My Story is My Impact:
A Self-Examination of Personal Resiliency and Experiences in Engaging Vulnerable Learners
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Hotel Nights with my Mother
By Linda McCarriston

The hometown flophouse
Was what she could afford
The nights he came after us
With a knife. I’d grab my books,
Already dreading the next day’s
explanations of homework undone
-- I ran out of paper – the lies
I’d invent standing in front of
The nuns in the clothes I’d lain in
Full-bladdered all night, a flimsy
Chair-braced door between us
And the hallway’s impersonal riot.

Years later, then, in the next
City, standing before my first class,
I scanned the rows of faces,
Their cumulative skill in the
Brilliant adolescent dances

Of self-presentation, of hiding.

New teacher, looking young, seeming

Gullible, I know, I let them

Give me any excuse and took it.

I was watching them all

For the dark circled eyes,

Yesterday’s crumpled costume, the marks

-- the sorrowful colouring of marks --

The cuticles flaming and torn.

I made myself each day a chink

A few might pass through unscathed.
Abstract

This paper takes an autoethnographic approach towards inquiring into the relationships I had with my teachers during the most vulnerable years of my youth, and the impact those adults had on the development of my lifelong resiliency. The passion, leadership, and subtle strength modeled to me by the teachers I most remember from my time in school has shaped who I am as a person, and as an educator. By examining the importance of teacher impact on my personal story, I come to understand key characteristics in some teachers who stood out as conduits for improving the coping strategies I had at my disposal, as well as how those characteristics have translated into my own beliefs and practices as a middle school teacher. Finally, while many of the stories shared are my own and have been altered only when the identity of another needed to be protected, some are also carefully constructed based on many students whose struggles with resiliency have stood out for me over the years. Their many truths have been combined into snapshots of fiction so that the reader might better understand the scope of our impact as educational professionals.
Acknowledgements

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I would also like to acknowledge the patient guidance of my thesis supervisor. Mary-Ann introduced me to the methodology I used in my research and opened my eyes to the value my passion for creative writing has in academic discourse. In many ways, this thesis has set me on a path in my career that I never imagined before. Thank you Mary-Ann for showing me all the doors open to me from here and into the future.
Dedication

I dedicate this paper to not only the teachers who became the source of inspiration during my descent into the rabbit-hole of my memories, but also the others: friends, family, and beloved pets. Resiliency cannot be wrought on a single forge, just as trauma is not often experienced in isolation from other events in our lives.

Also, I dedicate this paper to the most resilient person I know: my mom. Thank you for everything.
# Contents

Hotel Nights with my Mother ................................................................. ii

Abstract ................................................................................................. iv

Acknowledgements ................................................................................ v

Dedication ............................................................................................... vi

**Chapter One: Introduction** .................................................................. 1

  Introducing the Story ........................................................................ 2

  Identifying the Problem .................................................................... 5

  Importance of Setting ....................................................................... 10

  Overview of the Study ....................................................................... 12

**Chapter Two: My Story in Context** ................................................ 15

  The Bioecological Model .................................................................. 15

  Microsystem .................................................................................... 16

  Mesosystem .................................................................................... 16

  Exosystem ...................................................................................... 17

  Macrosystem .................................................................................. 17

  Resiliency ....................................................................................... 17

  Resiliency in the Classroom ........................................................... 18

  Limitations to the Current Research .............................................. 22

**Chapter Three: Finding My Story** .................................................. 24

  Story as Inquiry ................................................................................ 25

  The Autoethnographic Method ....................................................... 27

  Applying Autoethnography to My Story .......................................... 30

    The limitation of memory ............................................................ 34

  Acknowledging my Privilege ........................................................... 34

**Chapter Four: Telling My Story** ...................................................... 37

**Chapter Five: Analyzing my story** ................................................ 52

  What’s in a Name? ........................................................................... 52

  Finding Resiliency ........................................................................... 55

  Making Meaningful Connections .................................................... 56

  To Heal We Must Endure ................................................................. 58

**Chapter Six: Using My Story** .......................................................... 61

  Power of Passion ............................................................................. 62
Chapter One: Introduction

It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door.
You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet,
there's no knowing where you might be swept off to.

– Bilbo Baggins (Tolkien, 1995, p. 72)

Life doesn’t always start at the beginning, when we are squalling, helpless babes, victims to the experiential circumstances of our new world. Life does not have to be so linear. It can exist in small bursts of brilliance or hide in the shadows of despair. Often, it is as abstract as time itself, no matter how we try to organize it into neat, logical patterns in our own personal story.

Memory simply does not work that way.

Memory dances in and out of our minds, tickling our souls or shredding our hearts as it sees fit. Time and again, memory robs us of our present. It relieves us of our current existence to re-live moments from our past. For me, it stalks me when I least expect it, often tearing open scars I thought long-healed. Recently, I sat in a horror film with my daughter, fruitlessly resisting the flow of tears for a lost brother. The boy on the screen reminisces over a toy, his own brother lost to him, and the blood-thirsty clown waiting in the basement is irrelevant to my experience of the scene. Why must I find myself triggered by the grief of my past trauma, while those around me squeal with terrified delight at their present reality?
I believe memories are life’s way of reminding us of our strength, of the storms of joy and sorrow we have already navigated. Memories are life, proof that at some time, we reacted to something more profound than ourselves. It is from this belief that I have found myself exploring the story of my experiences and searching for meaning in my place within the culture of education.

**Introducing the Story**

During the approval process for the Bachelor of Education program I attended, we were asked to provide a written response to the question: who was a teacher who had the greatest impact on our lives or made us want to become a teacher? To my surprise, this question stumped me. In fact, to this day I am certain I was only delivered from the clutch of an empty page by the audacious fictions of the creative writer inside me. No matter how I looked back on my time in school, I could not think of an educator who stepped forward in my memory as someone who genuinely cared about my presence in their classroom. It was not until a few years later, and several more similar writing topics, that I came to appreciate a select few teachers in my journey from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

It has been an enlightening experience to look back on the blank space left by the teachers who failed to impact my story in any meaningful way. It is also heartbreaking to think that I will likely fall short for many of the students I meet in my classes. Now that I am a teacher myself, I am acutely aware of the impossibility of creating meaningful relationships with every child. After all, some students naturally gravitate towards us. They make us laugh, bring us Christmas presents, or tell on other students for every little slight. These are but a few ways they work just as hard as we do to develop a relationship.
What happens then, when we are working with those students who cannot be bothered to try? Who will impact those students who sit, invisible, amidst the chaos of their peers while we praise the raucous energy of others? Could this be why my own recollection of meaningful relationships with teachers was so hard to dredge up from the shadows of my memory? Herein lies the problem. Regardless of best intentions, or the number of cards or homemade gifts lining our desks each December or June, there are students who silently scream for someone to touch their lives during the hours and years they spend in our classrooms and in our schools. Their ability to make it from one day to the next, as I will demonstrate through my own data, may even depend on the environment we create for them in our schools and the relationships built there.

So then, how do we communicate the powerful truths found in our memories and experiences when the stakes are so high for our students? It is here the story begins to take form.

Written language can be a true gift for those who dare to embrace it. Nothing can compare to the complete loss of self when one immerses themselves in a beloved story. Stories are where I found solace at every turn in what was sometimes a tumultuous youth. It is where I continue to linger when the burden of reality becomes too heavy to carry on. Writing connects me to myself, and it opens the door to have an impact on others. Anthropologist Paul Stoller (2014), when reflecting on the beliefs of his mentors, said “…the story, in whatever form it might take, is a powerful way to transmit complex knowledge from one generation to the next… the evocative force of narrative could capture truths far beyond the scope of any philosophically contoured academic discourse” (p 466).

It is stories that ground me in my reality.

*Once upon a time there was a girl. She had heavy brown hair, pale skin, and dark eyes that challenged the presence of the on-call teacher who stepped into her French class that*
spring. The girl sat at the back of the classroom, surrounded by the safe cocoon of friendships on all sides. Work was assigned. Work was ignored. There was nothing at school worth her attention, not when her home life was a muddled mystery she never cared to share with those around her.

Once upon a time, the girl’s attention was pulled to the front of the room. For the first time all semester, all year even, the humble tone of the teacher became something more, something crisp and alive in an otherwise dull space and time. The short blonde woman was talking to the class about her interests and hobbies, in response to a nosey cluster of kids at the front who really just wanted to avoid work. Writing. The teacher had said she liked writing. The girl waited for the bell, hesitated in the shadows of her peers rushing off to the freedom of lunch hour, then slid carefully around scattered desks and chairs to the front of the room. The teacher’s eyes widened at the sight of the sullen girl smiling at her.

“You love to write?”

“I do.”

“Me too.”

Once upon a time, a lost girl found a reason to trust someone new.

Our students are all looking for those connections to adults. They need the experience of their elders in order to create their own standards of success, and to understand the tangible opportunities that can be found in failure (Bempchat, 1998; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1996; Howie, 2013; Katz, 2012; Moore, 2016).

With so much research already flooding the academic world, it has been overwhelming to find research on which to construct new threads of inquiry. A simple search term like “resiliency”, regurgitated hundreds of articles, books, and resources on my most recent hunt for
new information. Fortunately, identifying a specific issue surrounding resiliency helps to narrow the field.

Reflecting on my own lost years, that time in my youth where I struggled to come to terms with the events of my childhood while yearning for the freedom of adulthood, has been a difficult journey. I have worked very hard to overcome failure and seek out success as a professional adult, but I had spent little time analyzing where my ambition had come from. Regrettably, I began this research in a backwards way. I sought out terms I felt would allow me to direct my reflections towards the understanding of how I impact my students’ resiliency and engagement through our daily interactions. Furthermore, the role of community and culture cannot be underestimated in the pre-existing levels of engagement and resiliency of the population of students in my school (Bempchat, 1998). Fortunately, I began to realize I could never hope to understand my role in creating new knowledge and understanding within my profession, until I first discovered my story and acknowledged the impact it has had on who I am as a person, and as an educator.

Identifying the Problem

As an adult woman, I have come to appreciate the resiliency I found within myself to recover from a childhood that was less than functional. Like the girl in the story, there are adults whom I can look back on and acknowledge for their role in fostering the inner strength I needed. And yet, there were individuals who had access to me when I was at my most vulnerable and I felt invisible in their presence. They were adults who had made it their career to care about the cultivation of young minds yet missed the steady decline of grades and frequent absences as peer groups began to meet the core needs of a young girl right under their very noses. Now that I am ranked among this inspirational group of professionals, I am certain of one thing:
We can do better.

Educators, be they teachers or administrators or Educational Assistants, are in the most privileged of positions. We have the unique ability to change lives. We can inspire curiosity and broaden minds. We can empower students with exceptional needs by cultivating inclusive school communities where the individuality of every student is worthwhile. Schools can be powerful environments for transmitting positive values, such as learning, and strategies for resiliency to the young. Further to this, when a school fosters a community of inclusiveness, where the engagement of every student matters, “then all other relationships will become consistent with these shared values” (Brendtro, L., Brokenleg, M, & Van Bocken, 1990, p.41).

Unfortunately, how often do we truly get to live up to this expectation of greatness?

Resiliency is a primary theme in my reflections and my research. I have come to understand the definition of resiliency to be the ability of an individual to experience hardships, failure, or trauma, and still grow and have positive interactions with society and the world around them (Bentro et al. 1990; Arastaman and Balci, 2013; Bennet and Hay, 2007; Curtin, Schweitzer, Tuxbury, & D'Aoust, 2016). This is not to say they are unscathed by the experiences of their lives, but a resilient individual is not limited or defined by those experiences.

Henderson (2013) asked the question: “How can schools most effectively capitalize on their power to promote resilience?” (p.23). Her most basic finding, and one supported by some developmental theorists, was that there are both internal and external factors that must be strengthened if an individual is going to be able to cope with adversity (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Henderson, 2013). One such external factor is the relationship we foster with our students. The relationships we form with students need to be based on positive interactions, mentoring, and overall belief in the potential of the individuals before us (Smith Harvey, 2007).
Relationships are the basis for all things. They are also intricate and at times, fragile. Every action has a consequence, and every encounter we have with others becomes another scene in our life story. Teachers are tired. We are teaching in the barren landscape of a profession ravaged by years of underfunding and poor public opinion, a realm where policy is prohibitive instead of encouraging of positive change. Speaking to educational reforms in the early nineties, Lupart (2009) points out that “school systems became paralyzed in a battle over regular and special education funding and resources” (p19). From what I have witnessed in my own district, this is still very much the case and it is wearing on the staff I work with.

A resilient youth can express all emotions, the negative along with the positive, but they are able to do so appropriately (Smith Harvey, 2007). With some studies showing that one in five adolescents experience some form of mental disorder, in a trend that does not show signs of letting up, our attention to student resilience has never been more important (Patton, Glover, Bond, Butler, Godfrey, Di Pietro, & Bowes, 2000). However, in our exhaustion, we miss the subtle cries for help from the students in our classes.

Once upon a time there was a boy. His eyes drooped further with each monotonous word that spilled from his teacher’s mouth. The world blurred more every time he blinked his eyes, softening the hard lines of his desk. He shook his head, ran a hand through his hair, and yawned.

Two, maybe three hours. That was how much he had slept the night before. The new baby, a tiny brother, almost too fragile to touch, and yet unable to make it through the night without bellowing his ravenous song every hour or so.
Once upon a time, there was a boy who shared his room with a mini-monster. He roused himself from bed to feed the beast and tuck the little creature back in to sleep. When the dawn came at last, he said farewell to the sandman and trudged his way to school.

In class, he admires the softened lines of his desk, imagining it a pillow. He crosses his arms and allows his head to sink. The teacher drones on. A smile plays on the boy’s lips as he tastes the delicious release of sweet sleep. A voice nearby rises in anger. The boy grimaces.

“Please try to stay awake in class.”

“I’m tired.”

“Then perhaps you should stop playing so many video games and get some more sleep.”

The boy rolls his eyes. “Whatever,” he says.

“Excuse me?”

“Eff off.”

A red and purple face leans over the boy. “Go to the office. Now.”

The boy slings his bag over shoulder. The door shivers as it slams behind him. He bypasses the principal’s office entirely. His bed at home is more comfortable than a desk anyway.

As the adults in charge of what should be a safe environment, we often underestimate the impact we can have on every student who walks through our doors on a daily basis. Hattie (2012) alluded to as much when he said during an interview with a representative of the University of Toronto:

It’s not about who teachers are, it’s not about what teachers do, it’s about how they think… if teachers, if school leaders, walk into a classroom in a school and they start with that assumption ‘my job here is to know what
impact I’m having on kids learning’ then all the rest follows. All good things follow. (1:02min-1:33min)

Although Hattie was referring more to the academic areas of education, largely in areas of adequate assessment of all learners, the idea that educators should fully know the impact they are having on their students sits quite poignantly with me. Students from adverse backgrounds begin to anticipate poor interactions with the adults in their lives. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy unless we strive to make our impact one where we break the pattern and create frequent, positive interactions instead (Smith Harvey, 2007).

Somehow, we need to evaluate how the question of our impact on students’ resiliency relates to the domain of special education. To start, if we are to validate the necessity of special education, we must acknowledge that it is indeed special. Special education has typically focused on the needs of the obviously exceptional learners, such as those with autism or developmental delays (Lupart, 2009). In recent years, the role of the special education teacher has had to adapt to the demand of an evolving caseload. In my district, this is notable in the seemingly increased numbers of suspected or diagnosed Learning Disabilities in our schools. While it is true that by the very nature of my training, I am a specialist teacher and a special education teacher by traditional labels, I have begun to advocate for myself as a new breed of teacher. I aim to be an inclusive teacher.

I feel the inclusive teacher, while meeting the needs of exceptional learners, must also consider education as a whole. In other words, the inclusive teacher meets the needs of every student in their classroom or school. While it is my intention to explore how this altered mindset has already affected the impact I have on the students I work with, suffice it to say such distinctions have already caused ripples of change within the realm of special education in my
department. By broadening the speciality of the special educator to become inclusive, we have freed ourselves to have an impact on the most vulnerable of students in our school: the elusive “gray area” students who cannot seem to engage in school and yet have no diagnosis or testing to place them into a special education category (Sparks, B., Myrtle, R. & Fewster, S., 2006).

These are the students who just do not seem to care about school. They appear as supporting characters in our stories, vaguely residual reminders of someone we just did not connect with. They shut down, they refuse to ask for help, or maybe they simply miss class an inordinate amount of time (Bendtro et al., 1990). I have often heard colleagues label these students as “lazy” or “delinquent”, probably because we inherently understand these students could be doing better. I would be dishonest if I denied such stereotyping in moments of frustration, however, if we are to have a true impact on our students, we need to turn the position of power we have in our classrooms, to a position of trust. It is my opinion that we need to establish a relationship with all our students, even those who have become lost to their own apathy, so that they recognize their value as citizens of our schools.

More than this, we need to eliminate the label, light up the grey areas with colour, and make these students feel like the protagonists in their own personal narratives.

The relationships we form with these vulnerable students will have a direct, though often subtle, impact on how they see themselves both as a learner and as a person. This I understand from experience, but it is also supported by developmental theorists such as Uri Bronfenbrenner (Bendtro, 2006) and other educational research which I will discuss further in Chapter 2. This may be reflected in their achievements, as Hattie (2012) has studied in depth, but I also feel it will have an even greater impact on their levels of resiliency on a life-long scale.

**Importance of Setting.**
I work in the forbidding realm of a junior high school in a rural community. Like the
teachergarten teacher who loves little children, many raise an eyebrow when I explain how much
I enjoyed my time as a Resource Teacher in a middle school. In my most recent position, as a
Grade 9 Social Studies and English teacher, I cannot tell a lie: I finish each day with a
comforting weariness that feels bone-deep. After all, I am working with students on the cusp of
adulthood. Children who think they are close enough to being adults to flaunt rather astonishing
attitudes, all while stumbling through teenage drama that can only be complicated by the
fluctuating hormones raging through them. Add to all this the rural location of our community,
and no two days are ever alike.

We hail from a town reliant on the fickle nature of forestry and mining, surrounded by
reserves and ranches. The legacy of the local residential school is still keenly felt by the First
Nations families; I see its shadow in the eyes of many of the students in our hallways. The
distrust of educational institutions created by colonialism and the Indian Act remains a deep
wound for many families in our community (Furniss, E., 1996). When I look around my school,
I see a large population of students, from all sorts of cultural backgrounds, whose resiliency is
being tested daily by factors outside of school, and as a result, their engagement within school
suffers.

I spent several of my school years in rural communities. At one point, I lived
in Mirror, Alberta. They called it a village, but with a largely geriatric population of
only five hundred people I hardly think it qualified as even that. Quesnel, while
boasting a reasonably sized town at its center, is really just a hub from which rural
schools and communities branch off. Having lived in areas like these, as well as larger
centers like Surrey and Langley in B.C., and Red Deer in Alberta, I feel as though the
location of my school mattered almost as much as the teachers in how school impacted my resiliency. It mattered in the way my resilience was tested, and therefore, how the teachers who impacted my achievement were able to reach me.

In rural areas, the culture is that of hard-work, making do, and the connections that can be made with the community. In days gone by, large families worked together to make up the support system of young people. It goes without saying there is some reason behind the cliché “it takes a village to raise a child”. Yet as it is pointed out by Bendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990), “the decline of extended families and intimate neighbourhoods leaves an isolated nuclear family” (p.12) and in a modern day of single-parent households or the need for dual-incomes, it leaves one to wonder where our youth might learn to cope with the world. Where will these young people find room for developing their resiliency?

Overview of the Study

I consider my impact as a driving force in my daily interactions with students. It is the reason I try to remember names and say a simple greeting to all who I pass in the halls. It is here though, I hope to take the concept proposed by Hattie (2012) and move one step beyond. I remember all the academic “stuff” I have had drummed into my brain since I learned to read. Yet, I have had to ask myself, why did the men and women whom I should thank for this thirst for knowledge seem to have so little impact on me during the more formidable years of my adolescence? I have had to sift through the memories that make up my story to find the moments where others impacted my burgeoning resiliency. There is every reason to think teachers can have a lasting, positive impact on students’ feeling of self-worth and engagement if we stop to
consider the meaning behind our daily interactions with youth (Malti, Schwartz, Lui, & Noam, 2008; Campbell-Whatley, 2006; Curtin et al. 2016; Lupart, 2009).

This is also where my guiding question takes form.

**How has my own resiliency been fostered through relationships with specific adults in my life, and how has this shaped my ideology as an educator working with vulnerable youth?**

I maintain that our lives are made up of stories: incredible adventures, lasting romances, broken dreams and hopeful new beginnings. What are memories if not treasured scenes in the story of our life? What are the teachers and friends and family who pass through these memories if not characters in our stories?

I feel as though narrative has a more valued place in contemporary society than we have seen in the past. There seems to be a thirst for the qualitative information offered by emerging methods of research currently available. The rise of scientific minds paved the way for researchers to adopt the lens of culture in order to apply the experience of quantitative practices in real world situations. Autoethnography becomes a reflection of the researcher herself and explores how knowledge guides effective practices from a first-hand perspective (Adams, Holman, & Ellis, 2014).

My story then becomes my research. It allows me to explore how resiliency impacted my own engagement in learning, as well as link the impact certain individuals had on my life. Adams, Holman, and Ellis (2014) point out: "by being personally, emotionally, aesthetically, and narratively connected to a cultural group or experience, autoethnographers may take more responsibility for and greater care in representing themselves and others" (p. 19). While the stories of young people in this chapter are fictitious examples of the students that educators often
encounter everyday, many of the stories in the following chapters are entirely my own. They demonstrate my vulnerability, outline the trauma I have experienced, and suggest the powerful presence of a cast of supporting characters who had lasting effects on who I am.

While my own stories are truthful as far as I can rely on the quality of my memories, I will return to the use of fictitious examples of interactions I have experienced with students in my final chapters. The value in these stories is in the window they create to share how I believe I have had an impact on the students who I work with on a day-to-day basis. By blending real stories into fiction, I can share the knowledge I have created with my research, while protecting the identity of specific students and colleagues. Adams et. al. (2014) refer to a similar strategy in their description of doing autoethnography, whereby creating “composite characters” and “creating a single and general story” (p. 60) makes determining individual identities next to impossible. Next to this, is the importance of the narratives themselves. These layered stories also invite the reader to engage on a deeper level. Ethnographer Ronai (1995) points out that by layering narrative within the research, the readers are given the opportunity to “… reconstruct the subject, thus projecting more of themselves into it, and taking more away from it” (p. 396).

My stories are a reflection of my own resilience, and a lens through which I seek to understand the impact I have from one day to the next on students whose vulnerabilities and trauma affect their learning. How has my own resilience developed from the interactions I have had with my teachers? How does my resilience impact my role as a teacher in the classroom? Using an intertwined autoethnographic methodology (Cote, 2017), I will layer my stories with the research I have found to create what I hope is a grounding, and authentic, view of vulnerable youth and the impact that trusted adults, such as teachers, can have on their resiliency.
Chapter Two: My Story in Context

There seems to be an implicit, unquestioned understanding among both parents and teachers that the ability to be resilient in the face of failures or setbacks does not develop mysteriously. Rather, these qualities are believed to evolve and strengthen over time and much experience coping with difficult situations.

(Bempchat, 1998, p. 105)

If I intend to demonstrate the importance of my story and the contribution it can make to current practices, it is crucial for me to place my story within the current research on resiliency and teacher impact. While I find myself exploring the bioecological model as proposed by Uri Bronfenbrenner and Stephen J. Ceci (1994) time and again, more recent studies provide a more contemporary lens through which this model can be applied specifically to the impact of teachers and classrooms on the development of our students. Further to this, there is a wealth of research to support the role resiliency can play in child development, and ultimately, student success in school and in life.

To begin, these two areas of research will require more explanation. Only then will I be able to fully flesh out where my story falls within the context of both.

The Bioecological Model

Urie Bronfenbrenner has played an important role to how we understand child development and how we can apply that understanding to student achievement in schools. Hayes, O’Toole, and Halpenny (2017) point out that “his work looked beyond individual development to take account of wider influencing factors and the context, or ecology, of development” (p. 5). His belief that a child’s ability to do well in school is dependent on the
proximal processes surrounding that child, opens the door for other theorists to delve into specific niches within the broader theory (Hayes, et. al., 2017). This is why, for my own research, I found the bioecological model to be a valuable tool for understanding teacher impact on student resiliency.

The bioecological model proposed by Bronfenbrenner is a developmental theory wherein the child is at the center, surrounded by increasingly complex circles of influence. At each level, the influences are a two-way exchange between the individual and their environment, where genetic traits are developed through the influence of environmental experiences (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). It is the individual who makes meaning of these exchanges, as well as houses the child’s sense of culture, personal voice, dignity, innate abilities and learning needs, and sense of autonomy (Howie, 2013). Outside the individual, there are four systems that I will now explain further: the microsystem, the mesosystem, exosystem, and the macrosystem.

**Microsystem.** The microsystem is the closest band of influences on the individual. This layer includes the immediate family, close friends, and of course, teachers. It is both an honour and a responsibility to realize the proximity of our profession to the development of the student’s potential in the classroom. How we use this proximity to impact our students will come later in this paper, but it is in this level of the bioecological model, where direct learning and teaching take place, that we must tread carefully if we are to benefit our students (Howie, 2013).

**Mesosystem.** The mesosystem is the next level of the bioecological model. It is in this level of influence where the influences of the microsystem interact. In this level, the importance of how the school and the family interact can be established, or the effect of peers on achievement might be observed. Both of these examples are arguably beyond the scope of my research, and yet these interactions are at times subtly interwoven with my stories. Their
presence in my story makes it important to at least acknowledge the full importance of this proximal process.

**Exosystem.** As we move further from the individual, the levels of this model become broader in their meaning. The exosystem represents the institutions to which the individual belongs. This can mean the extended family of the individual, the community in which the individual lives, or even the outside forces that impact their parents, such as work schedules. This system is out of the individual’s control and yet impacts them none the less.

**Macrosystem.** The outermost level of the individual that I will explain here is the macrosystem and includes cultural patterns of government, religion, and education. It is well beyond the scope of my data collection to speak to the impact of this system on a student’s resilience, however it is useful to acknowledge the impact this outer system can have if we are to consider how our current practices might affect future educational policies.

**Resiliency**

In the first chapter, I provided a simple definition of resiliency: an individual’s ability to cope with adversity. Resiliency can look different in everyone. One individual may deal with trauma one event at a time, managing their emotions as they go, while others grow from adversity and allow it to transform their lives (Feinstein, Driving-Hawk, & Baartman, 2009). In the literature I have come across, resiliency has been described as having hope (Yohani, 2008) and has been linked closely with the concept of growth mindset (Bempchat, 1998; Ricci, 2013). When we consider how we as teachers can begin to impact the resiliency of the youth in our classrooms, we might consider the observations of Bempchat (1998): “any intervention or policy whose goal is to save individuals is bound to fail, for in the very act of saving, we communicate
our belief that those whom we perceive to be in need are incapable of problem solving and limited in their abilities to save themselves” (p. 15).

While we do not want to buffer the negative experiences of our students completely, it is important to remember that not all students know what it is means to be resilient in the first place. To put it simply, some students need us to show them what resiliency is.

Campbell-Whatley’s (2008) article “Teaching Students About Their Disabilities”, does not use the term resiliency specifically, instead describing the terms ‘self-determination’ and ‘self-concept’ in language similar to the definition of resiliency. This can be seen in her statement that “the self-determined student is able to set goals and exhibit self-control by responding to events in an independent, empowered, and self-realized manner” (p. 137). Since it is generally accepted that resiliency is a person’s ability to cope with negative events or circumstances, and to maintain daily positive functioning (Curtin, et al., 2016) the link between this term and self-determination is hardly a tenuous one.

Resiliency is one of those genetic traits that all individuals are born with, but the development of which is bound to the spheres of influence surrounding the individual as suggested in Bronfenbrenner’s model. In this, we can start to examine how these concepts are connected to the impact of teachers in the classroom and how that impact can help to create hope or create helplessness.

**Resiliency in the Classroom**

Resiliency and the environments around a student complement each other well, especially when considering the reciprocal nature of Bronfenbrenner’s model. The positive and negative relationships and events that occur in the microsystem and mesosystem can change the individual for better or worse, and those changes in the individual will in turn shape the spheres
of influence around them. For Bronfenbrenner though, the relationships built in these environments were the key to a student’s successful development. Hayes et. al. (2017) sums up Bronfenbrenner’s theories on relationships and environment when it is said “strong, positive relationships may have the power to overcome the impacts of the most damaging environments, and even very positive environments may not be good enough without warm and loving relationships” (p. 30). As teachers, this is an area where we already see the importance of our relationships with our students on our impact through the current research available.

Howie (2013) applied Bronfenbrenner’s revised model to her theories on inclusive and cognitive education, describing the impact of a Three-Tiered Model that would impact all learners. The three tiers of Howie’s inclusive model for instruction is not unlike Response to Intervention (RTI) practices: learning starts from a place that is accessible to all students and supports become more focused as the students move from Tier 3 to Tier 1 (Katz, 2012; Howie, 2013). When applied to a whole school in New Zealand, the Three-Tiered Model provided the inclusive structure of increasing levels of support to students who needed it, while keeping them immersed in their regular classroom. One might conclude that this would allow the students to feel safe and secure in their classroom environment, and therefore they would take the risks necessary to increase their learning.

Howie (2013) does not concretely state that this was the result of such inclusion in the case study; however, she does make connections to the culture that can be created by schools and family. Howie (2013) refers to the theories of Vygotsky when she states “…cultural embeddedness of learning reminds us that in any cognitive intervention we should take into account the cultural meanings and values which learners bring to an intervention” (p.43). Culture exists in those first two systems surrounding the individual. More specifically, the
individual’s culture is imbedded in their upbringing while surrounded by immediate family and can be further influenced when home life interacts with the school environment (Bempechat, 1998; Hayes, et al., 2017). Through this understanding of ideas, we can then begin to connect resiliency to this sense of culture.

Linked closely with resiliency, is hope theory: the idea that hope, as part of an individual’s experience of an event, is key to that individual’s engagement in activities and contributes to psychological development (Yohani, 2008). In one study called the Hope Project (Yohani, 2008), children from refugee families who were considered to be at risk were enrolled in an afterschool program meant to create the means for these families to heal from past experiences and adjust to life in Canada. Using photographs and stories, in order to overcome potential language or literacy barriers, children were asked to share what hope meant to them. One thing that Yohani (2008) noted from her experience on the Hope Project, was “sharing children’s exploration of hope can have a two-fold effect—enhancing hope by self-exploration as well as enhancing hope by sharing exploration with others” (p.317). Not only do her findings compliment the reciprocal nature of the bioecological model, but they also speak to the growth mindset in the sense that those running the program did not provide hope, but instead asked the children to discover what hope might look like for them.

Living in a rural community with a high population of First Nations students, I often find that not only do I need to stop and consider what hope might look like to the students in my classroom, but I also need to consider how culture plays a role in my students’ sense of belonging my classroom. While taking into consideration the different spheres of influence proposed in Bronfenbrenner’s model, researchers Feinstein, Driving-Hawk, and Baartman (2009) surveyed successful students from a reservation school in the upper Midwest to see what factors
impacted their resilience and how that had created success for them. Culture was considered from the understanding of the First Nations ideology surrounding the Circle of Courage (Bendtro, et al., 1990).

The findings of this study link to my own research in an important way. While I explore the importance of teacher-impact on the development of my resiliency, there were two important observations made by Feinstein, Driving-Hawk, and Baartman (2009) that apply closely to my reflections: “the ability to remain resilient despite inconsistencies in system support was evident in this study… [and] family and extended family support and value of school and work played an important role in sustaining their hopeful outlook” (p.17). They also found that peer values played little role in a resilient outlook. While the full importance of these results as compared to my own data will be explored more fully in Chapter 5, it is interesting to note how the value of education and the future impacts our students’ ability to cope with adversity.

Finally, like First Nations reserves whose youth seem to have the culture of their family to help scaffold their resiliency, there are differences in the development of coping strategies in youth from rural or underprivileged areas. The internal factors, such as personality, and the external factors, such as poverty and family circumstances, dominated much of what the articles “Investigating Factors of Resiliency among Exceptional Youth Living in Rural Underserved Communities” (Curtin et.al. 2016) and “Investigation of High School Student’s Resiliency Perception in Terms of Some Variables” (Arastaman & Balci, 2013) try to examine in more detail. Both of these two articles clearly state how their investigations will strive to determine what impact these factors have on student resiliency, and how much the school settings act as “protective factors” (Arastaman & Balci, 2013, p.923) for otherwise vulnerable youth.
There is one important conclusion worth highlighting in the rural school study: “While the general community can play a role in the emergence of resiliency, the school becomes a significant, instrumental force in the promotion of resiliency among children and adolescents” (Curtin et al., 2016, p.7). Whether this impact on resiliency is more significant in rural schools than in urban schools is beyond the scope of the study; however to use my own experience as a guide, I would say any school in which students spend any significant amount of time, has the potential to build up a student’s resiliency.

Limitations to the Current Research

For my own research, these studies support something I already feel is an important facet of my profession: knowing the impact I can have on the students in my classroom. That being said, the studies almost primarily focus on the impact schools can have on students, or that teachers can have on their students within the context of the classroom as a whole. The amount of literature which speaks directly to how teachers can have an impact on individual students seems limited. Ronai (1995) credits, although briefly, teachers as conduits for her realization that as a child she deserved to be loved and had value beyond her experiences as a victim of childhood sexual abuse. By extension, I might propose that these small connections made in school helped stabilize a natural resiliency she came into this world possessing, but without further exploration, or the chance to speak to the researcher directly, it is nothing more than hopeful conjecture. Even Bempchat (1998) comments on the importance of mentors in the development of resilience in some vulnerable youth; however these connections are lost in the larger exploration of culture and community.

As it stands, there is room for more exploration on the importance of individual experiences in how we as teachers can have an impact on our students’ resiliency. Even through
the lens of the bioecological model, the ability of an adult in a complicated environment, like a teacher in a classroom, is limited in that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of a few, and yet there is research to support that once the needs of many are met, teachers are in a strong position to make a positive impact on the needs of an individual (Hayes et. al., 2017).

Everything we know about the importance of classroom environment and the well-being of our students, now needs to be honed to a fine point. This is how it will come to be applied to that one student, whether we recognize who they are in our rooms or not.

I find the epitaph from Bronfenbrenner, as quoted by Bentro (2006), to be quite impactful for my own reflection into the relationships I form with my students: “Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her” (p. 165). While I worked on collecting my data and while I reflected on the impact my story has made my own professional practices, words like these have helped to ground my belief in the value of my own assertions: that one teacher can make a difference in a student’s life and this difference, will ultimately provide a stronger foundation for the development of those students’ resiliency.
Chapter Three: Finding My Story

*I hear the poverty of language*

*To describe how words have shaped our thinking*

*And how our thinking has shaped our lives. (p. 65)*

The above passage spoke to me from Rosie McLaren’s contribution to the book *The Art of Writing Inquiry* (McLaren, 2001, p. 62). McLaren goes on to denounce the ability of purely academic writing to capture the essence of the human experience. She writes: “we focus on the content and miss the subtleties and exquisite qualities of emotion and feeling” (p.69). How true is this when we look back on our memories of life? Our stories make up who we are, but they are not easily confined to the limitations of fact and reason. Our emotions and feelings warp the facts of events. The more we fight them, the greater power they take from our struggle to interpret the truth of our experiences.

If we cannot separate the emotions from our perspective of experience, then all we have left to us is to take ownership of them. Let the flood gates down and embrace every facet of our vulnerable souls so that we might hold them up for further scrutiny. For me to discover the impact teachers have had on the development of my resilience, I must acknowledge the adversity and trauma I experienced in order to accurately interpret my data. Further to this, by realizing the impact teachers have had on how I face challenges that arise in life, I can better actualize the choices I make in my own classroom while interacting with my colleagues and students.

The methodology I have chosen and will describe in detail in this chapter has provided the means through which I can understand the complexity of my interactions with education both in the past and in the present. In order to answer the question of teacher impact on student
resiliency, it stands that the individual experiences of my own history provide a valid source of qualitative data. Also, because I am immersed in the culture of education through my choice in profession, the data this method creates can be applied outside my personal situation to other educators looking for strategies that may allow them to approach some of their more vulnerable learners.

**Story as Inquiry**

In a recent professional development conference I attended, the keynote speaker Terry Small (2017) spoke to the importance of story telling to learning and engagement. He said: “stories create moments of human connection.” I sat in the audience, letting the rest of his words wash over me while this simple statement percolated in my mind. This thesis had already begun, so I lost myself in the consideration of how these words are the stepping stone to discovering not only my story, but how my story impacts my interactions as a teacher among my students.

Everyday, we all create a network of interactions.

I rush my children out the door to catch the bus. I place my order with the server at Tim Hortons. I nod in greeting to my administrator as I enter the school. I stand in front of thirty Grade 9 students and convince them to care about events from days gone by. I smile at the eager faces of students rushing from the halls at the end of the day. I scowl at three people ahead of me in the grocery store line-up. I share the story of my day with my husband.

Sometimes, like the day described above, these networks are intimate and tightly wound around routine. On other days, the paths of individuals who cross mine create a web to be envied by the most industrious of arachnids. Whether intimate or intricate, these connections with others represent scenes in our life stories, and yet, our experiences of each interaction are entirely our own. It takes a small leap in our imaginations to draw connections between our different
experiences (O’Connor, 2001) and from there, reflect on the meaning and impact those experiences have on our story as a whole.

Moore (2016) said it best when she asked the question: “How would our perspective change if we stopped assuming and reacting, and instead, started looking for, asking, or connecting to more stories to help us understand?” (p.72). To put her question in context, she was referring to the assumptions and judgements we make during the briefest of interactions we partake in everyday, particularly with the example of a screaming child in the grocery store. As I explore my own stories in this paper, I have to acknowledge the limits of my perspective. I have only my stories to help me understand and create meaning about my impact on the students in my classroom, but in my reflections, I also accept that I hold the clues to stories that are not mine to tell. Perhaps someday, I may gain insight to these other perspectives, and in doing so, further enrich my own learning. In the meantime, from here on, I seek to know only how the reflections of my own story have influenced my position within the education system. Where my story collides with others, I have taken liberties in the way I chose to coalesce these experiences in order to protect the identity of individuals I have interacted with.

Education is, by nature, reflective. In my practicum, in every course I took as part of my undergraduate degree, we were asked to reflect again and again and again on the processes and results of the learning we were doing, and the learning we were passing on to others. After further professional development and study, I now believe my earlier professors were preparing me to become what I feel most educators are by instinct: action researchers. In some of the best teachers I have had the privilege of observing, I see them seek out new learning, apply the strategies they find, and form conclusions about the impacts of these strategies through personal reflections. In this way, they move the profession of teaching forward.
If research is going to move us forward, it must first have a deep impact on our view of our profession and of our personal place within the culture of education (Chambers, 2004). The greatest impact research has ever had for me, was on my own beliefs about the world and about the job I do in the classroom. Every time I learn something new, I first apply it to myself and in doing so, consider the impact it could have on my students.

**The Autoethnographic Method**

It is fortunate for the aim of my research, that such a term as ‘autoethnography’ was established as a valid method of research in academia. It was first referred to by Karl Heider in 1975, though the movement of the researcher as part of their own research was "implied rather than explicitly embraced" (Adams, et al., 2014, p.16). In my opinion, the resistance of earlier researchers to fully embrace their own narrative in research might be in the bias it creates. Indeed, I do not think we can fully escape some bias in any type of ethnographic research, therefore I intend to use this method because I see value in what might be called bias.

Autoethnography is a research method that permits me to explore the way my teaching philosophy has evolved from the experiences of the present and the past. The process of reflecting on myself may be as flawed and interpretive as my memories, yet they are no less relevant than any information that comes to me from a book. "Social life is messy, uncertain, and emotional." (Adams et.al., 2014, p.9). The experiences of everyday life cannot be easily quantified. How do you measure the experience of someone coming out of the closet, or considering suicide, or someone with a disability? Experiences like these can only truly be described by the person or persons who go through them. When the researcher has experienced these events themselves, they can bring more truth to their research by offering specific insight.
In this way, researchers like myself must find another way to make meaningful connections between the well-understood canon of educational research, and the experiential nature of our profession. Poet and researcher M.A. O’Connor (Neilsen, et al., 2001) wrote “sometimes the silences, the line breaks, the spacing of words on a page, convey far more than pages of conventional research text. I make portraits in poetry because this is the best way for me to learn, and to teach” (p. 83). I would never presume to call myself a poet, but I have long had an affinity for the written word and beyond that, storytelling.

However, storytelling is something different as well. Storytelling branches off from autoethnography in many ways, merging instead with the research approach of A/R/Tography. With A/R/Tography, research offers qualitative inquiry through the lens of art (Detlefsen, 2012). It employs the senses of our minds and bodies to find and express understanding of the world around us. For my purposes, I would merge this idea with the autoethnographic methodology, because only by using them together, can I effectively tell my story and find understanding in it.

Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005) believe “…that arts-based forms of research empower and change the manner through which research is conducted, created, and understood” (p. 897). These art-based forms include performance and visual arts, but it also includes creative writing in its many forms. From memoir and creative non-fiction, to poetry and the analysis of fiction, creative writing has a place in academic realms of inquiry. For my research, it allows me a venue with which to tell my story as authentically as I can, while leaving me room to analyze what my story has to teach about my place within the culture of education, and the powerful impact teaching has had on my resiliency, and my resiliency on my teaching.

Storytelling is a much-honoured tradition for many cultures throughout history (Bendtro & Brokenleg, 2005). I do not count myself a great orator by any means, and yet I am a
storyteller none the less. My story is a reflection of my individuality. It is a journey I have taken, filled with all forms of characters. By undertaking my research through the lens of an autoethnographer, I am acknowledging and embracing the impact my story has on my current educational practices. I have wrapped my research in a cloak of my personal experiences so that I might better understand the impact I can have on those vulnerable students who enter my classroom from one year to the next.

Further to this, my story has become the source my inquiry. In this regard, my writing is both a tool I can use in my research, and the method with which I represent myself as the sole participant of this self-reflective study (Speedy, 2005). With this understanding, my research began when I realized I had a story to tell, a realization that the journey I am on has had, and will continue to have, an impact on my place within education. As L. Lockford (2012) points out, this form of qualitative research “…is not only vain, it is violent; it is to stake a place to be heard. It is to say ‘this happened to me and you must listen. What I have to say matters’” (p.164).

While elements of my research reside in a place of vanity, it also links me to my understanding of my own resiliency, and the impact others had on my strength. Writing as inquiry has created a lens through which I can safely conduct my research, even if it also exposes my vulnerabilities along the way.

With that, I then need to create a space in my research to find my story and interpret its impact on my educational practices. The search for stories often starts simple, in my case, with writing exercises designed to rediscover experiences and memories that I will describe in more detail later in this chapter.
Applying Autoethnography to My Story

One memory can lead to another, and they are what makes up the story of who we are. For better or worse, nothing that occurs in this life, in this grand profession of teaching, is independent of the personality of the vessel we now occupy. I cannot interpret the impact I have on students from one day to the next without first considering my own story and the relevance it has on my reality. In this way, I am both the researcher and the participant. It is a necessarily precarious balancing act that provides authentic meaning to the conclusions being drawn from my own careful reflections. I must also acknowledge both my ego, in centralizing my understanding of my teaching in my personal experiences, and my own vulnerability, in exposing myself to raw emotions of past-experience in order to interpret and apply new understanding (Frambach, 2015).

To answer the questions I have set for myself, it is necessary with my personal reflections to consider the roles other adults had in shaping the nature of my own resiliency. Where these characters cannot be excluded from the narrative because their impact was too great, I will strive to protect their identity through alteration of names or identifying characteristics. As Hamdan (2012) points out, “my personal autoethnography highlights how a personal identity has been shaped and constructed” (p. 588). By always centering my research on the intimate sources of my personal resiliency, I will keep the focus away from any extraneous details that may otherwise give away the identities of others in my story, whether past or present.

As a research method, autoethnography cannot always follow the objective, quantitative methods often found in more traditional research designs. As Chambers (2004) explains “what matters hides in improbable places such as dreams, just beneath the surface of a story or a lie or memory; and what matters springs up in the middle of the contradiction between what I say and
what I do” (p. 8). My data will be collected from the mirror I hold up to myself, and the window my reflection creates through which I might step back and see my place within the professional culture of teaching.

As researcher of the self through the lens of culture, I have the opportunity to offer unique perspectives on education (Hamdan, 2012) and the ways in which a teacher might impact the students in their classroom. In order to provide opportunity for those who read my research to benefit from the experiences I will share, there first needs to be clear intersection where memory and meaning can come together. Free-writing exercises, ones where I considered my questions about education in relation to my experiences in education, offered me a starting point.

In the early stages of my research, the exercise of free-writing often took me briefly away from my objectives. I struggled with silencing not only the ever-present censor in the back of my mind, but the myriad of other mundane lists of other things I needed to worry about in the real world that seemed ever on repeat at the back of my mind. I needed to make space for silence in my life and learn to take comfort from it. My favourite place to do this was outside in the sun. I would lay in the grass and try to connect with every other sensation but the thoughts in my head. I would feel the warmth of the sun on my face, the prickle of grass against bare legs, and I would marvel at the way the wind in the trees really did sound like applause. I would pick shapes out of the clouds or gaze longingly at the eagle circling overhead. I did this until I found a way to be grounded in the moment. Only then did I open up my mind to the possibility of memories.

Once I was good at clearing my mind, it was easier to coax a memory forward with an old song or the scent of a candle. Sometimes they were set aside for fear of sharing what still felt so raw. I was picking at the scabs of old wounds only to discover they had not quite healed
beneath the scar tissue I had built up over time. Still, it is important to follow the threads of inquiry wherever they might go; by turning down the volume of my censor I have found the story I was searching for. It has given me a fuller picture of who I am, and it has provided me the data I need to analyze my findings. With practice, I got better at sifting through the memories that mattered to my research. I often practiced the art of targeted reflection through the most abstract and basic of my interactions with the world: my senses. By re-visiting a recent journal entry, I remember that reflection can easily start with a smell:

Any smell. Maybe one that is dry and dusty. It crawls up your nose where it pokes at your brain until the memory broadens. The sharply, sweet scent that once tickled my nose now stabs through my clothes where I sit. My eyes close to better coax the memory out of hiding, but somehow, I feel that if I were to explore the chair beneath me it would be gone. Instead, I would find myself sitting on a bale of hay, smiling despite the sharp jabs because there is no other place I would rather be sitting.

It is here the memory diverges, slinking away down a dozen paths, coaxing me to follow:

I can smell the hay bales. They scratch and tickle my nose until I can’t help but smile. I can still feel the weight of bills and tuition and car payments tugging down the corners of my mouth, but the persistent needles digging into my backside makes my laughter stronger than my sorrows. My feet slide into my boots and the way the leather clings to my feet grounds me. I can’t tell if this is one memory or many, sidled into a whole to make me remember what serenity feels like. Am I thirteen still, or twenty-three? Does it matter?

Chuckling metal clasps bring me back to the reason I’m here. I abandon the itchy bale for a satin soft muzzle against my palms. Her heavy forehead presses into my chest, pushing me
back a step and reminding me that her trust and friendship are more solid than anything else in my life. Or, maybe she just appreciates the scent of hay still clinging to my jeans.

She sighs.

Though the scent of summer still lingers on her coat, pregnant grey clouds are moving in to wash away the season. I turn my face towards them, admiring their ominous beauty, just as drops of autumn splash against my face. I saddle up anyway. A little rain never hurt anyone.

If I dared, I could relive the thrill of the wind in my hair, or I might recall the gentle whisper of a velvet muzzle against my cheeks, coy lips tasting the tears of my youth. The warmth of equine breath is a sigh of promise: my secrets would forever be hers to keep.

These reflections are my data. They make up a large portion of the evidence I use in later chapters to support my findings about the importance of our presence in our classrooms on the resiliency of the most vulnerable students we see every day. I wrote out many such memories, sometimes with purpose and sometimes simply because the muse struck that day, but each of these strands of remembered moments needed to be sorted for their relevance to what I wanted to achieve in my research. I created a place for each one, labeling them for the themes they represented: hope, loss, love, and fear. By creating a space for each moment to belong, I am able to craft the larger narrative that is my own resilience. From my memories, I discover the path with heart, and my intuition provides the means to process and evaluate where the knowledge I find can be the most useful (Chambers, 2004; Hamdan, 2012).

This is also my opportunity to fully analyze my present and find meaning in my current practices. I explore the implications of my writing and reflection by examining how my story has influenced my adherence to a growth mindset (Ricci, 2013) as well as the importance of my role as a leader in my classroom, and my ambition as a leader in my district. In many ways, this
has been the most challenging in that this understanding needed to be reached while also recognizing my own, inescapable bias, as well as acknowledging that my history is not the same as the students I hope to impact.

**The limitation of memory.** There are also limitations to this methodology, as there are with any research method one might set out to use. Memories are faulty. Not only are they difficult to fully analyze, they can only be regarded through our personal experience of an event in our lives (Chambers, 2004; Hamdan, 2012; Frambach, 2015). They are biased and subject to the lens of our present circumstance when we try to recall them. The time that has passed from when I lived through an experience, to when I sat down to write out the memory of the event, muddles the minute details and alters the interpretation. As such, autoethnography can suffer from these limitations to our personal reflections and has been the subject of criticism for its lack of defined “facts” (Adams, et al., 2014).

Even so, the way in which I recall my experiences is as important to my data analysis as the experience itself.

As well, it would be hubris to assume my experiences are superior or that I have not been more, or less, privileged than the students I hope to impact.

**Acknowledging my Privilege**

In March of 2017, I attended dinner on social justice where the speaker told us to “check our privilege”; she explained to us that we must consider experiences or identities without placing them in categories:

> Our unique histories and experiences determine our social location; depending on who we are, we can experience greater or lesser degrees of privilege or
exclusion; sometimes we can be privileged in some ways and not in others

(Tony, 2017).

Still, the acknowledgement of these limitations also opens the door to explore the significance of this methodology. By its nature, autoethnography in many ways removes the necessity to worry about what privilege the subject may or may not have, if only because the act of self-reflecting is personal and unconcerned with comparing oneself to others. I mention it only because of the impact it may have on the knowledge I create with the data I collect. If I intend to apply my understanding to how I engage in my role as an educator, I cannot help but consider how the unintentional bias of privilege may colour my analysis. I identify as a Caucasian woman. I grew up in a home that mostly survived below the poverty line, yet as an adult I am a member of the middle class. And lastly, as a teacher in a rural community with a high population of people who identify as First Nations, I must also acknowledge my euro-cultural links to colonization. These things are as part of who I am as the experiences that brought me from my past to my present, and so they cannot be disregarded. By acknowledging and accepting my privilege, I free myself to fully open my mind to the full breadth of possibilities found in the interpretation of my data. I may then more fully understand my role in my classroom and the impact I can have on my students’ resiliency and engagement.

There is something to be said for the collaborative nature of teaching, and there is a place for it within the research I have set out in these pages. While the autoethnographic method is inherently reflective and focused on the self, it can influence the understandings of others as well. Will a reader have to have had the same experiences as I to fully grasp the validity of my findings? Absolutely not. What can be acknowledged by any good teacher who has spent any amount of time in a diverse classroom is that my stories are in the students we teach every day.
They may not be the same as mine, and none will be better or worse, but they will all have a story waiting behind their eyes.

For some, those stories are the reason our students try so hard for that A and are still upset when the A is not accompanied by perfection. For others, these stories explain every eye roll, every empty seat, every head lolling against the cool, hard surface of the desk. We are all made up of experiences and memories that shape us into who we present to the world. It has been my intention to understand the importance of this knowledge when I am engaging the most vulnerable learners in my classroom. At the end of it all, I hope the readers of this thesis will take the time to reflect on their own story, and the stories of their students, in order to consider the impact they are having, or the impact they could strive to have, on the resiliency of students who need someone to show them the way.
Chapter 4: Telling My Story

Life runs in cycles
The wheel never stops turning
No matter how dark the night
Morning comes, no matter how
Cold the winter, spring comes
When you feel despair know that the
Wheel is turning,
Joy will come

Early on in my research, I saw the above words on a tapestry and they became the first words to mark the pages of my journal. I was sitting in a room in my mother’s house, which she calls her “zen room”. It smelled like her perfume and the last essential oils she dripped into her infuser, jasmine I think. There were calming pictures on every wall, and across from where I sat, a hokey tapestry rested against the wall and summoned my attention when all I wanted to do was concentrate on my writing. It begged me to write its words down. There was no author at the bottom. My fingers itched to find their rhythm on the key board in front of me. I had already chastised myself for forgetting to bring the little notebook I had purchased just for these exercises. I like to write on paper, to feel the resistance of the page when my pencil scrapes across its surface, but quiet moments without my three children are rare. I needed to use what I had.

Since my mind would not cooperate, I wrote the words staring me in the face.
Then I realized something. I had sat there before, not on the little black sofa in a cloud of lavender and jasmine, but in this place where what I really wanted to see was a magic mirror, one that might give me insight into my own mind. Sitting there, contemplating my research, I realized I had been working on it for months and simply had not realized it yet.

I had started playing with memoir more than a year earlier, exploring my memories and writing them down as a method of release while finding my path towards mental wellness. I had written something for a non-fiction writing contest, 1250-words I had given the title: Growing Pains. I opened the file and added the words to my new electronic journal. I became a literary surgeon, breaking down the stories I had already found time to tell, and adding new ones suddenly there on the edge of my subconscious. When my allotted hour of work time was up, I wiped the evidence of weeping from my cheeks, and smiled sadly at the progress I had made.

_I remember being small._

_Not too small though. I know how to brush my own teeth and tie my own shoes. I help feed my little sister even though she smears green peas all over her chubby, round face and throws cheerios all over the floor. I know how to read, and I can take our new golden puppy outside to do his business._

_I still believe I can be anything: a doctor, an astronaut, an actress, or an explorer. What I really want to be is a lion, or a horse. Sometimes I’m content to be a puppy like the floppy blonde one my mom brought home. I love chasing him up and down the hall, galloping on all fours, barking more shrilly than even he could manage. I used to do this all the time. I stopped._

_The dangers of belief are in the shadows._

_Like the man who hates make-believe. He yells when I play my games._

_“Animals belong outside. Walk properly.”_
He tells me if I don’t want to walk on my feet then I don’t need to have feet.

In the shadows of my memory, the man can be anything too. When I close my eyes, his face is hidden by a shroud of darkness and he looms over me, an almost forgotten threat to my innocence.

Metal glints in his hand.

I forgot the rules.

Halfway down the hall, childish fun vanishes when I see the bogeyman peer around the corner from the kitchen. He had been making dinner. I see the knife in his hand and I remember animals aren’t allowed to run around the house. I remember I have two feet to walk on. When the monster’s shape fills the hallway, my legs turn to jelly and I can’t stand on my two good feet. I decide to run, all fours or not.

I scramble through the door to my room. I’m on my bed when I feel the grip of a hand around my ankle. Long, talon-like fingers wrap around the slender joint where my foot connects to my skinny chicken leg. I scream and kick out. The blade of his knife bites the tender skin above my heel. I’m sobbing. His face is too close to mine.

“Stop acting like an animal.”

My ankle is bleeding. My whole body is trembling. Only when my mother hugs me, when she moves us all away from that haunted house with its dark inhabitant, do I let the memory of the bogeyman fade away. All that’s left is the echo of a shadow, cackling in the corner of my mind.

This was the first step, the hardest I had been told, and I had done it. One moment in my life, a single point on my plot line, creates a starting point for all other things.
Further purges would prove to be as painful and bittersweet as the first, but many would also cause my chest to swell with pride, or my lips to pull back from my teeth with the memory of laughter.

Life is full of growing pains. They are what bring us to the present and shape who we become.

*I’m ten years old. I sit in a puddle of grief on my bed, the lights off, drowning out the buzz of conversation rising from downstairs. I’ve fled the mushy hugs and the stale condolences of well-meaning people I am not even sure I know. When the darkness does find me at last, it bears the loving face of an adult I trust.*

*A silent question blossoms in the air. ”Why are you crying in the dark?”*

*I’m just a child. I struggle to articulate the regret, the guilt, of losing a sibling. How do I describe witnessing the limp form of my baby brother being pulled from the innocent embrace of the neighbour’s pool? Every light and happy memory, every breath of laughter rippling over the water’s surface, now shrouded by the terrifying sensation of small lungs filling up with chlorine every time he opens his mouth to scream. I think of it and I feel the painful tightening of my own chest. I can’t breathe either. I feel the sting of salt behind my eyes and wait for the darkness to pass.*

*How do I tell her that everything is my fault?*

*I should’ve been watching him more closely. I should’ve known where to look the moment I saw the panic-stricken face of my step-father when he realized my baby brother was missing.*

*Joshua.*
Do I tell her when I close my eyes, I still see his cold, grey skin where he was laid out on a metal table for his viewing? I had touched him. I had traced the fine lines from where his scraped knee had hardly begun to heal. His lips held the faintest traces of pink, a fading blush of colour where colour no longer had a right to be. Blue shorts. Blue striped t-shirt with a little sail-boat. Seeing the shirt had brought to mind a picture I have somewhere. I took it last summer with the camera I bought with the money from my very first babysitting job. Josh looks like a filthy, dust-covered orphan boy and he is challenging the camera with a glare that used to make me laugh when I looked at it. His eyes had looked black in the photo: a trick of the light, or a glimmer of the fate waiting to come? His eyes were closed now. He was sleeping. I was certain of it. Why didn’t he just wake up?

My relative, whose own eyes are swollen from the grief she has poured out today, tries to cheer me up. "You shouldn’t be up here crying. Your mom needs you to be strong right now."

I feel the weight of her hand on my shoulder. The rough material of my sleeve scratches my cheek where I wipe the tears away. She must be right. She is smiling through her own grief, wrapping her arms around me even though I haven’t the strength to lift my own to reciprocate. She is stronger than I am. I’ll have to try harder.

I’m ten years old but I am strong. I can be strong. Just watch me.

This brief interaction, at a time when my soul was torn open and vulnerable to the influence of others, would become a defining scene in my story. This relative was not being malicious, she did not intend to instil in me the stoicism that would become my greatest weakness as an adult.

My 18-month old brother died in August 1997. It was the summer between Grades 5 and 6. I remember returning to school that September, and how it was often difficult to breathe. I
had been the new girl the preceding spring, and now, I was the silent moody girl just trying to
discover what normal was going to look like for me now. I had been told strength meant not
crying, and so I tried not to. I tried not to cry over my brother. I tried not to cry when the
students, like sharks sensing blood in the water, began to single me out as the bottom rung in
their social ladder. No one saw the tears when the one girl who was supposed to be my friend,
started calling me Holland because I was flatter-chested than the other girls. I told my teacher I
was fine, and because I was so “strong”, she believed me. My resiliency fooled them all.

Like many of the students who pass through the halls of our schools, I hid myself behind
a mask. Sometimes that mask was held in place by high achievement, sometimes by good
behaviour. Sometimes I retreated into myself and felt my very presence fade from the room.
While reflecting on this grief, I remembered another loss, and with that memory, I began to find
the teachers who helped build me up again.

*My dad is standing at the door of the classroom.*

*My heart swells with excitement. He never picks me up in the middle of the day. I put
away my writing books, grab my knapsack from the hook below the laminated paper where my
name is proudly displayed with daisies all around, and anchor my hand in his as we walk out of
the school.*

*The clouds are grey in the sky. It will probably rain. I know this means no playground
for us today, but my dad has got a different plan anyway.*

“I thought we could go for ice cream,” he says.

“Yes!”

*This day can’t get any better. I fail to hear the way his voice catches in his throat, and I
forgive the presence of my step-mother waiting for us in the back seat of the car. In fact, I decide*
I like her a little better since she has never let me sit in the front seat with my dad before. My mom won’t like it, she says I’m too small, but my dad always did challenge the rules when he could. I bet he’d even let me have extra topping on my ice cream.

The rain taps lightly on the window when my dad pulls over on a side street around the corner from the Dairy Queen. He turns off the car; the wipers freeze half-way through their arching sweep of the windshield. I can already feel the cool, sticky mess I am making on my face, but I was right, dad did ask the lady to put in extra cookie dough. It squishes between my teeth with every bite.

His ice cream remains untouched in the cup holder. She is nibbling hers in the back seat, silently watching the world outside her window.

My dad starts to speak.

“You know grandpa has been sick.”

“Yes.” I nod. I remember going to visit him in that horrible place he moved to not long ago. A few days, a week maybe. It had been sunny that day, but the shadows of the room he was in had terrified me. Grandpa is my favourite person on the planet, the light in his eyes a reflection of my joy and laughter, the strongest person I know, but that man in the bed, hooked up to a million machines like some kind of robot from a movie my mom would never let me watch, was not my grandpa.

My dad had kept talking while I thought of that shadowy robot-man who was not my grandpa. My spoon is stuck in the cup of ice cream.

“Your grandpa passed away today.”
Passed-away. What does that even mean? Her hand reaches over the seat to touch my shoulder, but I decide I don’t like her after all, so I ignore it. The windshield wipers start moving again. Rain drops are falling from my dad’s eyes faster than they can be wiped away.

My ice cream is melting, the chunks of chocolate and cookie dough settling against the bottom of the cup. I think they are settling in the pit of my stomach too because I don’t feel like eating any more of them. My mouth has gone sour. The clouds are darker, and I think my dad is taking me home to mom’s house.

I blink my eyes and I am home. My dad is leaving, and my mom is crying. She talks to me and hugs me, even though I don’t remember what she says. I think I know what passed away means.

Now, I’m crying too.

My Grade 1 teacher had been terrifying. I recall her stern face, her reprimanding, no-nonsense voice as clear as day. I could tell you her name if you asked. I even remember distinctly not liking her. She was a mean and horrible woman compared to the light-hearted and care-free kindergarten teacher I had loved so much the year before. Odd though, aside from remembering my fondness of that kindergarten teacher, no amount of self-reflection has conjured up a single other memory of that first teacher in a long line of others.

The first day back at school after my grandfather died, that terrible, grumpy, hard-faced Grade 1 teacher did something I will never forget. She took my hand and invited me to walk with her at lunch. She did this for several days, though I could not say exactly how long it took for me to feel normal among my friends again. This teacher brought her dogs to school, a species of animal that, even in adulthood, I rely on for comfort and companionship. In those days of loss and sorrow, I helped her walk them around the school yard. I became the envy of
other students, not the source of pity. It took maturity and adulthood to appreciate what this teacher did for me: she helped me bounce back from that time of darkness in a way no other adult in my life was capable of doing.

I had hated that teacher, resented her brusque demand that we learn to read when all we wanted to do was to play. However, in moments of reflection, I will always be grateful that she understood what I needed. She helped establish the first traces of resiliency in me. By supporting my healing instead of just making everything go away, she gave me the space to find acceptance and to grow. She let me discover I could survive the trauma in my life, when given the time to do so.

In the first year after losing my brother, there was no one like that Grade 1 teacher at my side. As much as I could, I managed on my own. It was easier anyway, to limit friendships and keep my distance from adults outside of the turmoil going on at home. The loss of a child can devastate the state of any family. In mine, serious mental illness, a young baby, and a weak support system, created a maelstrom of violence and fear I did not want to share with anyone. When we moved from busy Langley, British Columbia to the quiet, small town of Quesnel, the promise of escaping our demons and finally healing was a relief for the whole family.

While my family took many more years to fall apart at last, and several more attempts to outrun our demons, that first year in that tiny little logging town did more for my resiliency than almost any other space of time I can recall from my childhood.

Again, I have a teacher I can thank for giving me the opportunity to build up my armour. Grade 7 was another new school, new students, new potential friendships. I was terrified and excited all at once. As the city girl, I was an oddity and made friends quickly. These friendships did not last, as so few do in this transition from childhood to youth, but they were replaced by
others. I would love to say I escaped the bullies too, but bullies exist everywhere. I can say with absolute certainty that, bullies or not, friends or not, I began to love school again. My new teacher was not an imposing man, perhaps of average height, and always followed by the fading scent of tobacco and mint gum. I cannot say he ever reached out to me personally. Like many of us with our students, he probably never truly understood what my life had become outside of the four walls of the school. No, what that Grade 7 teacher provided was so much more than that.

In his class, we were all safe, and we all belonged.

In his class we laughed, and learned, and supported each other. In his class, it did not matter that rivalries existed on the playground, or that our academic achievements were varied. He created for us an environment where our presence mattered. For me, it offered some relief. I could explore what it meant to be myself again. Just me. I found out my strength was real, not just a façade of repressed emotions and hidden nightmares. His influence followed me out of the classroom, slowly infusing life back into my approach to the rest of my world. To him, I was just another average student in the classroom. To me, his impact would follow me for years to come.

*Strength comes over time. I’m thirteen and the creature staring at me from across the paddock paws the ground provocatively. It’s go time.*

*I hug two flakes of hay under one arm, grip a pail of oats with my other hand. Carefully, in slow-motion, I squeeze through the rails of the fence. Dark, liquid eyes watch me. Golden ears flick forward. She waits until I’m through the fence before she charges towards me. I’m not going to cow down this time.*

*This has become a routine for us. A carefully choreographed dance: I get to her feed bin first, drop the flakes, empty the pail, and scurry away before the mare takes me down. Not this*
time though. Her ears are flat against her head now. I'm breaking the rules by not retreating. I imagine the ground shakes beneath her hooves as she continues to come forward, but I stand my ground. A battle cry builds up inside me. I let it out like an explosion, startling the animal out of her malicious charge.

"Back off!" I shout at her.

She stands there staring at me, taking my measure. I reach down to the forgotten hay, rising again with a fistful of dried alfalfa and clover. Holding it out, I wait for her judgement. Will she find me worthy? Or will she re-teach the lesson of previous mornings with bared teeth?

Her neck stretches forward to close the gap between us. Nimble lips pull at the offering in my hand. My knees wobble from relief and I want to cry. I wait until she is done eating everything before I leave the paddock to get ready for school. Looking back over my shoulder, our eyes meet again.

I think we finally have an understanding her and I. My chest swells, and I can't stop smiling. Nothing can stop me now.

Grade 10 was the last time I had a teacher who reached out to me in a meaningful way. There were other good teachers, and ones who still make my blood boil twelve years later, but my English 10 teacher was the last one who had a lasting impact on my sense of worth.

The trouble with strength and resiliency is that over time, when traumas come one right after the other, little pieces of ourselves get eaten away. I had grown strong enough to hold on, though there were occasions I imagined how much easier it would be to just let go, but I had become invisible again. I resisted relationships, pushed friends away, and sheltered what was left of my self-esteem in the falsehood that a C or a C+ was good enough for me. There were
other adults in my life who cared, but trusting in them was difficult. The uncertainty of their motivations followed me for years to come.

We lay together on my couch, the movie playing on the TV only white noise in the presence of our laughter. I'm giddy and I feel so light I might float away, except I’m already trapped in the warmth of someone's embrace.

His hazel eyes melt into mine and he tells me he loves me.

He must see the fear inside me before I can look away. Does he notice the way every muscle in my body grows tense? I'm a rabbit in a trap and my already racing heart has gone into overdrive. I can't breathe.

Already he senses my unease, the fragility of my affections.

He back-tracks.

He takes off the 'e'.

I relax, and we are laughing again because he "luvs" me. The weighty implication of that damn 'e' is gone. I know I'm going to spend forever in his arms. Still, something always holds me back from giving him all of myself.

Broken memories, like the warning lights of an accident scene, flash through my mind.

I remember love like I remember being fifteen.

My sister's room is dark and the closed door against my back feels too flimsy to keep out the storm brewing down the hall.

If I had been faster, I might have made it down the stairs to my basement room where I could've drowned out the chaos with the innocent lies of popular music. He had come through the back door unexpectedly, his anger sucking the oxygen from the house. I couldn't breathe, so I fled to the closest room I could get to.
Now I'm panting for air while my sister sleeps soundly nearby. I envy her.

The shouting from the room down the hall grows louder, something crashes, breaks, shatters on the floor, so I push off from the door to join the sleeping child.

She's so delicate, like a doll. I hold her close and pray she doesn't wake up. She's five, old enough to remember I couldn't protect her from life's realities.

A door slams. I flinch.

Boy bands and trampy pop stars have it all wrong. This is what love really looks like. Love makes you into a masochist. You recognize the suffering in another person's soul. You see it fester there, consuming everything that they are and, even though it terrifies you, you stay with them because you just want them to feel better. They need you and love is about them. You don't matter. Even when the poison in their heart overflows and burns everything around them, turning happiness to ashes. Love is self-less and doesn't care.

I try to fall asleep with my sister tucked against my body. The safety of my own room is a forgotten pipe-dream. I want to run out there and yell and scream and stop what is happening, but I can't.

I'm a coward.

I'll always remember this terrible lesson: love is merely blackened eyes and broken drywall.

In Grade 10, the teacher had us do a novel study on *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960). Toward the end of the novel, we were asked to explore the theme of the story by creating skits. These skits were to be in small groups. I had already discovered a shy fondness for Drama, but the idea of group work was almost enough to make me want to stay home. Almost. My peers all
broke up into their little pockets of friendships and allies. I hung back in the corner, off everyone’s radar. At the end of class, I approached the teacher.

*Can I do a monologue instead?*

*Isn’t there a group you want to join?*

*No.*

*A monologue will be difficult. Are you sure?*

*Yes.*

The teacher gave in. I think she sensed my resolve, and though I remember the way her blue eyes searched mine during our conversation, I could not say if the pity I thought I saw there was real or the lingering self-doubt of memory. In any event, I did my monologue. I played the part of Jem. As the character, I sat at a desk and pretended to write an essay on what innocence means. When I was done, the class was silent, and the teacher had tears in her eyes. I felt a swell of pride and a dip in my humility. My monologue was better than any of the other skits, I was sure. I had even practiced my southern drawl in front of the mirror for days before hand. Scarlet O’Hara had nothing on me.

Parent-teacher night was soon after. My mom had almost stopped going to those. Why bother when every teacher just said the same thing? I didn’t disrupt the class, I usually finished my homework, and I got average grades. The really enthusiastic ones would tell her I was a great student, but I just rolled my eyes at them, tempted to say: *What’s my name again? No, no, without looking at the paper in front of you this time.*

Then we got to the table where my English teacher was waiting. I had mentally checked out by then, but when we sat down, there was something in her voice that pulled me back to the present. She was telling my mother about my monologue, about how impactful she found it.
The thing was, she was not simply talking about the content either. She used words like “gift” and “talent”. By the time she was done, my mom was looking at me like I was some kind of alien, and she held the card of an acting agent in her hand.

My teacher had discovered something in me, and her belief in that potential had driven her to secure an interview with an agent. A real agent, one with clients on TV shows I had actually heard of. Did that teacher set me on a career path? No. I had the interview, but life had other plans and that’s ok. What stands out in my memory is not the failure to seize an opportunity, but the impact that teacher’s belief had on me. That year, I started entering writing contests for the first time. I never once placed, but even in my failure, I went to that teacher and she helped me realize the value of revision and trying again. I still have yet to place in any writing contest, but I have never stopped trying. That was her impact on me: to never give up.

Each of the three teachers who made a notable difference in my self-perception, created a rippling effect on my life as a whole. They did not take away my burdens. They likely had no idea as to the baggage I was bringing in to their classroom every day, but that knowledge was irrelevant. They discovered my potential and did not leave it as a cliff-note in my report card comments. They created learning environments where every student felt safe enough to just be present and learn. And, without simply taking away the pain, they provided the support their students needed until the pain faded on its own.

I will never believe that teachers cannot impact their students’ resiliency beyond the days or the months a vulnerable student spends in their classroom. I am living proof that the impact teachers can have is tangible and life-long. It is in their honour, I hope to keep the ripple of their support and belief going in my school and in my classroom.
Chapter 5: Analyzing my story

You never understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it. – Atticus Finch (Lee, 1960, p.48)

Every day, our students come to us as the protagonists of their own story – stories in which we feel like members of the supporting cast. Like my own teachers with me, I am rarely privy to the joys and trauma my students might experience from one day to the next. Yet, their stories are profoundly impactful on who they are as a person and how they navigate life. Their resiliency, wherever it comes from, effects their ability to cope with the added stresses their teachers put on them through learning. For myself, I have come to appreciate the insight my own story has offered into the stories behind the eyes of my students.

There are many ways in which I bring my story into my classroom through my identity as a teacher. To start with, I struggle with the labels we sometimes invent to describe the misunderstood students whose needs we cannot seem to meet.

What’s in a Name?

As I already alluded to in Chapter 1, there was one term I used to use quite frequently when I referred to the vulnerable students who seem to slip through the cracks, and that term was “grey-area”. During my time as a special educator, I naturally focused on students who had an identity defined by Section E of the Special Education Services: A Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines (2016) provided by the British Columbia Ministry of Education. Students may not be their diagnosis, but the diagnosis is the foundation on which we build their support plans. When my caseload as an enrolling teacher reached close to thirty, the amount of
work it took to plan for and track each student, on top of teaching my classes and co-running the learning support room, left little space for any other struggling student.

However, my interest has always been those students we just cannot seem to wrap our heads around. I see them in the regular classroom as the quiet ones who get average grades and scarcely cause a ripple on our radar with their presence. I see them in the wild ones who swing between sleeping in class and interrupting every lesson. But perhaps more importantly, I see them in the mirror I hold up to myself.

*I stare out at my support room, watching the students scattered around round tables. It’s crowded today. The end of the semester is looming. Many of these students are slouched under the weight of assignments they’ve had weeks to complete but now must power through in a matter of days.*

*Two students are regulars. They are slow learners who often benefit from having a lesson re-taught to them in this quiet haven tucked beside the library.*

*One student is already working on an exam, their IEP quite clear that they require additional time and a scribe for the written portions. A colleague sits there with a pencil, ready to take down the words that may otherwise get lost between the student’s brain and the page.*

*But the rest, why are they here? Why do their assignments build up in this way? The party line is always the same it seems. They’re lazy. They’re absent. They’re undiagnosed.*

*They have given up on school.*

*I stare out at my support room, watching the students scattered around the round tables. They sit alone in this crowded room, shrouded in a mystery I long to solve.*

Early in my research, I discovered that the concept of “grey-area” students is not typically found in true academic research. I had always applied the term as I had heard others
do: these were students who do not meet the standards by which we categorize struggling students, yet continue to lack academic or social success in school. I spoke to others, I looked high and low for a proper definition, but it was not until I met a well-respected speaker on inclusive education at a conference in Prince George in April 2017, that I began to realize the truth behind the term: there is no such thing as “grey-area” students. I asked this person if I could highlight our conversation in my research and she told me to go for it (S. Moore, personal communication, April 28, 2017). If only I had thought to record the conversation, I would offer her exact words here, but essentially our discussion boiled down to labels and stereotypes. She stated quite plainly that she found the term “grey-area” discriminatory and down-right offensive. The more I strive to understand the motivations of my students, the more I cannot help but agree.

We label our students for a variety of reasons, funding usually at the root of such labels, but we forget their stories and their individuality (Moore, 2016). If you look back the fictional students I described in Chapter 1, you may have considered these students to be part of the twilight zone of our education system. After all, there was nothing in my descriptions that may impose a label. Certainly, there were no indicators in my youth that might have given my teachers a clue as to my potential or to the motivations behind my behaviour. Did a teacher ever refer to me as a “grey area” student? I will never know the answer to that question, in fact I do not think I care to know, but I believe our vulnerabilities exist in that grey area, even if the label itself is inappropriate.

Instead, we should look to what factors make our students vulnerable within our school. Poverty, cultural differences, violence in the home, violence at school, these are all areas we know can affect the mental well-being of children and youth (Bempechat, 1998; Hutchinson, 2010; Patton, et al., 2000) and there can be no school that exists outside of all of them. These are
not issues we can solve for our students, but they are clues to why one student may be struggling, when all you can see is their potential going unfulfilled.

**Finding Resiliency**

Bronfenbrenner (1994) included “coping successfully under stress” (p.596) in his list of desired developmental outcomes for children. Resiliency is this ability to cope, and it is crucial to the completed development of a child who will someday be functional adult. It is then necessary to acknowledge, as Bronfenbrenner does, the value of environment on a child’s well-being and functionality. Ideally, the child would receive all the support they need for development from the harmonious contributions of every sphere of influence in their lives: family, community, and schools (Bendtro, 2006).

In my story, there were certainly adults surrounding me outside of school whose love and support were instrumental to my development. This is particularly true when I reflect on the loss of my grandfather. My father and mother were able to comfort me, my home life was relatively secure at the time despite their separate households, and when I was away from all that, my school environment offered safety and understanding. However, trauma does not happen to an individual in a vacuum, and as it mounted within my household, school became increasingly important as the source of my security.

Imagine the stress and anxiety of those students who are not only struggling to fit the distinctive mold of traditional educational practices, as described by Lupart (2009), but dealing with the perfect storm that is shifting family dynamics, bullying, cultural and societal pressures, and the frequent media coverage of teen suicides as well (Arastaman and Balci, 2013). Without some stability in one, or all, of these areas, the development of resiliency can slow or stop altogether. Unfortunately, in our schools, we have sacrificed human connection at the altar of
better performance (Bendtro et al. 1990) and then stood back surprised when engagement and overall achievement falter.

Our ability to cope with adversity is at least in part dependent on the support of our social environment (Patton, et al., 2000). For students, school is a huge part of their social environment, potentially taking up more than thirty hours of their week. With this consideration, we must take on the responsibility of identifying different aspects of school can have on all students, but particularly those who may experience various risk factors outside our buildings. To quote Moore (2016) “we teach how we were taught” (p.51). Fortunately for me, I was taught by individuals who understood, perhaps even subconsciously, the power they had to influence the social environment around me.

Making Meaningful Connections

Sometimes, making meaningful connections with our students is almost an accident. Think back to the girl in Chapter 1, the one who hid among the white noise of more confident peers. In an off-handed comment about her interests, the teacher in that story was able to form a tenuous connection with a student who was lost. While that girl was a work of fiction, I have met students like her, and I have been fortunate enough to fully realize my impact on such students. I have a similar interaction as I described in that earlier chapter, with students so surly I fear to even approach them, for why risk the integrity of my lesson or the management of an entire class on the off chance my concerns will not be met with explosive animosity or outright indifference? Then there are days, sometimes after a whole semester working with a student, that little breakthroughs can occur and change everything. I might mention my love of writing, or share the risk I take every time I enter a writing contest, or I might share the struggle I have with anxiety or depression, and behold, a student will rise out of the shadows like a phoenix from
the ashes. Their excitement is tangible, and for a few minutes at least, we speak one-on-one about their passion for writing, or the anxiety they have about the presentation I have assigned.

These are all positive moments in my young career, and to this day, some of these students return to share with me every success and failure, looking to me for that positive reinforcement even after their time in my class has passed.

If we do “teach as we were taught”, then I suppose it was that high school teacher who taught me the value of belief in our students’. Her belief in my potential infused me with life at a time when my views towards my learning were apathetic at best. It did not matter to her that my family was balanced on the tight-rope of society’s poverty line, or that I did not always have any food with me, or that I often muted the storm brewing at home with loud music long into the night. It was all irrelevant. Her celebration of my success was not in comparison to everything else going on in my life. She connected with me by celebrating success for the sake of celebrating. In doing so, she gave me someone to trust, someone to impress, and a reason to be the best I could be.

The connections I make with my students about writing, serve as a similar example. Even as a new teacher, as I am sure some of the readers of this thesis are, I work to acknowledge a student’s passion even though it had nothing to do with the class she was working very hard at failing. I demonstrate unconditional interest in something that made her special. The fact that she returns to me still, is evidence of the impact I was able to have, I am so honoured to have had it. In this student, I saw a reflection of myself and I instinctually reacted to it by simply being present and supportive. As teachers, our impact is to allow ourselves to see the whole student and recognize the infinite potential and uniqueness there (Klangwisan, 2013).
To Heal We Must Endure

There is another aspect of my experience with impactful teachers, and that was in that Grade 1 class after the loss of my grandfather. It would be impossible to describe how devastating that experience was up to that point in my life. My grandfather was my safe place, he was my favourite person in the world, and for some reason, even now, I look back at this loss as the beginning of everything I had to survive afterwards. The bogeyman followed shortly after that, then my brother’s death and the trauma it inflicted on my entire family. In so many ways, that Grade 1 teacher was like a first responder at an accident scene; she was a stable adult the first time in my memory where my resilience was tested.

We do not need to take away adversity in order to have an impact on student resilience. I would not be who I am today if my life had followed a straighter path, if my plot line did not rise and fall like the erratic pulse line of an anxiety attack. This can be an intimidating prospect when we are staring out at a class of thirty, or multiple classes of thirty in the secondary schools, but while we should be cognizant of our impact on every student, not every student is going to need our impact to make it through this stage of life.

There is another side to the development of resiliency. Many of the arguments I have made, and the memories I have shared, emerge from a place of trauma or adversity. However, there is another way of looking at it. Yohani (2008) referred to this as the “dark side of hope” (p 318), where we focus on the struggles that must be overcome. For me, this is a considerable focus of my own story, as well as the most obvious way I try to make an impact in the classroom, but it does leave room for an alternative.

My Grade 7 teacher comes to mind in the way he created a safe environment for our learning. Without speaking to him and picking his brain for answers, I will never really know
the reason he used one strategy or another to run his classroom. He may not even have been aware of the impact of his teaching style. Perhaps it was natural, an intuitive response to spending days on end with a flock of prepubescent tweens who ruled the roost of elementary school before leaving to find a place at the bottom of the high school pile.

In their study of resiliency factors in Native American teenagers, Feinstein, Driving-Hawk, and Baartman (2009) noted that all of their participants identified the same teacher as a role model. He was described as “…someone who supported their academic growth as well as their social/emotional need to belong” (p15). The words those students used to describe their teacher could easily have described mine: “‘Laid back’, ‘he respects us and so we respect him’, he makes sure we understand’, ‘relates to us’, and ‘cares about us’” (p. 15). After arriving from a school where I hid the abuse I witnessed at home and suffered through merciless bullying, my teacher had a classroom where learning was fun, and belonging was just the way it was.

*I stand back and admire the evidence of my success. My Community Leadership class was an experiment, lightly tolerated by an administration keen to bring in the outside agencies associated with its risk-prevention initiatives.*

*Four eight-week rotations. A maximum of five girls in my class at a time. The year is at an end, so now I count the coloured hands on my wall: thirty-four. Thirty-four girls who had been identified as ‘at-risk’. Girls who had experienced trauma, who came from single-parent households or from families below the poverty line. Girls in foster care, or girls who simply a mystery to everyone. Thirty-four girls who, for four weeks at least, had a class where they could laugh and play and bond with peers they wouldn’t have even glanced at in the hallways before entering my room.*
I touch each of the paper hands on my wall, traced and cut out with varying degrees of care. Some are covered in such detailed artwork, it would impress the most talented of henna artists, others bearing little more than the goals I had ask them to set for the year.

“I want to make more friends this year.”

“I want to lose weight.”

“I want to gain weight.”

“I want to win at my dance competition next spring.”

“I want to fall in love.”

“I want to pass my classes.”

The hands are different sizes, placed in different spaces on the black background I had pinned to the wall, but all of them are reaching for the stars. I have never been more proud of this calling I am moving towards. I am a teacher.

These thirty-four girls are proof of the impact I can have on my students, and the impact they have had on me will never be forgotten.

If we are truly present in our classrooms, if our students recognize in us the capacity to actively listen to their story and empathize with their happiness and their sorrows, our impact will become evident. We do not need to wait until something awful happens to create a place where students feel safe enough to try anything, even if they fail in the process.
Chapter 6: Using My Story

I say let’s go for it
If it’s all coming down.
I say let’s speak it
Let’s fight it
Let’s right it
There’s nothing to hold on to
If it’s already gone.
They left it to us.
It sucks but it’s true.
It’s you and me baby. (Ensler, 2010, p 9)

Here is where it all comes down to how my story is used. Here is where I share the last discoveries of this journey and pull together the threads of my story in some meaningful conclusion with which I can move forward with you, my readers. Whether we create a classroom where students feel safe or we create meaningful connections with the mysterious shadow sitting in the back desk, our impact as teachers has the potential to echo throughout our students’ lives.

There are two areas I have come to recognize as important side effects of my resiliency. These characteristics are not exclusive to the realm of education, but they are the guiding light to the individuals striving to make an impact on our students, and they were present in the scenes of my story in which teachers stepped above and beyond just a supporting role. Passion and leadership are traits I admired in my teachers, and I have come to discover that these qualities
have in turn, become an important part of my identity as a teacher. This has an important effect on my relationships with my colleagues and students, and it guides every interaction I have from one day to the next.

**Power of Passion**

From the very beginning of my exploration of memories, I recall the teachers and instructors who brought the most passion into their classrooms. Their devotion to Shakespeare and poetry may have made them memorable and, for the duration of the class at least, it infected me with similar excitement over the subject matter. The issue is, what was their impact beyond a few months of enjoying a class? How did their passion impact my resilience in a way that I could pick myself up again when facing failure? The truth is, the three teachers who I remember best did have passion in their teaching, but it was passion of a different kind.

I feel as though the kind of passion that can impact our students, the kind that impacted my ability to cope with adversity, was the quiet passion of teachers who cared about the people in their class and not just the subject matter they were teaching. Again, I turn to Dr. Hattie (2013):

> I talk often about the notion of passion. For me, you have passion when you are willing to listen, when you are willing to demonstrate that you care about what the other person is saying. If you are listening, you need a different set of skills than you do when you are the dominant talker. (p. 5)

Those teachers who helped me to stand up when I truly did not know if I could had this kind of passion. Logically, I know they taught me things like reading, how the Ancient Egyptians made mummies, and the symbols of courage in an old novel, but I remember very little about those
parts of school. Instead, it was in their ability to recognize the individual first and let everything else follow.

True passion in education is about more than just excitement over subject matter. While I will always hope my enthusiasm for writing and history translates into increased engagement for my English and Socials students, this excitement is not enough all by itself. True passion in education is about how we work towards educating the whole student. It has been evident for at least the past century, that there is an increasing gap between the formal education students get in schools, and the education children and youth require to actually function in the demand of a modern society (Dewey, 1916). When we look at the students who are struggling in our classrooms, it is even more apparent. Perhaps in our focus on curriculum and subject matter, we have let this passion slip away.

Lupart (2009) observed that “when certain students were considered to require something different… they were put in a special class with a special teacher…” (p.20). We all know these students. They can range from the students with intellectual disabilities, to the students with behaviour challenges too great for them to function among their peers in the regular classroom. In our schools, we have created alternate programs for these students: resource rooms, life skills programs, boys’ and girls’ groups, and a myriad of others. As the saying goes, a rose by any other name right? Do not mistake this observation for a sense of derision towards these programs as I do see their value in different circumstances, however at times I cannot deny a certain cynicism about the arrangement. There are times when all I see are programs that serve the purpose of isolating a problem in the hope of fixing it with a temporary solution.

What would change if we added passion into the equation?
I believe this is where we find true resiliency and it is in inclusion. Society will rarely divide itself for us, I know it has never been forgiving of me, and so I have found a passion for inclusive educational practices. I focus this excitement in several ways. To start with, I try to ensure everyone in my classroom feels safe. We work on treating each other, and ourselves, with respect, and we practice the art of overcoming our fear. When a recent public speaking assignment had some students wrestling with their anxiety, I not only shared my own anxieties around public speaking, including standing in front of all of them some days, and I had everyone who felt anxious raise their hands. Almost everyone did, demonstrating for the particularly shy ones that they were not alone. I also gave them choices so that they might feel in control of the task. One choice was not to do it at all; however that would result in a mark of zero and I insisted they hold off choosing that option until they were quite sure they could not perform the task. The rest of the class could choose to stand at the front of the room or the back, while their audience was expected to face forward no matter where the speaker was. Another choice was to select a friend to pull up a chair so the student could pretend to read do their to only one other person.

I am proud to say that even some of the students who resisted the task found a way to do what I had asked. There were a couple of zeros, but that was ok too. Why? Because the next time I asked for them to do a similar task, those two students who chose to take zeros answered the call. This is where the power of passion comes in. The students who opted to lose the mark watched as we celebrated those who took the risk and not once were they singled out for failing to try. Instead, I expressed excitement about the next time and when the time came, some of the ones who gave a speech decided to remain silent and some of those who had been silence gave their voice a try. Passion, and trusting in their classmates to be respectful, gave these students a
nudge in the right direction. They may never feel at ease with public speaking, but they will always know their voice has a place in the conversation.

I believe that by including all students in our schools and classrooms, we are teaching more than just curriculum; we are also building capacity for all students to develop empathy for others. In their empathy, we allow room for our students to support each other in both successes and failures.

A little girl enters her new school. Her smile sits crookedly on her face, her lips pulling tight against her new, over-sized adult teeth. She speaks too loudly. Her words are slurred and when the class goes out for a walk, she lags behind the other children. Her muscles tire more quickly than others.

Today she stops walking altogether. She notices something that draws her away from the well-trodden path that circles the school field. A boy is sitting on his own. He is in the older grade of her split class. He is pulling at the grass, leaving clumps of green carnage in a pile next to his knees. His head is bent over as he concentrates on the task of destruction.

“What you doing?”

“Leave me alone.”

“Why you not walking?”

Angry eyes finally look up. He spits out an explanation through clenched teeth. He had shoved another boy to the ground.

“That’s mean.” The girl points out. She kneels down to pluck blades of grass one at a time. It’s a much better game than walking.

“Just go away.”

The girl stays. She is already humming to herself as she adds her grass to his pile.
Half a field away, their teacher pauses to watch the pair. When the girl had complained about being tired, sending her to check on the boy seemed like a good idea. Now, he knew he was right. He knew the boy’s dad had moved out a few weeks before, leaving behind an angry and confused little boy. He knew the girl, through the innocence of her condition, wouldn’t notice the snarly words or vicious glares. She had a way of ignoring the barbs when she caught sight of a rose.

One more lap before the teacher calls his class together to go inside. The boy and the girl join the ranks, neither of them speaking, but both of them smiling in their own way. Behind them, three small stones lay on a carefully crafted bed of grass.

Like the boy in Chapter 1, the one who slept only a few precious hours a night because of the new baby brother he shared a room with, we often see the need for emotional support in the behaviour presented in class. Whether it is violence, bouts of anxiety, or like myself, withdrawal, our students ask us for help even when they do not know what words to use. It is our job to listen. It is our job to see our students as individuals. Only then can we understand the importance of their stories and how we fit in to their narratives. For those who work with youth, the most successful are those that have the courage to see beyond the surface behaviour and identify the great potential that lies within (Bendtro et al, 1990). I believe this is what passion is, and in at least some of my students, I have already discovered how these beliefs have served to strengthen their ability to cope with adversity – just as my Grade 10 teacher’s belief in me did.

**Power of Leadership**

Ambition and high expectations of our educational leaders is another side-effect of the development of my resiliency. Perhaps it was the belief of that same high school teacher, the
one who helped me understand the power of my potential and provided me with opportunities to persevere, that also planted the seeds for my pursuit of excellence. I do know that this drive has the power to impact the connections I make with my students.

Effective leadership provides the necessary guidance we need to reach our potential, and what are we if not leaders in our own classrooms? Each of the three teachers who impacted my resilience showed at least some characteristics of good leadership. It is my belief that my Grade 7 teacher understood the importance of our autonomy, establishing classroom culture and rules in such a way as to encourage what we already knew to be right (Bendtro et. Al, 1990). Klangwisan (2013) expresses it best when she refers to a mentor of her own:

He taught me that students respond to authenticity, that students respond in classrooms that feel emotionally safe, that they respond to being noticed, heard and understood, that they grow when the adult in the classroom believes in their potential and makes space for it, that their mistakes are only stepping stones to success (p. 25)

This acknowledgement of a student’s ability to always grow and improve, as well as the ability to create the safe space in which students can realize this for themselves, are important aspects of effective leadership in our classrooms.

_The students watched their teacher step into the classroom. His hair is more dishevelled than usual, and he has never been late to class before. He is grumbling about a flat tire when his boot catches the corner of his desk. To catch his balance, he sacrifices the grip he has on the folders in his arms._

_Papers sail towards the ceiling before drifting slowly back to the floor._

_The class holds a collective breath._
The teacher is shaking while his students share a look. Here is comes, the look says. We’re in for it today. One student gets up to help collect the graded assignments. It’s then the rest realize their teacher is laughing. Soon, the papers are picked up and they are all laughing.

“You would not believe the morning I’ve had.”

At least a few of the students can relate. Their laughter rings just a littler truer than the rest.

This is an important observation for me, in that I credit the power of leadership in this development of resilient culture within a school. Hattie (2013) summed it up well when he said:

If I’m the school leader, what I need to do is create opportunities where I can hear what teachers are talking about and what their issues are. I need to create an environment where teachers can say, “this is not working for me” or, “I’m struggling with this particular student,” because acknowledging and addressing teachers’ issues and questions is essential. (p. 4)

This is how I aim to impact the resiliency of my students. The classroom is a smaller scale, but the same rules still apply. If I create an environment where they can trust me with their vulnerabilities, I am making it acceptable for my students to feel vulnerable in the first place. They will take more risks, open up more, and accept the inevitability of negativity in our lives.

In many ways, I already see these ideals being explored in other aspects of my career. I often find myself approached by colleagues for advice or even just to vent, and I strive to listen first and speak only as much as I must. These peers in education do not need me to tell them how to be excellent teachers – most of the time they already know how to be the best they can be – but if I can be a sound board for them to hear their own ideas bounced back at them I am prepared to be there. Sometimes, these interactions grow into a more meaningful conversation,
one where we both walk away with new perspectives on this job that we do, and from these interactions we all grow and appreciate the support of another weary traveller.

Does this make me a leader? Possibly. I believe it at least demonstrates a capacity for leadership (Hattie, 2013). I also believe that a part of how we demonstrate and encourage resiliency is through our roles as educational leaders. This does not have to be on a grand scale, as long as we never underestimate the power we have as leaders in our own classrooms.

My Privilege is my Limitation

As mentioned in Chapter 3, there are limitations to the use of my story in my research. Not the least of these limitations is the privilege I bring to my story. For every moment of dysfunction, there were also moments of contentment. While select men in my life are a source of pain, I will always remember the one who taught me how to speak the peaceful language of my equine partners. I will also always be grateful I was swept away from the only bogeyman who dared to lay a finger on me.

For every facet of my story that can be applied to the lives of my students, they are in no way a generalization of everything my students face on any given day. Instead, their value is in the capacity they create for sincere empathy towards whatever challenges my students face from one day to the next. They open the door for me, and for those who find a connection with my analysis of them, to explore what it means for a teacher to have a true impact on the students in our classroom. It is something we can never take for granted, even if the evidence of it can only be fully realized years after those students leave our care.

From this place of understanding, we can find ways to model the lessons of our past for those vulnerable students in our lives. How can my ambition to move towards leadership opportunities, some of which take me away from the classroom, affect the resiliency of the
vulnerable students in my classroom? To start, the passion to which I referred above has not
lessened as a result of this drive to continue growing my own potential. I still seek to know my
students beyond the evidence of their learning. I still listen to their stories and empathize with
their troubles in exchange for engaging in deeper learning. And, where it is appropriate, I share
my own story.

I do this because it is my belief that it is important that our students see us as human
beings who are as ever changing as they are. It is important that we model what resiliency looks
like. We experience both positive and negative emotions everyday, so it is crucial that we model
how we move on and grow from these experiences as well. Bempechat (1998) took a look at
what made “at-risk” students succeed, and she observed that “parents and teachers are the agents
of their culture – the ones who transmit cultural beliefs and practices to children” (p.7). She
went on to highlight the role teachers can play as mentors, proclaiming it as one of the top
reasons successful students cited as the reason they succeeded against adversity. Moving
forward, let us ensure the culture we are modeling, is one where taking risks and experiencing
failure can be a rewarding experience, even if we feel let down for time.

It is only when they learn to live with these negative emotions that they can learn to
overcome them.

Conclusion

When I consider the three teachers who impacted my own resiliency so directly, I must
acknowledge again my assumption that at least two of them had no idea what adversity I faced
outside of school. My Grade 1 teacher knew about my grandfather’s passing of course, but she
would not have known about the bogeyman who did not care for the magic of my imagination.
That Grade 7 teacher may have noticed my awkward shyness or made a mental note about which
students I fit in with the best, but there was no way he could know that the confidence I built up in his classroom gave me the courage to learn to ride a horse that had never been ridden or stand up to bullies picking on someone too small to fight back. Or that, above and beyond the curriculum, he taught me that I could enjoy school again. My Grade 10 teacher had no idea the lessons I was learning about love at home, but she helped me discover the potential of my words and the power of my presence.

Ultimately, my resiliency has changed my mindset. I reflect back on not only the things I have survived, but the adults, sometimes specifically teachers, who taught me our whole life is not defined by these individual moments in our story. This change did not happen overnight. In fact it took professional counseling that I would not presume to offer my students; however, by altering how I see my life I have altered the way I see my students too. They all have vulnerabilities beyond the usual suspects, such as poverty, violence, or mental illness (Bempechat, 1998; Hutchinson, 2010). For some students, it is the drive to achieve academically that can test their coping skills. For others, it’s the changing dynamics of friendship as they leave childhood behind for that mysterious in-between space of their youth.

I strive not to judge simply because their values and vulnerabilities are different than my own. Instead, I create an environment where failure is acceptable as long as it does not mean you give up, where a wrong answer is an opportunity to find the right one, and where self-advocacy is rewarded by patience and understanding. It is my hope that the readers of this thesis will reflect on their own journey to this place in time we now occupy. I hope that they reflect and understand where their story has taken them. I hope they will never stop wondering where they might go from here.
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