked them to get out a sheet of lined

paper or to retrieve a piece of scrap paper from a basket in the class and to write about whatever captured their imagination.

Luck Calkins (1994) describes writing as an intensely personal process (albeit one that often should become public) that students should find enjoyment in. My encouragement of free writing encouraged the students to use their imaginations and to have fun with their writing, free of the bonds of assignment parameters. Had I more freedom and the potential to follow up with these students, the form and goal of my encouragement might change; however, as a substitute bound by the limits of single-day teaching, encouraging free writing seemed like a viable, research supported option.

This pattern was repeated in the face of a particularly troubled classroom on Feb. 10, 2014. When confronted with an idle eighth grade student, refusing to do his work, I encouraged him to read. When that failed to work, I turned to writing, describing my rationale: “I couldn't bear to see him sit idle, staring into space. This was school and even during downtime or in the face of adversity, we should be learning. What better and more natural than literacy?” (Field note, 2014).

This echoes data gathered in several memoir entries, most notably that of Feb. 14, 2014, where I noted explicitly that writing was a form of escapism for my boyhood self, a way to fill in hours of idleness of my own. “I can't help but believe,” I wrote. “That there were elements of self-preservation to my writing” (Memoir, 2/14/14). When I would write, I would sink into my story. I mimicked the books, comic books, and other media I was reading (Memoir, 2/4/14). Moreover, I embraced the social elements of writing from

an early age, sharing my work with my parents and their friends, later working collaboratively to develop a comic book “company” as a fifth-grade student (2014). Writing embodied escape and imagination but also connection, camaraderie, and acceptance. In the moments when my students seem to drift, my mind regularly returns to my own childhood where reading and writing were so important and comforting.

Another way the data reflect a value for writing is in my attempts to connect with students over their written work. This is well reflected in the Feb. 24, 2014 post-teaching field note. On that day, I recorded that it was an “amazing day ... rich in literacy!” (2014). It began with reading, both independent and shared, before the students began work on a research project where they had to use the internet, take notes, and write a short informational essay on a topic of their choice. Later in the day, they had the choice to free write, which many of the students took. Feeling confident in myself and the educational progress of the day, I detailed checking in with each student, talking with them about what they were writing or researching, and “showing a genuine interest” (2014). I noted, somewhat atypically, that it was “a day filled with smiles” (2014). In the field notes of Feb. 20, 2014, March 12, 2014, and, indeed, Feb. 24, 2014, I noted a specific desire to help students “feel successful” and “like writers,” a research-supported goal that encourages students to take ownership of their work and identify as authors (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009).

Like other elements of my current teaching practices, these attempts at connection are again echoed in the memoir entries. On Feb. 4, 2014, I recalled extensively about my

own boyhood writing efforts (Memoir). The work of Clark, Picton, and the National Literacy Trust (2012) states the importance of parent-child shared writing, citing specifically the lower incidence of fathers supporting writing at all. This was not the case for me. I noted how impactful the validation of my mother, father, and grandmother were, and how encouraging it was for me when they would allow me to share my work with their friends (2014). I wrote, “My parents helped me to become a writer and stay one over twenty years later” (2014). As I approach the classroom, I do so with an awareness of the pivotal importance of parents in the lives of their children; I look to my own history and can see the real-life impact so reiterated in the research (Clark, Picton, & The National Literacy Trust, 2012).

Another important reflection included in the data regards my school-age experiences with teachers and validation. On Feb. 24, 2014, I documented a seventh grade attempt to push the boundaries and shock a new, first-year teacher (Memoir). This is not uncommon in boy writers, as Fletcher (2006) makes clear in his work on the gender differences in adolescent writers. The writing process allowed me to connect to my friends and use writing as a form of bravado, but when she returned my story, scratched through with the red ink and criticism devoid of any positive reinforcement, I “felt like a failure” (Memoir, 2/24/14). This is counter to Fletcher's suggestion that teachers attempt to reserve content judgments and instead focus on form, function, and positive reinforcement (2006). As I teach, I bear these experiences in mind and do my best to

foster a love of literacy in my students, without judgment or criticism when the ideas of students do not match up the conceptual norms of formal schooling.

Yet, the next year, when I received public praise and encouragement from two very supportive teachers, I stated I had felt “true accomplishment” (Memoir, 2/26/14).

More importantly, I revealed the following:

It was there that I really began to believe that I was a good writer, not just trying at nothing. From that moment onward, I started to believe in myself, because of two teachers who took the time to validate me when I needed it most. That's what I to do with my students today: lift them up and make them feel successful when they need it most. It changed my life for the better. I owe it to the children I teach to do the same now that I'm in the teacher's shoes.

Related to this, the data reflect an effort to support all writers, notably those undertaking alternative forms of writing. On Feb. 27, 2014, I recorded that, though I had directed the day's class to spend a short period of free time reading or writing, some of the boys were instead drawing comic-style stories (Field note). Rather than re-orient these students, I reflected on my acceptance of it as a form of “boy writing” (Fletcher, 2006) and even “encouraged them to add dialogue in the traditional comic book style” (Field note, 2/27/14). I even shared some of my own history writing comic books when I was a fifth grade student. This embrace echoes entirely positive sentiments related to that period of my life; this is described in the Feb. 4, 2014 memoir entry. Those experiences, I wrote, combined with others, (i.e. at-home and in-school reading and writing), taught me

that my imagination “the wellspring of whole adventures” and that “the written word could be an escape” (2014).

The recorded data also reflect several direct supportive behaviors I engaged in for writing. When facilitating a small-group research-based lesson that combined with reading, I reoriented students back to the text to gather details (Field note, 1/27/14), a practice which Fountas & Pinnell (2009) suggest is one of the necessary literacy skills for fifth-grade students to develop throughout the course of the school year.. This reinforcement to make use of the available classroom materials was enacted several other times throughout the data set.

Another post-teaching field note recorded on Feb. 20, 2014 states that I actively directed the class to make use of their classroom word wall and self-made dictionaries and thesauruses. It is apparent through the actions recorded that ensuring students feel prepared for each writing task is a priority I hold closely. This is supported by the work of Lucy Calkins in *The Art of Teaching Writing* as an appropriate action to scaffold unfamiliar writing exercises (1994). A made attempts to scaffold instruction at other points, as well. On March 14, 2014, I guided a fifth-grade class through the writing of a persuasive letter, using my own writing as a model and sharing my own thoughts out loud (Field note). The field note recorded on Feb. 24, 2014 provides another strong example, as I engaged the students in a critical analysis of a read-aloud text (Field note). Furthermore, it is clear through the many statements regarding the availability of

classroom materials that a well-stocked well-prepared *classroom* is another element I find important in the process of literacy instruction.

Finally, the wealth of post-teaching reflections indicate that I actively pursue a positive literate atmosphere in the classrooms within which I work. Examples of this pepper the recorded data, but the most prominent and widely applicable is through behavior management. In the Jan. 27, 2014 entry described above, I also enacted behavioral interventions to ensure that groups remained on-task and in the spirit of collaborative inquiry (Field note). There, I interceded when one girl became disruptive to her group, impacting the learning of her teammates; likewise, I met with each group, supporting them in the task of critically examining the text and working collaboratively to meet the requirements of the assignment (2014). On Feb. 14, 2014, working with a troubled sixth-grade boy, I reflected that during independent writing “I made a point to check in on him and show an interest” because “a spark of renewed interest” shone and counteracted the disruptive behaviors he had previously been exhibiting (Field note). Later, on March 14, 2014, in a field note where I reported being particularly flustered and did *not* do these things, I stated that, “I have to do a better job of giving an air of confidence.” “In retrospect,” I continued, “I should have assessed the situation better in the beginning and taken a firmer approach right from the start” (2014). These excerpts demonstrate my contemplations following behavior management practices that enabled a negative classroom environment that I did not find conducive to learning. My goal, as

shown here, is to help all students learn. When I feel unsuccessful in managing the many elements that make that possible, the data indicate such post-teaching reflection.

Supporting a positive classroom atmosphere has also been a priority on other recorded teaching days. On March 12, 2014, I embraced the students' desire to share their written work through a formal author's chair (Field note). The results, recorded exuberantly in this data point, were profound.

After they had finished their first paragraph, I had planned to let volunteers read their writing to the class. What I didn't expect, however, was that the first girl would pop right up, walk in front of the room to a stool their normal teacher had placed in front of the SmartBoard, and read hers there. I also wasn't expecting everyone to clap without provocation afterward! They went in a line without my even needing to ask.

As is made clear in this excerpt, the students became far more engaged in the writing process through the potential to share and be honored as an author (2014). Following the readings, I began the practice of initiating a round of applause, which visibly made the students feel successful and proud of the work they had produced.

Reading, writing, and literacy are enabled by supportive contexts and constructs. In many ways, my personal history has influenced my teaching to build and support these elements. In the data set recorded during the six-week collection period, example after example demonstrate that writing is a core value, held since the times when I was *taught* instead of *teaching*. It is a value I consciously work to impart to the students I teach and

one that research indicates often leads to further academic success (Mullan & Daraganova, 2012).

### **Theme 3: Active Identification**

Another common theme identified through analysis of the recorded data is that of identification. At different points, I engaged in teaching practices to better allow myself to identify with students and to increase the likelihood that they would identify with me. When reflecting on teaching encounters, I regularly made connections to events in my own past, in a way, building a bridge to better understand the perspective of the student and relating to him after the fact. Two of the ways my attempts at identification surface in my present-day are through sharing of myself and engaging in oral storytelling while teaching.

#### **Sharing of Myself**

One of the most common elements of substitute teaching days indicated by the post-teaching data is to begin the day “on the right foot” (Field note, 2/24/14). In the field note of March 12, 2014, I wrote that I believed introductions to be a time of “mutual expectation.” In those moments I set my behavioral expectations for the day and take the first core teaching action toward creating a positive learning atmosphere. Just as importantly, I am able to allow a new class to see a sliver of who I am as a person.

In the data, I remarked, “the introduction is the substitute's formal opportunity to be more than 'just another sub.' It is their chance to be a relatable human being” (Field

note, 3/12/14). During this time, I share pieces of my background: where I am from, how long I have been a teacher, that I love kids, and that I have pets. I allow the students to make connections and ask questions. On Feb. 26, 2014 I followed this by asking the students questions about themselves, beginning the flow of two-way communication (Field note, 2014). The goal, as described in that entry, is to set a positive tone for the day and to make me a relatable person for them; someone they can trust.

The post-teaching data set also reveals a tendency to embed pieces of my personal narrative throughout my day of teaching. The data demonstrate that this can occur at both a one-on-one level and with whole-groups. When on a one-on-one level, these connections come in the form of anecdotes and conversational connections to things the students are engaged in. On Feb. 24, 2014, I described such an encounter:

During their downtime, several of them would write or read or draw . . . If they were reading a book I had read, or an author, I would ask them what they thought of it and share that I had read it too and some of the connections I had made, maybe make a recommendation for a book they might enjoy . . . One student was drawing a comic strip, I shared how I had also drawn comics and made a “company” with my friends . . . It was a day filled with smiles (Field note).

These one-on-one encounters are not uniformly anecdote-based. In other instances, they take the form of singular points of connection. On a particularly challenging day of teaching, the data indicate that I used this form of connection in an attempt to manage the disruptive behaviors of a set of boys. The students, while not

mean, were simply silly and prone to impulsively shout out their answers, often attempting to make their peers laugh (Field note, 2/4/14). Faced with no set behavior management system from the homeroom teacher, and seeing that these students were not necessarily naughty or mean spirited, I tried to relate to them.

My teaching practice at this point was to move onto their level and then raise their standards through understanding and respect. I began by sharing that it had not been so long since I was in their grade, and that I understood making friends laugh, but that I needed them to listen and stay on task (Field note, 2/4/14). My goal was to make these students feel understood; to relate to them, so they could relate to me and alter their behavior. Ultimately, this attempt was unsuccessful, but it does represent a common teaching practice I undertake.

A similar circumstance is reported in the Jan. 31, 2014 post-teaching reflection. This day of teaching occurred in a self-enclosed middle school classroom in Weston. A student coping with emotional disturbances refused to do his work and instead focused on repairing the classroom vacuum cleaner. Despite several attempts by the classroom aides, he was uncooperative. Taking a similar approach to the students documented in the Feb. 4, 2014, field note, I visited with the student, revealing my own interest in repair. In this case, my attempts to relate to the student were successful and he was soon asking me to share more of my interests. With the rapport now built, I convinced the student to return to his desk, with the promise of further conversation later in the day (2014).

## **Oral Storytelling**

Using connection points in a whole-group setting has also proven to be a common practice. The first and primary way this is recorded as occurring is in the morning introduction. Several data points reveal a penchant for whole-group connections throughout the day, however. Moreover, these connections are not always spur of the moment. Rather, the post-teaching reflections reveal at least one instance of dedicated, oral storytelling, with reference to historical usages of this practice. The work of Heath identifies this in her examination of the Maintown, Roadville, and Trackton families, labeling storytelling as a primary discourse pattern many students enter schooling with (1982). Its effectiveness in building relationships with whole groups of students is without question, if by virtue of the near universal embrace of storytelling as an at-home bonding practice many students enter school comfortable with (e.g., Heath, 1982; Taylor, 1983; Mullan & Daraganova, 2012; Bradley & Donovan, 2012; Fox, 2013).

The standout post-teaching entry for dedicated oral storytelling occurred on Feb. 18, 2014. On this day, I taught science at the Midtown middle school. The lesson was particularly dry, focusing on science tools such as goggles and beakers, and it was apparent that the students were settling in for a dreary lesson. After the first early minutes of teaching it, I reported “looking out at a sea of glassy-eyed faces” (2014). Changing course, I began a story about how I had burned my eyelid by not wearing safety goggles during a technology class. The class perked up and for the remaining time in the period, and every one thereafter, I pulled from my own history to share pieces of personal story

relating to each tool. “The students loved it,” I reflected after the day's teaching. “What was once a boring, note-taking lesson became one of lively conversation that the students' actively contributed to” (Field note, 2/18/14).

The use of oral storytelling appears elsewhere in several different forms. On Feb. 24, 2014, the post-teaching data reveal another potentially dry day teaching textbook science content at the middle school level. Here, I reported asking the students to visualize as I retold the content from the textbook using rich imagery. Student engagement increased. Using a combination of textbook passages, examination of illustrations, and lively descriptions of the content, a class I had expected to be challenging transformed into a deep exploration of the real life implications glossed over in the text. When we discussed the San Andreas fault, I shared and connected with them over family members myself and several students had in California. This section of the post-teaching entry ends on notes of trust from the students and confidence in myself as an educator.

At the end of the day, I gave the students the option of having free time or, taking a chance, having a question and answer where I would allow them to ask any school appropriate question they had – about me, about something they learned or were curious about. . . To my surprise, they wanted to do the Q&A. Coming off of science, things started off with questions like “why is the sky blue” but quickly went into personal questions about myself. Was I married? Did I have kids? That kind of thing. Before long, the kids were making connections to me and I to them.

Not only did the students enjoy the exercise and ask many science-related questions, but they also showed a genuine interest in who I was as a teacher and a person, offering up their own connections with the things I had shared. “We ended the day with high fives,” I reflected, “and a chorus of . . . 'I wish you could be my substitute everyday!'” (2014).

Returning to the Feb. 18, 2014 field note, the data include a description of another time I had used oral storytelling preceding this project. Though the teaching event occurs outside of the data collection period, the reflections I shared are pertinent to the current theme.. In this case, it was with my work with primary aged students:

I would begin loudly with the classic fairy tale opening, “Once upon a time...” and then weave students’ names into a spontaneous story. Without fail, this method always quieted the class as they listened to hear what their same-named characters would do next.

Oral storytelling has become an increasingly important element of my educational practice. As the data clearly indicate, the role of narrative in my life has been profound, by providing an escape and to relate to others. In a general sense, reading has also allowed me a way to relate to circumstances other than my own. As reflected here, oral storytelling as an educator may have a similar effect of opening the doorways to relationship and understanding.

## **Relating to the Past**

Storytelling, it is clear, is an important part of the teaching reflected in the data. Throughout the data gathering process, I reflectively contemplated why this might be the case. I made connections to my past. Interestingly, the data also track a path into my present through podcasts, audiobooks, and talk radio. Unsurprisingly, though, there is also a core element of desire: wanting to open the doorway to relatability and identification.

On Feb. 18, 2014, I described how important stories were to me as a boy with a single-father and a grandmother who was a librarian. I shared how I would write stories and let my imagination run wild and how I loved to be read to. This entry carries a definitive enthusiasm for my lifelong narrative escapades. Building on the back of my memoir entries, I wrote, “I know how entrancing [stories] are for me, so it feels eminently natural to weave oral storytelling into my teaching” (Field note, 2/18/14). Ending this entry, I stated the power of oral storytelling, the nature of the endeavor to make education and learning accessible and communal, a “community tapestry” that says “connect with me and learn with me” (2014).

In the second set of journal entries, those memoirs focusing on my personal history, I elaborated on the continuing thread of oral storytelling throughout my life. On Feb. 5, 2014, I wrote about my love for read-alouds beginning all the way in kindergarten. I described my continuing love for them all throughout school and into adulthood, now taking the form of audiobooks. On March 14, 2014, I reported that

though I am busier than ever before, I still find time for oral storytelling through audiobooks; however, I have come to supplement that in my adult life through talk radio and storytelling podcasts.

Perhaps most importantly, the data reflect the specific goal of answering a need in students that I found in myself in my student-hood: to relate. In the post-teaching entry on Feb. 18, 2014 I revealed that I did not feel any substitute teacher truly understood me; that they did not know what it was like to be me in the student's desk; that I could not completely trust them. By telling stories from my past, I indicate, I am trying to remove the boundary between substitute teacher and student. I wrote:

This desire to relate, to trust, to connect, I feel is strongly rooted to my own history. It has to be. Even as I write this, I feel a tendril pulling all the way back to childhood when I sat in those desks, looking to my teachers as trusted adults, just like my parents.

One of the goals reflected in the data is to be known. More than that, I write repeatedly about the desire to be trusted. "I want students to feel they know me," I again wrote on Feb. 18, 2014, "so they can believe in the lessons I teach and the messages I send." This is an interesting revelation, as a good deal of the research surrounding children of divorce and separation raises questions about the emotional and psychological ramifications of such acts (e.g., Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001; Hanson, 1999). Later, in a memoir entry written on March 14, 2014, I reflected that it was clear I had overcome many challenges but that through education I had persevered. In order to make

an impact on the lives of students, I must be more than “just another [substitute].” The final paragraph of my memoir entries reflects this mission:

But to give back, that has to be my mission. Children need me – or someone – to care. And why shouldn't it be me? I want them to understand and relate with me the same way I want to understand and relate with them. I had caring adults in my life who did that for me. I don't want any child to go without if there is anything I can do about it.

#### **Theme 4: Gravitating Toward Challenging Students**

Considering the experiences reflected in the memoir entries, it is perhaps unsurprising that accompanying the theme of identification is a discernible pattern of gravitating toward the most challenging students. Throughout the post-teaching data set are examples of this behavior: honing in on the students most in need of support and attempting to provide it. When encountering one of the most challenging students in all of the data gathering period, I wrote on my empathy for him, stating, “I have read the research, but, more than that, I have lived the life” (Field note, 2/20/14). Just as I acknowledged my belief that students learn best from teachers they can identify with, the reflections gathered in this report acknowledge a leaning toward students I identify with in my post-teaching reflections. This relatability supports the questions raised by Hanson (1999) when examining how witnessing parental conflict impacts children of divorce. Though they do not impede my ability to be objective, the emotional ties of my own past

to my students' present have proven to impact my teaching choices, primarily in the domains of individual student support and behavior management.

### **Individual Student Support**

During my analysis of the collected data, I identified a marked trend of spending more time on the most challenging students. It was at these times that I reflected on the home lives of these individuals. Often, I would question whether these reflections were worthwhile, as I noted in particular in the field note of Feb. 4, 2014, attributing this tendency to my desire to understand the nature of their negative behaviors. Yet, I also noted that, as a substitute teacher my capacity was limited, when compared with other, more consistent adult influences in their lives. Many studies agree, however, that there is no uniform result of parental separation on affected children (e.g., Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003; Pong, 1998; Amato, 1987). Still, these reflections surfaced, ever connected to my own history as a child from a single-parent home with a surrogate mother in the form of my grandmother.

At times, my spending extra time with students seemed to help. On Feb. 14, 2014, I reflected on my experiences working with a troubled but bright sixth grade student from a fractured home (Field note). The stability in this student, Darius', home life was inconsistent. He would see his father but not engage with him often. He would see his mother who refused to see or acknowledge him. He was emotionally challenged, however, his in-school persona would hardly betray this; he never talked about it. Instead,

he would act out, sometimes physically. More often than not, he would simply become disruptive, non-cooperative, and verbally abusive to his peers.

When I arrived in the class, it was apparent that he had been marginalized. He sat in a desk in the back of the room, a row unto himself. He was drifting, not completing his work. I saw him repeatedly insult the boy who sat in front of him more than once and I knew, I stated in that Feb. 14, 2014 entry, that “there was something not quite right and I suspected he hurt.” Without further provocation, I made a point to stay in close contact with him as much as possible throughout the day, providing him with positive attention.

His success seemed to depend on that attention. Often, when I would step away to attend to another student, he would return to acting out. When I provided it to him, he would do well. I could tell that I was helping, and, understanding the context of his troubled life outside of school, I rationalized spending the extra time, even though I reported feeling guilty, “almost as if I were doing the other students a disservice, even when I made every attempt to attend to them as well” (Field note, 2/18/14) I rationalized my choice as I looked back upon the day, stating that I truly thought I was helping him. At the end of the day, however, he stung another student's eye with a quick swipe of hand sanitizer.

In my post-teaching reflection on this day, there is a palpable sense of disappointment. I reported feeling like I had helped him and acknowledged that he did do quite well, exceeding expectations when we were together, but also that “Darius was finding attention where it was possible to be found, even if it was negative” (Field note,

2/18/14) Rather than address the behavioral issues at the beginning of the day, I chose to partner with him instead, hoping to redirect that energy in a positive direction. This statement on Darius' attention, understanding that he lived alone with his father, relates to several studies which indicate that a lack of resources, both time and financial, is more common in single-parent households (Parcel & Dufur, 2001). A similar action, that of focusing more time on one individual student, was repeated on subsequent day of teaching.

On Feb. 20, 2014, after leading third grade at Midtown, I noted that one student, Martin, had failed to bring in his homework (Field note). The teaching aide scolded him, indicating that it had happened before and reminded him that it was his responsibility, no one else's. Hearing this, I wrote, "My mind went immediately to support. What was the reason he had to be solely responsible for his homework? What was his home life like?" (2014). Seeing that he performed significantly below his peers during guided reading, my next actions seemed natural.

Further in that entry, I wrote, "For the rest of the day, I made it my mission to help Martin feel successful" (Field note, 2/20/14). While also attempting to teach the whole class, the data recorded on this day makes clear that I devoted extra attention, even if only my own preoccupied thoughts, to Martin. I found myself calling on him more, I wrote. I began the trend of having students clap for each other after Martin successfully answered a math problem at the board. At the end of the day, I talked with him about his home life, at which time he revealed to me that his father was too tired to read to him at nights

returning home from work. My concerns, having been validated by Martin and later by the aide, caused me to contemplate the nature of my teaching choices.

“It is apparent that I have an inborn need to help students that are struggling,” I wrote (Field note, 2/20/14). This sentiment is repeated in the entry focusing on Darius: I wrote that my “heart broke a little” upon first hearing his story (2/4/14). This emotional connection and influence upon my teaching is not surprising given my own history. That period of my life, as I reflected often, is where my mind goes when encountering students of this type. I was also a child whose father worked and did not consistently have time to support him.

This is supported by my post-teaching reflection after working with Mario on Feb. 10, 2014. There I reported feelings of guilt when inadvertently bringing up the painful topic of his parents, noting how I could identify with his feelings and experiences :

I don't want to bring up a painful topic. I don't want to step in the mud and hurt them. . . I do my best to see past that and to the child underneath. . . I have read the research, but, more than that, I have lived the life.

Amato and Keith (1991) found that there is a higher incidence of emotional instability in children affected by divorce. Though the study is now out of date, it is reasonable, based upon my reflections and encounters with these students, to state an increased ability to relate to individuals with similar experiences.

At the same time, the data also indicate the intention of equity in my teaching practices. Within each of the entries discussed above, I discussed the importance of teaching to *all* students, remarking on my responsibility to not engage in favoritism. On Feb. 20, 2014, I remarked that I take special care to be equitable and to ensure that students remain unaware of my inclinations toward students facing greater challenges (Field note). This sentiment is affirmed in another entry where I wrote, “I have to be aware that the rest of the class also needs me and, above all, it is my responsibility to create a safe learning environment for all students” (2/14/14).

Likewise, the data also share contemplations on the avoidance of stereotype. “I must not do that . . .” I stated, noting that on my day with Mario in Weston, another student from a supportive, two-parent household was arguably the most disruptive of all (Field note, 2/10/14). On my day with Darius, I again confirmed that there were surely other children from single-parent households in the class that did not act out in such profound ways (2/14/14). My own history is recorded in the memoir-entry of Feb. 10, 2014, when teachers had stereotyped me into the Banana Splits program, a mandatory support program for children of divorce, despite my insistence that I did not belong there having never actually known my parents to be together; separation and step-parenthood was my normal, not something for me to rage against (2014). The data make clear that avoiding stereotype is a core value to my work with students, even while it demonstrates a tendency toward supporting and identifying with those experiencing the most trouble.

## **Behavior Management**

I described teaching fifth grade in Northtown on Feb. 4, 2014 as “a day of some conflict” (Field note). Several boys disrupted lessons, not once but multiple times, exhibiting classic attention-seeking behaviors. They shouted out, made jokes, and were quick to point out the errors in other students. More than that, there was a general silliness that lingered over them the entire day, even at inappropriate times. In the absence of a dedicated behavior management system, I attempted to redirect these students but it was to no avail. Though the students would seem receptive, they soon returned to their negative behaviors, leading to a very stressful day of substitute teaching.

In that day’s entry, I wrote of my experiences with this day's students. In the beginning of the day, I held a conversation with the whole class to discuss mutual expectations, mine of them and theirs of me. When it became clear that the three boys were not prepared to meet our shared classroom norms, rather than address the issue in an authoritative manner, I made an attempt to relate to them, sharing that I had also been silly in class, but that there was a time and place. I then restated my expectations. The issue did not disappear, prompting multiple reminders and a mid-day meeting with these students where I spoke sternly to them. Though it prompted a temporary response, the effect was not lasting and the lack of a behavior management system prevented me from taking meaningful action.

When the day was done, I reflected on the events. Why had I not reacted more firmly in the beginning of the day? Was I simply too lax? I reflected on my past and why

I had attempted to identify with the students as my first course of action. The answer is there, reflected in the data: “If I could make people laugh, be accepted by them, then that was worth everything” (Memoir, 2/4/14). This statement, a revelation of an old drive, my own motivation from when I sat in the seats of those vexing students, to bond and to be accepted, made me question what drove them, and failing to have any real information, I projected. The data illuminate a desire for identification and relationship with my students. It also indicates that this history may require conscious intervention to overcome for effective classroom management.

In the March 14, 2014 post-teaching entry, I describe a similar experience at Northtown. This time I had arrived for a half-day of teaching. The class was unruly from the outset, having just returned from lunch and physical education at the time of my arrival. Even though I documented seeing this and being bothered by it, I again held back. In explanation for going against my better judgment, I wrote, “I wanted to give them chances before being stern with them. Having a father that could be stern, I don't want to be that way unless I absolutely have to” (2014). Again, my past experience arises in the form of extra chances. The result is a feeling of “battle” and an internal monologue which questions my abilities as an educator (Field note, 2/4/14)

Interestingly, if perhaps unsurprisingly, the opposite pattern is demonstrated when encountering classrooms without behavioral issues. In fact, as I wrote after a Feb. 13, 2014 day of teaching at Northtown middle school, it is in these days that I feel “in my element” (Field note). An even greater exuberance is documented in a similarly negative

behavior-free day at Midtown, which I wrote was “in every way, one of my best teaching days ever” (2/24/14). It is also interesting to note that these days both include data on connecting and identifying with students through sharing of myself (2/13/14; 2/24/14). Conversely, the connections documented in the most challenging entries are singular, occur at the start of the day, and, considering their inclusion in place of authoritative response, could be viewed as appeals for positive behavior (2/4/14; 3/14/14).

It is clear that I value positive relationships with my students. Within the data set are numerous examples of active identification and attempts rapport building. At times, these efforts were successful. Throughout the six-week data collection period, I was able to support many students. At other times, however, I felt much more unsuccessful, with the identification leading to ineffective classroom management. What is clear, however, is that I often gravitate toward students exhibiting particular challenges or face difficulties within their homes. These practices certainly influence the practices and perspectives I engage with as a teacher.

### **Theme 5: Extended Literacies**

The final theme revealed in the accumulated data is the reflection upon the multiple extended literacies. Throughout the data collection period, the recorded reflections reveal, at the basic level, an awareness of these literacies and my contact with them. More than that, however, the data shed light on an embrace, value, and, in one case, discomfort with an extended literacy. These are, one and all, rooted in my own

experiences growing up as a child in a single-parent household with a supportive grandmother. The three extended literacies which surfaced throughout the six-week data gathering window are: technological, numerical, and musical.

### **Musical Literacy**

Musical literacy played a role in this study on Jan. 31, 2014. On this day, the associated field note reflected a sense of apprehension at the beginning of the day, noting that mornings were usually rife with students' avoidance behaviors. I decided to borrow an acoustic guitar from the Weston music room to play while the students went about their morning routine. Preceding the arrival of the students, the data state that "I recalled my own past and how therapeutic music had been for me. I took a leap" (2014). The students reacted exceptionally well, impressing the classroom aides and bolstering my confidence to try again later in the day.

When I did, one student impressed me by asking for a lesson in how to play. At that moment, I felt a kinship with that student (Field note, 1/31/14). As I recalled my own memories of developing a love for music, I knew that I was "opening a gateway . . . and wanted to help her step through it" (2014). The other students in class only continued to work quietly or offered mild acknowledgments of my strumming for them. At the end of the day, this student joined me in the back of the room as I helped her strum a guitar for the first time.

My value of musical literacy is also reflected in the memoir-based journal entries. In that same Jan. 31, 2014, field entry, I described my mother, a lover of music, teaching

me the lyrics to *Aerosmith* songs when I was very young, and singing in the car together (2014). Later, on Feb. 27, 2014, I reflected on my own first encounters with the guitar (Memoir). I spent my time away from my father teaching myself to play. I also spent time alone when he *was* home teaching myself to play and exorcising the tumults of adolescent strife. “I played to go into myself and pour out those wells of emotion,” I wrote (2014). As I got older, I identified myself by my playing and branched into writing poetry and lyrics. Music was formational in my development.

Though musical literacy only surfaced once during the data collection period, the implications on the guiding research question are profound. Just as I played to release something inside of myself as an adolescent, I played to release something on the classroom that day, perhaps a sense of calm or the simple soothing atmosphere created by light melody. The deep-rooted seed of musical literacy extends its influence into my current teaching practices. As a teacher, I often use music as a way to relate to students, though this practice is not captured in the data set. I share with them pieces of my musical past: what, when, and how I learned to play, public performances I have given, my penchant for songwriting; I have used all of these things to connect with students, to build rapport and trust, and to again seek the sense of relationship described earlier in the chapter.

## **Technological Literacy**

Technological literacy surfaced repeatedly in the gathered data. In most cases, it was with the simple, unremarkable acknowledgment that the students I had been working with made use of it. This tacit acceptance of the increased presence and utilization of technology is very typical of the data set. It is also supported by the materials lists which all include the availability of computers and sometimes individual tablets for each student; however, this in itself *is* remarkable for the question being explored. My own history as a child enamored with technology and the internet has made the incorporation of these new resources natural for myself as an educator; furthermore, it has been a window into relationship and connection with the students I substitute teach.

The instances of advanced technology use in the data set are numerous but mostly unremarked upon. One of the most noteworthy is documented in the field entry of Feb. 27, 2014. On this day, the students were using netbooks to research a topic of their choice. I recorded feeling slightly awed at how quickly and easily the students navigated the internet to find the information for their projects. On that day, it was the students' acceptance of computers and the internet that stood out as a norm. It caused me to reflect on how far schools had come, considering my own sixth grade classroom with its single non-internet ready computer and antiquated disk drive. "Today," I wrote, "these kids have the very world at their fingertips and it is nothing more than normal and expected" (2014). Using that as motivation to explore each student's project, I went on and made connections after exploring their internet-based research. Using the freedom of choice

provided by the assignment and the limitless bounds of the internet, I visited with them, discovering bits of who they were through their choice of topic.

The use of technology to forge connections is evidenced elsewhere in the research as well. On Jan. 31, 2014, I reported working with a student with emotional disturbances who, at the time of my first encounter, was refusing to do his work (Field note). As reported earlier, this was typical behavior for this student and I found him working on a classroom vacuum cleaner. His interest in machinery and technology was apparent. As I connected with him over the vacuum, he soon brought up tablet computers and struck up a new conversation. I reported sharing my history with him, how I had began college career as a computer repair technician before becoming a teacher, and how, when I was his age, had spent many hours working on my own computer. This rapidly built up rapport with the student. Using that, I was able to convince him to return to his seat and continue his classwork, but only with the promise that we could talk more about these interests later in the day.

The last field entry of particular note, however, takes on a different tone. This reflection, written on Feb. 5, 2014, occurred after a day of teaching fifth grade at Northtown. Here, the students had come to use their iPads for many parts of their school day, from submitting homework, to digitizing their classroom agendas, to taking assessments, to reading interactive storybooks. I reflected at the time that it was both “a little awe-inspiring and a little disheartening” (2014). Despite having many literacy resources available, as the materials list for the day clearly indicates, only two students

chose to read physical books during their downtime. I modeled looking through the library and offered verbal encouragement. I made a point to engage the students in written text as often as possible throughout the day, even providing scrap paper and writing utensils to students when it came time for free writing rather than have them use the built in writing application included on each tablet. I walked away with a negative impression about the use of technology in the classroom.

As I contemplated the day's events, I noted my love of technology but also the accompanying belief that its incorporation can be overwhelming. I wrote, "This is a classroom that prefers digital literacy over the physical. It seemed backwards" (Field note, 2/5/14). As I continued, I reflected that technological literacy was only one of my passions and that reading and writing also had a place of importance higher on the academic food chain. "Interactive storybooks are not the same as a *real* storybook," I wrote, "I want these kids to love literacy in its most basic forms, not just through a 10-inch screen" (2014).

### **Numerical Literacy**

Finally, the last extended literacy reflected in the data is that of mathematics. While there is only one entry which discusses this, the reflection is important. It stems my own from upper-high school academic experiences with defined connections to the marital circumstances of the house in which I grew up. Again, as many researchers imply, children living in single-parent households often lack the resources of their two-parent peers (Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003; Cooksey, 1997; Parcel & Dufur,

2001). As numerical literacy appears in the data, it does so with a question of my value for it, which is a relevant question within my pedagogy to reflect upon.

The post-teaching reflection in question followed a day of teaching at Weston middle school. This day, Jan. 28, 2014, I had been assigned to teach mathematics, a subject which I note early on is challenging for me. Before even discussing the day's events, I recalled a memory of a poor tenth-grade math teacher I recalled embarrassing me for my lack of understanding (2014). The negative connotations in this are apparent from the get-go: math is not something I enjoy teaching but, more importantly, it is not something I enjoy doing beyond its most basic means. Current research makes it clear that teachers must value their content, lest children pick up on this tendency; but, further, they must value content to be able to teach it in a meaningful way (Calkins, 1994).

Unfortunately, it is apparent that I was not prepared to adequately value the content of that day of teaching.. I reported my disdain for teaching math as a substitute, doing my best to learn the content in the “15-20 minutes before students arrive for the day . . . relying on [the manual] heavily when I feel far over my head” (Field note, 1/28/14). I also shared the perception that modern mathematics methods are far different from how I recalled learning them as a student, making that window of preparation time feel far too short. Importantly, I concluded that I do not value numerical literacy in all of its forms as I should. Specifically, mathematical terminology, as compared to the layman’s terms which might otherwise be applied. Realizing this, the reflection goes much further.

As I contemplated the implications of this cognizance, I confirmed that I *do* value numerical literacy and content-area vocabulary. “Proper content-area terminology is important,” I stated, “but because of my own history, my own lack of value, I find that in teaching I place much more of an emphasis on literacy than math” (Field note, 1/28/14). This can, in part, be attributed to my current academic background as a burgeoning literacy acolyte, however, I considered my upbringing:

When I went through that terrible time with that 10<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher, my father was unwilling to reach out to the school. He was probably tired from working all the time and perhaps thought I was exaggerating. I couldn't ask my mom to do anything since I didn't live with her. She didn't know and I didn't feel confident in her ability to help me. No one was there to advocate for me, so I developed a resentment for that math teacher and of any math that I found challenging (2014).

With this awareness, I concluded the entry with the resignation to factor this knew knowledge into my pedagogy. I resolved not to let my own prejudice influence my teaching and to relinquish any remaining resentment. The students, I wrote, deserve that from their teacher.

Include a brief summary for this section.

## **Conclusion**

After a careful analysis of the accumulated data, I have come to the conclusion that my current teaching practices are heavily influenced by my upbringing in a separated household. Though I do not feel less capable as a teacher, the teaching actions I undertake certainly hold roots in my personal history. Furthermore, the students with which I typically spend the most time are largely determined by their relationship to my own experiences. The themes identified in this research – valuing and supporting reading, valuing and supporting writing, active identification, gravitating toward the most challenging students, and extended literacies – all stem from my past while also being considered through the lens of my current experience.

Examination of the data revealed that the themes identified in this research align with many of the findings reflected in current and classic research. Both my own experiences and those of the students I have worked with are products of the resources available within the home (Foster, 2002; Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003; Cooksey, 1997; Parcel & Dufur, 2001). The experiences of reading and writing which so drove my own value and support of it in my pedagogy were indeed established in the early reading experiences and subsequent bonding with mother, father, and grandmother (Bradley & Donovan, 2012; Mullan & Daraganova, 2012). My interpretation and disappointment when encountering students who lack these experiences is without wonder. Interestingly, the gathered data do not address elements such as home-school connection as anticipated at the outset of this exploration.

The research suggests, however, that though my familial experience may play a role, it is not a deciding factor in my pedagogical decisions. Indeed, many of my teaching actions are rooted in current best practices. Rather, my contemplations after the fact draw connections as I seek to draw out and better understand my emotional responses to teaching situations. That, in many ways, is the point of reflective journaling, to better understand oneself so as to improve one's practice (Samaras, 2010). In that regard, the data collection and analysis process was quite successful.

## Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

This study set out to examine my own teaching practices, as well as my beliefs and perspectives on students and learning. The research was focused particularly on the implications of my upbringing, having been raised in a single-parent household wherein my father was my primary guardian and my mother, though an active part of my life, only provided me residence every other weekend and throughout the summer; my grandmother, too, filled an influential maternal role through her daily presence in my life. The study was centralized on the following question:

*How have the literacy experiences I experienced through my upbringing in a separated household influenced my teaching philosophies and pedagogical practices with my students?*

### Conclusions

A careful review and detailed analysis of the collected data have allowed the following conclusions to be drawn.

**My childhood literacy experiences have allowed me to place a high value on literacy, which I now seek to impart to my students**

One of the most fundamental conclusions I have come to following an analysis of the collected data is that my own history has engendered within me strong values toward reading and writing. Throughout the reflective process, I came back to supportive, positive literacy experiences from my own history time and again. My past is peppered

with individuals who built in me and supported my desire to pursue the written word in all of its forms. My mother, father, grandmother, and teachers all played a role. Likewise, the social contexts surrounding literacy also supported my pursuits and provided me with motivation to keep reading and writing. As a teacher, it is apparent that I also seek to impart these values on my students.

As I wrote my reflective journal entries, I repeatedly returned to the adults in my life as reading and writing role models. In the memoir entries written on Jan. 27, 2014, Jan. 28, 2014, and Jan. 31, 2014 I described how my father, grandmother, and mother were all active readers. Though they read different materials and engaged with print in different ways, each of them acted as a reading role model for me. This, according to the extensive work of Routman (2003), as well as Pinnell and Fountas (2009), is one of the foundational supports young readers need and benefit from when developing their own values toward literacy.

Their approaches shared both similarities and differences. My mother and father, as well as my grandmother read to me (Memoir, 1/27/14; 1/28/14; 1/31/14). They each encouraged me to read verbally, as well as through specific actions, such as acquiring new reading materials for me. Where they differed, however, was in frequency and the types of materials being provided. My grandmother, for example, had a wide array of texts to choose from and was free to read with me regularly. My mother, on the other hand, would make use of alternative materials such as animal fact cards (1/31/14). Likewise, my father who worked during the day had less time to acquire new materials

but more time to spend reading with me in the evening. Each, however, was unified in another way.

In their free time, each of these parties would read for pleasure during their own free time. My mother enjoyed mystery novels, for example (Memoir, 1/31/14). My grandmother, I wrote, would spend her evenings “lying comfy on her couch with a great big book propped up on her chest” (1/28/14). Usually, these books were westerns or about realistic fiction, often focusing on Amish families and communities. My father would read thrillers and science fiction novels (1/27/14). Interestingly, the only non-fiction being read came in the form of magazines and newspapers. Likewise, very little writing was done outside of necessity and almost never creatively, unless by me; this, even though each of these individuals was very supportive of my own writing pursuits. Regardless, I was well supported in my literacy development.

Throughout the data gathering period, I recorded many examples of my own support of students' literary efforts. Whether it was encouraging students to browse their classroom libraries or to free write rather than play on their Apple iPads, I continually directed students toward engaging with literacy (Field note, 2/5/14). When working with a struggling student during a guided reading sessions, I did my best to make him feel successful and continued that effort for the rest of the school day; when it came time for him to go home, I encouraged him to find several books he would find interesting enough to read (2/20/14). Throughout my teaching entries, there is a palpable undercurrent of literacy support.

The same is true in the case of writing. Following the recommendation of Lucy Calkins (1994), I modeled the writing process for my students (Field note, 3/14/14). Also following her suggestions on providing students choice in their writing, I encouraged students about what interested them (2/5/14). When I encountered a student writing and illustrating a short story, I made a point to share supportive words with him and noted that his “interest flared every time I would stop in and give him the chance to update me on his work” (2/14/14). When I encountered a set of boys working on comics, I embraced it rather than shut it down (2/27/14).

Engaging in a comparative analysis of my teaching and memoir-based entries, a clear connection can be drawn between my own value of reading and writing as a child and my current day teaching practices. When I wrote stories as a boy, I enjoyed being creative. I enjoyed sharing my imagination with my father's friends (Memoir, 2/4/14). Even as an adult, I enjoy writing, so supporting the same freedom of choice that began the passion for literacy that would so enrich my life is no coincidence. Directing students to look through their classroom libraries when so much of my own childhood was spent scouring public library shelves is also no mistake (Memoir, 1/28/14; Field note, 2/5/14). Likewise, coming across a group of fifth grade boys writing comic books, when I too wrote comic books as a fifth grade boy and recall those experiences so fondly, there is little wonder why I would encourage rather than squander those opportunities to foster these students' interest in literacy (Memoir, 2/4/14; Field note, 2/27/14).

Without question, my literary past allowed me to develop a passion for reading and writing. As a child whose household was segmented by parental separation, literacy was one of the great unifying factors in my life. The message sent by the parental figures in my life was unequivocal: literacy matters. Now as an adult with the potential to shape young minds, the data make evident that I am also endeavoring to impart this message; even as a substitute, encountering students for a single day and sometimes only half, I consistently make an effort to support literacy in my students.

### **Emotion plays a critical role in teaching practices**

Throughout this study, emotions have played an important role in the teaching practices I utilized. Likewise, emotions shaped my perspectives of the students I encountered. This is perhaps unsurprising. Hargreaves (1998) states that teaching is an emotional practice. Furthermore, he identifies three additional points related to the role of emotion in the field of education: teaching and learning involve emotional understanding; teaching is a form of emotional labor; and teachers' emotions are inseparable from their moral purposes and ability to achieve those purposes (1998). These points are especially relevant in the context of my guiding research question, how my past as a child from a single-parent, separated household has shaped my educational practice.

One of the key themes identified in examination of the collected data is my active identification with certain students. This identification, I note in my post-teaching reflections, is often the result of a feeling of kinship based on the propensity for our having shared a similar experience (Memoir, 2/17/14). Identification also plays a role

when I see pieces of myself in the students I teach. This has affected my teaching both positively and negatively. For example, when I encountered students embracing literacy, such as young Kayla who would read so fervently throughout the day that it approached distractibility, I admitted that part of me did not want to stop her and that I could relate to her passion for reading, especially when I discovered that she had experienced troubles in her home life (Field note, 2/27/14). Or, in that same day, embracing a group of boys who chose to make comic books instead of more traditional writing; I had done the same, so I showed lenience in pursuit of fostering their interest in literacy (2014).

Identification has also had a negative impact on my teaching. In a field note recorded on Feb. 4, 2014, I described three boys who were particularly silly. Rather than be stern in the beginning of the day, I chose to reason with them and be friendly rather than authoritative; the result was a day-long battle to maintain a learning atmosphere in the classroom (2014). As I contemplated my mistakes in the day, I thought back to my own boyhood, when I was their age, also the silly boy being told to pay attention and stay on task. I related it to experiences with my father and the wonderful feeling of making others laugh (2014). Tellingly, I questioned whether my choices were a result of wanting to be liked and considered their favorite substitute teacher (2014). Here, identification and emotional projection caused me to react differently than I might have should circumstances have been different.

These experiences also relate to Hargreaves' (1998) theories on emotional labor. Emotional labor, as described by Hochschild (1983), is the act of suppressing one's

inward emotions for to maintain the proper well-being of those around him. I certainly experienced this during the data collection period. In my work with Darius, and again with Martin in Northtown, I reflected upon my desire deliver an equitable education without favoritism or bias (Field note, 2/14/14; 2/20/14). Outwardly, I did not allow these students to see how their lives related to my own. I did not want them to feel separate, different, or doted upon. Instead, I wanted them to feel valued, capable, and successful (2/14/14; 2/20/14). A study by Brown (2011) indicates that this is a common occurrence among teachers, with the majority of those participating in said study reporting emotional labor in their teaching.

Indeed, as Hargreaves (1998) suggests, emotion is directly tied to my moral purpose as an educator. In my memoirs, I reflected repeatedly on the important role supportive adults played in my life, culminating in a final reflection highlighting how their support, specifically in the area of literacy development, allowed me to be successful (Memoir, 3/14/14). My teaching goal, first and foremost, is to be a similarly positive influence in the lives of the students I teach; to enable them to learn and grow and prosper in spite of any challenges that might stand in their way. The emotional connotations in the relationship between my past experience and present practice cannot be ignored.

Furthermore, I engaged in actions specifically to meet the needs of individual students. My teaching decisions were often in *specificity* to the needs of individual students. In the case of Darius, I adjusted my proximity to him throughout the day and

offered regular words of encouragement and actions of support (Field note, 2/14/14). With Martin, I used opportunities in the teaching day to help him feel successful and validated in his skills (2/20/14). When working in a self-enclosed special education classroom in Weston, I made a point to talk with an especially off-task student about his interests, building trust, and convincing him to return to the activities the other students were engaged in (1/31/14).

Likewise, when I heard about the struggles these children faced, I recorded deep empathy, stating things such as “my heart broke a little” and “I know that” in terms of the pain I imagined they must feel as compared to my own remembered emotional history (Field note, 2/14/14). These elements are part and parcel of the emotional understanding Hargreaves (1998) describes in his essay, *The Emotional Practice of Teaching*. These are examples of emotional understanding shaping key teaching encounters in my educational experience.

Emotions are a necessary part of effective teaching. As Hargreaves (1998) and Brown (2011) describe, emotional qualities permeate the very act. In my own experience, I have suppressed the outward expression of my emotions and undergone emotional labor and applied emotional understanding for the students' benefit. Most importantly, however, I have allowed emotion to act as the primary impetus behind my pursuits as a teacher. Reflecting over the course of this study has allowed me to identify that moral pursuits underscore my teaching decisions and aspirations. These are rooted in my personal history, a body of knowledge and experience I carry into the classroom. As my reflections

show, I must take care to ensure that emotions only impact my teaching positively but that I also maintain the authenticity that motivates me to educate.

**My experiences as a child in a divorced household allow me to relate to particularly troubled or silly students**

A detailed analysis of the collected data reveal a particularly noteworthy finding: As an educator, I often identify best with challenging students. This is not to say my reflections indicate a relish for particularly defiant students; however, there *is* a trend of spending extra time and attention with students who demonstrate the most need. Looking back on the experiences recorded in my memoir entries, as well as the post-teaching field notes, it is apparent that I exhibit a sense of identification and empathy which I must acknowledge to not allow for an impact on my best practices teaching goals.

The data indicate that this behavior may be rooted in my experience growing up in a single-parent home. I recall what it was like to be the silly little boy in the classroom. In a post-teaching field note recorded on Feb. 4, 2014, I recalled how I had struggled to find the line of acceptability with my classroom silliness, balancing the at-home behaviors of playing and rough-housing with the more rigid expectations of formal schooling. I often failed to find that line and occasionally found myself in trouble. I further reflected upon the continuing impact this piece of my past has had on my current teaching practices, noting that my behavior management practices had suffered that day when faced with students that I deemed “[were not] particularly naughty, just silly” and reminded me a bit of myself (2014). Rather than provide sterner punishments earlier in

the day, I reflected on a desire to give all students second chances and opportunities to correct themselves (2014). While I do believe this to be true, the entry reflects an over-extension of that desire, one that caused me to question whether I had been too lax (2014).

Another connection which can be easily drawn to my childhood is one of attention. I reflected repeatedly that my father worked during the day (e.g., Memoir, 1/27/14; 2/4/14; 2/14/14). I also noted that I spent a large amount of my time at the babysitter, at the library, or alone (1/28/14; 2/10/14). As an example of the implications of these reflections, when working with Darius, I stated that I felt, based on what I had discovered about his home life with a similar single-father scenario to my own, that his behaviors were almost certainly attention seeking (Field note, 2/14/14). That day, I connected with him, stated unequivocally that I related to him, and understood his sense of loss at living in a single-parent household when many of his peers did not (2014). I also made a point to stay by his side and provide him the extra attention he seemed to seek.

My seventh memoir entry, dated Feb. 13, 2014, provides another window into the identification I feel with these students. This entry is perhaps the most personal of any in the data collection and was easily the most difficult to write. Within, I discuss the crushing fear of lying awake while my mother and step-father fought. I was afraid for my mother. I felt like a coward for not standing up to help her, not realizing that, as an eight year old, my place was away from such adult issues. I did not see that I was helpless, that

it was not my battle; instead I blamed myself for it. I wrote about being an “island in the dark” wanting to “sink into the couch and have everything fade away” when a police officer shone a flashlight in my face as I feigned sleep (2014). This is the type of experience which represents the very worst of my post-parental-separation life. The feelings, the fear, the wanting beyond measure for stability and safety; my parents did their best when raising me, they were good parents, but when I work with students with “troubled home lives” I cannot help but wonder if they have felt the same.

Why do I identify with students whose home lives are challenging? “I have always and still doubt,” I wrote, “that anyone who hasn't lived through it can truly understand the fear and shame” child witnesses can bear (Memoir, 2/13/14). In that light, the core belief underlining the data on identification and student support is that teachers should work to build up their students. When I engaged in teaching practices to make Martin, the struggling reader from Northtown, feel successful throughout his school day, it is likely that a part of me empathized with that student on a sub-conscious level (Field note, 2/20/14). He lived with his father, he struggled for attention. So did I. So I tried to provide it to him.

The sentiment behind these teaching choices is positive. As a teacher, my heart must always be to help students learn and thrive in all the ways that it is possible to do so. I am, by virtue of my profession and my role in their lives, their advocate. Identifying with students is as natural as being human. I must also take care. I need to be careful not to let favoritism enter my teaching. I cannot make assumptions about my students or their

life experiences, or project my own feelings and experiences upon them. Additionally, I must ensure that they are always a part of the whole student body. Just as I reflected in a field entry on Feb. 26, 2014, making students feel separate, different, or damaged only holds negative implications for further teaching encounters. Rather, I must teach directly to each student, meet their needs, and use my own past to relate, not dictate, the functions of our teacher-student relationship.

**My experiences as a child in a divorced household allow me to deeply reflect on preconceptions on children and divorce**

After analyzing the collected data, one conclusion I have come to is that my history has allowed me to reflect deeply on the preconceptions surrounding children and divorce. Having lived between two homes, gaining a step-father, and having a grandmother stand in as a mother figure, I have a wealth of experience which I apply to my teaching decisions. These life experiences have shaped my perspectives, as well. The way I view education, a foundational element of a successful life, has been supported by the adults who propelled me forward in my educational pursuits. The way I view literacy, this wonderful, freeing, educational set of skills and practices, is a direct result of that support, but also a desire for affirmation and validation, escape and respite. Likewise, it has shaped the way I view students.

When I come into a classroom, I take care not to make assumptions about students or their home lives. As I have already shared, adult assumptions resulted in my being placed in a program for children of divorce, one I resented being a part of (Field

note, 2/26/14). I also see myself as having overcome the challenges I experienced in life. I believe that children can and do overcome the hardships placed before them. Marital status is surely impactful, but just as researchers like Pong, Dronkers, and Hampden-Thompson (2003) and Cooksey (1997) have shown, how those parents come together and allot resources to support their children is far more impactful.

Yet even so, over the course of the data collection period, I found myself questioning students' home lives (e.g., Field note, 2/4/14; 2/14/14; 2/20/14). The reality I have acknowledged, as is proven by my reflections, is that preconceptions about troubled students exist and that, like many stereotypes, isolated cases have a validating effect. I derive this conclusion from my own experience. If I did not have preconceptions, positive and negative, many of my teaching decisions and thought processes would be altered. There would, for example, be no such relation to students demonstrating the challenges of difficult home lives.

The data also indicate a heightened propensity for reflection. Growing up as a child of separated parents, experiencing all of the tumults, the supports and sometimes the lack thereof, has provided me with a self-awareness of these preconceptions and the folly of believing anything about a student without investigation. I take this conviction into the classroom with me, just as I did Feb. 10, 2014 and reflected upon in that day's field note. In that encounter, I had allowed preconception to overrule my experience and chastised myself, resolving to take better care not to allow traits of stereotype effect my view of any student in my care. I reflected that day, and again in a separate entry, that

even when children of divorce and separation appear troubled, there are others in the classroom from similar circumstances that do not (2014; 2/14/14).

As a child of divorced parents, I look back on my own path and see that preconceptions would have mislabeled me. It is true that many children whose parents separate lack the resources to provide at the same level as two-parent household (Cooksey, 1997; Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003). I know from my very life and now my teaching experience that these are not rules. If they were correct, I would have been unsupported and unattended to at home. I was well supported. I would have been doomed to achieve less than my peers. I have achieved higher than I ever expected I would and my final memoir entry exudes pride and satisfaction with my accomplishments (Memoir, 3/14/14). When I look at my students, I understand that they will all face challenges, regardless of the marital circumstance of their parents. Some will be challenged more than others. I also know, however, that they are supremely capable and with the proper support can surpass any limits the world would seek to place upon them.

### **Implications for Student Learning**

**Students should be held to high standards regardless of the marital circumstance of the home**

Over the course of my research, one point that consistently went unmentioned was the shifting of academic standards. This was so for a number of reasons, but the most

important is outlined quite well by Parsons and Rubin (2008): all students, regardless of their circumstance or unique needs, benefit from high academic standards. Viewing students as less capable does a disservice to them, places a glass ceiling above their heads, and views them as victims of circumstance, destined for lower levels of achievement than their two-parent peers. This mindset separates children into domains of capability influenced not by their own academic prowess but by the stereotypes of circumstance, likely reinforced by a set of behaviors exhibited in the class. Easing academic standards on such a basis is tantamount to embracing the misguided logic of the deficit view (Taylor, 1993).

As teachers, we must take care never to fall into a deficit mindset. Taylor (1993) makes a strong case for why this must be the case. “I have found that many so-called undereducated parents,” she says, “are highly literate and that many have developed complex problem solving skills that enable them to survive in circumstances that most of us cannot even imagine” (1993, p. 551). Further, and perhaps most resoundingly true, is her conclusion that families of every circumstance have more in common than different in their use of print (1993). Family context may and, in many cases, should raise questions for educators. Academic capability, should not be one of them, exempting factors unique to the individual student.

Pong, Dronkers, and Hampden-Thompson (2003) would likely agree with this assertion. Their work examined the policies and practices of single-parent and two-parent homes. Unsurprisingly, they concluded that there are indeed differences between these

household types. Children in single-parent households tended to have parents with less time and finances to support their children's education (2003). There was a lower level of investment and involvement with the school (2003). There were fewer parent-to-parent relationships (2003). Many of these were related to the loss of income often following divorce or separation (2003). Yet, when resources were controlled for, the academic outcomes were almost wholly mitigated (2003). This indicates that marital status is not a reliable determining factor for student academic outcomes. More importantly, it indicates that though teachers may witness negative behaviors in the class, that these are likely not representational of that student's capabilities and should not be viewed as such.

A better mindset would be to view students as overcomers. As I collected my data, I considered the home lives of my students repeatedly (e.g., Field note, 2/14/14; 2/20/14; 2/27/14). At no time did I concede that any student, even the most challenging, lacked the intellectual aptitude of another. Looking back over my personal reflections, I took umbrage when teachers classified me differently (2/10/14). It was a negative association, knowing that the school staff thought I "I must be damaged" (2014). More importantly, however, is that I acknowledged that I faced challenges and was able to overcome them with my own abilities (Memoir, 3/14/14). As an adult, I see literacy as the "lynchpin to my success" (2014). Through the caring support of teachers and adults, and never being given the easy way out, I was able to meet the demands placed before me and show everyone, even myself, that I was intelligent and capable of whatever I set my mind to. Reinforcing that point in each student should be a goal for every teacher.

**Students should be highly encouraged to engage in reading and writing, including through the development of supportive classroom environments**

Modern research supports the practice of encouraging students in their pursuit of literacy. Lyons (2003) advocates for writing support in the form of writer's workshops and celebrations of student work. Reggie Routman (2003) asserts the same in the realm of reading: teachers should encourage their students to read on a daily basis and then build time into the curriculum for both independent and shared reading. Pat Johnson (2006) posits the very same: children should have many opportunities to read and should receive support and encouragement from their teachers and, ideally, within the home.

During the reflective data gathering process, the most prevalent theme to surface was my active support of reading and writing in all students (e.g., Field note, 2/5/14; 2/10/14; 2/27/14). This is in part due to the research described above and the evergreen pursuit of delivering effective instruction. It is also due to the profound impact growing up in a single-parent household had on my own literacy development.

Throughout the collected memoir entries are examples of reading and writing (e.g., Memoir, 1/27/14; 2/4/14; 2/14/14; 2/18/14; 3/12/14). In each, there is an element of social and familial connection and using literacy to forge and reinforce bonds. In the beginning, these took the form of supportive reading experiences. I would read with my mother, father, and grandmother when at home (1/27/14; 1/28/14; 1/31/14). At school, I loved gathering on the carpet for read-alouds (2/5/14). Later, I made particular note of enjoying books that my mother and father had read when they were young (1/28/14). I

wrote short stories to share with my parents and their friends and wrote comic books in collaboration with my own to sell to classmates (2/14/14). As I grew, literacy took on an even greater social element as I shared short stories in academic settings and regularly discussed my current novel with a friend who was also reading it (2/18/14). I played text-based internet roleplaying games where my friends and I created shared stories which we would later relive in conversation (2/20/14). As an adult, the social element of my writing continues through online blogging (3/14/14). All of this has fostered a strong value of reading and writing within myself as an educator.

As a teacher, one of my primary practices is to encourage students to engage with literacy. Often, this involves modern technologies, such as Apple iPads and computers (Field note, 1/31/14). As someone who embraced technology from an early age and has continued to maintain a passion for it, supporting technological literacy is another important facet of the encouragement I offer to my students. However, the data show that I do show preference to traditional, text-based mediums. The field entry recorded on Feb. 5, 2014 offers a strong example of this. On that day, teaching in a classroom that had embraced technology so as to seemingly train students to *avoid* print-based materials, I found myself dismayed and engaging in practices which required students to disconnect from their tablets and either read or take part in a free writing activity (2014). Students should be presented with classroom atmospheres that embrace all forms of literacy, without exclusion.

The classroom environment is a pivotal aspect of creating a literacy-supportive atmosphere for learning to occur. From the beginning to the end of the data collection period, there is a positive relationship between literacy rich environments and positive teaching encounters (e.g., Field note, 2/10/14; 2/20/14; 2/24/14; 3/12/14). The field entries recorded on Feb. 10, 2014 and Feb. 24, 2014 provide good examples for the impact a supportive environment has on me as a substitute teacher. In each, I entered the classroom and found the walls decorated with literate materials and examples of student work, as well as multiple book shelves featuring a wide array of materials (2014). These classrooms also featured bookshelves specifically for the teacher, making it clear that they valued reading in their personal lives (2014). Each of these days is reflected upon with a sense of exuberance; the children engaged with literacy repeatedly and without issue; I felt in my element, able to connect with them over the written word and to take risks with my teaching (2014). In that same way, when there are not sufficient reading and writing materials in the class, I become disturbed and feel disempowered (2/10/14).

Students should be encouraged to engage with both reading and writing on a daily basis. Teachers should arrange classroom environments that create a literacy-supportive atmosphere. Modern research suggests that students are better able to discover their literate identities when their teachers authentically value reading and writing (Calkins, 2003; Routman, 2003). This study reinforces those assertions. As a child growing up in a single-parent household, literacy was extremely important to me and helped shape my

life in a meaningful and positive way. As a teacher, I hold a research- and experience-based conviction that imparting this value is an essential teaching decision.

**Particularly challenging students may benefit from special attention and support, but they must be assessed on a case-by-case basis**

Finally, students should be supported based upon the particular needs they demonstrate in class. This research makes it clear that students can benefit from special attention. What is less explicit, however, is that many students of families of the same marital status do *not* require such attention. This illustrates a clear flaw in any teaching practice based on the preconception that children of separated parents required separate treatment than those of two-parent families. In that same way, students who *do* require extra support may have specific needs separate from similarly circumstanced peers. The answer, as research suggests, is assessment and differentiated instruction (Parsons & Rubin, 2008).

Take, for example, Darius. Though he exhibited clear behavioral issues and lagged academically behind his peers, simple proximity and verbal encouragement were sufficient to increase his investment in classroom learning (Field note, 2/14/14). This was effective during the brief encounters during which I taught him and could remain by his side. Even so, by the end of the day, when that proximity could not be maintained, he slipped back into negative behaviors, injuring one of his peers (2014). In the field entry for that day, I wrote that I thought I had reached him, and perhaps I had, but the outcome of that day remained little different than others I had spent in the classroom: Darius got

into trouble and his marginalization was reinforced (2014). Still, the teaching practices I engaged in made clear that proximity and direct support were helpful to his academic and social pursuits.

Taking these experiences into account, a more effective support plan could be designed, to meet Darius' unique needs. It is clear that simple proximity was not enough. Rather, a student of this type could be taught using a blend of proximity, one-to-one support, and positive reinforcement for times when the previous two elements could not be consistently maintained. This system is based on knowing Darius, not on knowing the marital status of his parents.

This sentiment is reinforced with the other students I reflected upon in my field entries. Mario and Ishmael of Weston Middle School both presented extreme challenges to effective classroom management (Field note, 2/10/14). They both acted out profoundly, disrupting the learning environment and nearly coming to blows (2014). Yet, Mario was from a single-parent household and Ishmael from a two-parent. Their needs, while similar, also support the dismissal of preconceptions before entering the classroom; student behavior, academic achievement, and family-type may all be interrelated but they are not sole-determinants of any other factor. The same idea is reflected in the field note recorded on Feb. 20, 2014. There the focal student exhibited no behavioral issues as a result of his single-parent living arrangement, only academic and even then only in part (2014). Should this boy be taught the same way as Darius, Mario, or Ishmael? Research,

experience, and common sense tell us no. He should be addressed as a unique student with unique needs.

Children should be taught based upon their own unique characteristics. Those whose parents separate are not doomed to behavioral acting out or academic failure. My memoir entries culminate in a message of overcoming challenge based on individual persistence and adult support (Memoir, 3/14/14). Students should expect an education based on their own merits. They should expect freedom from judgment based on their parents' relationship choices. As educators, it is our responsibility to use effective assessment and relationship building to understand the needs of the children we work with. Once we gain that understanding, free of preconception and bias, we are empowered to provide a free, appropriate, quality education.

### **Implications for My Teaching**

#### **Teachers must actively engage in reflection before, during, and after teaching**

Reflection is one of the most important practices a teacher can engage in. As educators, considering the impact of our teaching decisions is a fundamental element in our pursuit of best practices teaching. Research has shown that dedicated reflective efforts hold positive implications for professionals in the education field (e.g., Loughran & Russell, 2002; Samaras, 2002). What is more, reflection grants teachers self-awareness that can benefit them both inside and outside the classroom. They are, through exploring their internal dialogues, better able to understand themselves as people; their thoughts,

feelings, teaching decisions, and reactions to the day's events grant them insight into their own thought processes and the funds of knowledge and experience they bring with them into the classroom and day-to-day encounters (Loughran & Russell, 2002; Samaras, 2002).

In completing this investigation, I engaged in dedicated reflection each day I substitute taught. This resulted in thirty unique journal entries, fifteen related to the days of teaching, and fifteen memoirs on my past. My goal with this exercise was to identify points of connection between the two, to draw a line between my past and my present, and to examine how my own life experiences have shaped my perspectives and pedagogy as an elementary school teacher. Even as I began the project, understanding that there were clear points of connection I could already easily identify, the results surprised me in a number of ways.

First, I was stunned at how many connections I was able to draw between my childhood experiences and my current teaching practices. When I began this project, I had never consciously considered *why* I might seek out particularly challenging students to work closely with. Likewise, I never really considered that my support of reading and writing might extend beyond the best practices education I received in undergraduate and graduate school. Or, even, that my assertion that *I* like to read and write, so encouraging the same in my students is only natural, might be a surface-level analysis of my motivations. Having reflected deeply on these matters, I can now see that there is a corollary between the emotional dissonance of a household in challenge and the high

expectations of a formal schooling environment. I can see that my love of reading and writing was not entirely self-motivated, but that I had many supportive structures that fostered its development. I can trace the roots of my educational inclinations and by doing so get at the marrow of why I do what I do.

Further, engaging in active reflection made me a more conscious teacher during active instruction. Researchers such as Samaras (2002) suggested as much, indicating that regular, routine reflection may change my overall thinking. This certainly turned out to be the case. As I taught during the data gathering period, I recognized that the day's events would be reconsidered and in so doing gave each choice, each student interaction greater consideration. As I read a touching storybook on Feb. 24, 2014, I understood in the moment that I was being affected and allowed that to fuel my passion for the ensuing conversation (Field note). I examined the environment and considered what resonated with me and what did not. I contemplated the positive educational atmosphere and earnestly reviewed the elements that allowed it to take place. This pattern is repeated in both positive and negative encounters throughout the data set. Regular reflection after teaching made me a more reflective during teaching.

I was also struck by how impactful generating a record of the day's events was to my subsequent days of teaching. As I recorded how I thought and felt about the day, it was typically with the intent of creating a form of teaching record. Almost invariably, I found myself engaging in deep thought on specific events or feelings; often, I would relate these to my past history, both in childhood and as an educator. Post-teaching

reflections allowed me a space to clearly consider how I felt about my teaching decisions and my motivation for engaging in them. This allowed me, as Samaras (2002, 2010; Samaras, Adams-Legge, Breslin, Mittapalli, O'Looney, & Wilcox, 2007) explains in several examples of her research on the topic, to alter my teaching decisions for the next day; to recognize what worked and what did not, whether I was satisfied or I was not, and to find myself more fulfilled as an educator.

Finally, my experiences demonstrate that reflection should not purely be limited to what occurs in the school. Dividing my reflective attentions between the past and the present allowed me to reconsider my own life experiences and how they have shaped me as an adult. This act of dual probing – into today and years past – was fundamental toward being able to understand myself better as a current day teacher. Moreover, these reflections upon my personal history drove further connection making in my post-teaching reflections, deepening the level of their considerations and investigations into how and why I teach.

**Teachers must engage in instructional practices with consideration to the implications of their own past experiences**

As I gathered my reflections, I developed a self-awareness to my own teaching behaviors. Entering into this project, I was unfamiliar with why I approached challenging students and made extra efforts to meet their needs and help them feel supported. More importantly, I did not adequately consider the wider implications of this teaching action and how it might be perceived by other teachers or students in the classroom. Following a

thorough review of the data, I feel confident in stating that there is a clear connection between my past experiences and a number of teaching decisions I engaged in during the collection period.

Take, once more, my work with Darius (Field note, 2/14/14). During my first encounter with him, mentioned within the field note but occurring before this day being reflected upon, I understood that his life was clearly more difficult than many of his peers (2014). On this day, I “suspected he hurt” and “wanted to help him see the light inside himself and to shine it on positive things, like learning, and accomplishment, and friendship” (2014). This is a particularly heartfelt sentiment, so it comes as no surprise that I later relate my work with him to my own past growing up with a single father and relate emotionally to the sense of separation when surrounded by peers whose home lives seem too far removed from your own (2014).

On another day, I reflected on my work with a particularly silly group of upper-elementary boys (Field note, 2/4/14). The day could easily be considered an example of bad classroom management; a group of students allowed too much leeway in the face of negative, disruptive behaviors, challenged a whole day of teaching. As I reflected on the events, still somewhat frustrated at my inability to manage the class as effectively as I would have liked, I drew a connection to my boyhood, where silliness meant having fun and where often I was freest and most validated with my father (2014). I also realized, in exploring this connection to my past, that part of me truly desires to be liked by my

students, that “I shouldn't just be their substitute but their *favorite* substitute” (2014). This lingering youthful desire for acceptance shaped the day's teaching.

Reflecting on matters of our own past is important (Kuzmic, 2002). Teachers should actively consider their personal histories if they hope to understand their present selves. Without conducting this research and being forced to hold a mirror to myself, I doubt that I would have drawn such connections; but rather, I would have continued on, knowing that there was a motivation for my choices somewhere buried under layers of memory and years of experience, too deeply buried to quickly put a finger on. As teachers, it is our responsibility to teach deliberately and engage in practices that benefit our students. In order to do so, we must attain a level of self-awareness which allows us to pinpoint where our own dispositions may lead us astray; or, as is equally likely, support our strengths and inclinations toward best practices teaching.

**Teachers must avoid stereotype and judge students and situations based on their own merit**

There exists an old adage that within every stereotype exists a seed of truth. While we can clearly see how misguided and dangerous adhering to such a principle is, the unavoidable fact is that many people, educators included, buy into the classifications of stereotype. In the case of families affected by divorce, separation, and step-parenthood, research clearly indicates that the availability and utilization of resources are better determinants for academic outcomes than family-type alone (e.g., Parcel & Dufur, 2001; Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003). Yet, even still, when presented with

challenging students we know are from single-parent households, it is difficult to avoid falling into these stereotypes and considering affected children as disadvantaged and somehow different from their peers. We must not do this, a sentiment I experienced first-hand in conducting this study.

In the post-teaching field note composed on Feb. 10, 2014, I thought deeply on the teaching encounters that had taken place. As hinted at previously, it was an exceptionally challenging day in the classroom, one which was dedicated to students with behavioral difficulties. Two students seemed to stand out as particularly disruptive and defiant. In conversing with one of these students, I discovered that he came from a family which had been altered by parental divorce. The other student, however, came from a two-parent household with parents whom I learned “work so hard to give him what he needs” (2014). Given that this student was also out of order throughout the day, the disparity between household contexts is remarkable. These two boys reinforced the folly of believing stereotype: no two students will be alike; ascribing contexts without the benefit of background knowledge only serves to create prejudice toward particular children and family-types.

This experience was also repeated on Feb. 14, 2014. My experiences with Darius are already well documented, but in this area, one of my final contemplations is of particular importance. I spent many words discussing my identification with Darius in that entry, revealing what might almost approximate a sense of kinship with him resulting from my own childhood in a single-parent home. However, as I remark in conclusion,

though Darius was by far the most challenging student in the classroom, he was certainly not the only student impacted by divorce, again reiterating the great diversity in how students react to conditions within the home.

Likewise, we must also take caution to avoid needlessly separating students based upon their family type. On Feb. 26, 2014, I reflected briefly on my placement in an elementary school program called “Banana Splits,” specifically for children of divorce. Though I had already long recognized the differences between my peers’ families and my own, being acknowledged by the school as a “divorced kid” only made me feel more different and, quite literally, separated out from my classroom community.

As teachers, it is our responsibility to have a positive outlook. We must be optimistic about our students. It is the job of every educator to be situational, contextual, and observant. If a student presents a challenge, we must inquire and seek out its origins without shallow and likely false relations to the student's parent's marital context. Rather than begin with assumptions based upon the family, we must hold fast to the ethics of our profession: begin with the student's needs and avoid prejudice at all costs.

**Teachers must embrace literacy without prejudice against types of student work and understand that the process of becoming invested in literacy evolves differently for each student**

Fountas & Pinnell (2009) identify six domains of literacy development: reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and thinking. These domains develop in relationship to one another, but they do not develop identically in all students. Research

suggests, rather, that literacy development is a unique process and that every student should be assessed independently to monitor their growth (Lyons, 2003; Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). Though there are developmental paths and milestones, assuming that all students learn identically to one another disregards much of what we know about best practices education. We may recognize established trajectories of literacy development, but must always follow such understanding with assessments to plot each student's progress and areas of need.

One might say that literacy development has many moving parts. Over the course of this project, I took the opportunity to reflect upon my own in a series of childhood and adolescent reflections. In early childhood, my efforts in school were supported by supportive parents and a grandmother who made the library a sort of after-school haven (Memoir, 1/27/14; 1/28/14; 1/31/14). When I was young, I read rhyming books and lots of picture-rich non-fiction. As an adolescent, I enjoyed fantasy, horror novels, and comic books. Even later, I took part in an online game that was entirely text-based and allowed my imagination to run wild (2/20/14). My own passion for literacy was the result of a large amount of freedom and even more support from the caring adults in my life. It did not develop because someone mandated it; it developed because the home and school facilitated it. My path toward investment in literacy was my own.

As I reflected on days of teaching, I made efforts to support my students' literacy efforts, just as I had been supported, without regard to genre or type of material. Most importantly, the recorded entries reflect a lack of judgment on their work. In my

memoirs, I reflected on the impact of critical adults. In the memoir recorded on Feb. 4, 2014, following exuberant details about sharing my writing, I explained how my father's efforts to help me, using red pen and marking my short story's many issues, caused me to stop seeking out help. In that instant, I decided it was better to write just for fun (2014). A piece of my motivation was lost, the entry itself seeming to come to a stop in that brief paragraph. It was not the only experience.

Ralph Fletcher (2006) writes extensively on gender differences in writing. In *Boy Writers*, he cautions teachers not to be dismayed when boys write about violence, war, or topics that might otherwise be unexpected in an academic setting (2006). Instead, he suggests that teachers encourage these boys, use their passion for writing without regard to the topic, and move forward to developing their self-image as writers and literate individuals. My memoir on Feb. 24, 2014 shows the value of these advocacies. I wrote then about being a seventh grade boy out to shock my young, first-year teacher, but producing a story I was genuinely happy with and proudly allowed my friends to read (2014). Her critique was harsh and a piece of me walked away from that experienced crushed, only to be rebuilt by other teachers willing to offer the validation I so desperately sought (2/26/14).

Embrace of literacy development must not be limited to traditional mediums any longer. The presence of Apple iPads is routine in my reflections and materials lists following days teaching at Northtown (e.g., Field note, 2/4/14; 2/5/14; 2/20/14). Though we must take care not to let these new technologies replace traditional, text-based literacy

materials, we must also recognize their unique value and appeal to students. In the memoir of Feb. 20, 2014, I reflected on how important engaging with a text-based computer game (referred to as “the MUD”) was for my own literacy development. I talked then and again in the memoir of Feb. 26, 2014 about how the game built up literate social links between myself and peers. This program helped me sink deeper into the imaginative potential of the written word and also develop as a writer. It also supported the social value of literacy and that skillful reading and writing were important skills to possess. It was so important, in fact, that years later as a college student, I reflected fondly on its role in my life and the paths it lead me through (3/14/14).

Students in classrooms today make extended use of technology. Apple iPads open the door to e-books and web-based text. Deep research, the likes of which were far more cumbersome in past years, is only button presses away. The presence of search engines and databases, interactive storybooks and literacy-based games, allow educational encounters based upon the unique interests of the student. Just as we recognize that literacy develops differently in all students, so to must was acknowledge the unique potential advanced technologies have in the classroom for supporting that development.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

### **Conduct this study with more participants**

One of the primary limitations of this study is that it was limited to a single participant. As a self-study, this was quite effective and has already helped transform my classroom instruction. For wider applicability to the academic world, approaching this study on a larger scale would be beneficial. Without radically altering how the study has been accomplished, this task could be undertaken for greater, wider-spanning implications on the impact of divorce and separation on educational perspectives and practice.

Rather than limit the study to a single participant, future research should endeavor to solicit a number of researchers each engaging in identical studies. Just as in this research project, each participant would engage in a reflective process following his days of teaching. The amount of entries could and should vary between participants to ensure authenticity to the depth and scope of their teaching encounters. Once these reflections have been gathered, they should be added to a collective for whole-group analysis to ensure uniformity in the process of identifying key themes.

The goal of this recommendation is to engage in cross-comparative research on a larger scale for wider applicability to the field of education. Just as this study has repeatedly emphasized, no two children are alike. Therefore, no two educators' reflections will be alike. When applied to a greater number of participants, however, key themes may arise unifying important elements in the experiences of each. This research can then lead

to further studies which can impact our beliefs about students and educational processes within the classroom.

### **Conduct this study in different geographical and cultural settings**

If this study were to be conducted in the future, a fundamental recommendation would be to conduct it within different geographical and cultural settings. If the first recommendation were also followed, this suggestion could be altered to include *participants* of different geographical and cultural settings. This suggestion is put forth in an effort to overcome another limitation of this study as designed for self-study research: the results may not apply outside of the context under which the study was conducted. Expanding the geographical and cultural boundaries could easily expand the applicability of the resulting findings.

As a self-study project, this research was limited to my own experience and the primary settings in which I substitute teach. In effect, this means that the study occurred, geographically, outside of the urban school environment. Excepting Weston, which has been designated as an urban district, though the actual setting is many miles from the nearest major city. The teaching experiences of educators are highly influenced by their teaching environment. Had I taught in an inner-city setting, the events which prompted reflection may have been different and generated original insights not found in the existing study.

Furthermore, culture should also be accounted for. Family dynamics are fluid between households and certainly vary based upon the cultural and regional practices of

family members. Take, for example, Heath's (1982) examination of the Roadville, Trackton, and Maintown families. Though each family embraced literacy, each was very different from the others. In that same way, and perhaps even more so when wider cultural considerations are accounted for, the impact of divorce and separation on the subsequent perspectives and pedagogical practices of participants in wider geographical and cultural settings could provide valuable insight to support the wider applicability of this research.

**Further examine the role different forms of literacy in developing value within students, including e-books, digital texts, and online resources**

This study has also revealed a need for additional research on the role of technology in the classroom. Though there is already a wealth of material on the value of new literacy mediums in schools, there is little comparative research on the implications of using one form of material over another. This is a gap that needs to be addressed to better inform teachers and enable them to make effective instructional decisions.

The increasing presence of computers and tablets in schools warrants an objective analysis of these mediums. Forms of this are already taking place, primarily through reviews of groups or individual programs seeking to determine their educational merit (Guernsey, 2011; Murray & Olcese, 2011). Yet, there can be no doubt that with appropriate application choice, technology can open up new educational opportunities that would otherwise have been impossible. There is also little reason to doubt that the presence of technology in our classrooms will continue to grow as it becomes more

common and financially affordable. It is important that teachers be empowered to make informed decisions on where best to spend instructional time.

What is lacking in the research is a comparative analysis between reading and writing through technological mediums and reading and writing using print, pencil, and paper. Indeed, some research has been submitted assessing the merits of e-books; however, the conclusions are less than resounding: quality varies akin to traditional literacy materials (Guernsey, 2011). As Murray and Olcese (2011) suggest, the surging popularity of tablet computers has resulted in a wide array of educational content and e-books which, if assessed honestly, are likely the result of application developers rushing to release products with little regard to quality or educational principles. There are well-designed e-books and applications, but they are outnumbered by those unworthy of class time and can be difficult to locate and accurately assess, even before the challenges of making their best use are fully taken into account (2011).

No, what is needed is a long-term study examining the academic implications of using modern technology to the heightened level it is often found at in classroom. Within the field note recorded on Feb. 5, 2014, I reflected that the students seemed almost adverse to reading print-based books, so enamored were they with their Apple iPads. This is the type of educational atmosphere which needs to be examined. The work of Waters (2010) perhaps comes closest, comparing the efficacy of tablets versus laptops, Windows PCs versus Macs. More needs to be done.

The role of technology is important in the context of the guiding research question behind this project. Should it be iterated upon, reflections on technology will almost surely be present. As teachers engage in reflective practice, they must also be able to reflect on new mediums of literacy, perhaps different from those they have experienced in their personal histories. Since these considerations remain important outside the bounds of this or similar studies, this recommendation is relevant and applicable to the wider field of education.

### **Interview or survey the students of participant teachers**

The last recommendation for future research lies in the students themselves. Thus far, this study has focused almost explicitly on educational practices and perspectives as they impact the teacher. When reflecting, educational encounters that involve students discuss them as external actors; students take the form of characters in a play focused on the individual engaged in reflection. The materials are teacher-centered, as they should be in a personal reflection; however, this also presents an opportunity for shared perspectives and additional insight through student interviews.

As teachers make instructional choices, they rarely do so in a vacuum. Students are affected and often notice when, for example, their instructor spends more time with one student than another. These students should be interviewed or, failing that, surveyed. In the context of divorce and separation, their interpretation could yield valuable insight into the emotional and social impact of educators' instructional choices.

Since teachers will likely still be in relationship with the students being questioned, interviews should be conducted by a collaborative partner or lead researcher if the study scale has been expanded. Honest feedback from the students is of the utmost importance. Measures should be taken to protect student privacy, including anonymizing the survey process. Interview data should also be withheld from the participant teaching until the conclusion of the school year to ensure the integrity of the classroom environment is maintained.

The value of this insight should not be underestimated, however. Teaching is a reflective practice. One of the primary thrusts of this research is to engage teachers in deeper levels of reflection than they would otherwise undertake. Reflective practice can only be enhanced with the inclusion of additional perspectives. As teachers, it is impossible to fully understand the experience of our students. Interviews and surveys provide a necessary and important window that could be foundational to future instructional decisions.

### **Final Thoughts**

As teachers, engaging in reflective practice is important. We carry with us the weight of our experiences. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we carry those experiences into the classroom with us each day we teach. The students we encounter are shaped by the decisions we make, so understanding ourselves and how our personal histories shape our instruction is important. Reflection is the key to understanding who we are and why

we do what we do both inside the classroom and out (Kuzmic, 2002; Samaras, 2002).

Reflection is a gateway to understanding oneself and improving one's practice.

Today, more than half of all marriages end in divorce ("Marriages and divorces," 2012). Children in schools across the country will enter the classroom from families of every type. Many teachers, like their students, will have been touched by divorce and separation. As a result of this, there is a growing importance for educators to understand the implications of parental separation. Research shows that they may lag behind their two-parent peers; however, those studies also show the folly of preconception: resources strongly mitigate the negative implications of single-parent family-types (Cooksey, 1997; Pong, Dronkers & Hampden-Thompson, 2003). Teachers must invest in the growing body of research but must also develop personal understandings of their students to develop specific instructional strategies to meet their needs. Schools, too, must invest in strong home-school connection programs that support family literacy and involve parents in the educational process (Pong, 1997; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005).

As an educator, my goal is to provide the highest quality education I am able. I am to provide this education to every student that enters my class, without reservation and without regard to how similar or dissimilar their circumstances may be from my own. Engaging in a self-study focused on how my experiences growing up in a single-parent home have shaped my practices and perspectives as a teacher has been foundational toward building a greater self-understanding and becoming a more effective teacher. This

study has enabled me to see the specific ways in which my past influences my present, making me a better educator than I could otherwise have been.

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## Appendix A: Post-teaching Field Notes

<b>Date:</b>	1/27/14
<b>Record:</b>	Teaching Entry #1
<b><u>Journal Entry:</u></b>	
<p>Today I taught middle school. I was at Weston, teaching fifth grade Social Studies at the middle school. Since the middle school is broken into periods, I only had each class for just under an hour. Each was at different stages of the same group project: creating a poster about one of the world wonders, about how erosion and corrosion are effecting it, what can be done to solve the problem, and why, as a group, they think it's important that the wonder be preserved.</p> <p>Teaching at the middle school level affords me the ability to see lots of different students throughout the day. Today I taught four periods and a learning lab. Each group was distinct, a unique collection of minds, that changed the atmosphere of the teaching.</p> <p>It was interesting to see how the students reacted to the challenges of the assignment. Though I introduced the lesson with clear expectations and an example of using the textbook to find the information – the assignment absolutely required they pull information from the text – some of the simply would not until I prompted them to do so. Most did, of course, and functioned very well.</p> <p>As the students worked, I toured the room supporting each group. Though I had to use the teacher's pre-selected groups, it was interesting to see the different dynamics emerge. Some worked very well together. These tended to be very independent, needing little support, though I still visited with them to check their work and offer them words of guidance and encouragement. The others that struggled stand out to me most.</p> <p>One group in particular comes to mind. A little girl, Sarah, had wanted to be paired with her friends. Since I did not select the groups and wouldn't presume to change the teacher's selection on a project that would extend beyond the day I was present, she was asked to stay with the three boys she was partnered with. When I returned to them several minutes after beginning work, only two boys had opened their books to find information. The other boy was sharing his thoughts on preservation ideas. Sarah was diligently drawing smiley faces all over their poster, arguing with the boys about the value of their suggestions while she offered none of her own.</p> <p>I reoriented Sarah. I asked her to open her book and find facts and then to share them</p>	

with their group to decide if they should be placed on their board. She was unhappy to have to wait to decorate her page and for her avoidance to be put to an end. For the rest of the period, the boys worked, albeit distractedly, despite her upset whenever they questioned her suggestions.

In other struggling groups I found my reaction to be the same. What does the text say? If you're off task, open your book and find a fact. Talk with your group about what you found. What do you see in the photograph next to your wonder? Always reorienting to the text.

In the back of my mind, I found myself thinking about formal testing. Even as a substitute, state tests wear on my mind. They need to refer to text because the test will demand they refer to the text. This bothers me. I don't like that my thoughts, my teaching, are predicated on the demands of formal testing. I believe that students should be looking into the text because they value what it has to offer for their assignment. I believe that students should value text situationally, even if it's not something they particularly enjoy reading – like a textbook. This is your assignment, this passage is your resource. Reading is enjoyment. Reading is work. Books are a joy. Books are a tool.

Reading, I believe, is the work of students but it should also be one of their great escapes. In my own life, I have found it to be such. Growing up, it was quite a juxtaposition: reading as something I loved to do and reading as something I was made to do. When I was made to do it, I didn't like it. Now, as a teacher, I wish I didn't have to make students read things they didn't like. I wish it could all be enjoyable *and* educationally rich. I guess I have just learned, and now must teach, that the act of reading is multi-faceted. It may not always be fun, and we may have to read things we don't like, but it is important to try new things and find value in *all* reading.

The important element, I think, is to allow students enough free reading time that enjoyable reading overcomes the necessitated. The balance must always be tipped toward find what is great in the written word if we want student to become independent readers. After all, who would want to read text books all the time?

**Classroom Materials:**

- ▲ SmartBoard
- ▲ Dictionaries
- ▲ Thesaurus
- ▲ Several computers in the back of the room
- ▲ Research Journals (composition notebooks)
- ▲ Textbooks
- ▲ Markers, Pens, and Pencils

- ✦ Rulers
- ✦ A small classroom library
- ✦ Worksheets

<b>Date:</b>	1/28/14
<b>Record:</b>	Teaching Entry #2

**Journal Entry:**

I was back at the [Weston] middle school today. I taught math. Math is a hard subject for me. As a little boy, I was a reader, not a mathematician. I was alright with it, up until high school when a particularly nasty teacher made me feel like a failure by embarrassing me in front of class. After that class, I made a conscious decision to never take another math class if I could help it. Looking back, I think that was a poor decision, not because it has made me an effectively worse teacher, but because it has made me a less confident teacher in areas outside my expertise.

As I taught, I looked for ways to introduce and embrace literacy. I had students read their questions, share their thinking, write their answers, and turn-and-talk with their table-mates. I was limited by the lone 50 minutes I had the class, however, and limited by my own struggles with teaching the content. I played it safe and followed the lesson as laid out in the teacher's manual with only minor alterations.

When I teach, I try to make the content my own. I don't believe in teaching from a teacher's manual. It's necessary, as a substitute, especially when teaching math concepts in the era of Race to the Top and the Common Core. The way I learned how to do many types of math is very different from what students are learning today, so I review the book, do my best to learn it for myself in the 15-20 minutes before students arrive for the day, and then off I go, using the manual as a guide, only relying on it heavily when I feel far over my head.

Teaching today, I realized something important. I don't value numerical literacy as much as other forms of literacy. It struck me during my first lesson, which is usually the roughest of the day when I am trying my hand at new content for the first time. The problem utilized fractions and at the time, a co-teacher was in the room with me. I referred to the numerator as, quite simply, the "top number" which my colleague corrected with the proper term. To my surprise, I felt myself feeling slightly stepped on.

This was unusual. I don't mind when other teachers, especially those who are there regularly, correct me. I take it in stride. But in that moment, I found myself asking (in my mind) "why bother correcting me when they're understanding the concept?" The answer is simple: using the proper content-area terminology is important. But because of my own history, my own lack of value, I find that in teaching I place much more of an emphasis on literacy than math. This is interesting because I highly value other

literacies, such as the technological.

At the end of the day, and even as I write this, I questioned how growing up in a single household might have shaped this moment. I believe I know the answer. When I went through that terrible time with that 10<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher, my father was unwilling to reach out to the school. He was probably tired from working all the time and perhaps thought I was exaggerating. I couldn't ask my mom to do anything since I didn't live with her. She didn't know and I didn't feel confident in her ability to help me. No one was there to advocate for me, so I developed a resentment of that math teacher and of any math that I found challenging. On another level, I think I felt a little resentment toward my father who was good at math and closer to my mother who had similar experiences to myself. My parents, even in this, were split.

It feels a little bit crazy to come to this revelation but now that it's out, it's there.

As a teacher, I can't let that impact my teaching decisions. I need to be aware that math literacy is the sole literacy which I hold a prejudice against – and it's not even just today that I've seen these feelings surface! On other days, sitting in on math lessons or teaching them myself, I find myself questioning the importance of the concepts or knowing that if given the option I would skip teaching math entirely.

I'm glad I am becoming aware of this. These reflections will help me to be a better teacher that embraces all subjects and literacies.

**Classroom Materials:**

SmartBoard

Dry Erase Board and Markers

Numerical disc manipulatives

Textbooks

Pencils

Rulers

Several computers (unused)

Environmental text, including an oversized ruler and several posters made by the teacher

Worksheets

<b>Date:</b>	1/31/14
<b>Record:</b>	Teaching Entry #3

**Journal Entry:**

Today I tried something new. I was teaching in Weston in a self-enclosed special education classroom of fifth and sixth graders. I had worked with these students in the past, some of them even at the elementary level, so we were over that initial hump of rapport. It was the morning, a time when the five children are supposed to be working on morning work ( or coloring) or reading quietly while they eat breakfast, but which is usually filled with a lot of avoidance behaviors.

I arrived early, however, and made a trip down to the music room to borrow and acoustic guitar thinking that I would play for them a little later in the day during a moment of quiet work time. Instead, after going over the day's schedule, I decided to strum it lightly in the back of the classroom. Though only a couple even acknowledged that I was playing, they *all* quieted down! The students read, wrote, and (once their other literacy-based work was done) colored without talking and without getting up from their seats. I, and the two aides in the room, were amazed! This was very unusual for these students, as they typically are very noisy as they shift into “school mode” for the day.

Later in the day, the aides were having trouble reaching one student who was pre-occupied with the classroom vacuum cleaner and resentful at any of their attempts to get him to work. I visited with the student, and asked him what he liked about working with the vacuum cleaner. Ascertaining that he was mechanically and technologically-minded, I shared how I had taken apart my home vacuum cleaner several times to fix it. His eyes lit up and he shared how he had done the same. He then asked me if I had ever tried to fix a tablet (an iPad mini). I told him about how I began college wanting to repair computers and had spent a lot of time with all forms of computers. We talked in this way for several minutes before I asked him if he could come to his desk and finish his work. He agreed, begrudgingly, and asked if we could talk more later (he had things he still wanted to ask me if I had done.)

Feeling successful with my previous attempts to reach the students, I had to try incorporating music again. Later in the day, during another period of quiet work time, I did the same with the same result. The students did acknowledge my strumming slightly more, some saying that I must have taken lessons or asking if they could play, but quickly returned to their own work. Again, this was unusual, causing the classroom aides to comment that the classroom had never been so calm.

As I reflect on these events, I have to ask myself why I chose, and have chosen in the past, to bring music into the classroom. I can't help but think back to the influential role music played in my life. I spent hours with my guitar as an adolescent. While my dad was at work or while I had free time after school, I would scour the internet finding tablature and reading interviews. I would sink into the lyrics of my favorite groups, letting it sweep me away into flights of fancy.

Deciding to bring music into the room was a risk but one that paid off. The kids could have reacted poorly. It could have been more of a distraction than a pleasant way to treat them at the end of the day. Instead, it bolstered their reading and . This is definitely something I will be coming back to in the future.

**Classroom Materials:**

- ▲ SmartBoard
- ▲ Small classroom library
- ▲ Dictionaries
- ▲ Thesauruses
- ▲ Word Wall
- ▲ Art supplies and scrap paper
- ▲ Several computers and available netbooks
- ▲ Literate wall hangings (posters, signs, etc)
- ▲ Worksheet

<b>Date:</b>	2/4/14
<b>Record:</b>	Teaching Entry #4

**Journal Entry:**

I subbed at Northtown today in a fifth grade classroom of about twenty students. It was a day of some conflict. The kids were very chatty and I had to really keep after them to stay on task. Three boys really stood out as the instigators and the noise in the rest of the class seemed to rise like the tide anytime I had to stop to ask them to return to their seats. This particularly stressed me out because this building utilizes a loosely open floor plan where classrooms are presented in clusters with only single walls and bookshelves separating them. You can hear other classes much more than in traditional classroom arrangements.

As a substitute, I don't have access to any of these student's records, but I do know that one of them had to visit the nurse in the morning and at noon to take medication. He had the classic symptoms of a boy being treated for ADHD, including the rise in attention-seeking behaviors as the window of the medication's effectiveness started to wear off. None of them were particularly naughty, just silly, but that silliness caused disruption I had to work to keep under control. They reminded me, honestly, a bit of myself.

When I taught lessons, I paid particular attention to these boys. They each had a penchant for shouting out and when one would speak up, the others would often have something to say in response. The other students in the class seemed used to this behavior and would shout out in turn to correct them or, ironically, to remind them to raise their hands.

Throughout the morning, I reminded them publically and privately of my expectations. I shared with them that it wasn't so long ago that I sat where they now sit, making jokes and being silly, but that it was important for them to listen and stay focused. I had to remind them, more sternly, later that there was a time and place for silliness and that during a lesson, while I was teaching was not it. That disappointed me. I suppose I was hoping they would see that, rather than come down on them severely, I tried to relate with them. Through that relating, I tried to build respect and gain rapport. In this case, it didn't work.

Midway through the day I pulled all three of them to the side and sternly reminded them that their behavior was unacceptable and that there would have to be a consequence. This seemed to work for a little while but within an hour they were back at it and this time several students throughout the class were also having side

conversations and a disappointing level of bickering was beginning to take place. I was forced to stop what we were doing and take a moment of quiet time before having a whole-class discussion of what was an was not working, as well as what we could do to have a good rest of the day. In the end, everyone lost two minutes of free time and the three boys had to sit it out entirely.

I do have to admit to questioning these students' home lives. In my experience, students who act out more do so for attention. Sometimes it is because they are not receiving as much as they need at home. I am also aware that students coming from single-parent homes often act out for attention, not because of a fault of the parents' but because that parent often has to work and meet other obligations usually shared between two guardians. I try not to dwell on these thoughts and, honestly, feel a little guilty. In my capacity as a substitute, I have very little, if any, involve with my students' families. And, if I'm being completely honest, my influence on their lives is far more limited than that of other, more regular adults in their lives. Why do I bother wondering? I do, though, because it is a touchstone for my own life and would give me a window into understanding why possibly these negative behaviors might surface.

Today was a battle. It was one of those days that makes me question my own abilities as a teacher. It is a downer but I also know that these kinds of days come with the territory. There are some wonderful days and some that are very troubling. I can usually put my finger on what's different about those days. Today, I think it had a lot to do with a very nebulous behavior management system where minutes are taken from free time. To my knowledge, there was no positive reinforcement inherent in this. It was all loss.

I always try to give students the opportunity to correct themselves and make good choices. I give them second chances because I believe all children deserve that. On days like today, I need to reflect on how effective my behavior management practices are. Am I too lax? Almost certainly sometimes. Why is that?

When I grew up, I remember the terrible feelings of failure when I would let my father down. His disappointment was worse than any punishment. A lot of that was rooted in my behavior at school. Having the teacher call home was one of the worst things that could happen. I know that I want to save children from feeling those feelings. I don't like to make children sad but I also know that setting and standing behind appropriate boundaries is *helpful* to students, even if they don't see it in the long run. I know boundaries helped me.

Unfortunately, I was a pretty silly little boy. I loved to play and roughhouse, just like I would do with my dad. I would like to make people laugh. If I made my dad laugh, it was like a triumph. I looked up to his ability to relate to others. Everyone liked him, I

wanted them to like me too. Do I want my students to like me? Of course. But I also know that I am their teacher, not their friend. I can be a trusted, respected adult. Someone they can come to care about in the same way me, as their teacher, can trust and care about them.

Yet finding the line at just the right time is hard for me. Today shows that I sometimes let students go too far too early and then fight an uphill battle for the rest of the day trying to get them back in an educational posture. Is there a feeling of inadequacy in me? Something that says I shouldn't just be their substitute but their *favorite* substitute? I think there may be. Actually, I know I want to be their favorite but I can't let their days education be hindered because I want to give students chances.

The problem is, I don't know these students well enough to know if they should *have* those chances at the start of the day. I always begin my sub days by setting the days expectations: me of them and they for me. I try to get to know them in that morning conversation and let them know me. Throughout the rest of the day, I try to peek under the surface of their behavior to see the real child underneath. Are they shouting out because they want to be heard or are they shouting out because they want to make their friends laugh?

Professionally, this is an area I have to actively try to balance. It is one of the greatest challenges I have found in substitute teaching: trying to know students I couldn't possibly know from a single day or class period. But I must do my best, set boundaries and stick to them, and to treat students as individuals held to high standards with consequences in both the positive and negative.

**Classroom Materials:**

- ▲ SmartBoard
- ▲ iPads for each student
- ▲ Rich classroom library
- ▲ Word Wall
- ▲ Colored pencils, scrap paper
- ▲ Available netbooks
- ▲ Chalkboard (filled with posters and student work)
- ▲ Literate wall hangings (posters, signs, ruler, etc)
- ▲ Worksheets

<b>Date:</b>	2/5/14
<b>Record:</b>	Teaching Entry #5

**Journal Entry:**

As luck would have it, I was in the same cluster as last entry's class today! Unlike that last class, this group of students, also fifth grade, did very well. They were also chatty – I wonder if that's a theme for this little group of classes? – but I only had one jokester to contend with. He was a kind-hearted boy, though, and responded well to redirection. The rest of the class was very respectful; though, it's worth noting that this class also had a lack of substantial behavior management system.

What stood out to me today was the class's use of technology. Whereas that last teacher had the students read quietly during their downtime, this class was allowed to use their iPads for virtually everything. It was both a little awe-inspiring and little disheartening.

Every student in the class had their own iPad. They would use them to play educational games, read and listen to books, engage with interactive storybooks, take assessments (I am a little confused on how this works or what the program is) and then email them to the teacher, and as a replacement for their school agenda. Instead, they would take a picture of the homework assignments written on the board and then take their iPad home with them to review later.

Since the classroom was set up almost identically to the last class, there were many books and literacy resources available. Rather than read or write with physical materials, an option I was told to support the students in choosing, nearly every student chose to use their iPad instead. A couple, one little girl in particular, kept her nose buried in a Goosebumps book throughout the day. I was proud of her and told her so several times so that the other students could hear. I routinely toured the room asking students about books they had read recently or things they were working on in . I encouraged them repeatedly to look through the classroom library and reminded them that they might find something they'd like, even modeling this behavior twice throughout the day, making audible commentary about the available selection of books.

As I taught, I engaged the students with the written word as much as possible. Instead of allowing them to play games on their tablets, I asked them to free write in their composition notebooks. Unfortunately, they didn't have writer's notebooks! Instead, they had been using a set of netbooks available to the whole cluster and they hadn't been doing free . Their writing thus far, as they described it, had been all about particular topics or for assignments they had been given. Rather than plug them into another electronic medium, I asked them to get out a sheet of lined paper or to retrieve a piece of scrap paper from a basket in the class.

At the end of the day, the students eagerly anticipated “free app time.” Similar to recess in other rooms, the students had free choice for how they would spend their time. Here, only two even left their seat. I was disheartened by this, as I was at multiple times throughout the day, with this reliance on tablets and games.

When I grew up, I *loved* computers. I would spend hours poring over webpages and playing roleplaying games over the internet. It was one of the key ways I filled my spare hours while my dad was at work or when I just wanted to be alone (especially during adolescence). So I understand the love of technology and how entrancing it can be at this age. I know the allure of games and interactive stories. I considered my thesis on the value of technology and tablets in the classroom. Part of me stands in awe at just how incorporated modern technology *is* in this classroom. At the same time, however, it can go too far.

See, reading and were two of the *other* ways I filled that time. It made me sad to see technology replace books for these students. An interactive storybook is not the same as a *real* storybook. That's a value this period of reflection has made me aware of. To see only two out of 22 students even open a book throughout the day was disheartening. That is the key reason why I kept pushing them away from their tablets and towards the library or free . I want this kids to love literacy in its most basic forms, not just through pixels on a 10-inch screen.

Free app time was also a problem for me. In an age when so many children (and adults) are being reported overweight, there was something... sedentary about it. Technology, like all things, has to come with moderation. I can't help but feel like replacing regular independent literary encounters and routine movement – play, the work of children – is a step over the line of what I can embrace educationally.

Note: I'm sure the students do have regular reading encounters in whole- and small-group settings. It just wasn't a part of this teaching day.

**Classroom Materials:**

- ▲ SmartBoard
- ▲ iPads for each student
- ▲ Rich classroom library
- ▲ Word Wall
- ▲ Markers, crayons, scrap paper
- ▲ Available netbooks
- ▲ Chalkboard
- ▲ Literate wall hangings (posters, signs, ruler, etc)

<b>Date:</b>	2/10/14
<b>Record:</b>	Teaching Entry #6

**Journal Entry:**

Today I taught at Weston Middle School and, oh, what a day. I was in a self-enclosed eighth grade classroom for students with special needs, most notably those with behavioral issues. The day was a challenge, through and through, and it highlighted a couple important points for me: 1) I avoid referencing students' parents if all possible; and 2) even I must be cautious not to stereotype.

There were only six students in the classroom but it felt more. There were four boys and two girls. Three of the boys seemed to play off of each other, sometimes instigating, sometimes butting heads, and other times coming together to fight the common enemy of authority. These three, Mario, Rodney, and Ishmael, were in the STAR program, a bootcamp like organization that places strict boundaries on its participants in hopes of augmenting their behavior.

I began my day as I usually did, setting out the expectations, somewhat surprised to see a total lack of engagement with the students. I tried to connect with them one-on-one but did not make much headway and was even blanketly ignored by Ishmael. The two girls, Sarah and Sadie, and the other boy, Steven, would respond when addressed directly but were otherwise quiet. I found myself leaning on these three throughout the day because I knew they would respond as I tried to engage the students in each lesson's content.

Teaching was a problem. Mario, Rodney, and Ishmael acted as if I wasn't even there. I would try to teach a lesson and they would shout and laugh and throw papers at each other. I tried to connect with them each individually taking the kind, understanding approach. Later, I tried to be firm with them, reminding them that there would be consequences and even threatening a trip to the office. There was no behavior management system in the classroom, except, as the aide informed me, to send the problem students to the principal's office.

I wanted to avoid that and repeatedly tried to talk reason to the kids without also getting into a power struggle. The ring leader, Mario, acted out the most by insulting and threatening other students. During down time, he would sit and draw on his desk. When I approached him with a magazine from the class to read, he told me "I just don't like to read, okay? Get out of my face." Looking around the room, there were no materials. There was no classroom library. No alternatives to provide him with something interesting he might *enjoy* reading, and this wasn't a boy I could trust to go to the library and return quickly and safely. I let the issue rest, despairing at the lack of

resources available to these students, most, like Mario, unable to visit the library without an adult escort in an already under-staffed class.

I encouraged him, if he wouldn't read, to take out a piece of paper and write. I couldn't bear to see him sit idle, staring into space. This was school and even during downtime or in the face of adversity, we should be learning. What better and more natural than literacy? If he was unwilling to read, I said, he could still get his pencil moving. I gave him options. He could write about anything he liked, his day, how he felt about a topic, a story. It could even be a comic book. He refused by simply ignoring me.

Later, during a spelling test, Ishmael flamboyantly swiped his paper to the floor and shouted "I'm not going to do it!" Mario, wanting to be done, told him to "just pick it up, so we can be done with this!" They two came chest to chest and almost engaged in a fist fight. At that point, I called the principal who said this was no new issue for Mario and to gather what he would need to spend the rest of the day in his office.

I did so but I talked with Mario first. I asked him, person to person, what was the matter. Why was he acting like that? He stubbornly refused to talk to me. I told him, without really thinking, that I would hate for his mom and dad to hear that he was having such a rough day. He looked at me accusingly and told me he didn't have a dad. In talking with the aide afterward, she told me that he lived with his grandmother and five brothers and sisters; that no one really had time for him at home. Mario wasn't getting any support at home and would stay up late, not doing his homework, sometimes not eating, and come in the next morning with all of the pent-up frustration brimming just under the surface.

And I brought up his mom and dad. That's the reason why I avoid mentioning "mom" or "dad" when talking to students I don't know. I don't want to bring up a painful topic. I don't want to step in the mud and hurt them. Usually, I'll mention "the adult at home" or "mom and dad, or grandma and grandpa, or whoever the adult is with you at home" when quickly addressing this topic.

The truth is, that Mario and the other boys were troubled was obvious from the get go. As a teacher, I do my best to see past that and to the child underneath. I try to support students in all that I do. I have read the research, but, more than that, I have lived the life. I know that students from single-parent households act out more often due to a lack of resources. As I taught, I knew that it was a possibility for each of the students. In my heart, I knew that it wouldn't be a surprise to find out any of them were from trouble single-parent households.

That said, Ishmael, had two loving and supportive parents whom, I'm told, "work so

hard to give him what he needs” and that “don't know what to do.” Ishmael was arguably more disruptive than even Mario. Even though it wouldn't have surprised me to hear there weren't two parents in any of the three boys' homes, it *did* surprise me to hear there were two at Ishmael's. Without even being aware of it, I had stereotyped. I *must not do that*. And for that reason, I am glad to have reflected today.

What's more, I found that, after a couple periods during the morning, I avoided relying on Mario, Ishmael, or Rodney. I turned to the children who would participate, at least partially, and tried to rise above the din instead of continually try to stop it. I *did* try but, ultimately, I was avoiding conflict. I didn't want to have to call the principal.

In my adult life, I avoid conflict wherever possible and appropriate. I would much rather everyone get along rather than butt heads and possibly make the situation worse. My father was the opposite way. He would avoid *unnecessary* conflict but he wouldn't shy away from an argument. Rather, his style of conflict resolution involved a series of quick explosions followed by a quell and the pretension that nothing ever happened. Growing up, that was how I handled things. I learned after meeting my wife that my style of conflict resolution just wouldn't work. My history had shown me, sometimes people thrive on those explosions. Sometimes they even seek them out. That was the potential I saw in pushing any of the boys or drawing the line and sending them out of the classroom.

And honestly, I still feel that I have something to prove. Growing up, I was ushered into the Banana Splits program. I was one of the kids who must be damaged because Mom and Dad weren't together. That wasn't the case for me but there I sat with several students whom the divorce had absolutely impacted. I always, *always* felt the need to prove I was capable and self-sufficient. Even in teaching. I suppose, reflecting on it, that calling the principal feels like an admission of defeat.

These are things I will need to work on. Thankfully, reflection brings them all the more into my awareness. Now that I know, I can react.

**Classroom Materials:**

- ▲ Smartboard
- ▲ Chalkboard
- ▲ Pencils
- ▲ Paper
- ▲ Dictionaries/Thesauruses
- ▲ Several motivational posters
- ▲ Tape and stapler
- ▲ Worksheets

<b>Date:</b>	2/13/14
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<b>Record:</b>	Teaching Entry #7
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**Journal Entry:**

Today was a *fantastic* day. I was teaching at Northtown in the middle school and had the opportunity to substitute for an English teacher. Northtown Middle School operates in periods, so I was able to work with five different groups of 18-21 seventh grade students each reading chapters from a chapter book. I was in my element.

What really stood out to me today, and allowed it to be such an incredible day of teaching and learning, was the complete lack of behavioral issues. The students came in quietly and, after I introduced myself, were very respectful as they read, and listened, and responded to discussion questions in a whole-group conversation. There were a couple of instances of side-conversations but those slid off my back like water off a duck. We were digging *deep* into the story.

Each period built on the last. As I grew more familiar with the source material (I read it once before first period), I was able to ask more of the students. We started off by listening to an audiobook recording of the day's chapter. Then, using some of the teacher's suggestions as prompts, I would push the students' understandings. What was the author's intent in this passage? Why do you suppose she used this language? Think back to [other reading provided by the teacher in a note], how is what Creech is doing similar to what that author did?

So many things lined up just perfectly today. Right from the outset, I felt at ease in the classroom. Examples of student work ringed the classroom. Poems and short stories were taped to the walls. Book covers they had made and comic strips they had illustrated. All around the room were books and books and more books from a wide variety of genres and reading levels, not just adolescent fiction. The teacher had also provided me with an excellent selection of notes prompting me to remind students about Reading X or Reading Y. She familiarized me with what they had been doing, what they knew, and what they were working toward. I was empowered to be the best teacher I could be in that moment.

With all of the tools at my disposal, I went through today feeling like I had substitute teaching by the gourd. What's more, I think the students could see my confidence and enthusiasm. In fact, I'm sure of it because they responded to it! I found myself sharing pieces from my past that were similar to those of the main character. I asked them to relate and they did, one girl offering up how sad she felt when she had lost her grandmother the previous Fall.

Every period was this way. Every. One. Some were more chatty than others but I have to stand back and respect just how well today went. Because of that, I didn't find myself considering anything negative about *any* student! I didn't cast a thought to their home life – outside of the usual respectful consideration any new teacher must show, we don't want to be careless after all. I didn't have to consider their coming from a single-parent household. I didn't have to think about how I would relate to these students because we did so naturally, student to teacher, reader to reader, digging into what the author had to share with us.

This was a wonderful day!

**Classroom Materials:**

- ▲ SmartBoard
- ▲ Large classroom library
- ▲ Lots of books on display
- ▲ Many examples of student work decorating the walls
- ▲ Pencils
- ▲ Pens
- ▲ Fresh lined paper
- ▲ Stapler and tape
- ▲ Three-hole punch
- ▲ Book binders (the plastic kind you can buy at Walmart)
- ▲ Worksheets

<b>Date:</b>	2/14/14
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<b>Record:</b>	Teaching Entry #8
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**Journal Entry:**

Today was one of those days that reminds me of why student's home lives are so important. I was teaching sixth grade at Weston in a class I had been in before. The special education teacher I was filling in for co-taught with a general education teacher. It was a blended classroom. It was in many ways an unremarkable day – English, Math, Social Studies; the quiet students and the far too chatty – except for one student: Darius.

I had worked with Darius before, actually in the vignette which opened this thesis paper. I knew what was typical for him but I try not to hold expectations of students. Each day is a new beginning.

Darius is a tall boy, bigger than the others, and seemed to be a bit of a bully. More than once today I had to remind him about our classroom norms: keeping our hands to ourselves, not touching things that don't belong to you, being kind to others. He had a penchant for saying mean things to the students who sat next to him, calling them dumb when they would disagree or babies if they got upset with him. Twice today I saw him try to physically intimidate one of his peers. Needless to say, I spent a lot of time in close proximity with him.

Academically, Darius seemed to lag behind his peers, though, in truth, I'm still little unsure of the full extent of this. His day was filled with avoidance, as is usual. He didn't want to work unless I was right next to him, in his lone seat a row behind his closest peer at the back of the room by the coat rack, supporting him every step of the way. When I would walk away to help another student, he would revert back to drawing on his paper or playing with rubber bands and paper clips in his desk. The general education teacher seemed content to let him sit quietly in the back, not paying attention, unless he became disruptive to his peers. Then it was an issue.

I could tell there was something inside of Darius that wasn't quite right and I suspected he hurt. Why else would he act out so much? I made a point to be in close proximity to Darius throughout the day. When I was, he did much better. He *could* do the work, if he applied himself. When we had independent reading time, Darius read a Lego storybook quietly and with great interest. During math, with my support, he showed that he understood and could complete every problem, so long as he didn't get distracted. Due to his lower reading level, I anticipated that writer's workshop would be a challenge for him. Like previously, I made a point to check in on him and show an interest in the

creative story he was writing and illustrating. His dedication flagged early but a spark of renewed interest flared every time I would stop in and give him the chance to update me on his work. When he was with me, he was a good, capable little boy.

But again, every time I would step away, the old Darius would return. While he was in class, I could try to stay close but part of me felt guilty for doing so, as if I were being manipulated or doing a disservice to the other students, even when I made every effort to attend to them as well. Still, his behaviors On the way to lunch he pinched the girl in front of him in line and then lied about it. In lunch, he stole a snack from the boy sitting across from him and lost his computer time at the end of the day as a result. He was very unhappy going into the afternoon but seemed unable to make a connection between his choices and the negative consequences he was experiencing, despite having followed this pattern throughout the year.

As I mentioned earlier, I know that Darius has a very troubled home life. He has lived with his father since early last year after he was paroled from county jail. Before that he had lived with his mother, a woman who now, in the throes of drug addiction, wanted nothing to do with him. She lived just down the street, forcing Darius to see his absent mother on a daily basis.

I pulled Darius to the side when we returned to class. I talked with him about what he was feeling and the choices he had made. I told him that I was there to help him and reminded him that he could start his day over at any point. He did well. For the rest of the day, he seemed subdued, quietly sitting in the back of the classroom. It seemed as if he had taken my words to heart.

But by last period, when the class was going to computer lab for their free time, he was upset again, feeling the sting of his consequence. As we left, a girl shouted out in pain. Darius had wiped hand sanitizer in her eye. I was disappointed.

I thought I had reached Darius today. Even a little. Just like my first interaction with him, he did better when we could work together. Objectively, I can see that his actions are very likely attention-seeking. Since his father is working and by Darius' own description "watches TV and sleeps," it seems to fit that the resources in the home are lacking: time, money, support. Darius was finding attention where it was possible to be found, even if it was negative. I didn't want to come down on him in the beginning of the day. I wanted to help him see the light inside himself and to shine it on positive things, like learning, and accomplishment, and friendship.

I have a penchant for seeking out troubled students and trying to help them. When I first learned of Darius's home life, my heart broke a little. How terrible! But I have to

be aware that the rest of the class also needs me and, above all, it is my responsibility to create a safe learning environment for all students. But I can relate to him. I can understand his sense of loss as the other students talk about their moms and dads. I know that. And I also know that his must be so much worse.

As a teacher, I have to take care not to take the easy way out. I can't over-compensate for one student at the expense of the others (that wasn't the case and I wouldn't do that anyway – again, it was a co-teaching environment today, so I was able), but I also can't allow him to get away with being passive.

As I reflect on this, there is another important fact about the day. Darius was surely not the only student in the class coming in from a single-parent household. That reinforces me in this research. Not all students are alike. It's about the home environment, the support and resources, as much as it is the number of parental figures.

**Classroom Materials:**

- ▲ SmartBoard
- ▲ Pens, Pencils, Markers
- ▲ Lined paper and clean white paper
- ▲ Four computers
- ▲ Multi-shelf library filled with a wide array of on-level fiction texts – very little non-fiction – and a rotary of paperbacks
- ▲ Dictionaries, Thesauruses
- ▲ Tape, Stapler
- ▲ Art supplies (poster board, colored pipe cleaners, colored pencils)
- ▲ Board games
- ▲ Richly decorate walls with motivational posters, student work, and literacy resources – very colorful and fun
- ▲ Worksheets

<b>Date:</b>	2/18/14
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<b>Record:</b>	Teaching Entry #9
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**Journal Entry:**

I realized something today: I love telling stories. When I teach, I pepper my lessons with stories and anecdotes. Today I taught middle school science in Midtown. It was a half day filled with two periods of sixth graders each receiving the same lesson on scientific tools.

It was pretty basic, in truth. My job was to use a pre-made PowerPoint presentation to guide students through filling out a series of workbook pages describing several types of beaker, a scale, a ruler, goggles, and a microscope. The students were able to ask questions and make connections, per the teacher's recommendation, but their definitions were all to match what was included in the PowerPoint.

But, frankly, it was a bit dry to teach. Midway through, I found myself holding a pair of goggles and looking out on a sea of glassy-eyed faces. "You know," I began. "When I was in eighth grade, I almost blinded myself because I decided not to wear safety goggles. A piece of red hot metal landed right on my eyelid and burned a hole right into it." Immediately they all perked up and wanted me to go on – which I did, gladly.

I had stories for several of the other tools, as well, and not just about me. When I was demonstrating the beakers, one of the students asked if you boiled things in them. I then went into a short story about how resilient they are, using the example of liquid nitrogen and how science teachers will often use beakers to demonstrate the freezing qualities by dipping in tennis balls and shattering them.

As I consider this, numerous examples come to mind. I love telling stories. When I was little, I used to write short stories, allowing my imagination to run wild. I used to love having stories read to me, too, which I think is a natural quality many people carry. I would take my father's read alouds and then write stories to read aloud to myself. I would use them to impress other people with my imagination. As a boy with lots of spare time and a grandmother who worked at the library, stories were a great getaway. As an adult, I still listen to stories through talk radio and podcasts and audiobooks. I know how entrancing they are for me, so it feels eminently natural to weave oral storytelling into my teaching.

I also think it has to do with my desire to have students relate to me. Returning again to my own boyhood, I recall feeling like substitutes didn't really know me and I didn't know them. Those that I did know, I was able to relate to and like. I could trust them,

which was important for me. As a teacher, I want students to see me as someone more than a one-time substitute. I want them to feel that trust so that they can learn and I can be a better teacher to them. This desire to relate, to trust, to connect, I feel is strongly rooted to my own history. It has to be. Even as I write this, I feel a tendril pulling all the way back to childhood when I sat in those desks, looking to my teachers as trusted adults, just like my parents. I wanted their approval because I felt I knew them. I want my students to feel they know me and can relate to me so they can believe in the lessons I teach and the messages I send.

That said, I do recall several times in the past where I have used fictional storytelling to regain control of primary age classrooms. I would begin loudly with the classic fairy tale opening, “Once upon a time...” and then weave students names into a spontaneous story. Without fail, this method always quieted the class as they listened to hear what their same-named characters would do next.

The kids loved it. What was once a boring, note-taking lesson became one of lively conversation that the student's actively contributed to. That is the power of oral storytelling. It takes a teacher-centered experience and transforms it into a community tapestry; “here, grab an end, connect with me, and learn with me.”

**Classroom Materials:**

- ▲ SmartBoard
- ▲ Science materials: several beakers, goggles, a scale, a microscope, ruler
- ▲ Pencils
- ▲ Science textbooks
- ▲ Running faucets
- ▲ Some motivational posters
- ▲ Several computers and a cart of netbooks (unused)
- ▲ Worksheets

<b>Date:</b>	2/20/14
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<b>Record:</b>	Teaching Entry #10
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**Journal Entry:**

I taught third grade at Midtown today and was able to see the real life impact of one single-parent household on a good-hearted little boy who just lacked the support he needed to reach his potential. It started in the morning when it came time for the students to turn in the previous night's homework.

Martin, the boy, was having trouble finding his. The aide, Mrs. Manor, saw his searching and went over to help him. She opened his backpack and, I thought, rather brusquely searched through his things and asked him where his work was. He seemed very distressed and it was obvious to me watching from the sidelines that this was not a first-time occurrence. Mrs. Manor escorted him to his locker so he could search there but shook her head at me on the way, signaling that she didn't expect to find it. She was right.

When she came back, she told me to give him a zero for bringing in his homework. Martin was standing right there and my heart immediately went out to the little boy.

“Martin,” she told him. “We have been over this again and again. It's *your* responsibility to make sure your homework is completed and comes back with you.” He tried to protest, mentioning his older brothers. “I don't want to hear it, Martin,” she continued. “It is your responsibility, no matter what your brothers are doing.” My mind went immediately to support. What was the reason he has to be solely responsible for his homework? What was his home life like?

Throughout the day, Martin did very well. He was a happy, pleasant student. When it came time for guided reading, I noticed that he was significantly below many of his peers in the class. I did my best to support him and give him the opportunity to feel successful. His peers offered up decoded words which he quickly latched onto. Even still, he walked away from reading once again feeling low about himself.

For the rest of the day, I made it my mission to help Martin feel successful. As I write this journal, it is becoming very apparent that I gravitate toward the most needy students and try to lift them up. That was definitely the case with Martin. I found myself calling on him more when his hand was raised and when he was the first one to come to the SmartBoard to solve a math problem, I began the trend of giving volunteers a golf clap. This caused nearly every student to grin and several to even take a bow before returning to their seats.

It helped that the classroom was filled with resources. I could direct Martin to look to the word wall or his personal dictionary/thesaurus during independent writing (something I recommended to all of the students). I also saw him looking around the room during spelling and a window of free to appropriately spell the words he was attempting. In the afternoon, he asked if he could use the computer to play math games. In earnest, when he was in class, he did very well.

At the end of the day, each student had a book bag to take home for their 20 minutes of independent or parent-shared reading for the night. They also had a nightly log that a parent had to sign. As I helped him to pack his backpack, I noticed his log had only been signed once. He had filled out his own a number of times after that but there was no signature.

I suggested that he find some new books to read since he had been reading his for a while. He consented, gathering up several more. I asked him if he thought he could spend some time reading with mom and dad or even one of them. He said, "My dad doesn't read with me. He's too tired." I asked him if there was anyone else he could read with and he told me no: "my brothers don't read, I have to go to my room but they bother me. That's why I don't have my homework usually." I asked him if his dad had ever tried to convince his brothers to leave him alone. "He works," he said, "and watches the races. Do you like Nascar?"

During a planning period that morning, I had some time to talk with the aide. The homework had indeed been an issue since the start of the year. "He just doesn't get the support he needs," she told me. I commented that he seemed to be a smart boy. "He is, and sweet too. But once he goes home, his brothers run wild. Dad doesn't seem to do much."

This is a recurring theme I have noticed. Single-parents working and coming home too tired to devote the time they would probably like to in order to support their children. I don't assume the worst of any parent, especially one with three children and a full-time job. Martin's family seemed to see the boys home alone, the babysitter the oldest brother (only in 8<sup>th</sup> grade). Still, it's hard not to draw connections. Is Martin's reading related to the lack of support at home? Where would he be academically if someone, anyone could spend that extra time with him? Where is his mother in all of this?

It is apparent that I have an inborn need to help students that are struggling. Students whose out-of-school lives seem to be more challenging. That goes back to my own life. I take special care to make sure I'm being fair and equitable but I will probably always have a soft spot for children like Martin, even if I can't let the other students see that.

**Classroom Materials:**

- ⤴ Well done notes for me!
- ⤴ Word wall
- ⤴ Walls decorated with examples of student work and definitions of new words (!!)
- ⤴ Computers
- ⤴ Several iPads
- ⤴ Spare pencils
- ⤴ Lined paper and scrap white paper
- ⤴ Markers
- ⤴ A rotary of available paperbacks
- ⤴ A selection of books for each guided reading book to be able to choose from for independent/parent-shared reading
- ⤴ Worksheets

<b>Date:</b>	2/24/14
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<b>Record:</b>	Teaching Entry #11
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**Journal Entry:**

Today was another amazing day! I am astounded that I have had two solid days with no – I repeat, *no* – behavioral issues in such short proximity. I was teaching in a general education classroom in Midtown consisting of 23 students and can count this in every way as one of my best teaching days ever. What's more, it was absolutely rich in literacy!

The day started off on the right foot just based on the environment. All around the room the teacher had hung examples of student . One poster described the process. Another declared that “everybody is a reader!” In the front of the room, a poster hung covered in sticky notes under the heading “A Successful Classroom Is...” The post-it notes had been written by students and some were downright surprising: “beautiful,” “respectful of others,” “has a supportive atmosphere,” “allows everyone to take part and learn.” What fifth grader writes such things?

There were also books all around the room. A tall, five-shelf bookcase stood in the back filled with a selection of on-level fiction and non-fiction. A rotary stile stood next to it, also brimming with books. Literature seemed to be in every corner of the classroom, even though it wasn't an English class like my last stellar day at Northtown. I was enthusiastic before the students even entered the room.

When they did, it was with smiles and laughter and a little silliness. I don't mind that at all at the start of the day. I want students to come into class excited for what the day has to offer, happy to see each other again and ready to embark on another day of learning. I introduced myself and shared that I had enjoyed reviewing their “Successful Classroom” poster. We talked about the qualities of a good classroom and what expectations they had of me in turn. I shared a little about myself and engaged the students in a conversation about their pets and home lives.

After that, the students had twenty minutes of independent reading. They were *silent*. Every student was engaged with the stories. Not even a peep of side-conversation. Wow.

Next we read a story about a whale and a mouse called *Amos and Boris* by William Steig. It was a sweet story about how those two creatures helped each other survive at different points in life. It was also very deep and figurative. I peppered the story with models of my own thinking and connections. Several students raised their hands when I

would ask relevant questions. Why, for example, would the mouse consider the whale so astounding? And what do you suppose the author's purpose was for making one character a whale and another a mouse?

Still today, I found myself leaning on some students more than others. As is always the case, some students were quicker to raise their hands than others and a handful were downright quiet. Even though I did call on the more eager students more often, I made a point to ask every student in the class for their thoughts. I know that sometimes, like me, quiet students don't raise their hand not because they're distracted or unthinking, but rather because they're shy and afraid to take risks. One of my goals is to make sure every student has an open doorway to feel successful; that every student has the opportunity to feel valued and part of the class.

Throughout the day, I was able to make connections with students. During their downtime, several of them would write or read or draw and I would stop by and check in with them to show a genuine interest. I would share things from my own history to relate to them. If they were reading a book I had read, or an author, I would ask them what they thought of it and share that I had read it too and some of the connections I had made. If not, I sometimes shared simply how I loved to read and maybe a fact about what the (long) book I was currently on. During Social Studies they were working on a research project about a career field of their choice and finding facts and examples. I visited with each student and talked about what interested them and shared what I was able to relate to. It was a day filled with smiles.

At the end of the day, I gave the students the option of having free time or, taking a chance, having a question and answer where I would allow them to ask any school appropriate question they had – about me, about something they learned or were curious about – and I would do my best to answer. It was a risk, engaging in this type of exercise as a substitute teacher. It could, with some acting out, become non-productive and need to be concluded in short order. I went for it. I had developed a strong enough relationship, I felt, to use our free time to connect with one another over learning. To my surprise, they wanted to do the Q&A. Coming off of science, things started off with questions like “why is the sky blue” but quickly went into personal questions about myself. Was I married? Did I have kids? That kind of thing. Before long, the kids were making connections to me and I to them.

This reminds me so much of why I love teaching science in other settings. Usually, teaching science as a substitute means making extended use of the textbook, which I don't enjoy and the kids seem to tire of quickly. I recall a particular lesson in Weston focused on earthquakes and faultlines. Using the illustrations in the textbook, I asked the students to imagine the tectonic plates, shifting and moving, the vibrations

reverberating through the ground and shaking the earth above. I described the magma, far below the Earth's crust. We looked at pictures of the devastation caused around the world by earthquakes before returning again to the map of faultlines. I then asked them to apply their knowledge to the San Andreas fault. What did they make of this, I asked them. What did they imagine? When they shared their concerns for the people of California, I asked them what they thought they could do to prepare. The students were asking questions, making connections, and truly engaged when my experience had told me to prepare for a challenge. I could feel that the students were truly interested. They trusted me as their teacher. Narration and lively retelling, allowed a textbook-based lesson to come to life, just as it had in Northtown.

As I reflect, this is exactly the kind of connection and relation that I have talked about in other journal entries. I think early on in the day I was able to show a genuine interest and make real connections through literacy and my embrace of their classroom norms. I believe they could see how *Amos and Boris* touched me and when I shared my own connections, they felt free to make their own. It was a series of mini trust-building exercises that allowed for a wonderful day.

Without the need for discipline, I was able to focus my attention on connecting to every student, even those who seemed to shy away from it. I was able to define one of my core values, that all students should be seen, even if they don't raise their hand. I was also able to share a love of reading and use that as a bridge to meet these students whom I'd never worked with before halfway. We ended the day with high fives and a chorus of "can you come back tomorrow" and "I wish you could be my substitute everyday!"

**Classroom Materials:**

- ▲ SmartBoard
- ▲ Netbook for every student
- ▲ Expansive classroom library
- ▲ Well-decorated walls with resources and examples of student work
- ▲ Pencils, Pens
- ▲ Scrap white and lined paper
- ▲ Whiteboards surrounding SmartBoard
- ▲ Worksheets

<b>Date:</b>	2/26/14
<b>Record:</b>	Teaching Entry #12
<b><u>Journal Entry:</u></b>	
<p>I was back at Weston today. This time I was in a self-enclosed special education class of six students. I walk away from today both impressed and feeling a little lost. There is one student I am not sure how to reach in the context of the greater classroom composition. I am left with a question: with such disparate ability levels, how do you make sure each student is learning in every lesson – <i>especially</i> as a substitute teacher?</p> <p>The teacher kindly left me very detailed notes and many different resources. I was able to look examples of the student's prior work in ELA and Social Studies to see what they had been working on and to get an idea of each student's current ability level. I also consulted with the classroom teaching assistant to get an overview of each student's particular needs.</p> <p>The day began very well. I introduced myself and reviewed the day's schedule. I connected with all six students and asked them to share something special about themselves with me and I, in turn, did the same after everyone else had shared and our conversation was winding down into ELA time. One student, however, Katalina, was obviously off-put by my being there.</p> <p>While I am unsure of Katalina's particular diagnosis of IEP guidelines, it is apparent that she has the highest needs in the class. Her reading and level, according to the aide, is at the first-grade level. Her ability to communicate, while functional, is severely hampered by her challenges articulating full sentences. Instead, she would share punchy, brief responses, such as “yes,” “no,” and “don't want to.” When it came time for her to share this morning, she was not upset, but her attention was elsewhere and she would not share.</p> <p>Throughout the day, it was a struggle to keep Katalina attending. I was impressed by the rest of the class. Though there were impulse issues and some shouting out, they responded well to redirection. Katalina, however, would redirect momentarily before returning to staring off. When she would get an idea, usually about something she'd seen another student do, she would become upset and yell at them from across the room, causing momentary interruption as the aide and I reoriented the class back into the lesson's teaching.</p> <p>Though I am trained in special education, I still felt unprepared to meet Katalina's needs. While managing an already high needs class, there just weren't resources in the</p>	

class to keep her engaged without also abandoning the rest of the class during whole-group teaching. I *really* dislike that. While I know that I am only one teacher, and a substitute at that, I can't help but feel that Katalina's education is suffering due to a lack in support by the school. In speaking with the aide, I discovered that, indeed, Katalina was in the class on a trial basis; that she was too high for the “upstairs” special education class and too low for the one I was currently teaching. Today seems like an example of falling through the cracks. I don't like having a role to play in that.

I've mentioned before that I gravitate toward the most needy students. Because every student was needy, I had to choose who needed me most at the time. That answer, without weighting out each student's ability to accomplish the non-modified lesson objective, would have been Katalina unanimously, though I could not just stay with her consistently. So there were times when she was just sitting, not working, not learning today. That bothered me.

What today showed me is that, yes, due to my own past, I want to help the students who need it the most. But also that it won't always be in the act of actually teaching. It will also be in lesson planning. What was lacking today was differentiation. Katalina, though having such different needs, was being given the same lesson content. When I have my own classroom, I will be able to plan for students like Katalina and help them from the ground up. It is a key difference from substitute teaching. As a sub, I am only present for delivery. As a homeroom teacher, I will be there every step of the way.

I also realized that there is another element to the child advocacy I have made so much a part of myself. As the aide mentioned, how do you teach the other six kids an appropriate lessons, and teach Katalina hers, when you are only one person with a limited amount of class time? She is absolutely correct. One of the roles of a parent, as I relate this to my own past, is to fight for your child even when they're not there to know you're fighting for them. As a teacher, I want to do the same. If I am ever in a full-time teaching situation with a child and context such as today, I will go to the principal and find every resource I can to support her and find her the most appropriate placement. It is not okay for a child to fall through the cracks because they're different and have different needs.

When I was growing up with my dad and my grandmother, only seeing my mom every other weekend, I could see my other single-parent peers and the differences between us all. I could see the impact of being lumped in as the “divorced kids” and being made to go to the “Banana Splits” program. Children need to be valued and taught to as individuals, whether their special need is family-based or ability-based. I believe firmly in that.

**Classroom Materials:**

- ⤴ SmartBoard (inaccessible)
- ⤴ Book baskets for every student
- ⤴ Classroom library
- ⤴ Board games
- ⤴ Pencils, pens, scissors, highlighters
- ⤴ Scrap paper
- ⤴ Decorated walls with resources, student work, and motivational/informational posters
- ⤴ Reading area
- ⤴ Teacher manuals
- ⤴ Prior student work
- ⤴ Worksheets

<b>Date:</b>	2/27/14
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<b>Record:</b>	Teaching Entry #13
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**Journal Entry:**

Today I was back at Weston, once again in a fifth grade classroom. The day went pretty well. The teacher had a well laid out day for me consisting of reading, , social studies, and math. I arrived early today so I could review the materials and I'm glad I did! The math lesson in particular was a bit confusing with this new Common Core approach.

The kids arrived in good spirits. They were a chatty group, though! I had to remind them only a few short minutes after we discussed our shared expectations of what we had all agreed to. Thankfully, Weston utilizes a standard behavior management system across all of their classrooms and this particular teacher also had a ticket system for positive reinforcement. Out of all the students, though, one stood out to me more than the others.

Her name was Kayla and she was the most voracious reader I have ever taught. All throughout the day, if there was a minute of downtime, and I mean a *minute*, this girl was reading! Every time we would transition between subjects, she would be over to her table group's book box perusing Calvin and Hobbes or her Farside compilation. At her desk, she had a copy of the Hunger Games. I had to ask her several times not to sneak reading in her desk while we were working in other subject areas.

This may be the first time that a student's reading has actually been a behavioral issue. Though I had to address it, part of me didn't want to. It is so rare to see a student so deeply invested in reading! I did address it, though, and made a point to bring her into classroom discussions by calling on her and asking for her thoughts or participation with a demonstration.

In a way, I suppose I doted on her a little bit but not in the usual way that is associated with favoritism. When she would participate, she usually had a lot of good insight to share. At one point during a guided reading passage on wildfires, she shared how much she already knew about firefighters and how, in the photograph, the airplane was dropping chemicals to put out the flames. I was consistently impressed at her level of insight.

But throughout the day, it was a struggle to keep her engaged. She would drift often. So I came back to her and pulled her back into the lesson, keeping her on task.

I can relate to her. I wasn't as voracious a reader as she is at her age but I certainly

enjoyed reading more than my friends seemed to. I wasn't surprised when I asked her about her home life and she shared that she lives with only her mom. I also wasn't surprised when the classroom aide told me that she suffered from some emotional issues and that the excessive reading seemed to be an avoidance maneuver. And why not? Reading is an escape. I could see their being social ramifications as she got older, though, even if Kayla's academic capability continued to exceed that of her peers.

Today was a day I felt prepared to teach. I had everything in the room I needed and the homeroom teacher had left a number of resources. There was a substantial classroom library and since each group had a basket of books they'd collected from the school library, as well as writer's notebooks, I was able to direct the students towards literacy instead of games and idle chatter.

Some of the boys were drawing comic stories, which I don't much mind. Making pictures with captions and word bubbles is also literacy and a good example of boy writing. I visited with them and inquired about their writing and encouraged them to add dialogue in the traditional comic book style, even describing my own elementary comic history. I did make sure they were actually writing sentences and paragraphs at other points in the day, however.

**Classroom Materials:**

- ▲ SmartBoard
- ▲ Pens, Pencils, Art Supplies
- ▲ Posterboard
- ▲ Television (unused)
- ▲ Chalkboard and chalk
- ▲ Textbooks
- ▲ Substantial classroom library consisting mostly of on-level fiction
- ▲ Book baskets for each table group
- ▲ Worksheets

<b>Date:</b>	3/12/14
<b>Record:</b>	Teaching Entry #14

**Journal Entry:**

Another day at Weston today. Once again I was in a self-enclosed special education classroom. I spend a lot of time in this environment and I'm comfortable in it, especially when I already have a relationship with the kids as I did today. I had taught in this classroom previous to beginning my thesis work, as well as last year, so the students greeted me with cheers of "Mr. Coke!" this morning. It was nice, though I still reintroduced myself for students who might not have remembered my name and went over classroom expectations.

This, I think, is important. When I introduce myself, it provides me with the opportunity to not only set my expectations of them for the day, but it also allows them to set expectations of me. With a new class, I will share my name, how long I have been teaching, that I have a wife, three cats, and am expecting a son. I tell them that I teach because I love kids and that I think we're going to have a *fun* day. If there is time, I let them ask some questions or share their connections. The introduction is the substitute's formal opportunity to be more than "just another sub." It is their chance to be a relateable human being, ripe to be learned from. With a class like today's, I had taught them several times previously, so the reintroduction was lighter: a hello and reinforcement of mutual expectation.

Though the classroom was self-enclosed, the students all had high ability levels. An outsider would be hard pressed to see why these students should even be placed in such a setting. To that end, many of them shifted out at different periods today to join other inclusive classrooms for specific content areas. I had some of them all day, however, and was able to teach the whole group a number of lessons.

What struck me today is how much these students value author's chair. At two different points today, the students had to write a paragraph as part of a lesson. The first was about their favorite fast food restaurant and why. The second was a part of a research project on an arctic animal of their choosing; they gathered information from the internet using netbooks and wrote down the facts they found most important.

After they had finished their first paragraph, I had planned to let volunteers read their writing to the class. What I didn't expect, however, was that the first girl would pop right up, walk in front of the room to a stool their normal teacher had placed in front of the SmartBoard, and read hers there. I also wasn't expecting everyone to clap without provocation afterward! They went in a line without my even needing to ask, each

sharing their piece from the front of the class, with only a couple exceptions for the most shy students.

Later, when they had researched their animal, I hadn't planned on having them share since the project still had several more steps and added research to be done. That same first girl, Lillian, seemed dismayed that I didn't plan in sharing team and outright begged me to let the class share what they found. When the other students heard what was happening, they joined in a chorus of "Come on!" and "Please? Just some of us?". Who was I to say no when we were transitioning into free time anyway?

This really impressed me. I am a firm believer that reading and go hand in hand. You have to be a reader to be a writer and if you're a writer, you're also a reader. When I was a little boy, I used to write all the time. If I was bored at home – or in class in upper elementary through high school – it was the perfect time to begin a story or draw a comic strip. As an adult, is an absolutely huge part of my life and I believe in its empowering potential.

I didn't hesitate to allow the students to share today. I knew the work they had and I knew how important it was to validate their efforts. I wanted them to feel successful and like writers. Sharing out is a part of that. It comes after the teaching process, however.

When I teach , my goal is to outline just how a particular type of comes to be. I model both the thought process and the process. I try to support them in that oh-so-tricky transition from ideas to written words and then reviewing those words to craft the highest quality sentence they are able. I ask them to read their work out loud and see how it sounds. I pull them through the pitfalls of word choice and have even helped students make use of physical thesauruses.

In my own life, I have felt like a lot of this was lacking. My dad would go through my in red pen. I didn't much like having him "help" me brainstorm, even though I know he was doing his best. It just made me feel inept. My mother, on the other hand, was incredibly supportive. That said, she would very rarely correct even if I needed it.

As a teacher, days like today show me how important positive experiences can be. Unlike many students I have worked with who tell me they hate , these students were eager to share. They had a foundation of positivity. I want to embrace that in my own classroom.

**Classroom Materials:**

- ▲ SmartBoard
- ▲ ELMO ImageMate

- ⤴ Pencils, Pens, Paper (lined and scrap white)
- ⤴ Whiteboards
- ⤴ Several computers in the back of the room
- ⤴ Netbooks
- ⤴ A small classroom library paradoxically smattered with *above* level and adult texts
- ⤴ Textbooks
- ⤴ Motivational posters and examples of student work
- ⤴ Word wall
- ⤴ Worksheets

<b>Date:</b>	3/14/14
<b>Record:</b>	Teaching Entry #15

**Journal Entry:**

I was at Northtown today, teaching a half-day of fourth grade while the homeroom teacher was at an in-service. Since I was coming in during the afternoon and the kids had just returned from lunch *and* P.E. it was a challenging day of teaching. The kids were *wound!* It wasn't long after introducing myself that I found myself having to firm and remind the students that their normal teacher was just down the hallway and that it was everyone's responsibility to respect everyone's ability to learn. Rough start.

Unfortunately, it was a lost battle. I don't know how the teacher's at Northtown do it. There is no effective behavior management system! It all seems to come down to threats of losing free time at the end of the day. Is that what we're reduced to, putting substitutes in the position of being threat-makers? I had to follow through with that, too, but it was all I was left with. The teacher didn't take the time to leave me more than cursory notes and, as someone who likes to be organized and prepared, that just wasn't enough for me, especially with a lack of knowledge on what the student's classroom norms were.

I taught both math and writing. Math was a struggle due to all the shouting out but also because I had no guide to go on. Just a key to the packet the students had been working on and the instruction to guide them through two problems. The key did not disclose the steps that the students had been using and I was woefully lost as soon as the first student piped up with, "that's not how we do that!" I know they could see how out of sorts I felt and it was shout-out after shout-out. I had to bring the class to a full stop when the noise of side-conversations and call-outs for my attention grew too high.

To get around the absence of actual resources, I made the children my resource. I explained the situation to the students, that we were missing some teaching materials, and that we were going to be working together to complete the lesson. I shared that in my past, I had struggled with math and found it difficult, at times, but that if I worked together with my teacher and my classmates, that I was able to learn and accomplish more than I would have alone. I had a students work quietly before asking one to come to the board to demonstrate how they found their answer.

Writing was much better, if not in behavior, then at least in the teaching. The students had to write a persuasive letter to the principal making the case for flavored milks in the cafeteria stating at least three "well thought out reasons." I modeled the process on the board and lead a discussion on persuasive and what makes a strong reason versus a

weak one. There was a lot of shouting out, something I again had to pause the class for, but I was able to walk away from that lesson feeling like the students who stayed on task learned something. Their work showed it.

As I reflect on the days events, I make a connection to my father. He was a very organized man. Very type-A. My mother, on the other hand, was a definite type-B, with my grandmother falling somewhere in between. I'm like my grandmother, probably more of a type-B, but one thing I don't like is to feel like I'm unprepared to teach the days lesson. I'm fine with going off the page if I'm confident in the content, but without that basis in already knowing what the students need to know, I feel like I'm taking shots in the dark.

My dad was a man of lists. And so, as a result, was I. I wasn't around my mother enough to incorporate that relaxed approach to life into my teaching, without the lesson details already in hand. I'm a bit of a mixed bag, I think. Which means I really value a well laid out set of plans for the day before I begin teaching. Or, failing that, resources to draw from to make *myself* prepared.

When faced with behavior issues in a situation like today, I find myself flustered. Reflecting on this, I have to do a better job of giving an air of confidence even when I'm feeling lost. The students fed on that today. In retrospect, I should have assessed the situation better in the beginning and taken a firmer approach right from the start. This all comes back to my desire to relate and connect with students. Being authoritarian squashes that. Being authoritative does not. I have to go forward with a posture of firm confidence, right from the get-go.

**Classroom Materials:**

- ▲ SmartBoard
- ▲ Scrap paper
- ▲ Pencils
- ▲ Composition notebooks
- ▲ Worksheets
- ▲ Stapler, Tape
- ▲ Textbooks
- ▲ Lots of resources on the walls
- ▲ Word Wall
- ▲ Basic classroom library

## Appendix B: Memoir

<b>Date:</b>	1/27/14
<b>Record:</b>	Memoir Entry #1
<b><u>Journal Entry:</u></b>	
<p>My first memory of literacy was before Kindergarten. I'm not sure how old I was then but what I remember is this:</p>	
<p>It was evening, 1991. Bed time. I lay on my bed, the wood paneled room lit with the orange glow of a 1980's lampshade, with my dad standing at the foot of my bed, asking me what bedtime story I wanted to hear. In one hand, he held <i>I Wish That I Had Duck Feet</i> by Theo LeSieg. In the other, he held Dr. Suess' <i>If I Ran the Circus</i>. I asked him to read <i>Duck Feet</i>. It was one of my favorites.</p>	
<p>Reading as a little boy was a special time for my father and I. Bedtime stories were always fun, a way for us to bond before I fell asleep for the night. Even if my dad had been grumpy, coming home from work, at night he was always full of smiles and hugs and would even tuck me in like a mummy. Those are some of my happiest childhood memories.</p>	
<p>I loved that style of book. As a big Dr. Seuss fan, I realized early on that many of the children's books we would read had the same style. All colorful, heavy cardboard covers with friendly illustrations of animals and fantastical creatures. Each page was rich with color. It almost looked as if the same illustrator did all the pages. Our collection of books became very special to me. I think it was because of how it let me bond with my father.</p>	
<p>I liked reading <i>Hop on Pop</i> and <i>Fox in Socks</i>. I would imagine myself as the boy seen on each page of <i>Hop on Pop</i>, in the fantastical world of crazed geometry and perpetual rhyme. I would imagine myself hopping on my daddy's stomach, laughing. That was an image I came back to time and again. When we would play, roughhousing on the carpet of our living room, I would ask if I could jump on him. I was always too big, but looking back at it now, I always wanted the fun on the page to become the fun in my life. I wanted to be the happy, carefree characters. Even knowing that I couldn't, that a story was just that, a story, I wanted to pull every bit of it I could. I wanted one bonding experience with my father to join the next.</p>	
<p><i>Fox in Socks</i> was special, though. That was a book of rhymes and I used to laugh whenever my dad would trip over a word. If he didn't, I stood in awe at how quickly he could read the complex language. I would try to do the same as I learned to read. <i>Fox in</i></p>	

*Socks* was a litmus test. Not only did it test my early use of language and provide me with a stellar sense of satisfaction, but it also brought my imagination to life.

Reading with my father brought me joy. I will always remember it fondly.

As I grew older, my dad also taught me how to read through his example. All throughout raising me, he was an active reader, enjoying thrillers and science fiction. He would read before bed, ignoring the TV, and tell me how he had finished so many pages that night. He would read in the bathroom, as men are wont to do, and kept a healthy supply of books and magazines throughout the house. I found myself drawn to the same materials he was and wanting to enjoy the same books he had. I would do that all throughout my upbringing.

My dad was a huge reading influence right from the start. I feel very blessed to have had him in my life.

<b>Date:</b>	1/28/14
<b>Record:</b>	Memoir Entry #2

**Journal Entry:**

My grandmother was like a second mother to me. She lived on the other side of the house from my father and I, and since I only saw my mom every other weekend, she became, in earnest, another mother to me. She would wake me up for school, feed me breakfast, comb my hair, and make sure I wore a scarf on especially cold winter days. When school let out during my primary years, she would be just outside the school's front doors waiting for me. I loved her very dearly and in her declining years we would often acknowledge that I was her "other son" and she was my "second mom."

She was also the town librarian. That meant that on our walk home, as early as kindergarten, we would often stop at the library so she could help me find books I would enjoy and then sit in the children's section and read to me. Though she stopped reading to me once I became embarrassed to be read to in public, she continued to bring me home interesting books until I was well into high school. This is how I discovered one of my favorite books series, *Harry Potter*, as well as the perennial classics of Roald Dahl. It was a reminder to keep reading. It was a gentle nudge that said "reading has value, so value it." Even when I would drift from my own searches of the library's shelves, this action would remind me of how much awaited me between those covers. How much lay in wait, to be learned or drunk in like the finest form of entertainment.

Everybody knew my grandmother because of her position. She was well-loved in the community and always associated with the library. She would even smell like books. My father would tell her, jokingly, that she smelled like "ly-berry!" I loved it. She smelled safe.

When I was old enough to walk to my babysitter's, about age eight, I would go to the library every day before going home. I would spend hours each week poring over the shelves, searching for the perfect book to fit my current idea. Usually, it was non-fiction. I would find books on making paper airplanes or drawing cartoon characters. I would read about animals and prototype cars. I would learn card games. I wasn't limited by age ranges and would gladly scour the adult non-fiction section as well.

I would also look for books by my favorite fiction authors. During library in school, our teacher would read to us the works of Jerry Spinnelli or Louis Sachar or Roald Dahl. I would find a copy of the book we were reading just so I could get ahead. I would also look for books my parents had told me about. That was how I had first found and read *The Hobbit* (a favorite of my mother's, though, we were also reading this in sixth grade

when I actually read it) and *Where the Red Fern Grows*, which my dad had recommended.

My grandmother always supported me. She would help me find books if I had trouble and would often order them through interlibrary loan. If I needed them for longer, which was often the case since I would get distracted by another great book hunt and forget to finish what I had check out, she would renew them for me. Coincidentally, this is also why I have trouble adhering to due dates as an adult. It was common for grandma to come home from work with a selection of books that she thought I would like.

When Grandma wasn't at the library, she spent her evenings reading. I always knew I could find her, lying comfy on her couch with a great big book propped up on her chest. She loved to read stories about the Amish, a group that was common in our town, and sometimes Westerns. Occasionally, I would see her reading something by an author I recognized, like Stephen King, but not often. I would ask her why she read the things she did and she would always explain that she liked learning about different groups of people and that reading allowed you to "kind of live life in their shoes." She shied away from scary stories. She said the authors were too often "nasty" and said crude things.

When I look back at my childhood, I *revered* my grandmother. She was so smart, so dedicated, so... bookish. She supported all of the good things in me I still hold dear to this day. She is one of the biggest reasons I am who I am today.

<b>Date:</b>	1/31/14
<b>Record:</b>	Memoir Entry #3
<b><u>Journal Entry:</u></b>	
<p>When I wasn't with my dad or grandmother, I spent every other weekend and the summers with my mom. I loved my mom very much but the truth is we had a troubled relationship. In my earliest memories, I remember resenting that she was dating other men. I also hated that, even though I could be there so little, she still had to go into work and would leave me with one of her friends or boyfriends. I didn't want to go and would often tearfully beg my dad to let me stay. When he would take me to drop me off, I had to have my stuffed animals with me.</p> <p>But my mom tried her best. And the truth is, once I was there I was usually fine. I have a lot of positive memories with my mom. She, like my dad and grandmother, was also a reader. I would see her reading magazines and mystery novels. The man that would come to be my stepfather, and the person I remember being there the most, was also a reader. He loved Stephen King and would read the newspaper religiously. That was about it for him, though.</p> <p>When I would come over, my mom always liked to read to me. She would get me Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles books and comics because I was, hands down, the most obsessed TNMT fan that ever lived. She also knew I loved Dr. Seuss and would read me my favorites as well. Mom actually got me a subscription to a Dr. Seuss book club where I received a special Suess-themed miniature bookshelf and got a new book every month for a year. I loved that. We would read them together and it was very special. I remember feeling lonely on nights she would have to work, wishing we could be together reading. Or, honestly, just being together.</p> <p>She also got me a collection of animal cards. There were hundreds of them all in this green plastic case. We both loved animals and I have very fond memories of she and I sitting on my bedroom floor looking over those cards. We would choose favorites and ones we found especially interesting, or cute, or strange.</p> <p>I don't think I ever read with Tom. Back then things weren't very good at my mom's house. She and Tom would fight a lot. I resented him for trying to replace my dad. I already had a dad and I told my mom as much. On one tear-filled night, she told me that he wasn't going anywhere. Tom was with us for the long haul. In time, I would really come to look up to him. Tom taught me what it means to be a friend.</p> <p>But then, I just didn't want him around. I remember holding my Dr. Seuss books tight</p>	

while my mom was away on the night shift and I was lying in bed, feeling totally alone with Tom there. He didn't do anything to deserve my dislike, other than let me hear the sometimes nasty fights they would have. He just wasn't my mother.

It was a tumultuous time but filled with positive reading and writing experiences. My mother was never one to criticize my work. She would read my stories and comics and poems and always support me in them. When I wanted to make my own comic book company and sell the comics at the local corner store – a “newstand” – she used her exceptional art skills to make me posters for the shop. She would always encourage me and tell me how great what I wrote was.

My mom always embraced music like no other. Before I started school, I could name of Aerosmith songs after only hearing a few notes. I would go through he record collection reading lyrics and liner notes. When she would sing in the car, I would sing with her. It was here, I think, that my love of poetry first blossomed.

Listening to Aerosmith in the backseat of my mom's car.

<b>Date:</b>	2/4/14
<b>Record:</b>	Memoir Entry #4
<b><u>Journal Entry:</u></b>	
<p>When I was little, I loved to write. I think this was natural for me, since I loved to read. My mind would go wild with the stories I was reading and I wanted to create my own. Just recently, my parents dropped off all of the old work of mine they had kept. Stories and more stories, poems, lyrics, and masses of comics.</p> <p>When I started chasing narrative, it was like most little boys. I would draw pictures, then later, I would write about what I had drawn. This was rooted in school, of course, but I'll save that for another entry. What I'm interested in here is how much I loved putting pen to paper.</p> <p>I recall reading the Alvin Schwartz <i>Scary Stories</i> books and being entranced by their macabre. Combined with some of the movies and television I would watch, I wanted for a period to be a horror author. Later it was mystery, then science fiction, fantasy, and in adult life realistic fiction. Much of what I wrote was based on what I was reading.</p> <p>The first scary story of my own that I remember writing was about a boy who ventured into the basement home of a vampire. It was based on a very old <i>Tales From the Crypt</i> comic that my father had come home from work with one day. In the story, there was always something bad that would happen. Someone would die, or get hurt, or be changed into a monster. As my writing became more complex, the monsters became things to overcome. In upper elementary, I wrote a story about a set of friends who faced off against a great horned slime beast. The friends, all boys, armed themselves to the teeth with guns and walked away victorious. I also loved action movies.</p> <p>During these years, I was deeply into <i>Goosebumps</i> by R.L. Stine. My dad would buy me one every now and again but we weren't very well off, so I borrowed what I could from the library. I read masses of them and was soon writing my own "chapter books."</p> <p>In sixth grade, I read the book (and watched the movie), <i>Harriet the Spy</i>. I promptly convinced my dad to give me \$.75 for a flip notebook that I could collect clues in. By that afternoon, I was sneaking through the town hall, trying to uncover a mystery I felt sure was just under my nose.</p> <p>Later in sixth grade, I read <i>The Hobbit</i> for school. It was also a favorite of my mothers. She had a copy with Gollum on the cover and I would sit transfixed by the little monster, feeling sure that there was some dark tale bound by those pages. Most of my</p>	

friends hated it, hated the style of prose, hated the lengthy descriptions, and old-timey writing. I loved it. It started a love of fantasy that would never again relent.

At another time, one of my friends turned me onto Star Wars, the great space opera which has entranced young boys for years on end. I had seen books bearing the heading forever on the paperback turnstiles at the library but always wrote them off. When I had tried reading them, I found the descriptions hard to imagine. After watching the movies and, more importantly, seeing that my friends loved them, I promptly found a copy of the original novella which spawned the first movie. Within a week, I was re-writing the opening scenes on the desert planet with a different set of characters and a different great enemy.

In fifth grade, that same friend and I, as well as a handful of other boys, decided to make our own comic book company. We had a whole series of characters that would go on wacky adventures. We sold them for \$.25 a piece and even convinced the school librarian to give us a slot in the magazine rack. That same company would spiral into our first true business venture, flush with competing companies all from the same classroom.

My dad and my grandmother always supported me in these efforts. They kept my work, and praised it, and let me read my stories to their friends. I used to ask my dad for help from time to time but I quickly learned it was better just to write for fun. Much as he had been taught, he would mark my stories with red pen, trying to help me improve. Instead, it made me feel bad about what I had created. The work couldn't stand on its own. It was flawed.

But those early experiences taught me that my imagination was the wellspring of whole adventures; that the written word could be an escape and that I could entertain and earn praise with my words. I have never forgotten how good it felt, which is one of the reasons I'm still writing today. My parents helped me to become a writer and stay one over twenty years later.

When I look back, I do believe that I wrote more than my peers. Some would write like me, sure, but I recall writing for the same reasons I would read. It would take me away. I would write at home or in the library, filling in the hours when my father was at work or just occupied, or when I felt alone. I would then allow that to become a bonding experience but, I can't help but believe there were elements of self-preservation to my writing.

<b>Date:</b>	2/5/14
<b>Record:</b>	Memoir Entry #5
<b><u>Journal Entry:</u></b>	
<p>When I was in primary and early elementary school, I have very fond memories of reading and writing in those classes. My earliest memory is Kindergarten in Mrs. Burgio's class. She would read us stories and I would love it. To this day, I still love read alouds and listen to audiobooks regularly. But in Kindergarten, I remember my excitement and joy when it was time to gather on the carpet together. Mrs. Burgio would sit in a big rocking chair and read using all of the voices. Then she would show us the pictures making sure we all had time to see them.</p> <p>Later, throughout elementary school, I recall visiting the school library for scheduled periods. I enjoyed being read to even then, as our library teacher would often have funny, short chapter books, such as <i>Sideways Stories from Wayside School</i>. I would then find these books and read them myself. I also remember, even in primary school, finding picture-rich non-fiction books about topics I was interested in: animals, futuristic cars, motorcycles. Boy stuff.</p> <p>I also used to love to write. Early on, writing and art were closely tied with me. I would draw pictures and then describe what I had written. I would do the same in my normal class and in my art class, from time to time. I loved communicating with the written word. I always wanted to tell my own story, just like how teachers would read to me.</p> <p>One of my favorite things to do was write things to show to my parents. My dad and grandmother usually, since they were the ones I would come right home to, but I would also make things for my mom. Mother's and Father's Day were some of my favorites. I would make them cards and illustrate and decorate. I would share my heart in those little projects without ever realizing the depth of wha I was expressing. My parents have kept many of those things for years.</p> <p>In fourth grade, I started taking trips with my family. One of my first assignments related to these was to keep a journal of my vacation to the Adirondacks, including pictures, to give to my fourth grade teacher, Mrs. DiMeirio. She was a wonderful woman and I loved making that journal for her. It was a long drive to Lake Placid and further, and I remember writing in the car, talking to my dad about what I was doing. I also read on those rides and, like my dad, I cried when I finished <i>Where the Red Fern Grows</i>. He told me he had, so it made it okay for me.</p> <p>I loved sharing in my writing. Communicating pieces of myself. It made me feel</p>	

successful. When I could do that and connect with my parents, it was even more special. In a way, though, writing and connecting with my teachers was just as important. Their validation meant the world to me. Today I can see that I may have been filling a void, seeking that extra adult approval. Mrs. DiMeirio always gave me that and I loved her for it. Other teachers did the same and, as it would happen, it often had to do with books and selections we had recently read.

Funny how that works, isn't it?

<b>Date:</b>	2/10/14
<b>Record:</b>	Memoir Entry #6

**Journal Entry:**

Until the fifth grade, I usually to a babysitter after work. Robin was a wonderful woman and I loved her family dearly. She would keep four or five of us there at any given time, on top of her own two boys. While my dad was at work, they were my second family and I spent many pleasant days in their home, sharing their family's life.

I do recall reading with them. From time to time, Robin would read a book to us all. Her oldest son, Anthony, also had an incredibly collection of every Goosebumps book ever written. He would let me look at them and sometimes even borrow them. It was there that I decided Goosebumps was “cool” and I wanted a collection to compare to Anthony's.

More often than not, though, we children would play together. There were always lots of toys. When the weather was nice, we would run around outside, chasing each other, and playing make-believe. Other times we would stay in the house and watch movies. It was there that I was introduced to the Brave Little Toaster and the mind-blowing idea that there might be more to life than first met the eye.

One of the things that we used to do was play video games. Anthony always had the latest game system. When I was very little, I wasn't aloud to play. As I got older, though, Anthony got the Nintendo 64 and we were absolutely enamored with Goldeneye 64. Goldeneye was a multiplayer game set in the James Bond universe where you played either Bond or one of the villians and tried to shoot each other on a number of maps based on the movie of the same name.

We would spend *hours* playing Goldeneye and other Nintendo 64 games. At that age where friends and peer opinion means so much, I learned the value of sharing in a video game narrative. It began in me a passion to experience story in all of its forms. Playing the single-player campaign of Goldeneye, I experienced the story of the movie. It inspired me to watch the movie and then to hunt down every James Bond book I could find at the library. The social bonds we formed around that game, and more, inspired me to not only read but formed the foundation for a love of narrative in all its forms.

Even to this day, I still cherish good video game storytelling. I am discerning enough now to separate the good from the bad, but from those early moments, I started chasing after story in the games I would play. Likewise, I would try to build my own. When I

played a character, I would imagine I *was* that character. In my mind, I engaged in another, more personal, kind of storytelling, using the games as a sandbox for my machinations.

It dug my love of story deeper because it showed it to me in a new way, let me experience it with friends, and let me make it my own. That's the power of a good video game that, sadly, goes unrecognized in most corners of the adult world.

<b><u>Date:</u></b>	2/13/14
<b><u>Record:</u></b>	Memoir Entry #7
<b><u>Journal Entry:</u></b>	
<p>I woke up to the sounds of yelling. I was in the fourth grade, then, but the memory still stands out clearly. It was late, perhaps eleven, and maybe later. My mother was screaming at Tom. I don't remember her words now, I just remember the terrible hurt strains of her voice. Then I heard Tom's thunderous, reply. He was furious and when he was mad I got frightened. He had the raging, ragged tone of a man unafraid of violence and used to forcing his way.</p> <p>I was afraid and pressed my eyes shut. I was scared for them to find out I was awake. I didn't want Tom to see me. I didn't want my mom to involve me, even by acknowledging my presence. I wanted to sink into the couch and have everything fade away. I didn't want him to hurt my mom. I didn't want my mom to hurt him. But I couldn't see and I didn't know what the reason for this row was.</p> <p>I heard a slam, which the next morning I would find out was the microwave crashing to the floor. I was terrified for my mother and felt totally helpless. Helpless, and alone, and unprotected. I don't remember what immediately came after but soon there was a strange voice downstairs. My mom and Tom were still yelling. The voice was telling Tom to leave. I heard the sound of breaking glass.</p> <p>Tom left but the voice was still there. It was asking if there was anyone in the house. It wanted to check on me. I faked sleep as best I could as they climbed the stairs into our apartment. Still quaking, I swallowed my fear and focused all of my attention on laying perfectly still, an island in the dark. My eyelids went blood red when he shone his flashlight on my face. It lingered for a moment and then he told my mom I was lucky I hadn't been awake for everything that had happened. I would have been lucky but I wasn't.</p> <p>This was a theme that would repeat for years of my life. Mom and Tom fought nastily. They would say terrible things, without regard to my presence. Tom, to my knowledge, only hit my Mom once. I wasn't there. I only heard about it years later when Tom had recovered from a raging drug addiction. Even still, I often felt powerless.</p> <p>When Tom would yell at my mom, I would hide in my room, afraid that his rage would turn on me. I felt like a coward, like I should have stopped him from talking to my mom like that. It was wrong and mean and didn't he know I loved her? Wasn't <i>he</i> supposed to love her? When my dad would come home from work, he would often be angry and would yell and slam cupboards, but I was his son. It was different. And it never got</p>	

quite so far.

They didn't fight often. In fact, my dad came home upset more often than my mom and step-father ever fought, but together, these events had a profound impact. They both amounted to my feeling alone. Since it was only one parent at any time, when we were at odds, I was the boy island, wanting the other parent, and not having them.

When I was at my dad's, I would go to my grandma. If she was on her side of the house, I would go to her and she would comfort me and tell me she wished my dad wouldn't speak to me like that. When I would return from my mother's after a weekend where they'd fought, I would tell her sympathetic ear, and really feel heard. She was my safe place. My refuge. If she was at the library, I would go to her there. Sometimes I would stay and read, a place away.

Looking back now, I think I was a sensitive child. My father was not terrible, nor were my mother and step-father. My life was not bad. But these instances stay with me, clearly. It is, I think, the reason I am drawn to the children who most need adult love. Without my grandmother, I know that I would be a different man today. Furthermore, I have always and still doubt that anyone who hasn't lived through it can truly understand the fear and shame a child can experience as a result of parental conflict. Inside me, I wonder how many of my students have a person like Grandma was to me. If teacher's don't try to be their refuge, even when they're not openly asking, then who will?

<b>Date:</b>	2/14/14
<b>Record:</b>	Memoir Entry #8
<b><u>Journal Entry:</u></b>	
<p>The day the library got the internet, my life changed. I remember those days clearly. I had been using their computers for some time, making cards in Microsoft Word or playing Solitaire, but suddenly it was like the world opened up. I had access to anything I could possibly want to know. The library manager showed me how to use a search engine and I was off.</p> <p>I was in middle elementary school when the doors to my world exploded. At about this time, the other students in my grade started getting the internet at home, too. Windows 95 was out and dial-up internet access was becoming common. I had heard all about it, how my friends were logging onto AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) and chatting instantaneously, checking their email, sending along chain messages... the works. We didn't have a computer in our house until I had entered high school and only got my own when I won a contest in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. But I knew from that moment in the library onward that I needed this in my house.</p> <p>I made due. Every day after school, I would go to the library and enter whatever search term entered my mind. I dug and dug and read and read. Later, a friend introduced me to the website LiveJournal. I started writing online and had my first taste of public acceptance when I wrote an entry about the "human condition." I was hooked.</p> <p>Shortly after, my friend Ryan and I discovered that you could play games on the internet. He found programs called emulators that would let us play classic video games from home consoles. I remember going to the library, intent on playing Pokemon, even though I couldn't afford the handheld unit most kids played it on, and we would play for hours, monopolizing the two computers. Yates Library had a time policy to ensure everyone had a chance to use the computer, but with a little prompting, Ryan and I began staying far over our time "forgetting" to write in when we had logged on. Thankfully, it was a small town and it was rare for someone else to wait in line for internet access.</p> <p>Our family got our first computer when I was in middle school. My grandmother purchased hers even when my dad was still very fearful of the dangers of the internet. When she worked, I would use her computer for hours, tying up our household phone line. I didn't care, even though my dad certainly <i>did</i>. I loved being able to find out anything, anytime I wanted to find it out. More than that, I loved how it build up my social life.</p>	

Using AIM, I could articulate myself better than I could in person. When I wrote my statements, I could craft them to sound just as I would like, when I couldn't do the same in person. I met my first girlfriend through the internet, a young lady in a neighboring town who messaged me out of the blue one night, thinking I was someone else.

I even made my own websites using tools like Geocities and Angel. Ryan and I would compete to see who could receive the most pageviews. I would write, what I thought, were wonderfully compelling paragraphs about... I'm honestly not quite sure. But I remember I made those websites flashy with built-in music and animated graphics. I wanted them to be as sparkly and alluring as I wanted myself to be.

All of this took hours. When my dad wasn't home, I was online, reading and writing. When he was, I was usually online, reading and writing. He didn't like it but it was a safe place for me to be me. It was a point of fascination and the foundation for a passion for new technology and internet-based reading that is still prominent in my life today.

<b>Date:</b>	2/18/14
<b>Record:</b>	Memoir Entry #9
<p><b><u>Journal Entry:</u></b></p> <p>When I was in eighth grade, I discovered my first epic fantasy novel. I was on another “dig” through the library's shelves, when my eye was instantly captured by the colorful, mist-woven binding of <i>Dragons of a Fallen Sun</i>. At that point in my life, I had certainly heard of fantasy. In fact, the book I was looking for was an urban fantasy recommended by a friend who had one of the most entrancing fantasy collections I had ever seen – the collections of friends were always influential for me – but I had never actually read one.</p> <p>When I pulled the book from the shelf, I was sold. The cover showed an armored heroine on a horse, striding through a plane of lava. The prologue described a squad of militarized minotaur venturing through a haunted, ash-filled valley before the heroine parted the coming storm, with a message from a mysterious goddess. I was in. I had to read this book.</p> <p>As it would happen, <i>Dragons</i> was the first book in a trilogy I would read that whole summer. I had entered the library that day on the eve of summer vacation. I was going to be spending the summer with my mom and Tom at their new house, several miles outside of town. I wasn't nervous, per se, but disappointed at the loneliness I was sure would come. I was wrong.</p> <p>That summer, I read all three books in that series. I would lay in the hammock behind the house, deep in the adventures of Tanis Half-elven and the playful kender, Tasslehoff Burrfoot. I called my best friend Orin and told him about it. Before long, he was also hooked. He flew through the books much faster than I had but we still finished at the same time. Soon, he was over visiting so we could talk about what we had read and then venture into the back woods to pretend we were characters, using sticks as swords.</p> <p>That summer, that first series of fantasy novels not only freed me from a situation I was uncomfortable living in – being lonely, that is, I was more mature and more comfortable being with mom and Tom for the summers now – but it also allowed me to bond with a friend time and again. After the first couple of times hanging out, Orin and I became almost inseparable. Even today, we still share the same tastes in reading. Those tastes allowed us to become better friends and made for one of the best summers of my life. But fantasy also allowed me a different, limitless world to ignite my imagination. As people get older, their imaginations tend to diminish. Fantasy has allowed me to keep a piece of my youth. It has allowed me to remember the magic just at our fingertips. Though I read much more now, I still value it deeply.</p>	

<b>Date:</b>	2/20/14
<b>Record:</b>	Memoir Entry #10

**Journal Entry:**

When I was in seventh grade, I was introduced to The MUD. That's what we called it, just "The MUD" or "TFC." In reality, it was an online Multi-user Dungeon called *The Final Challenge*. As I mentioned in a previous entry, the internet had begun becoming a household staple in my town three years prior. When two older students, my friends Anthony and James, introduced me to it, my family had just received dial-up internet access and I was hooked.

The MUD was the precursor to modern MMORPGs. People from all around the world would connect to a shared world to chat, interact, and adventure together in a Dungeons and Dragons-like setting. Computers didn't yet have the graphical prowess to render large-scale 3D graphics, and so were composed entirely of words. Playing the game meant reading descriptions of each "room" you were standing in and typing out each command you wanted your character to take. Summoning, for example, meant typing "cast summon [player name]"

Though ours was "The MUD" there were many such games. It just so happened that TFC was the only one teens in our area played. At one point, there were 17 of us. We were a clique, members of this club no one else knew about. They would hear us talking about it and ask questions but once they found out you had to *read* to play it, they were immediately turned off. For us, we relished that reading.

I used to tell my friends that the game being all words made it better. I would argue that, by reading, your imagination would come to life, creating better, more detailed environments than any set of video game graphics ever could. It was and remains true. The MUD was a game of imagination, of reading, and of writing.

TFC inspired me to write short stories about my character. I would write lofty descriptions other players would see when they "look"-ed at me. I think it was then, during that period when social ties and public perception mean so very much to an adolescent, that I really discovered how important good writing could be. In the game, it was my face to the world. Even the 16 other kids who played – I didn't know them all and only met seven or so – they knew me based on my writing.

I would step into the shoes of my character and roleplay. Through the game I could weave my own stories. Then, after I had achieved a new item or piece of equipment, I could go into school and share my stories with my friends. The MUD represented true

bonding to me. It also represented some turmoil when things would go sour with a friend. We lived, in a way, half in the world of written imagination, a world that could bleed out into our own.

It was formational for me.

<b>Date:</b>	2/24/14
<b>Record:</b>	Memoir Entry #11
<p><b><u>Journal Entry:</u></b></p> <p>Seventh grade was a challenging year for me as a writer. I still loved to write and was writing short stories regularly (though I don't think I finished many). I would write about my MUD character or use the book I was reading as inspiration. I was also really beginning to discover a love of horror and scary stories. I was, in a word, a boy writer.</p> <p>I had an English teacher that year that I really liked. She was a nice woman. A young, first-year teacher. I don't know what got into me but when we had the opportunity to write a short story about anything we'd like, I decided to push my limits. I wanted to write a scary story filled with gore and violence and spooks.</p> <p>We had time to write in class and I remember bragging to my friends about what I was working on. It was a story about a boy with an abusive father who, after being beat, turns and exacts revenge on that father. It was violent and not the most school appropriate but I was proud. I was being bold, writing something daring, and all of my friends were impressed. I turned that story in, eager to see my teacher's shock so my friends and I could laugh. I knew that I was a good writer, so the thought of receiving a bad grade never entered my mind.</p> <p>When I got the paper back, it was littered with red ink. Section after section had been circled and underlined and marked with notes like "this is NOT appropriate." On the top of the paper, the teacher wrote in all capital letters "65 – SEE ME." When I did, she proceeded to tell me how out of line that story was and that it had no place at school. There was nothing, not one thing, positive that the teacher had to share.</p> <p>I sat down with my friends and we did laugh. At least by appearances. I made it out like she was a girl and just didn't get it, like my little mission had been successful. I told them I didn't care about the grade; I had got what I wanted and we all loved the story. Inside, I felt like a failure.</p> <p>I knew I had pushed the limits but I was also proud of what I had created. There was lots of dialogue and good imagery. It had an interesting perspective and a solid premise, if a bit dark. As a teacher myself I look at that today and see that my first-year English instructor as woefully misguided. She squashed me with all of that red ink.</p> <p>It didn't stop me from writing permanently but I don't think I wrote anything for some time after that.</p>	

<b>Date:</b>	2/26/14
<b>Record:</b>	Memoir Entry #12

**Journal Entry:**

Thankfully, it wasn't long before I received the validation I so desperately wanted. The next year, eighth grade, I felt like king of the world because of my writing. I was still playing the MUD, reading fantasy stories, and coming up with my own, but it was in what I submitted at school that got me the positive attention I so needed.

At this time, I was beginning to feel very insecure about myself. I was overweight, gawky, and awkward. I was falling behind my peers in the MUD and felt trapped in the middle-ground between the freedom I sought in life and the limits of being an adolescent living with a single- technologically fearful father. I also, perhaps in an attempt not to add “nerdy” to that list, I contented myself with being a “B” student. I also made every attempt to avoid doing homework to preserve my time on the MUD.

Yet I still loved writing, even if my past educational experiences made me feel distinctly average. Then, one day, my Home Economics teacher shocked me by holding up an essay I'd recently written in front of the class. She said it was one of the best she had ever read and that, when the person who wrote it recognized their work, they should stand up and take credit for the exceptional job they had done. I stood and in that minute felt true accomplishment. Never before had a teacher said something so kind to me. After class, she held me for a moment and reinforced just how impressed she was at my work, and encouraged me to keep writing.

Within that same month, my new English teacher, Mr. Hughes, did something very similar. It was another short story assignment and I, now contemplating life after death and whether I would believe in a power greater than myself, chose to write about a man who died and went to heaven only to be given a second chance at life. When it came time for our stories to be handed back, he told the class that one of us had really given his whole effort to the assignment. That was high praise. When he handed me my paper, he winked and I knew it was me. Then, referring to me as “Mr. Coke,” praised me in front of the class.

I have always held onto those moments. It was there that I really began to believe that I was a good writer, not just trying at nothing. From that moment onward, I started to believe in myself, because of two teachers who took the time to validate me when I needed it most. That's what I do with my students today: lift them up and make them feel successful when they need it most. It changed my life for the better. I owe it to the children I teach to do the same now that I'm in the teacher's shoes.

<b>Date:</b>	2/27/14
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<b>Record:</b>	Memoir Entry #13
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**Journal Entry:**

Due to my penchant for spending hours on the computer, my dad and I didn't get along so well as I progressed through high school. One time, after repeated attempts to get me to log off, he physically cut the phone cord, severing my ties to the internet until I could buy a replacement. He told me then, and I'll never forget this, that I "may be his son, but I really wasn't much fun to be around." That stung and I resented him for it. As I grew towards my peers, I grew away from him.

My mother got me my first guitar when I was in the seventh grade and I played it religiously all throughout high school. The older I got, the more I began to define myself by music. I had played the trumpet since sixth grade but my band teacher didn't approve of guitars. In a way, I played in spite of him. I played to go into myself and pour out those wells of emotion. Even to this day, playing guitar is therapeutic for me.

But back then, it was music in general, not just strumming a six-string. I listened to a group called Tool and was fanatical. I would search the internet for Tool fansites and would read through their lyrics looking for the hidden meanings to them. I would relate deeply to the singer's words. Something about it spoke to my soul. The same became true for all of my favorite bands. Songmeanings.net became one of my favorite websites because I could read the comments of other like-minded people, all searching for meaning.

For me, lyrics were like poetry. I could see the beauty in them. Often, it felt like the singer was writing just for me, like the music and vocal lines all lined up by God's hand to meet me right where I was at that moment. I started transcribing them in my notebooks when I was bored in class; I had my favorites memorized, so it was an easy task. In those pages, I wrote stanzas of great personal meaning. I started to define myself by the music I enjoyed.

Along with my guitar, all of this combined to my wanting to be a rock star and lead a band. Instead of spending time with my dad, I would search the internet for tablature and practice for hours. My dad would come and go, usually asking me if I wanted to go out with him, but I would isolate with my music, my games, and my books. Our relationship wasn't bad but we weren't terribly close either. I was the boy island by choice now, finding my landlines where I could, through those games, and groups, and well-read pages.

This time in my life did wonders for my other relationships, though. My mother was a big music fan and she had always encouraged me to follow my dreams in this area. She had done the same things, poring over lyric sheets and sinking into her favorite groups. Suddenly we could relate better than ever before. I wanted to be over there now. She wanted me to be the world's best guitarist and to tour the world with cheering fans. I wanted the same. As I grew up, the animosity I held for her and Tom began to fade. Our relationship healed.

In school, I was known as the guy who played guitar. People would tell me how good I was and would sit in with me when I would practice in one of the band room's practice studios. I even had a couple of girls start to take notice. Guys I had never spent much time with before wanted to get together and "jam." I was also writing my own lyrics regularly by middle high school. It was a given that I would be the singer-songwriter.

Music and literacy blended together with technological prowess to make me a self-made musician. It, like so many other times, built up social bonds in my life. Literacy continued all throughout high school to define me.

<b>Date:</b>	3/12/14
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<b>Record:</b>	Memoir Entry #14
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**Journal Entry:**

By eleventh grade, I decided to enter into a BOCES program for computer networking. I had made the decision the year prior after a particularly punishing math teacher, that I wanted no part of math and science as long as I was in school. BOCES was my answer to that. It made my days at school half-days while I spent the afternoons working on computer-based projects at the nearby campus.

There was a lot of reading in that computer networking class. We had to take a number of computer-based training sequences produced by CISCO systems, makers of Linksys and other high-end computing equipment. But I loved being hands-on with the technology. I made friends that shared my interests. I also met people from all of the surrounding school districts and found that, though I had felt awkward for so many years, I wasn't alone. I would bring in my acoustic guitar and play for them in our downtime. I would also make animated comics using computer software. BOCES expanded my literacies in a number of ways but especially technological literacy.

It was during this time that my relationship with my mother and Tom fully recovered. Rather than ride the bus back to Lyndonville, I would leave campus and walk to my mom's apartment and spend the afternoon there. When it was warm, I would bring a book and we would read together. As I mentioned in a previous entry, my mother loved to read, so we would sit in lawn chairs and spend time together. I was no longer the little boy not wanting to leave the stability of my father's house. I could come to my mom and find stability there also. She and Tom had been together for years by then and he was truly my step-father.

During this time, my grandmother was always there to support me. She retired from the library shortly after I entered 11<sup>th</sup> grade but she remained a bedrock in my life. She was the constant: I could go to her side of the house and visit, her always with a book on her chest and a kindly smile. Even after my relationship with my mother healed, she was always my "other mother." I loved her dearly.

By 11<sup>th</sup> grade, I wasn't so introverted and self-centered anymore either. My relationship with my father was also starting to improve. Rather than sit and play guitar by myself, I would go for him on walks and drives. He would share pieces of his history with me. I also, during one heated encounter, finally told him how I felt about him coming home from work angry and taking it out on me. In what seemed like the blink of an eye, much of the animosity evaporated. We still weren't as close as we are today but it was

improvement.

My dad inspired me as a reader. Up to this point, I didn't really give it much credence, but he regularly read books by Michael Crichton. When I finally picked these up in middle-to-upper high school, I was hooked. My dad would also read in long bursts. One night, I revealed to him that I usually read 20 pages at a pop. He told me that I should spend more time with it, that reading was one of the best things I could ever do, and that if I only read 20 pages, it would take me ages to finish a book.

I'm thankful to my dad for being the reader he was. It took me years to recognize it but he was incredibly influential to me in this way (like so many others). My dad read regularly and made sure there were books in the house for me. He supported me through example and action. He was a great father.

<b>Date:</b>	3/14/14
<b>Record:</b>	Memoir Entry #15
<b><u>Journal Entry:</u></b>	
<p>When I graduated from high school, my life quickly changed. I entered community college the August after my June graduation. There, I enrolled in a computer technology program, following the promise I was so often told that “technology jobs are the future.” I met the woman who would become my wife the very first day. We were almost inseparable right from the start.</p> <p>Most of my coursework was online or in the lab, working with actual hardware. I had to do a lot of reading of technical manuals and I'm sorry to say that I hated it. It was dry, and math-based, and felt completely uninspired. This was also the first semester that I had to read textbooks full time for my other liberal arts courses. I didn't have time for leisure reading anymore. My imagination for leisure writing seemed to dry up. I still played some computer games, having purchased a laptop for college that could play MMORPGs like <i>World of Warcraft</i> – I moved on from the MUD when I graduated since WoW scratched the same RPG itch -- but it wasn't the same. I was losing pieces of who I was.</p> <p>I stayed with computer technology for one semester before switching to teaching. It was a tough decision. In that same seventh grade class that so disheartened me about my writing, I remember imagining my name written on the board; my first inklings of becoming a teacher myself someday. I wrote the idea off. I didn't have that kind of dedication. I wasn't smart enough to earn a Master's Degree. No one on my mom's side of the family even <i>went</i> to college – I was the first – and the Bachelor's was the upper limit on my father's. But Becky, my now wife, inspired me to take the chance. I enrolled in the education program.</p> <p>Something amazing happened. Once I discovered education, my dedication to doing well skyrocketed. I became a straight-A student, something I didn't even think I was capable of! I still disliked the required reading but I felt myself grow from it. The gap that was leisure reading never filled in until the semester let off – which is still the case today – but I started to feel successful. I began to feel like a real student, capable of great things, thanks to my teachers, and, indeed, the required reading which <i>made me feel competent</i>. Reading began to empower me in a brand new way. It began to shape who I was as an adult on the way to becoming a professional, just as it had, I see now, in every formational period of my life. That journey is still taking place and it has absolutely transformed me.</p>	

During this time, I also started a blog. It was benign at first but within the first two years I had wracked up over 200 posts; enough to compose a short novel. People came and read my video game punditry. They commented. I developed a love for starting conversations and stirring reader's thoughts. More than that, however, I learned what it meant to be a regular, daily writer and to find time for writing even when life seems insurmountable.

Writing on the internet also solidified my identity as a writer. Combined with the transformational effect of college, I was becoming a more literate individual than I ever thought I would be. When I look back at this, the combined power of technology and literacy changed my life. I have to embrace these things in the classroom because they helped to make me the teacher I am today.

When I look back at my journey, it's clear that I overcame some serious challenges. Education and literacy were the lynchpin to my success. I stand today at the precipice of a Master's Degree. I never imagined I would be here. I am breaking new ground for my family and setting a new standard for my son. Even though I am busier than perhaps ever before, I still find time for leisure reading and writing, thanks in large part to audiobooks. I also supplement this with talk radio and podcasts, such as *This American Life* and *The Moth* always ingesting the spoken word and storytelling in all of its forms. Though I came from a family of divorce, my parents used the resources they had to provide me with the best life they could. I am drawn to children of similar challenging circumstances because I recognize that I may well be one of the lucky ones.

But to give back, that has to be my mission. Children need me – or someone – to care. And why shouldn't it be me? I want them to understand and relate with me the same way I want to understand and relate with them. I had caring adults in my life who did that for me. I don't want any child to go without if there is anything I can do about it.