How I Use Personal Stories to Build Connections in a Middle School

by

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Abstract

What has become my most magnificent skill is my ability to cultivate and create connections between learners within their school community by using their personal stories. I have learned that when a child is free to share his or her own stories they become part of a classroom community, connected to their learning, validated as a person and confident in the classroom. These attributes are necessary for students to succeed at school. As a teacher, I have had to adapt what I am teaching, my routines in the classroom and my personal philosophies in order to create connections between myself and the learners in our school. I have learned to make space and time for learners to have a voice in their classroom, and I have done so through the use of Learning Maps, activities and the development of listening skills. This is an autoethnographic research project designed to draw out and reflect upon the power that learning about the personal lives of each other can have on the relationships in our school. I feel that the results demonstrate the importance of learning to listen, building relationships, and trusting your learning partners.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

I have been creating Learning Maps as a way for each learner to map their personal stories and journey of their learning. Learning Maps provide an opportunity for students to begin to have a voice and to tell the story about themselves and their learning experiences. “Who are
“Who are you?” is an example of one of these Learning Maps activities, and I’ve written it as if I am taking you through the activity of making your own Learning Map.

**Who are you?**

Get a blank piece of paper and draw yourself in the center of the page. What do you notice about your drawing? How big did you draw yourself? What clothing are you wearing? Did you add your eye colour? Think of something very special to you, draw that thing in one of your hands or at the bottom of your feet. What did you draw? Why did you choose to draw this one thing? What is the thing most important to you? Could you tell a story about your Learning Map, if I asked you?

Imagine the parts of your life that you have mastered – the ones that you love and that are most important to you. Draw thick arrows out from the picture of you and label what they mean. Take your time, and be reflective about all the amazing things you bring to this world. Are you a great reader? Do you play sports? Who is in your family? What is your favorite food?

Think about your stretches, or the things in your life that are hard for you. These may be things that others may need to help you with. Stretches can even be the things in your life that you have not learned yet! Add these things to your picture using thin arrows. So, for example, one of your thin arrows might be how you feel about math. Maybe one of your thin arrows is a sibling. Maybe you have trouble learning computers. Whatever your thin arrows are, know that you can trust in yourself to show vulnerability and that you can be brave enough to show them on your map. On your Learning Map, show the parts of yourself that you are still working on.

This Learning Map is the story about where you are now. However, your Learning Map is always changing. This year, some of your thin arrows might become thicker. This year, take a look at your thick arrows, or strengths, and reach out to help others with your areas of strength.
If we were in a classroom, I would hang your map on the wall with other maps from the people in our class and I would refer to it as we move through the curriculum together. In this way we all know; who are your learning partners within our school? Who can help you with your learning along the way? When we know and share the stories of ourselves we open the door to the possibility of creating an interconnected web of learners within our classrooms. We have the ability to turn our school community into a well-functioning machine where everyone has a role and we can all work together in unison.

Every September, at the beginning of the school year, I create Learning Maps with the learners in our class. I hang them on the wall as a class quilt and we look at them together as a team. We make a visual graph of the strengths and stretches of each student so that everyone understands who can help and who needs help when hard times arise in our class. One learner wrote on her map that she has a hard time with spelling. We discussed this and she explained that she doesn't like to write words that she can't spell. I brought this up in a class meeting and one of my students said, “Well I am a good speller. It is too bad I can't help you spell when you write.” I said, “Why can't you help her spell when she writes?” He said, “My desk is too far away.” I told him that from now on this will be a chair, not your chair. You can move where you need to, in the classroom, in order to be a learning partner for someone else who has stretches. I use the term strength because it defines the things that you are good at and the ones you are passionate about. The term “stretch” I use instead of “weakness” because it defines what you are still improving on. Improving on something takes courage, commitment and grit. Both a strength and a stretch are equally valuable because we all have our strengths and at the same time we all have our stretches. This balance of strengths and stretches gives us all something we have in common.
Our Learning Maps are my guide for how I structure our class, for what I am teaching, and how I teach it. Our Learning Maps become a guide for our classroom routines, structure and learning. By the middle of the year, the learners and I are very comfortable working together to support one another. We are a team, and we are used to passing the ball so that others can score.

My name is Corrie Goessman and I teach at a Middle School in Penticton, British Columbia. I teach grades 6, 7, and 8 and I coach rugby, basketball, volleyball and track. This year I learned to create a yearbook, lead a talent show, design blankets, and organize a Poetry Cafe. These activities have afforded me several opportunities to work with many learners that I have not worked with before. I appreciate and value the activities at school that go on outside of the prescribed curriculum. I see these activities as an opportunity for learners to shine by demonstrating their talents, gifts and strengths.

Purpose of this Story

I wonder: how can I use personal storytelling to cultivate stronger connections between the community members of my school? This is where my “path with heart” gets complicated (Chambers, 2004, 4). I do not see storytelling in a straight line. I do not see stories as happening one after the other where each chapter is in its own box. Instead, I see storytelling like a spiderweb, where each thin thread connects to the others and is vital to holding the web together. The themes are tangled with my personal story, your personal story, the story of research, books I have read, and stories I have been told. So, with consideration to all these different stories, I want to learn how to be more reflective on them. I want to consider my story and your story, how they impact our lives, change our minds, help us see things differently, and move us forward.
This is an autoethnographic research project designed to draw out and reflect upon the power that learning about the personal lives of each other can have on the relationships in our school. I aimed to uncover what would happen to my group of learners if I focused my lessons and my energy on discovering more about each of them and then connecting what I have learned about their strengths and their stretches to our classroom activities. I have planned activities throughout this year that I believe will assist me in learning more about the people in our school community. I used my journal to record what I have been doing, what I have noticed, and things that I have noticed about my thinking as I do this work. This is my story about how learners can connect to their school, grow together with deeper relationships and define themselves confidently when they are given space and time to tell their stories.

This autoethnographic project is designed to deeply investigate my own experience related to the following questions: How do you gather and draw a personal story from a learner? How can I use my own story to create further connections with my learners? If learners are given opportunities to share their personal stories, will interconnectedness, empathy for others, and their growth mindset become stronger? What can I learn from reflecting on my own stories of these experiences?

I wanted to know what would happen to the culture among my learners if I really focused on who they are as people and the relationships that they have between one another. Throughout the school year, I designed curriculum, lessons and daily activities into our learning environment with the hope that during these times of sharing our personal stories we would create stronger connections and a greater growth mindset. I began with building a platform of trust and listening in the classroom so that we could share during check-in. I introduced short stories, read them to the learners, and made personal connections to the text. We learned to write a variety of personal
poems and celebrated our learning at the Poetry Cafe. I read the novel *Touching Spirit Bear*, and while I was reading I taught the learners to sew and design a blanket that represented their personal story. We wrote about memories from our past and displayed them on story-sticks. A story-stick is a stick about a meter in length that has colours of wool wrapped around it. Each colour represents a different memory in our lives. We listened while we shared these memories and really worked on being present in the moment with the speaker. We learned to think about what other people are saying and how their story impacted their lives. We learned through these activities to understand where we are coming from and to help each other with where we are going. This autoethnographic project demonstrates the importance of learning to listen, building relationships, and trusting your learning partners. As a result, the learners were able to build confidence, their growth mindset, and self-esteem.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction
I want to listen deeply enough that I hear everything and nothing at the same time and I am made more by the enduring quality of my silence. I want to question deeply enough that I am made more not by the answers so much as my desire to continue to ask questions. I want to speak deeply enough that I am made more by the articulation of my truth shifting into the day's shape. In this way, listening, pondering and sharing become my connection to the oneness of life, and there is no longer any part of me in exile. (Wagamese, 2016, p. 23)

I admit that at the beginning of the year I was stumped as to how I would be able to teach math, writing, social studies and French if I wanted to familiarize myself with my class. I was wondering: where do I start, and how can I connect it to the curriculum? The truth is that, for a couple of weeks, I wrote nothing. I closed my journal; I shut my Master’s binder and was not sure where to go next. I continued thinking about questions I had; how do I make my school better for our learners? What am I missing? How can I build relationships and teamwork within my classroom? Is this important? Should I just get on with math? What am I going to do? Am I going to write a Master's paper about telling stories? So I decided, after three weeks of writing nothing, to open my journal to the very first page. On that page there is a drawing of a medicine wheel with the words beside it: “We are all connected.” I began to consider that we can all be connected by sharing our stories. I read the First Peoples Principles of Learning again (FPPL, 2013). These principles have become a guide for my teaching and for our classroom; why can they not be my guide for this autoethnographic project as well?

“Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)” (FPPL, 2013).
I believe that the most important aspect of the time we spend in school is creating and fostering relationships. Relationships between teachers and children in school are essential for their academic growth and positive sense of self. According to Roorda et al., there are two theories that need to be taken into account when looking at relationships in schools.

The first of these theories is attachment theory. According to Bergin and Bergin, attachment is “a deep and enduring affectionate bond that connects one person to another across time and space” (2009, p.142). The idea of attachment is that learners create bonds that promote feelings of security within the child. These feelings create emotional security that assists in the child's willingness to explore their environment (Roorda et al., 2011, p.494). Therefore, attachment has two main functions in the classroom. The first is that learners who are attached to their teachers and their school are more likely to explore their environment and socialize with different people. I believe this is essential to connecting with school; if learners are more likely to explore new areas of their school, they are more likely to try new activities and meet new people.

The second theory that is relevant in looking at relationships within schools is self-esteem theory. According to Roorda et al., in order for learners to have a high level of self-esteem three basic needs must be fulfilled: the need for relatedness, the need for competence and the need for autonomy (2011, p. 494). Teachers can support these needs by being prepared for class, setting clear structure and rules and by giving learners the chance to make their own choices so that they can make connections between school work and their personal interests.

Together with the concepts of attachment theory and self-esteem theory learners gain school bonding. School bonding, according to Bergin and Bergin, refers to a learner’s sense of “belonging at school and having a network of relationships with peers and teachers” (2009,
Bergin argues that school bonding can make a child feel secure and valued, which can liberate them to take on social challenges and explore new ideas. The evidence suggests that strong teacher-student relationships create greater academic motivation. According to Hughes, a close relationship with teachers serves as a source of stress regulation, allowing children to direct their energies toward engagement with tasks, peers, and teachers in the classroom (2012, p. 321). Therefore, by first building relationships at school, learners gain the ability to take academic and social risks. In turn, learners join more activities and they acquire a better sense of self and greater self-esteem.

**How do you build relationships in the classroom?**

“Learning involves patience and time” (FPPL, 2013).

Building relationships with a learner takes time, patience, and work. It is important to note that attachment is a relationship and not a trait that learners are born with. Attachment requires many interactions between child and adult (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 154). It is often difficult to build relationships with learners as they get older because children spend less time with a single teacher (p. 153). Therefore, secure relationships are more likely to develop when teachers are involved with, sensitive toward and have frequent interactions with children (p. 154). Reichert and Hawley argue that there are three successful approaches that teachers can use to create a working alliance with each student. The first approach is to respond to a student’s personal interests or talents. Secondly, teachers should share common interests with the students. And lastly, instructors should reveal their own vulnerability (2013, p. 50).

“Learning requires exploration of one's identity” (FPPL, 2013).

To demonstrate a talent, to share a common interest, and to reveal a vulnerability takes two things. The first is the ability to trust the person you are sharing with. According to Bergin
and Bergin, to be an effective teacher and build relationships with learners, teachers must connect with and care for children with warmth, respect, and trust (2009, p.142). Learners must have a platform that they trust is safe before they are going to reveal anything about their identity. Secondly, learners need a growth mindset and a belief that they can do something and get better at it over time. If I want these relationships to cultivate in my school, how do I create the platforms in my classroom to foster the growth of these relationships?

“Learning is embedded in memory, history and story” (FPPL, 2013).

Instructors must begin with stories. Personal stories that are shared with one another is how we learn about each other. Where we come from, what we believe, what makes us laugh, tears we have cried, and where we want to go next are all wrapped in the blanket of our stories. Stories protect us. There are stories we do not tell and stories that we do tell that shape who we are. Strong identities are shaped through the stories that we tell and the stories that we hear. Identities full of passion, trust, emotion, and learning are formed when stories are shared. These personal identities become connected and grounded to one another through storytelling. By storytelling, we learn to listen and start to build community through relationships, honesty, time and personal identity.

**Learn to Listen**

“We have three ears to listen with: two on the sides of our head and one in our heart”

(Archibald, 2008, p. 76).

Some of the learners who skateboard at our school are using an expression, “full send.” This expression is used when a boarder is about to do a trick such as kick-flip or go over a jump. What they mean by “full send” is to go all the way, or to put your whole self into something without quitting. What I have learned is that to truly listen to a storyteller is very much the same
thing. Brene Brown writes that a person needs to “be all in” when they are presenting
themselves to the world (2012, p. 38). I believe that in order to learn to listen I need a “full
send” of myself. I need to give it everything that I have – my ears, my eyes, my heart, and my
mind. I need to “be all in.” I still wonder: how can I learn to listen? What does listening look
like? And why is listening important?

Two weeks after I had a double mastectomy (due to breast cancer), I am sitting in the
Cancer clinic waiting for my turn to see the doctor. I am reading a magazine when from
across the room a woman apologizes to me and says, “I am sorry but I have to ask you: why
are you here? You are so young.” I take a breath, swallow hard, and explain how I found
lumps in my breasts and how I had a double mastectomy to remove the cancer. I am telling
her about the tubes from my chest that drain the blood and how removing the lymph nodes left
me with barely enough strength to close a car door. I explain how I am getting used to the
way that I look and that it is difficult to recover from cancer. Just then, the person beside her
says, “I know what you mean. Last week I stubbed my toe and lost my nail.” I sat there
thinking about how that person does not care about my story. How can he relate a double
mastectomy to stubbing a toe? He is not listening to me.

Storytelling is like sitting on the teeter-totter at the park. It is a reciprocal action and
reaction between the storyteller and the listener. Baskin writes that “each of us is a storyteller
and each a listener” (2005, p. 181). All of us can participate in both the telling and the listening
of a story.

Archibald states that “The oral tradition implicates the listener into becoming an active
participant in the experience of story” (2008, p. 32). He goes on to write that “centering and
quieting one's self is another way to get ready for story listening” (2008, p. 76). Learning to
listen, with a “full send,” is like training yourself to do anything that you have never done before. Learning to listen takes patience and time. I have been reflecting this year on how difficult it has been for me to keep my mouth shut, to stop moving, stop multitasking and keep my eyes on the storyteller. In Indigenous cultures, storytellers often told stories and the listeners would not ask questions or talk about the story. They would think about the story and what it meant to them (Archibald, 2008, p. 115). Learning to listen is essential in drawing a personal story from a learner.

To truly listen, as Chambers writes, is to “be all ears, to give your audience your full, sympathetic and thoughtful attention” (2005, p. 7). Too many times I have caught myself doing something else or interrupting someone else when I should be listening to a story. I agree with Baskin when he says that “stories have many layers of meaning, giving the listener the responsibility to listen, reflect and then interpret the message” (2005, p. 180). The time for reflection, thinking and interpreting is essential to participating in personal storytelling.

Listening to oral stories creates a shared experience (Coskie, Trudel, & Vohs, 2010, p. 4). When someone is brave enough to share a personal story, they want the listener to care enough to listen with their whole selves. The storyteller will stop telling their story if they feel that they are not being listened to. Baskin writes that “without storytellers and listeners there would be no culture” (2005, p. 181). Therefore the strength of the culture and the connectedness that I want to build between my learners and myself comes not from the books we read, the math we do or the activities that happen but my ability to be quiet and hear what is being said to me.

Listening is essential to the process of building strong relationships, making connections and gaining trust and compassion among the learners that I teach. Learning to listen is important because, when a learner is truly being listened to, it completes the circle of storytelling. If I want
personal stories to be told in my classroom then a listening community needs to be created. Rather than focusing on an external object, the focus then becomes the speaking/listening relationship (Coskie et al., 2010, p. 4).

Delia Baskerville’s (2010) study on developing cohesion and building positive relationships through storytelling in a culturally diverse New Zealand classroom found that relationships created within a culturally diverse classroom were directly linked to the stories that the learners told. The study included a grade 10 drama class with 11 girls and 13 boys, ages 13 and 14. The drama teacher, along with Baskerville, began a process of sharing their personal stories to the class. Once the learners had listened to the story, they wrote responses in their journals. For two weeks, learners listened to personal stories, told their own stories and wrote responses in their journals. Baskerville found four themes that emerged from working with the learners and reading their journals. Learners developed ways of working together that included respectful conversations and listening. The learners enjoyed telling and listening to the stories. They appreciated their voices being heard. Finally, Baskerville noticed “a small shift in the overall sense of understanding within the group” (2010, p. 111). Relationships were enhanced and the group wanted to become closer so that they could learn more about one another.

According to Baskerville, the focus of learning should be to listen to one another. In her study, she found that when learners focused on listening to one another, students talked more and argued less. They made new friends and in some instances they were feeling more positive about school. Baskerville goes on to explain that listening to family stories enhanced understanding of self and others and developed confidence and self-esteem (2010, p. 110).

Baskerville's study highlights the necessity of learning to listen in order to build relationships. I believe that learning to listen is the most fundamental skill that is pivotal when
we are building relationships with learners. Jo-Ann Archibald states that “we will listen before we utter” (2010, p. 21). I believe that all too often I jump in with assignments, lessons and stories of my own without listening first. Chambers writes that, “to seek, to listen, to hear is to be teachable. Being able to listen is a highly valued quality and is a characteristic of both good teachers and good students” (2004, p. 8). The qualities of being a good listener must be taught, explored and practiced before storytelling can truly occur between learners and teachers.

Creating Circles

In Indigenous cultures storytelling is sacred. Baskin writes that one of the primary values of Indigenous culture is that we are all related. Such relationships are reciprocal – each gives and each receives (2005, p. 179). Archibald (2010) writes that in many First Nations cultures, “a common goal has been to attain a mutual balance and harmony among animals, people, elements of nature and the spirit world” (p. 11). One of the key ways that we do this is through storytelling. Stories have the power to make our hearts, minds, bodies and spirits work together. This balance of equality, respect and listening is what I want to have with the learners in our class. One of the ways that Indigenous cultures create this reciprocal relationship and reflective discussion is by being open to one another in a circle.

Circles are a place where everyone is welcomed, invited and listened to. According to Baskerville, the sharing of these stories in a circle may have contributed to the change in dynamics in the relationship between participants. A circle is a shared power of relations where they could see one another in a circle and were partners in the learning conversation (2010, p. 112). Baskin agrees in the importance of sitting in a sacred circle while everyone shared their experiences. As people speak, everyone else listens without interruption, comment, or question. Laughter, anger, and tears were welcomed and honored in the circle (2005, p. 183). Therefore,
THE POWER OF OUR STORIES

learning from Indigenous cultures and forming circles of trust, compassion, empathy and
listening ears is essential to the process of storytelling.

**Why Personal Storytelling?**

For Indigenous peoples storytelling is a necessary way of communicating. Baskin writes
that “Aboriginal people’s cultural way of communicating ensures a reflective discussion that
enables all participants to build knowledge together, knowledge is passed on by these voices,
through our oral tradition and our storytelling” (2005, p. 180). Baskerville states that in her
study the way that the children treated one another and the way that they told their stories
explained why students did what they did and also who they were. Storytelling was a beginning
to building relationships based on understanding and mutual trust (2010, p. 112). Stories
enhanced the ability to reflect, understand and listen. By physically shifting the learners in our
classroom into a circle with me, I changed the feeling in a classroom from a hierarchical power
where I am in charge to an equal, respectful and reciprocal relationship. By learning to listen and
honoring the circle we had created an environment ready to truly hear our stories.

Our personal stories unite all of us. We all have stories to share. These stories make us
who we are and tell others about where we come from. Storytelling is the oldest form of
communication. People around the world have always told stories as a way of passing down
their cultural beliefs, traditions and histories to future generations. Stories are at the core of what
makes us human (Coskie et al., 2010, p. 2). According to Al-Jafa and Buzzelli (2004), from the
day that children are born, many hear stories from their parents, grandparents and older siblings.
Such experiences are important in their social, emotional and cognitive development (p. 38).
Telling personal stories is an essential part of becoming who we are as people. When we share
our stories we demonstrate to others how we know ourselves, how we know each other and how we make connections and build relationships with the people around us.

Linda Wason-Ellam (1992) wrote an ethnographic study on how inviting personal stories into the classroom has positive implications for second language learners. Within her study, Wason-Ellam focused on one child, spending her time talking and sharing small stories throughout the day. The child, Karim, was a second language learner. Wason-Ellam writes that the stories that were told and the time that she spent listening gave Karim the confidence to say more, and it allowed him to be connected to the classroom and to Wason-Ellam herself. Wason-Ellam explains that her time with Karim has made her a critical friend and helped her understand how critical it is for cultural and linguistically different children to tell their stories and break the pattern of silence. Throughout the storytelling times, Wason-Ellam found that stories were swapped from one learner to the other, connections were made from one story to another, and confidence and validity in their own identities were formed. One implication of Wason-Ellam's ethnographic study is that she found that children need many opportunities in the classroom to talk to each other, build common ground and contribute to the classroom community (p. 6). This ethnographic study is an example of learners who feel free to be connected to our classroom communities and confident in their own identity to share their stories.

To know who I am, where I come from, what I believe and where I want to go next is what creates my sense of self. I believe there needs to be a strong foundation of who we are as individuals first before we truly can hear other personal stories. Huber and Yeam (2017) argue that we are all stories. Stories are who people are becoming, our sense of self is, at every moment, to some extent integrated into a story (p. 300). Al-Jafar and Buzzelli explain that children first experience their own importance before they can appreciate others. They go on to
state how such understanding is important before they can explore the world of the others (2004, p. 36). I believe in myself, I am brave and I have enough courage to share my story with you. If I share my story with you then you will know me. You may become braver and wish to share your story with me. We become a reciprocal relationship of storyteller and listener, of give and take, and of vulnerability and courage.

Powerful connections and relationships are formed when personal stories are shared. Trust, empathy, communication and bonds are formed when people share their stories with each other. Dyson and Genishi (1987) write that the storytelling self is a social self who declares and shapes important relationships through the mediating power of words. Thus, in sharing stories
we have the potential to forge new relationships, including local classroom cultures in which individuals are interconnected and new groups form. Individual lives are woven together through the stuff of stories (p. 5). According to Heliker, story sharing is an interactive experience aimed at improving relationships by encouraging individuals to come together and share commonalities and differences (2009, p. 44). After reading my story did you feel more connected with me? Is there something we have in common? Is there something that you would tell me if we could talk? This dialogue that begins when a story is shared is essential to connections and relationships being formed.

Relationships and connections among the learners in our classrooms are essential if teamwork, trust, kindness and friendships are to be formed. We need to know each other, what we love, what we struggle with and what we believe before we can work or play together. Coskie et al. state that through storytelling students experience the power of narrative, creating meaningful connections with each other and members of the community (2010, p. 2). According to Luna, the teller and the receiver of stories can discover connections between self and other, penetrate barriers to understanding and come to know more deeply his or her own historical and cultural narrative (1993, p. 5). These connections and understandings are essential to a classroom environment. To let go of the power between the teacher and the learner is to recognize that we all have stories and the need to tell them is to build lasting bonds among your learners. “This includes establishing positive relationships, addressing power imbalances in the classroom, acknowledging students prior knowledge and having high expectations of themselves and their students” (Baskerville, 2010, p. 107). According to Baskerville's study, she found that after sharing personal stories there were changes in the students’ connections and relationships. Storytelling was the beginning of building relationships based on understanding and mutual trust.
All too often, as a teacher, I jump right in with the lesson or unit and the concepts that I feel I need to teach. There is a desire in our teaching community to “get it done”. Storytelling is not viewed as academic enough or important enough to warrant the time. Jo-Ann Archibald explains to her readers that her stories and storytelling should be taken seriously. Archibald states that some may feel that the life force of a story has disappeared (2008, p. 3). Baskerville explains that students are rarely given the role (of storyteller) in the classroom as they are pushed to leave their personal expressions behind as they progress through school (2010, p. 108). Caruthers also agrees that the suppression of personal experience within schools and teacher education often contributes to the absence of reflective practices, relationships and overall caring (2006, p. 664). If I want powerful listening, a strong sense of self, and new relationships forged among the learners in my school, I need to begin with storytelling.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Within this study I am exploring the following research questions: How do you gather and draw a personal story from a learner? How can I use my own story to create further connections with my learners? This exploration of stories is interconnected like a spider web. This journey is about how I have carried these stories with me as I tell you my own story. And my story is one about people in a school who began as strangers and ended with strong connections, relationships, compassion and empathy for one another.

This journey through storytelling has lead me to use an autoethnographic approach in my methodology. Autoethnography is a personal story that is composed of both emotions and details that examine the meaning of a human experience (Wall, 2006, p. 44). I have chosen this method of researching myself using story to cultivate relationships because I am half of all of the relationships that I am trying to cultivate. Mendez states that some authors feel that all researchers are storytellers (2013, p. 218). An autoethnography is made up of “highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experiences of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). Autoethnography begins as a personal story, but its disposition is made of three parts: “auto,” meaning the self; “ethno,” meaning the social, cultural connection; and “graphy,” meaning the application of a research project (Wall, 2008, p. 39). Autoethnography, in a sense, gives me permission to write you a
story. In this story, I want you, the reader, to become a believer of the power that a story can have. I also want to change your mind, to introduce you to new ideas, to entertain you, to evoke emotion in you, and to build connections between us.

**Strengths**

I believe that as a research method, autoethnography has several strengths that make it the best choice for this inquiry. First, autoethnography is a way of researching that is personal and emotional. Like telling a story, the reader needs to become connected to the tale and be able to draw on their own memories so that they too can become part of the story. Wall explains that when reading (an autoethnography) she wants to be “fully engaged, immersed in the flow of the story, unable to put it down, and reminded of her own experiences” (2008, p. 48). Secondly, an autoethnography connects the person deeply to the research. It takes a great deal of courage to be part of your own study and to be your own research. It takes strength to study yourself honestly and be open to the raw emotion, feelings and memories that are evoked when telling a story. According to Wall, autoethnography is about presenting an authentic self. Wall explains that “it was important to reflect in the same sense of identity and self-understanding that she had established in her life” (2008, p. 41). This sense of connection to my research is difficult to portray, yet I feel that it is essential to how you will feel about my story.

**Limitations**

Some authors believe that autoethnography is writing a story, and it is not research. Some researchers even label autoethnographies as self-indulgent (Mendez, 2013, p. 283). Wall argues that autoethnographers have a need to reassure themselves that they are behaving like real researchers. Wall asks, “How much participation is enough? Might one become so involved as
to make observations impossible?” Wall argues that there may be limitations to autoethnography when the researcher only sees what serves the purpose of the study or the project. She explains that autoethnography could be viewed as putting the passion for a subject before the science of a subject (2008, p.44).

I have questioned what people might think about my story, and I have wondered if blending research and my experiences with my emotions will be enough to convey my thoughts. And yet, with consideration of this apprehension, I still feel that autoethnography is the best methodology. I am telling a story about the power of storytelling. I believe that research begins for everyone as a story. There are acts of memory in all writing. I appreciate the ability of an autoethnography to be raw, emotional and personal. This study is personal, and it’s full of heart, compassion and desire – my story should be written the same way.

As a teacher, the actions that I took with my learners is wrapped up in the work that I was doing as a researcher. As I sought to develop connections with my learners, I paid careful attention to my own thoughts and responses to what was happening within the classroom and within our relationships. This careful attention has helped me to focus clearly on my own actions as a teacher, my own thoughts as a person and my observations as a researcher. Like the webs of stories, these actions and thoughts are all interconnected.
This learning map is a representation of my thinking and the process that I went through to formulate my question, guide my teaching and reflect on where to go next. I used this map to analyze and discover what works in my classroom for my learners and what I am doing that needs to change. The learning map above began in the corner of the page from the first time I thought about doing a Masters program to how I formulated my research question then to what I did about my question. As my reflections, thoughts and writing continued, the map grew into a journey, laying out the path that I followed to get to the power of our stories. What is interesting for me about this Learning Map is how many times through the journey the word story is
THE POWER OF OUR STORIES

mentioned. Right from the very beginning of the journey I have been interested and thinking about our stories.

My Research Process: The Beginning

As part of my teaching and support role at the beginning of the school year, on September 8, 2017, I gathered a picture of every child in our school. The photos are separated into grade and classroom. Printed in black bold letters is the name of each learner under each photo. I sat quietly with the pictures of every child in our school and I circled the children who were strangers, I starred the ones that I knew of from a distance and put a green mark on the ones that I felt I knew well. Some of these children I do not teach directly, nor do I see them in my classroom or have conversations with them. These children walk our halls as strangers to me. This is what led me to consider: How could I use storytelling to build connections with these unfamiliar learners?

Researching the Research

I started looking for authors who had written about the power of storytelling. I found articles that lead me to other articles. I read each article and highlighted important ideas, the names of other authors, other books and quotes that stood out for me. I created a matrix. A matrix is a system of organizing articles, notes and page numbers. I put the matrix on poster paper because I like to see the whole picture at the same time. Across the top of the poster paper I put the article title, author and number. I labeled the articles about storytelling with numbers, I labeled the articles about autoethnography with upper case letters and the articles about relationship building with lower case letters.
Figure 4. The research matrix
The Story of My Journal

At the beginning of this journey I had no idea what I wanted to do. My professor asked me, “What keeps you up at night?” My professor suggested going for walks, talking to people and keeping a journal. I do not consider myself a strong writer but I listened and went into the Vancouver Island University Book Store and bought a journal. I remember the first time I wrote – I was slightly nervous about what to put on the page. I wondered if what I wrote was going to be academic enough, spelled correctly and well thought-out. I began to write everything down all of the time. All of my thoughts, feelings and daily events went into the journal. I write what my class is doing and my reflections. I write small poems, quotes I cherish and things that people say that I find powerful or that tug at my heart. My journal is a place where I write thoughts, feelings, what happened in the day and memories of my own. Keeping this journal taught me to truly listen to what was being said to me. Keeping this journal taught me to pay attention, slow down and to document everything about a particular situation. Writing everything down taught me to stop, think and reflect about what I am doing, why it is important and where I want to go next. My journal has become my story of this journey.

I would draw little diagrams and pictures in order to remind me to add something to this autoethnography. In the same method I use with the Learning Maps, I read my journal entries over again and over again, pulling interesting quotes, like, “Mrs. G, I can't even talk. No one likes me here,” or “We are all connected.” I looked inside the pages of my journal to revisit themes. For example, I document when learners enjoyed sharing their talents, what they were good at and what they were passionate about. I also recorded social maps in my journal; I constructed these social maps by sitting in the hall and watching who was interacting with whom.
and who was by themselves. I mapped before school, nutrition break and lunch time. It became so detailed that in the back of my journal, I had crafted one page for every person in my class.

Sometimes in my journal, I wrote a single word, a phrase a child had said, or even just a facial expression or feeling that I took away from a moment in our school day. At other times, I wrote paragraphs explaining exactly what had happened that day. Some of my entries seem dull and uneventful, and others were busy and complicated. When I was not writing in my journal I was reading it over, poring over the words, phrases and events that seemed to reoccur. I paid attention to the events in my journal that I felt established connections between learners and myself. I noticed what was on the pages but also what was not on the pages. I highlighted and circled ideas and themes transferring them onto my Learning Map so that the moment became a part of this story. Each page was chock-full of notes on that specific learner, detailing exactly what I had learned about them. What began as a blank book bought from a university bookstore has developed into a complicated, yet illuminating story about my own journey with this year’s students.
Figure 5. My Journal
Chapter 4

Introduction

Storytelling is in fact the backbone of this paper, and as I worked with my learners during this project, I discovered that each one was a gifted narrator. In this chapter I have outlined the activities that helped draw their stories from them. In addition, I have written guidelines to assist you, my readers, in following my work and to use the activities on your own. I also gave you a snapshot of the reflections and insights that formed along the way.

Figure 6. Some books that I love to read.
The truth is that we are all tangled in our stories. We love to hear stories read to us again and again. We love to share our memories from past events over and over. It’s especially clear that I was born a storyteller whenever my Mom and Dad retell the story about how I would come home from school and ask everyone to sit around the fireplace. My family would listen and I would tell the entire story about what happened that day at school. I grew up with stories read at bedtime, stories told around the dinner table, stories during camping trips and stories shared to teach a lesson.

One of my favourite bedtime stories was … The Monster at the End of this Book:

“What did that say? On the cover, what did that say? Did that say there will be a Monster at the end of this book? It did! Oh, I am so scared of Monsters!” (Jon Stone, 1971, p. 1).

Stories are important, stories help us remember past events, stories draw emotions from us and stories are what we all have to share. We are who we are because of our stories. And this year, my goal is to listen. Like Sesame Street’s Grover, I am excited about what is going to be on the next page. I wonder what learners would share if they are given opportunities to talk about themselves? What will the sharing of their stories do to the creation of connections, teamwork, kindness and understanding among them? As learners in my school come to know me, I am learning to get to know them by drawing their personal stories out into the daily conversations, writings and events at school.

“May I go into the forest to play? ‘Oh, No Peter,’ said Grandfather. ‘You must stay away from the forest” (Prokofiev, 1974, p. 3).

This year I have learned that I was like the Grandfather in Peter and the Wolf, afraid of what would happen if I went too far into the “forest.” I was afraid of asking too many questions, making things too personal, and afraid of taking “teaching time” to hear stories and have
personal conversations. Until this year, I maintained a distance with my students by keeping to
the curriculum and short simple interactions. I have learned to venture into the forest. I have
learned to be braver and shift the importance of our time in school from one of learning about
academics to one of listening and learning about each other so that we can learn together.

“What about a story,” said Christopher Robin. “What about a story I said. Could you
very sweetly tell Winnie the Pooh one?” I said. “I suppose I could “ I said. “What
sort of stories does he like?” “About himself because he is that sort of bear.” “Oh, I see.”
“So could you very sweetly?” “I will try, I said. So I tried.” (A.A. Milne, 1926, p. 4)

I am noticing that everyone loves to talk about themselves. We love to share our stories.
Somewhere in the years at school we minimize sharing. My daughter once said, “I do not like
grade four because we do not get to have Show and Tell.” Somehow, as we move up in the
grades we stop learning about each other, we concentrate more on the school work and less on
the personal parts of ourselves that we bring to school everyday. I believe that if learners are
given opportunities to share about themselves we can learn from each other and that learning we
do turns into understanding. Once understanding is established, respect for one another and
teamwork can be created within our schools. In The Wizard of Oz, four unlikely characters are
brought together by sharing their individual stories to create a team to solve their problem of
going to see Oz.

“Who are you and where are you going?” asked the Scarecrow. “My name is Dorothy,”
she said, “and I am going to the Emerald City to ask the Great Oz to send me back to
Kansas.”
“Do you think,” the Scarecrow asked, “that if I go to the Emerald City with you, the Great Oz will give me some brains?”

“Do you suppose Oz could give me a heart?” asked the Tinman.

“If I only had courage, then I could truly be King of the Beasts,” said the Cowardly Lion.

So Dorothy, the Scarecrow, and the Tinman invited the lion to join them on their journey to the Emerald City. (Baum, MCMLXXXIX, p. 38)

The following activities are ones that I use in our classroom in order to draw personal stories out from the learners. Within all of these activities I give plenty of time to talk, to be free from constricted assignments and to encourage a growth mindset. Giving permission to talk to one another is important because by talking, learners are sharing their ideas and explaining details about their stories. They are able to work together as learning partners in order to develop bravery to share their ideas. There are no marks given for these activities. Learners are free to share as much as they want to in order to tell their stories. With each small story and artifact that is shared I always say something positive about their story. The courage to tell a story or show an artifact is always a celebration.

**The Story of Checking-In**

I create time and space within our day, usually during our check-in period, to listen to the learners in my class as they share their thoughts. I start with simple questions, such as, “What did you eat for breakfast?” Paying attention to the answers is crucial. The more confident they become with sharing in front of the group, the longer our check-in period becomes. I take notes, jotting down ideas in my daybook to ask a question the next day about a learner’s specific story – this is critical, and it allows them to trust my listening abilities and show them that I care. Over
time, the learners begin coming to the circle with their own questions for the class, questions about traditions and weekend plans, but also some heavier topics such as divorce and relationships, almost as if I was not in the room at all.

**Checking-In Protocol: Guidelines**

Our daily check-in period only works if we follow the guidelines below. Not only do they provide a frame and structure to this time in the day, but they remind the learners exactly what is welcome and what is not welcome during this activity.

- Everyone in the team sits in a circle no one gets left out or sits behind.

- Only one person talks at a time and sometimes the person talking can hold something in their hands like a stick or a rock that represents that they have something important to say.

- The person talks until they are finished - keeping in mind of the time.

- Everyone in the circle listens with their ears, mind and heart.

- Everyone in the circle gets a chance to speak.

- A person may pass if they do not want to speak but they must remain a thoughtful listener.

- A Check-In circle is used to discuss important issue, find out how people are feeling and what is going on in the classroom.
When we participate in our Check-In circles it is expected that people are thoughtful, respectful and kind.

Check-In Reflections

Monday mornings are always the longest Check-In. “How was your weekend?” I might ask. “What did you do?” At the beginning of the year the learners share short quick statements that really just explain enough to pass to the next person and to speed through the activity. Learners will say, “I watched a movie,” or “I had a sleepover.” I spend a great deal of time reminding others to listen, to sit still, and to not talk while others are talking. At one point, I remember thinking that Checking-In was only becoming a time consuming task.

During Check-In, it slowly became clear that the more the learners talk and listen, the more confident and open they became. A single story about an emotional subject such as divorce opens the floodgates for others, and before you know it, the conversations go from weekend business to a heavier discussion. Learners begin talking about personal stories that affect them deeply. And it is clear that these personal stories, which none of us knew about prior, are a significant weight on their shoulders. We listen to our stories about family fights, divorce, parties that should not have gone on and stress about school. Our stories become longer, more detailed and more personal. I believe that, at times, the stories that are told about ourselves should be harder and more complicated. But at the same time, as we gather courage to tell our heavier stories we also gather the courage to laugh, banter and joke with one another.

It is early Monday morning. Chairs are moving across the floor, tables are being shifted, and our classroom is getting noisy as the learners are moving their chairs into a circle. I am taking attendance, and we quiet down to hear the daily announcements over the television. I take a seat in the circle with everyone else and I wait until our
class and our school has quieted down. I ask the standard questions: “How was your weekend? What did you do?” Instantly, everyone starts talking, turning to face one another – they are excited to be back at school from their weekend. I remind everyone to get ready to listen. Again, I wait for them to quiet down. On this morning I shared that my family was in Kamloops and we went to a pet store because my little girl loves pet stores. In the pet store there was a baby tortoise and everyone in my family got to hold him. When it was my turn, I took the baby tortoise and held it in my hand. My husband asked, “Do they bite?” Just as he said it, the baby tortoise chomped down on my hand. The lady who was working at the store had to remove the tortoise and it became a family joke for the rest of the weekend. The students enjoyed my story, and it set the mood as they began to tell other funny stories about their weekends.

Checking-In each morning is an opportunity for everyone to have an equal voice in your classroom. It is the moment in the day when we are all marbles; each one of us beautiful, important, equal and different. It doesn't matter how well you do in school, who your friends are, or where you come from. For that moment in the day, you have the right to be heard and the freedom to tell your story – whatever your story might be. Making time for a Check-In creates a mutual respect and equality in your classroom.

The Story of Learning Maps

At the very beginning of the year, all of the learners in my class create Learning Maps about themselves. A Learning Map is a personal story, written and drawn like a diagram, that details their strengths and their stretches, as well as their likes and dislikes. The learners add their family members, their pets, their favorite foods, activities, subjects and friends. I gather all of the maps and read them closely. This year, I tallied reoccurring themes, keeping track of
things such as siblings, stretches for subjects like math, affinities for drawing, and noting the students who write nothing. At the beginning of the year, the Learning Maps are comprised mostly of aspects of the students’ lives that I can find out just by asking. The learners create the maps with information about themselves that is easily shared and understood. At first, there is no information on the maps that is too personal or too deep. Everyone gives me just enough information about themselves to get the “assignment” finished. Although the information I gather from their maps is important, I often feel it isn’t personal enough and I want more. Still, I remind myself to be patient – the trust will grow over time. The more personal details might come later.

Figure 7. A small Learning Map about how I feel about problem solving during math.
Math Problem Solving

Showing my work

Reading the problem

Solving the equation

Creating the equation

Understanding what to do.

$x \div + - ?$
Throughout the year, we create many different kinds of Learning Maps for different purposes. Some of these maps are very small and may outline thoughts and ideas we have around a specific topic. For example, I may ask, “How do you feel about doing word problems in math?” We do these small maps on a sticky note and put them up on the board so that we can see how we all feel about this new topic we are about to explore. Some of the maps are bigger and they let us express our opinions. For example, we can express our thoughts about school rules like the dress code or cell phones. Learning Maps that help us visually express our ideas and thoughts about a topic or push us to understand both sides of a situation. The bigger maps are about ourselves and include what we like, our strengths and stretches, where we come from, and the parts of ourselves that other people may not know. With time and enough map-making practice, learners begin to speak in this visual map-based language. If I am struggling in front of the class with a technical or technology issue (such as fixing our projector), we always call upon the learner who we know has a thick arrow for technology. If I am struggling to spell a word we know to ask the people in the class with thick arrows in spelling. The Learning Maps help us know who we are and who we have in our class that make up our team and they give every classmate a sense of belonging and responsibility.
Learning Maps Guidelines:

I believe that before a learner is ready to create a Learning Map, they must first find the courage to write and draw about what they have not yet learned.
I talk about the first Star Wars movie when Luke Skywalker gets his ship stuck in the swamp. Yoda encourages him to use the Force to pull it out. Luke tries but he fails, and Yoda says, “Always with you it can not be done.” Yoda then uses the Force to remove the ship while demonstrating the importance of a positive attitude and consistent practice to get better at skills.

I use Michael Jordan and the Nike commercial where he talks about how many times he lost games, missed baskets and failed before learning to succeed.

I read Mary Cay Ricci’s, Mindsets in the Classroom (2015) and Carol Dweck, Mindset, The Psychology of Success (2006). These are two insightful books with interesting examples of teaching courage in your classroom.

I teach with the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FNESC, 2013) which helps guide me into thinking about teaching differently. The principles of learning remind me to take my time when I am teaching, to learn about the learners in my class, to take them outside and to do hands on activities.

Learning Maps have two main purposes.

1) Learners can demonstrate through drawing and words what they know, what they are proud of, who they are, where they come from and what they have mastered.

2) Learners can demonstrate what they don't know yet, what they are unsure of, who they are not connected to and what they want to learn more about.

It is important to encourage drawing, colouring, words and phrases in the Learning Maps rather than paragraph writing, because it can be easier for learners to express what they mean and
expand their ideas when the structure that they are given to express themselves is free from constraints. I always encourage learners to “make a mess” when they are creating their Learning Maps.

I believe that in order to craft a Learning Map that has all of the above factors the learners need to employ a growth mindset and the courage to be honest.

**Step 1**

To begin a Learning Map on the topic of self identity with a class, hand out blank paper and felt pens and have the learners draw themselves in the center of the page. Explain to the students that the drawing should represent them. It may help to employ an example about yourself; for example, I may say that I have crazy curly hair, so that is what I draw in the center of my Learning Map.

Watch closely and take notice of who seems to enjoy the activity, who is apprehensive about drawing, and who says they cannot draw.

The learners will draw themselves in a variety of sizes some take up a great deal of space on the page, while others are quite small. Some students leave out important details; for example, they wear glasses, they have a scar, or they have red hair, while some students will show every meticulous detail.

**Step Two**

Do a Gallery Walk. Have the learners stand up and leave their work on their table for others to see. Ask everyone to walk around the room without talking as they look and read each other’s Learning Maps. Doing a Gallery walk often sparks ideas in others that they did not think of themselves.
Pay attention to who is apprehensive about their drawing and who is excited to have others look at their work. This is important because often the learners that are apprehensive about showing their work to others struggle with their own lack of confidence, personal feedback from learning partners and a Growth mindset.

**Step Three**

The learners can pick their favorite colour; this colour should be used for the fat arrows. Explain that the map they are going to make today is about their self identity. Allow the learner to be the teacher, and the map is the tool by which we can learn everything there is to know about them.

Have the learners think about something that they are good at, that they think is most important and have them write or draw their idea on their map and connect it with a thick arrow from the picture of themselves to the thing they wrote about.

Have the learners continue this process of adding thick arrows for things that they are good at and have mastered. The thicker the arrows the stronger the connections.

**Step Four**

As a class, have another Gallery Walk and encourage reading of other Learning Maps but again without talking. This may spark ideas that were not there before. Tell them to “remember that gaining an idea from a learning partner is not copying, but rather it is collaboration.”

**Step Five**

Have the learners choose a different colour. Explain that they are adding more arrows and more ideas, only this time they’ll employ thinner arrows. The thinner the arrow, the less they like the item, mastered the skill or the more they are afraid to try something.
I give the students some time to work quietly and to reflect on themselves while they are working. Some learners find this to be very difficult. Others do not like to admit what they hadn’t yet learned and what they struggled with.

**Step Six**

When the learners are “finished” I ask if there is anything that anyone wants to share from their own maps. Some people share their thick powerful arrows while others share some of their thinner arrows.

I suggest that Learning Maps are a working document that can change over time. We can add things when we think of them and over the school year some of the thinner arrows may change to thicker ones!

**Step Seven**

Create a Discovery Chart

Once all of our Learning Maps are finished I lay them on the floor and we look at them together as a class. We begin pulling out of the maps the things that some of us have in common.

Some of our discoveries were things like...

- Some people are great at Math, Spelling and Reading
- Some people are afraid of the dark
- Two people do not like Marshmallows
- Seven people do not live with their Dads
- Some people love sports, hockey, soccer
Some people could not swim

We listed our discoveries and learned that everyone has fat arrows and thin arrows within their identity.

Learning Maps Reflections

As I read out some of the discoveries that we make when we read all of the Learning Maps, I often hear the students say, “Just like me!” Comments like this introduce to the students how we are all connected. The learners are often surprised by how many times other people in our class have the same stretches or strengths that they do. Learning together like this helps us to become a team.

We build a Learning Map quilt and put it up in our class to remind us that at times there are things we have not learned yet. We are all different, but that makes us great learning partners for others. We can help each other turn some of our thin arrows into thicker arrows.

*Drawing can be a vulnerable activity. In front of our class, I am drawing myself in the middle of my page, my crazy curly hair, my colourful socks, my blue glasses and my winter purple boots. I love colours! I ask the learners when we are finished drawing ourselves to show their work to their neighbour and I can hear the excited chatter and giggling. I explain to everyone that the next part of the map is to draw something that is important to you and put it in one of your hands. I make a big deal about looking for the brightest and fattest yellow marker I can find. I start to draw what maybe looks like a person but it is actually a stuffy duck. It is not just a stuffy duck, this duck is 42 years old, he has no eyes, feathers or wings. He wears a dress that my grandmother made and I call him Duck. I show the stuffy duck to the learners so that they know that I am being honest and showing courage. I am always intrigued when we share*
what we draw in the picture of our hands. I always sit with the learners and do a map as everyone else is doing their maps because I find that when I share in the process the learners open up more.
I put information from the Learning Maps on a spreadsheet and use this data to guide my school year. For example, I may find that 17 learners have thin arrows to math. In this case, I will work on finding out why math has so many thin arrows and consider the many ways to teach it differently. Another scenario may be that 11 learners in my class have never participated in a school activity. For example, they have never been on a sports team or participated in a class field study. If that is the case, I would encourage participation, and given my experience as a coach, I often encourage them to try out new sports or bring support staff with me when we go on field studies so that everyone can participate. The learners and their maps guide what I teach and how I teach it.

I have found that Learning Maps can be utilized on a smaller scale with general topics like math and specific concepts like problem-solving. It may, however, be different than math – the topics may be writing poetry or practicing a new sport. I do think that the Learning Maps become more detailed as the learners build a foundation, especially when they gain a certain level of expertise. By the middle of the school year, many learners can create Learning Maps on their own, and they use them often as a tool to communicate with myself, family, community and other staff members. The evidence of the students’ gained confidence after some experience with the Learning Maps is encouraging.
The Story of Story Books

Magic is always pushing and drawing and making things out of nothing. Everything is made out of magic, leaves and trees, flowers and birds, badgers and foxes, and squirrels and people (287). So it must be all around us. In this garden, in all the places. The magic is in me!” (Burnett, 1938, p. 293).

There is magic that comes from reading a story to a group of learners. It is not the same as handing out a class set of books so that everyone can read silently on their own. And, surprisingly, I find that it does not matter whether the story is happy, sad, or scary, with pictures or without, even long or short. Something magical happens when I read any kind of book. At the beginning, when we are looking at the cover and reading the title to see what hints we can draw about the book, the students are always rustling, talking and making noises as they settle down. But after you open the first page and begin to read, the class starts to become quiet. Some learners often ask other learners to stop and listen. If, during reading, I forget to show the picture, the learners always remind me to share the page so that they can see. Sometimes I find learners moving their chairs closer to me as I read. I always make a personal connection between myself and the story, and I invite the learners to do the same. There is a feeling of magic when the class settles to listen to a book and when they respond to a story with a personal memory or connection.
“Puff, puff, chug, chug, went the Little Blue Engine. I think I can, I think I can, I think I can” (Piper, 2005, p. 33).

What is it about listening to a story that draws us together? As a child, I remember getting ready for bed with the anticipation of a story in my mind. They were always the same books read again and again. My dad and I would sit and read *The Little Engine that Could* over and over each night. Or I would wait to see what was going to happen each time my Mom turned a page when she read *The Monster at the End of this Book*. And later, I am not sure why every night *Peter and the Wolf* became the story that I loved to hear. Now as I read these books to the learners and use them to teach lessons about the importance of growth mindset, courage, and following your heart, I can't help but consider how important those childhood books became in my life.

**Story Books Guidelines**

- A book sharing time is for listening, looking and discussing.

- I do not often assign a task to go with a book that I am sharing.

- I allow learners to put their feet on their tables, or put their heads on their desk so that they can relax while they listen.

- If I ask questions or make connections about the story I ask for voluntary responses and No Hands Up.
No Hands Up is important because we are all having a conversation rather than giving permission to speak. No Hands Up prompts learners to look at one another and focus on who is speaking.

I honor the pictures as much as the words because they are both equally important to the story.

Sharing a story is a time to relax, breathe, think, make connections and get ready for the rest of the day.

**Story Book Reflections**

*It is the very last hour of school before winter break. There is hot apple cider in the crock pot, warming in the back of our room. Everyone is sipping on their warm drink, and I have settled the class into hearing a story. For this story, I hand each learner a silver bell and a ticket. Everyone knows how much I adore Chris Van Allsburg – both his stories and his illustrations. I calm my voice and begin to slowly read the first few pages of the Polar Express. As I am reading, the story sounds like the rhythm of a train, giving the feeling that we are all on the Polar Express together. The illustrations draw us into the magic of the pages, and the story comes to life in our imaginations. Our class is quiet and everyone is listening. I need to remember to breathe because at the end of this story my throat closes and my voice cracks with emotion as I read the last page: “The bell still rings for me as it does for all those who truly believe” (Allsburg, 1985, p. 29). I tell my students, “I read this story because it is my wish for you to always play and always believe. Enjoy your holiday, your family, and the traditions that you share.”*
The Story of the Poetry Cafe

I begin the year by teaching the learners in my class to write a variety of poems. This is an activity that really excites me. Poems are simple; they’re a place that everyone can start with their writing and succeed. We each make a poetry book of all our great work and go to a cafe to share our work with our families. I book the cafe in anticipation of an evening of poetry reading with my class. But, when I first introduce the topic, everyone in the class groans and right away explains how they can't write poems and they are not good at poems. They say things like, “This is lame. This year is going to suck.” Although it seems that almost everyone in our class does not like the idea of learning to write poems, I push forward with our writing task, knowing that the ultimate benefits outweigh the students’ reluctance.

We begin with an acrostic name poem. With this poem genre, everyone writes their name vertically and one word about themselves that begins with each letter of their name. When we are finished I ask who would like to share what they have written. No one puts up their hand. I ask a learner if I could share her work and she reluctantly gives me her writing. Everyone else in the class sits without eye contact with me and listens. Through the poetry writing sessions, together we move through different genres of poems: metaphor, alliteration, diamante, haiku, limericks and free-write poems. With each new poem I encourage the learners to write about parts of their lives and aspects of themselves that they think might be interesting to other people in our class. Each time I ask the learners to share in front of the class and each time more and more people participate.

Guidelines for the Poetry Cafe

1. We begin with learning about growth mindset and the idea that anyone can write a poem.

2. No matter their length, short or long, I encourage all poems to be shared.
I provide positive feedback only for this project so that learners have a greater growth mindset about writing poems.

Students practice reading our poems to the rest of the class.

We use our learning partners in the classroom to help improve and strengthen the students’ work.

Once we have completed all of the poems, I help each learner bind them into a book.

During the Poetry Cafe learners can choose how many poems to read and which poems to read.

**Poetry Cafe Reflections**

*When we are finished writing our poems and have each made our poetry books, I invite families and the learners to an evening of poetry at a cafe in downtown Penticton. The owners of the cafe set up a little stage and I introduce our class to the audience of parents. Each learner begins slowly by taking a turn to sharing their work, reading one poem on the stage of their choice to the audience. One by one, with little nudges from their friends, learners begin to come up on the stage. Everyone is nervous and it takes some time for the momentum of courage to grow. As more learners stand in front of the audience to read they begin to choose poems that are longer and more personal. Some learners even read poems that are written by other people in our class because they like them so much. We celebrate their learning by clapping and appreciating their work. I move from table to table with my*
mug of tea, meeting parents, shaking hands and holding little ones. My family is present and I introduce my son, daughter and husband to everyone. Still, I am nervous because I feel that it is so different to ask families to come out in the night to a cafe and listen to poetry. And yet, despite the different environment, everyone is thrilled to hear what our class is learning. I am overwhelmed with the support from the families that are at the cafe.

Writing a poem can be a very vulnerable activity. I have always found it hard to pick the right words or know just what to say. For me, writing a poem is almost as scary as reading the poem out loud and in front of people.

*Think of your favorite colour. I think of yellow. What does yellow sound like? Children laughing from playing at the beach. What does yellow feel like? The warm morning sun on my face. What does yellow smell like? Peach jam spread across warm toast. What does yellow look like? A sunflower growing in a field. My favorite colour is yellow. The first time I ever wrote a poem I was so afraid of what to write. I do not consider myself a poet. I started with this poem about colours. Since they are short and have a simple structure, metaphor poems are less complicated to write. I think in metaphors and describe many ideas through them. This metaphor poem about my favorite colour gave me the courage to try writing other poems.*

I always begin with poetry. Poetry, for me, is an inclusive, equal access point where everyone in our class can accomplish writing a poem together at the same time. The poem may be short or simple like a name poem, but once everyone has written one, everyone then has access to share. Once everyone can share, be applauded, and be praised, I find that everyone's self esteem increases. I enjoy taking the learners to the cafe to share their work because it is an opportunity to meet everyone's family. Siblings and grandparents are invited and encouraged to
participate. This meeting at the beginning of the year is crucial; it allows me to become acquainted with the families that these students come from. The Poetry Cafe is an opportunity for everyone in our class to make connections to the families and the lives of their peers outside of the classroom.

The Story of Creating Blankets

‘What is this?’ Cole asked, unfolding a heavy wool blanket that was woven with colourful blue and red images of a totem pole. ‘Tlingits call it At.oow.’ At.oow,” repeated Cole.

‘Like towel without the l, At.oow is something you inherit. This blanket has been handed down for many generations in my family. It once belonged to one of our chiefs and it is linked to our ancestors. You can't own an At.oow. You are only its caretaker for a time. If you except this At.oow from me you must promise to care for it and someday pass it on to someone else that you trust.’ (Mikaelsen, 2001, p.19)

One of the stories that I read to my learners is Touching Spirit Bear, written by Ben Mikaelson (2001). Touching Spirit Bear is the story of a young boy who gets into a fight and hurts another boy. The main character, Cole, is in and out of trouble until he faces Circle Justice, where the Indigenous community that decides that he will spend a year on an island alone, learning to survive, heal and become more empathetic. Once Cole gets to the island he is so angry that he burns all of his supplies in a huge fire. All that is left for Cole to use for survival is an At.oow or blanket. Within the story, because of tradition, history and survival the At.oow becomes very special to Cole.

As a class we listen to the novel; however, instead of answering questions, literature circles or other worksheets, I give each learner something much more relevant to work with – a
plain blanket. I teach them to sew words with wool, add buttons for designs and even add more personal elements to their blank canvas. The “assignment” is to create a blanket that represents who they are, where they came from, and what they love. The goal in mind is to guide them in crafting a blanket that is as unique as they are. At the beginning of the project many learners barely know how to sew with a needle and thread or how to add an artifact or a button onto their blanket. In our classroom, we had 27 learners with 27 blankets everyone was moving about the room equipped with badges, buttons, wool, thread, and needles. Because everyone needs help to tie, cut and sew, all I hear across the room at the beginning of the project is my name being called out: “Mrs. G! Mrs. G!” During the first days of the blanket-making task everyone needs help. Our class looks like a carnival of thread, scissors, badges, buttons, colours and chaotic noises. Slowly, the students become more confident in their abilities, and they begin to help each other. There are three or four students sitting around one blanket all working together, all listening to each other explain why they are putting different pieces on their blankets. It is wonderful to see the focus, determination and teamwork from these learners.

When the novel is finished, I ask the learners to explain their blankets and how they represent themselves. As I am reflecting on this blanket creation I recall all the different items that the learners are sharing. The learners share about the land they come from, colours they love, medals they have won, animals they care for, languages they speak and family members they have or have lost. By just listening closely to the students while they are working and sharing, I can gather a bounty of information. By the time they are ready to take their blankets home they are able to look at each other’s blankets and describe elements that are special about their classmates. Learners that couldn’t sew were taught by others, and the students learned an
important lesson in the value of teamwork. It was a special feeling to see all the learners sharing, listening and talking about what they are putting on their blankets and why.

**Blanket Guidelines**

1. We start with a plain blanket for each learner.

1. I teach them how to thread a large needle and do a blanket stitch in order to make a design.

1. I bring buttons, coloured wool, and ribbon to class.

1. I teach them that because creating these blankets is something that we have never done before, it is out of our comfort zone. Therefore we will need to utilize a growth mindset and teamwork to complete our blankets.

1. Teaching teamwork is an essential component because I can’t help everyone at the same time.

1. I invite every parent that can spare the time to come to our class to become learning partners and help us with our blankets.

1. I explain to the learners that part of the time is about getting organized, talking to your friends figuring out the plan. The other half of the time is for sewing and listening to *Touching Spirit Bear*. 
There are no marks for this “assignment,” and there’s no wrong way to design the blanket.

Figure 10. My blanket

**Blanket Reflections**

There is something about a blanket that is comforting and safe.

*She was 8 pounds 5 ounces when she was born. I was so tired from pushing and I had been up all night. She was crying and when I got to hold her for the first time, I wrapped her in a pink fluffy blanket. The crying stopped and I got to look at my little*
girl. Kamryn always goes to sleep with her special blanket. There is something about a blanket that is comforting, and in some magical way a blanket makes us all feel safe. Upon reflection of my own experiences with the unmatchable comfort that blankets provide, I know that the learners will build similar positive associations and experiences through the creation of their own special blankets.

Among all the blanket-making and noise in our class there are a few learners who struggle with paying attention, sitting still and organization. They often complete their class work while standing up and wiggling, and it is rare that they come to class prepared – rarely will they have a pencil, paper or a binder ready for their class work. These learners often have no idea what activity will be coming next in their day. The students with these tendencies stand out in my memory because during days with blankets, sewing equipment and shuffling in our class, they’ll often be plopped down on a bean-bag chair in the corner of the room with their heads tucked under a reading lamp. As they sit in a circle with one another, they are helping each other sew their blankets while still continuing to work on their own. It is the most focus I have ever seen from that group of learners. They are engaged in an activity, surrounded by friends and taking leadership in their own learning and as their teacher, nothing is as exciting as seeing this group so engrossed in their work. A brief wave of regret also comes over me as I also feel sorry that I have not done more hands-on project-based learning with them before. Through all 28 chapters of Touching Spirit Bear, the class remained focused and hard-at-work on their blankets. When the book and the blankets are finished we share them with one another. There are designs of trees, family flags, special medals and little stories to hear about each one of them.
Creating the blankets is an opportunity for learners to move as a team through something that takes them out of their comfort zone. Almost everyone in my class would have been very happy to read the chapter and do a worksheet or answer questions. The blanket activity is a chance for everyone to try something new, build a growth mindset and support each other in their learning through teamwork. Designing the blankets is an opportunity for some of our hands-on learners, the ones that like to create and build to shine and the pencil-and-paper learners, the ones that like to write and read to learn in a different way

**The Story of the Yearbook**

_We are all storytellers, really. That is what we do. That is our power as human beings. Not to tell people how to think and feel and therefore know – but through our stories allow them to discover questions within themselves. Turn off your TV and your devices and talk to each other. Share stories. Be joined, transported, and transformed._

_(Wagamese, 172)_

I choose 30 learners from our school to work on creating the 2018 yearbook. I choose learners who are often not heard or not seen by our school population. Some of these students are shy with not a great deal of connections to our school. For the yearbook program, I give each student computer access, several cameras and a notebook. I explain that this year the theme of the yearbook is “Our Stories,” and with each picture we need quotes from the people who were participating in the events. I ask some of our quietest and shyest learners to go in front of the school to take pictures of the major events, band concerts, and school assemblies. We go around the school talking to people in tech ed, drama, art, band and home economics about what they were doing and why they chose that elective class. We create a yearbook that is a story about our school year, who we are, what we've accomplished and what is important to us.
The 30 students that began as strangers, with little confidence or connections, become a great team. The group begins to understand and become aware of who has the strengths to check spelling, take photos, align pages and write captions. The learners use their strengths that they learned about each other to create a yearbook in which everyone's story is included and respected.

**Yearbook Guidelines**

1. I choose learners to complete the yearbook who are often not the most powerful voices in our school.

2. I encourage them to work together to design the colour scheme, fonts and overall look of the book.

3. I give them the theme – “Our Stories” – for this year’s book.

4. I encourage them to not only photograph students at our school events, but to aim to take a picture capturing the feelings and thoughts of the subjects in the photo.

5. I make sure that other people on the team have given feedback about each page before they are approved.

6. I stay out of the book. The yearbook is written, designed, approved, and sold by the learners in our school. The entire process is directed by learners, and I remain the guide on the side.
Just before the due date of the yearbook, some members of the yearbook crew decide to meet at the school over Spring Break in order to insert the final stories and make the finishing touches. On my way there, I stop to pick up hot chocolate, Timbits and fruit, and of course, when I arrive, everyone is waiting for me. They are all so excited to be at school when no one else is here. We go into the school, I turn off the alarm and we open the computer lab. I am listening to all the chatter as the learners are talking about the pages of our yearbook. They discuss who is in the photos, the stories that pair with the photos and the memories that they have of their year. I notice how passionate the yearbook crew is about preserving the memories of their school year and about how much they enjoy looking again and again through the pictures.

And I understand – I, too, love pictures. It doesn’t matter how much technology I have – my laptop, iPhone and iPad, I love to hold and look through actual photos. I think about family photos on my walls and baby books we have in our home and I recall all the times I have looked at the photos and told the stories. I believe photos are important – they help us remember moments, people and emotions of a moment. And, of course, most importantly, photos help tell stories.

Yearbook Reflections

What draws me into this group of learners and the yearbook is how strangers can come together to create a story of memories on blank pages. Really, a yearbook is nothing more than 64 blank pages. It is not until we start talking, sharing and listening to our stories that we created what is important to us about our school year. I appreciate the compassion that the yearbook crew has to never leave anyone in our school out of the pages. There are class lists of everyone in our school and we have been checking off students to make sure that no one is left out. What
began as a blank book and a daunting task has become a story from the heart that the learners are dedicated enough in to come to school over their Spring Break to finish.

After working all afternoon, I ask the Grade 8 learners if they want to play hide and seek in our empty school. The whole yearbook team stops typing and proofreading and they look at me. I am thinking to myself, “Yes, I am serious!” All of the learners get up from the lab, discuss who’s going to be “it,” and slowly begin a game of hide-and-seek. And despite there being no one in school, the students all still follow the school rules, leaving me laughing. “No running and no yelling!” they shout. Someone starts counting to 30, and I start running so that I can hide in a good spot. We are laughing, running, and playing together.

These learners are united by sharing their stories of this school year and maintaining the stamina, perseverance and grit to finish a yearbook together as a team.

The Story of Story-sticks

I gave an assignment in English to write five short stories on the strongest memories that each person in our class has from their past. I explain that memories are stories and when they are put together they create a timeline of who we are. I invite one of our Indigenous teachers into our class and she speaks about her memories, traditions, history and artifacts that she brings in. She reminds all of us about the importance of telling our stories so that they are honored and not forgotten. As a class we brainstorm all the different things that we can write about and how to write a short story. Learners begin to write, talk, listen, and remember.

During the final stages of their writing and once they all have their five important memories typed up and printed, I bring in meter-long sticks and a variety of coloured wool and beads. I explain that we are going to make a story-stick – a representation of your timeline of
memories. Each event or moment that you remember is added to the stick by the colours of wool and the beads that we choose. I ask everyone to begin with tying a colour onto the stick that represents the day they were born. Everyone gets some wool, a stick, and scissors and goes to work. I noticed immediately that no one asks me for assistance. Everyone is helping everyone else and talking about what colour they chose. We continue wrapping our story-sticks memory by memory, colour by colour, until they are completed. I display all of the story-sticks on the wall in the hallway.

We all sit on the floor and listen to the stories that are represented on the sticks. I ask who wants to go first to share their story-stick, and almost everyone raises their hand. We take our time when letting each learner speak because I am a believer that it’s vital to hear all of the details of each student’s story. We share happy memories, scary moments and sad times. Everyone is respectful, empathetic, compassionate and attentive. Comments in response to the storyteller are thoughtful and kind.

The story-stick sharing is so different from our Poetry Cafe or our Check-in at the beginning of the year. The class seems not only more confident in what they are going to share but also more eager to listen and more prepared to hear the stories of others. When the learners take their turns they wait before they speak. In fact, I often even see some of them take a deep breath of bravery. I feel the rest of the class quietly encouraging each other to go on like a group, making support remarks like “You got this!” I watch the rest of the class as they listen to the stories and always find them to be attentive, encouraging and thoughtful. When each person is finished sharing their memories, many learners thank them for the stories as they rejoin our class.

**Story-stick Guidelines**

1. I find sticks about a meter in length and give each learner one of their own.
I have a great deal of wool all varieties, textures and colours.

I get everyone to pick their favorite colour.

We wrap our favorite colour wool around one end of the stick for about a centimeter.

This first wrapping of wool represents the day they are born.

We share stories about what we know about the day we were born.

We pick a different colour of wool and start wrapping a colour around our stick for a story that we were told that happened when we were young.

We share the stories about what happened when we were young.

We put our story-sticks aside and write at least 5 memories from our past in the order that they occurred.

When the stories are finished in good copy, we share them with one another.

We then return to our story-sticks and continue wrapping wool of different colours around the sticks. Each colour represents a different memory in our lives.
Once the story-sticks are completed I conferenced with each learner individually. I asked them to share a memory from one of the colours on their sticks.

I tie a string to their stick and we hang it on the wall in the hall.

After conferencing with each learner, we all gather to share our story-sticks.

We listen and share our stories.

I like all the sticks hanging together because we notice that we all have memories, stories and different events in our lives. The sticks are a representation that we are all different but all the same.

Figure 11. Our Story-Sticks
My mom often tells a story about the day I was born. After several hours in labour, I had turned around inside my mother and had to be delivered via a breech birth. At around two in the morning, I was born. When my dad saw me I was the colour of a deep ocean blue and I did not make a sound. The doctor explained that the cord had wrapped around my neck during my delivery. The nurse took me from my mom, puffed some air into my lungs and I started screaming. My Dad always says I have been talking non stop ever since.

Wrapping wool, colour by colour, around a stick that represents memories and stories that are important to you can be a fantastic learning tool. It also provides the storyteller with a visual tool and something to hold in their hands when they are talking. Once all the story-sticks are
THE POWER OF OUR STORIES

finished and they are all hanging on the wall, no one can tell whose stick is whose – everyone has a variety of colour in their life. When we look at all the story-sticks together it is an example of how we are all different but also the same.

**Learning Maps: Revisited**

At the end of the year, we revisit the concept of a Learning Map and create one about our thoughts from this school year and the people we had in our class. I find several recurring themes that were not there at the beginning of the year. Within most of the maps there are more people mentioned who have connected with the person who made the map than the beginning of the year. For example, this often occurs with people in our class who are not necessarily friends but who had worked together, supported each other and built stronger connections. There are thick arrows on the maps about what we learned about people in our class rather than just the subjects that we have in school. Students often detail their experiences branching out and trying new activities at school over the year, and the Learning Maps are a great way for them to reflect on those leaps and advances. Of course, visually, their arrows are stronger and thicker than before, which provides that clear evidence of their growth.

At the end of the year, I put all the Learning Maps together on the floor in a class quilt. I took a class list and tallied all the names of the people in our class that appeared on all the maps. When I was finished I found that no one in our class was left out; everyone had been mentioned on someone else's map. As a teacher, it’s gratifying to see that not a single person in our class was left behind. Everyone in our class had made an impact on someone else, and this was direct proof of that. Although the learners in my class were not necessarily “best friends,” through their sharing of personal stories and their Learning Maps with each other they have become connected.
Through the activities this year I was able to draw personal stories from the learners in my school. These shared stories created connections between people, promoted a personal growth mindset, and encouraged a deeper understanding for one another. I believe that this foundation is essential for encouraging success in the education of our learners. To feel connected, to feel understood, and to feel a sense of belonging are the key ingredients to a positive, beneficial time in their years at school. By demonstrating our vulnerabilities and telling our personal stories, we create deep connections between the people in our school communities. These connections foster teamwork, empathy, and kindness – values and skills that will stick with the students far beyond their years in school.

Chapter 5 – Conclusions and Recommendations

‘Let me think: Was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I am not the same, the next question is, who in the world am I? You?’ said the caterpillar contemptuously. ‘Who are you?’ Alice felt very irritated at the caterpillar making such short remarks, and she drew herself up and said, ‘I think you ought to tell me who you are first.’ (Carrol, 1923, p. 11)

Many learners struggle with discovering a self-identity, developing self-esteem and using a Growth mindset. They are all trying to find their way through a maze of peers, subjects, and activities. Many learners push aside who they really are in order to come to school and succeed everyday. Somehow, through these years, many lose the ability to share who they are, where
they come from, and what they believe. Their own fears, accomplishments, desires, failures, and celebrations go unheard and unnoticed, and as this happens, their focus shifts from their whole self to their academic self.

On the day before the district track meet I am preparing my class for what they need to bring and what they can expect will happen. I create a list of all the participants and every event. The district track day is a big day. Learners come from all over our district to compete. We are sending many athletes from our school. I have a few learners from our class that are going to run the 800-meter race. In front of our class, I speak to everyone about the long run. I explain that the first time around the track should be a jog and the second time around the track should be a little faster until you see the finish line, and then you need to sprint. As we are all talking about the track meet, the students support and encourage each other in preparation. It is as if the whole class is going to run the race and finish it together. School is a race; sometimes you sprint ahead, and sometimes there are obstacles that get in our way. I believe that getting through the race is so much easier when you have people around you that will support you, that are connected to you, and that believe in you. From what I heard me learners saying that day, and what I saw when they went out onto the track, they have come to deeply understand this concept as well.

Learning to listen and building a platform where learners are free to share their personal stories about their lives opened many doors within the community at my school. Like Alice did in *Alice in Wonderland*, we learned that before teamwork and cooperation can occur, we must first hear each other, respect each other, and understand each other.

Through the process of observing, writing, and reflecting I have become very aware of the stories that are told around me. I am recognizing my own listening or lack of listening, and I have a greater sense of when to be quiet. I am focused on how I respond to someone else’s story.
I am aware of learners who have not shared anything with me. I have learned to change my teaching and start with stories first. I have learned that I do not have to be on the stage all the time; it’s not required that I am the talker and the teller. Sharing the role of storyteller and listener gives the learners in my class power, independence and a growth mindset, leading to many positive impacts on my class.

**Implications for the Learners**

Firstly, it was my impression that everyone developed a stronger sense of who they are, and, in tandem, the confidence to share it with the rest of us. I see a stronger growth mindset and a greater willingness to take risks and fail in front of their peers. Mistakes are celebrated and learning is now about supporting each other. Lynda Baloche, a researcher of topics such as creativity and cooperation in the classroom, states that, “students learn more about each other and to develop appropriate habits of interpersonal sharing and responding that service to deepen their relationships when they share their stories are told” (2014, p. 209). Telling stories develops relationships and provides a connectedness with one's inner self and others, empowering and strengthening one's beliefs and knowledge (Keening and Zorn, 2002, p. 394). I believe that building on the knowledge of ourselves an understanding of who we are and where we come from gives us permission to not only try new things, but to make mistakes and learn from them so that we can try again. The strength and power to know who we are gives us the confidence to fall and get back up. In our school system, we need to encourage this in our learners and let them explore who they are so that they can go out into their world and succeed confidently.

Secondly, because we hear the personal stories about one another we become intertwined with one another. Whether it is someone who is adopted, who comes from a divorced family, who is terrified of math, whose dad has passed away, or someone who has autism, it’s doesn’t
matter—we create and understanding for one another. We learn why we act the way that we do and struggle sometimes when things are hard. We support each other during difficult times. When we share our stories we make us real to each other, we become more than just the people we see in the halls. Stories help us understand one another. Without storytelling, imbalance and inequality of interactions have been shown to weaken relationships and cause a more dependent or vulnerable person to become hesitant to ask for help (Heliker, 2009 p. 48). If, as a teacher, I expect all learners to have a “full send,” or in Brene Brown's words, “show up in their lives” and “be all in,” then I need to create a foundation where the learners feel they have a team around them (Brown, 2016, p. 3). Before I can hold high expectations and expect a high level of participation, I need to ensure that they are surrounded by peers who understand them and will be there for them in the highs and the lows of their education. I believe that only through telling our personal stories can this teamwork be created.

Finally, stronger connections are created between individual learners and their school community. Baskerville argues that through storytelling four interrelated factors emerged as keys to develop culturally inclusive classrooms. Learners developed a way of working that was built on the characteristics of a supportive learning environment; they empowered students’ voices, enhanced connections, and promoted relationship change (Baskerville, 2010, p. 109). By the end of the year, our Learning Maps are full of things we tried and groups of different people we worked with. Many learners ventured into other parts of our school and participated in activities they had not been a part of before. Many learners worked within groups of people around our school that were not from their class or were not in their social group. Storytelling builds a web of understanding for one another this web creates a community within our school.

**Implications for Learning Partners and Informal Leaders**
My wish for other teachers is that you try creating Learning Maps with your class of learners. Use the maps to learn the stories of your learners and to guide your teaching. Be okay with sitting at the back of the room while a learner takes over the class to show what they know. Honor everything that a learner brings to your class. This year in our class a learner brought in a mini motor bike that we learned to take apart, someone brought in a pig from a rescue farm, and I learned to shoot a bow and arrow.

Adopt the idea of a learning partner and teach this to your learners. This year I was able to work at a back table with a small group while the learning assistance teacher taught the rest of our class. Change the language from labeling individuals to referring to everyone as a “learning partner” so that the learners know that they have many grown-ups in your school that can help them along their way. By the end of the year, most of the learners in our class named three or four different grown-ups as their learning partners and not all of them were “teachers.”
My wish for you is that you give yourself permission to play tetherball, build lego, and have tea while reading a good book with your class. The times when I played with my students were the most important times for sharing stories and learning to listen with each other.

**Implications for Formal Leaders**

School leaders should create Learning Maps with the staff that they work with. Learning the strengths and stretches of the people we work with has two implications. One is that as a formal leader you can draw on the strengths of a staff so that, at times, they too can lead. Learning about the stories of the people you work with and allowing their strengths to guide your school breaks down the hierarchy of a formal leader always being “in charge.” Secondly, if as a formal leader you have the ability to know the stretches of the people working with you in a school you have the ability support them in improving on their personal goals. By having the
staff in a school complete Learning Maps you learn the stories of the people you are working with and therefore use the stories to build a team.

School leaders should play outside, share their personal stories, and go into classrooms just to “hang out.” Show vulnerability, explain to learners what they can not do yet, and let them know that you are practicing something. Open your office to listen to stories and celebrations of learning. This year, when a learner in our class had accomplished something great, this could be picking up a piece of garbage, scoring in basketball or finishing a Math assignment, we always left class and walked right into our formal leader’s office to share what we had accomplished. Often he would stand up and let a learner sit in his chair. The learner became the leader as they got to share their story while we all listened. Honor growth mindset and grit when you see it in learners, especially at assemblies, over the announcements, and face-to-face. Praise learners for their talents and their perseverance. Be present, show up, and know the stories of the learners in your school.

**Implications for Further Research**

I would like to see more research focused on drawing stories out of the more disconnected and quiet learners. This research would target the learners who seem to “float” through the halls. I believe we need tools in order to know how to respond to the stories when we are given the privilege to hear them. There needs to be more research around how to react and what to say when some of these stories are shared within group time such as Check-in. I would like to know what we would learn from tracking Learning Maps of the same learners through their school career. I would like to see in what areas they changed, and what areas they remained stagnant. A Learning Map is meant to explain their intentions for their school year,
who they are, where they come from and what their stretches are. But how does it help them to succeed as they move through their years at school?

Looking forward, the next focus of mine will be to engage with the rest of the learners in our school. I believe that although this year I feel the learners that I directly taught were greatly impacted through storytelling, the ones that I did not see every day I still do not know. I did not get to hear everyone. Moving forward, I would like to try and hear more of the learners in our school. I believe that those that had the opportunities to share their stories are more connected, more confident, and more empathetic towards themselves and others. Still, I wonder about the rest of the school community. I would like to see our whole school learn to listen, draw their own Learning Maps, and share their stories so that our learners and our grown-ups that make up our school community could all be interconnected.

From this moment forward, I am a different teacher; I know my “path with heart,” and I have the courage to follow it (Chambers, 2004, p.4). The power of stories and storytelling has become my philosophy. I truly believe the sharing of our stories is necessary in school for learners to succeed. There is a new focus in my teaching from how I teach the curriculum to how I learn the stories about my learners. This learning is a slow process and it involves changing the way some things have always been. I no longer have desks in my classroom, and I don't assign seating. I don’t believe in students sticking their hands up to ask a question or talk. We talk while we walk instead of lining up. Time has become important. I am making more time to have tea and read a good book, to play tetherball, to play lego, and to hear the stories. I have become a complete listener, using my ears, heart, and mind to truly hear what learners are saying or not saying to me. The Learning Maps that we create are my guide to what my learners
need from me in their school year, and I have become dedicated to making their school days work for them instead of the other way around.

**Conclusion**

Let's celebrate one another. Let's build teamwork, connections, and compassion within our schools. Before jumping into the typical classroom subjects, let’s learn to listen and create a platform for personal stories to be shared. As a teacher and instructor, you should be open to new ideas. Teach kindness, courage, respect, and a growth mindset. Allow learners to learn from one another, to talk to each other, and grow together. We all have stories to share that are inside of us – this is what makes humans such natural storytellers. And storytellers can be like a kaleidoscope, where the design begins as a tiny spot of colour. As you turn the kaleidoscope other colours and shapes connect to that spot, and each section of the design builds on the other while growing larger and more intricate. Be the tiny spot. Be the first one to tell your story.

When one story is told, other stories grow from that. Our stories are what we have in common. Our stories are what bind us together as people. Before anything else, begin with your stories, because who knows how far they will take you.

“*And the Little Blue Engine smiled and seemed to say as she puffed steadily down the mountain, “I thought I could, I thought I could, I thought I could, I thought I could”*”

*(Piper, 2005, p. 89)*.
References


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