

LIFE AS PEDAGOGY: A STORY OF ONTOLOGY
AND SELF-AWARENESS

by

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DEDICATION

To my son, Townes,
the author of my universal soul.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The world has spoken to me throughout the years in the form of story; however, my soul took a while to craft, to condition, to hear the wisdoms that this life has offered my heart. As I reflected on this journey, from my days of youth where the one hundred year old walls of a country farm home spoke to the wisdoms of modesty, perseverance, work ethic, kindness and resourcefulness; to now, a time in which my son speaks to my heart with his gentle coos and tender moments, I hear, I resonate, and am aware of the story life has to tell me. Each of you has told a story to my heart, and, by means of story we have traveled this journey together. Without your love, guidance, and relationship, our work to inspire the spirit of social constructivism through the craft of story, would not have transpired into this account of our experiences together. This is our work, and I am humbled. There have been many moments of time sacrificed during the wordsmithing of this piece; but know, we have crafted an account for others that validates the essence of story. Together we stand to testify that story begins, story creates, and story educates. Life is story, story is life. From first breath, this world speaks to us, and from first breath, you have spoken to me and I am grateful.

To my parents, Hugh and Carolyn, and my sister, Andrea, my days of youth, are the foundation of my country soul. Nestled in the midst of the wise ole oaks, I shared with you a curriculum of family, in a setting where fields of wheat and grasses billowed in the wind, the tastes of home grown tomatoes fell sweet on the tongue, and the sounds

of nature enveloped the soul as the winds whipped the dandelions and floated their dreams into the skies. The simplicities of life are the cornerstones of my existence and it is that sweet simplicity that warms my heart with the truths of togetherness, resourcefulness, hard work, creativity, ambition, aspiration, the value of education and appreciation for family. No matter the endeavor, no matter the barrier to overcome, your strength has rectified life's struggles and I will forever be grateful. Without your continuous selflessness and understanding this work would not have been a possibility.

To my husband and son, we set on this journey together, and there has been much time sacrificed with one another during the process; however, this time is now encapsulated in history, scripted in the black and white of these pages for generations to read. For it is *our* story, that has inspired its' creation. The moment you were born, my son, to our family, my heart felt this world for all that it is worth. You have authored a story without pen or paper, without spoken word, just by existence alone. It is a story of endurance, patience, and pedagogy of life that we will share through the ages as mother and son. It is a work that I hope brings light to the fact that our schools need to start with story as praxis for education, with the concept of self as connected to the universe and shared with others; not numbers, assessments and a stoic, bureaucratically created accountability system that disenchants our creativity.

Mark, yellow paper says it all. Who knew that an interview at the hamburger stand, a hug by "Stars" and a trip to Port O' Connor would lead to this? You have been, and still are my inspiration as an educational leader. Your passion for community is

revered and celebrated. You bleed your soul for this world and it is a better place because of it. Do not relent. You are a witness to my soul indeed, brother. Now finish your paper.

Dr. Guajardo, we were sitting at tables positioned along the perimeter of a classroom. You had the class face one another, and with pen in hand, you opened a journal and began to write. I resonated with the power of story in action for the first time that day. You took account of our life as we spoke, you asked for heartfelt reflection and readily, people offered their narratives without hesitation – I had never seen anything like it. Your first words spoken to us as an entire class, felt as though you were personally inviting me to embark on the journey ahead; despite the fact that I felt out of place, as if this moment was beyond my legacy. From there, you have watched me grow in pedagogy, word, action, and soul. You have seen me broken-hearted from love and then build with a community using the same mighty force. You have seen me transition from teacher, to principal, to a student of life. That day in class, you asked, “Where is home?” Now, after several years of navigating this life, I write this dissertation with you. Like a father, you watched me take my first steps with patience, guidance and have led me to a path of self-awareness in a quest to answer that question. I have now come to realize, that, for me, home is the in-between and I find comfort with the unfinished tapestry this world has wrapped around my gypsy soul. You have helped me realize that my story, that which is continuously crafted, and has a collective, synergistic and loving meaning – one that has meaning once spoken.

I humbly thank my research partners for their contributions towards this work. I also want to thank my committee members, especially Dr. Larrotta, for having provided the space to create, negotiate and make meaning of the spaces between current practice and imagined possibilities.

To this world, that encompasses teachers, students, and community, we have a purpose. That purpose is to *share our story*. And that purpose is only lived out when we engage in conversation and share lovingly, empathetically and courageously, with one another, our account of life. Story educates and has done so for generations past, and will continue to do so for generations to come. When we give of *our self* through story, we gain the collective identity of *ourselves*.

It is time to ask each other about our lives, and craft our curriculum from the heart; instead of basing it on the numbers that present themselves on academic performance reports. Accountability is the ability to stand affirmed for one's thoughts, actions and lives; to account, one must have witness. We are each other's witnesses in this world. We make meaning together. Share your story; co-construct knowledge.

Finally, I thank you the reader. For you have now created story together with me, witnessing, experiencing and living as your eyes journey the pages and sift the sea of black and white. I ask that you navigate the pages of this work, making your own interpretation, using your imagination and allowing your mind to render a picture of public education that platforms on the roots of story, self and ontological awareness.

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ABSTRACT

Formal, systematic education provides for sequential reasoning of new learning. This qualitative study, is a departure of that normed practice by creating a space to invite the organic nature of relationships, story and the intricacies of a learning journey. Inspired by the spirit of social constructivism through the craft of story, this research emphasizes the need for schools to focus on story as a pedagogical tool. Using life as curriculum, students can connect themselves to the universe, create depth in contextual understanding, and reflect upon their own ontological journey to reach self-awareness. The salience of this research is found within the implementation of story as a teaching and learning method; while, symbiotically weaving a contextual literature of self as a means to explore ontological awareness and the transformation from an individualistic lens to one that is aware of a collective self. Accountability is the ability to stand affirmed for one's thoughts, actions and lives; to account, one must have witness. How can there be an accountability system without story? We are each other's witnesses in this world. We make meaning together. Our story is the pedagogy of life. The concept of Pedagogy of Life is the skillful art of teaching life, through another's personal life story. This research takes you on the ontological journey of four research partners as they make meaning of the world they teach and learn in. This research will also challenge you as a researcher and practitioner to ask of yourself, and of others, "What is your story?"

OPENING REFLECTION

At times, in moments of silence when I seem to be lost,
floating, almost disconnected, I reflect.

- Paulo Freire (Pedagogy
of Freedom: Ethics
Democracy, and Civic
Courage)

I. THE CONTEXT OF SELF THROUGH STORY

The room was silent. I looked upon the doctor's face with trepidation. She was analytical, but humanistic; in deep thought and reflective practice. Although she had delivered hundreds of babies over the course of her years, science submitted to soul, and analysis rendered to gut instinct. She claimed, "one more push or else we will lose her." I remember being confused, my mind rushing with memories and then being in a dark void. I remember thinking, "I'm having a boy" not realizing I was the 'her' that was about to perish. A team of doctors, unfamiliar to any I had met with before, flooded the delivery room; they were ready for an emergency cesarean section. Another team of doctors came in with an isolette anticipating Townes' premature birth and the complications that could arise being only delivered at thirty-five weeks. Then there was the push, the pressure, the flood of endorphins, my body shaking, the release and then, the chilled, cold silence. An absolute silence. He was still. I was scared.



Figure 1. The Wise Old Oak from My Childhood Home Where I Used to Swing

I have experienced silence, reflection and moments in which my soul was searching for the answer to life (Figure 1). I grew up on a farm, surrounded by billowing fields of wheat, peach trees rendering a summer sweetness and wise old oak trees whose branches reached with grandeur; one of which, had two wooden swings that dangled from its mighty branches. Under that live oak, I grew as a child, playing, swinging, imagining and looking up at the branches of leaves, each leaf being a fantasy, a gypsy soul's dream, an experience to be had.

Sometimes as a child, the branches would stretch their wisdoms across me as if a road map towards my future aspirations; other times, I would feel ever so small and confused under its majestic stature. "We can't be creative if we refuse to be confused. Change always starts with confusion; cherished interpretations must dissolve to make way for the new. Of course it's scary to give up what we know, but the abyss is where newness lives. Great ideas and inventions miraculously appear in the space of not knowing" (Wheatley, 2009, p. 41). As a child, the spirit of confusion brought life to adventure. As a laboring mother, it transcended my soul and connected me to the universe in an intimate way. As an educator, confusion, this space in between, led me to utilize story as a means to teach, a pedagogy of life; a curriculum of the soul. Reflection of these experiences then deepened self-awareness.

These moments of reflection throughout life in both my personal and professional realms; have always been mindful balances of *life world* and *systems world* that sometimes rendered a space between to negotiate and understand (Sergiovanni, 2000). I remember listening to the wood grain of an eighty year old oak desk, hoping to inspire reform as I took the seat at my first desk as a campus administrator. I had the humble role

as a principal, to balance the holistic needs of a child with the pressures of bureaucracy in the form of state assessments and accountability. In that yellow room, with ages of paper stacked in the condemned halls of the asbestos tiled building, I reflected as a means to reform a school district faced with consolidation due to low performance on state standardized testing scores. “Given the demands and constraints under which they work, it is critical for principals to determine their own readiness for change before undertaking the complex process of changing schools. Leaders can discover their change readiness by becoming reflective practitioners who know themselves” (Zimmerman, 2011, p. 107). Reflection is a tool by which one can listen. Although the halls are quiet in the brick and mortar of schools, providing a perfect environment for reflective practice, my experience has rendered one conclusion: critical reflection is a weak element in guiding the decision making process of those within the public school environment. Freire stated that having a “correct way of thinking” is socially responsible and it involves critical practice and reflection. A movement from doing to “reflecting on doing” is essential (Freire, 1998, p. 43). That being stated, story is a tool by which one puts listening into action. “It is one of story’s gifts that when a person or a group tells a story about themselves, they too begin to develop a clearer identity of who they are” (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010, p. 87). Too often administrators are inundated by performance standards and the stress shadows the essence of pedagogy rendering the most critical question one can ask, unspoken and it rests, lost in the sea of politically defined accountability – “What is your story?”

Dear Townes,

Some may call this a dissertation. Others may refer to it as a piece of work, a paper written, or research. However, I would like to think of it as a story.

For me, this is a story of self, of how I have come to understand this world and how I share this understanding with others. You see, baby, to tell a story, you must feel it. Likewise, to listen to a story, you must render your heart to the words and let it fill your soul. But know, this world tells story in a myriad of ways. Your aunt tells stories through art. She is a very talented artist. No matter the medium, her soul tells the story. She crafts emotion from charcoal, paints the world in a subdued watercolor that soothes the soul, then, in the stroke of a hand, highlights the passion in a display of acrylics. She has mastered telling story through art. Your grandfather tells story by means of his own learning and shares life's wisdom with you through advice. Your grandmother tells stories to you as she reads you books and writes you letters. Your dad stories the world through experience with trips to the zoo, the museum on Saturday mornings and strolls through the park. You see son, this world has many stories to tell and the stories are filled with love, empathy and told with courage and humility. But know, my prince of peek-a-boo, there is much to be seen and learned through story, so listen with an open-mind and heart to the stories this life tells you- for there is no teacher greater than that of life.

Love,

Mom

Whether it is a new staff, or a new set of students, the beginning of a school year brings with it a level of uncertainty juxtaposed with a sense of interdependence as a community of learners. As an administrator, I would receive the snapshot data reports indicating the academic achievement of students and students' permanent folders. But,

these reports were just captured moments, historical glimpses into what had happened along the child's educational path – it was not a representation of the full journey taken. The real data revealed itself through story; and yet, sometimes the most simple of question escaped me as a practitioner, “What is your story?” I lived my days not telling my story or asking others to share their story as a means to learn from one another.

Overview of the Dissertation

Story has agency, but too often is placed second hand to esoteric data sets in public education like standardized testing scores, national normed exams, and formal curriculum shaped by politics. Schools must focus on story as a pedagogical tool. Formal, systematic education provides for sequential reasoning of new learning. This qualitative study, is a departure of that normed practice by creating a space to invite the organic nature of relationships, story and the intricacies of a learning journey. Using life as the curriculum, students can connect themselves to the universe, and reflect upon their own ontology to reach a state of self-awareness; a needed practice in formal educational settings. Attempts have been made to incorporate story into curriculum (critical pedagogy, liberation pedagogy, etc.); but, as a practitioner, I have not seen it within the constructs of public education as a normed practice. “The world is becoming more, not less, diverse, global, and interconnected. A restricted, standardized diet of curriculum basics fails to connect with or capitalize on this diversity. It tries to raise expectations, push harder, and have everyone be more diligent with curriculum materials and test preparations-but these engage fewer and fewer of our students” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p. 106). This diversity is the artistic medium of perspective that paints life; it is the thread by which the world weaves the tapestry of story. “A culture is built through the

stories we tell and what we choose to talk about-our narrative” (McKnight & Block, 2010, p. 95). Schools must focus on story as a means to understand students so that community of self, others and a universal knowledge is developed within and among the learners as a learning community is established.

“A primary function of a family, neighborhood or community is to create its story. Telling the story gives body to the collective” (McKnight & Block, 2010, p. 95). For many communities, the school is the hub of the community. “Public Schools should be one of the most important agencies for the dissemination of useful information and the shaping of attitudes necessary for the achievement of a democratic society” (D. Jacobs (Ed.), 2000, p. 76). Therefore, it is only fitting that the data of narrative be the pedagogical tool used to educate a child.

Born at only five pounds and two ounces, and premature at thirty-five weeks because I had preeclampsia, Townes spent about twenty days in the neonatal intensive care unit for hyperthermia, a heart murmur and diagnostic testing to determine whether it was his non-rotational bowel or the severe acid reflux that was causing his poor eating behavior. I knew the station rotations of the nursing staff, the shift changes, the layout of the hospital and the food service providers quite well by the end of the stay. I also had opportunity to observe the hospital’s protocol for teaching new doctors. The facility was a learning hospital and my son was in the care of several specialists. He had several doctors including cardiologists, gastroenterologists and otolaryngologists visiting the room daily, each with a team of resident students. Each time, no matter how many lab reports were produced, no matter the thickness of the chart with its infused

data, or the x-ray film glowing on the board; the lead doctor would calmly walk in and ask, “So, tell me about Townes” while leaving the traditional data to sit at the nurses’ station desk outside the room. At that moment, the resident students felt the depth of another data set, another diagnostic tool: a mother’s heartfelt story. But how often is this methodology used for teaching in public schools?

“We know our story and together imagine the narrative for our community. This allows us to reframe the present, and direct our actions towards a good future” (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010, p. 85). This is the salience of narrative as an educational tool – *we must use story to connect, reflect and educate*. “Inviting stories is the single biggest community-building thing that we can do, especially when the stories we tell are stories of our capacities, what worked out. Since stories tell us what is important, speaking of our capacities establishes them as the foundation upon which we can build a future” (McKnight & Block, 2010, p. 96). Currently, our public schools do not utilize story, narrative or the concept of dialogical pedagogy as the primary means to educate; instead, story is set aside, as numbers and performance data bombards administrators, teachers and students.

Story is a powerful data set because it transcends geographic divides, brings context to data, bridges the individual to a collective self, builds relationships, and serves a more powerful, deeper source of information than any numbers-based report which lacks context. The use of the Freirian concepts of dialogical pedagogy and reflection, as the vehicles for engagement in the learning process, facilitates the transformation of what was (by means of reflection) into what could be – a true platform of praxis towards educational reform (Freire, 1998). “Using stories to engage students in ideas that are part

of course content may be the only way to allow understanding to occur. It is also a powerful means of making connections not only with ideas, but also with other learners, perhaps ultimately creating a learning community” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 210). It is this simple approach to guide education, this need to relate, the contextual connection of story, the need for awareness of an ontological self to the universe, that inspired this research – to integrate a pedagogy of life into public schools.

An Invitation to Journey

Story is a learning journey; and, in this research, story is a woven method. At times you might feel as though you are wandering, searching for the connections because traditional chapter summaries and conclusions which are not always provided. This feeling of searching is a deliberate creation of space to engage you on the journey with the story, relating to the data and allowing you the flexibility to make meaning. Enter into this research with a sense of responsibility knowing you create your own learning journey. Enter into this journey with a sense of urgency to include the elements of research presented in future school improvement endeavors. Enter into this research with empathy, for the stories shared are personal, intimate and connected to lives that stretch far beyond this printed text. Enter into this experience with a sense of creativity, imagination and possibility. Allow yourself to step in and out of the roles you have in life, using those perspectives to guide, not confine or define the limits imposed of their own construct. You will see this state of awareness, this act of stepping in and then out, throughout the paper with the utilization of italics to signify stepping into story and then stepping out. But then, you will see a gradual blending as the story telling process embodies research and a tension between the worlds of academic standards and essence

of story develops. This tension is needed, it is the space deliberately created to serve as purposeful utilization of story as method. The tension exists because no one can fully step out of one role, and be in isolation of others; we are a blended identity of self and others. The tension allows for motion of thought between the implied and the stated; which, in itself is a redistribution of power between teacher and learner.

Enter into conversation with the research, your mind and your heart, for story is one of our oldest and dearest of friends. Allow the constraints of formality to be removed so a deeper level of curiosity is bred. Step in and out of the process. Bring an open mind to the conversation so that imagination can be used to rethink the thinking within our schools today. Begin and end in self –reflection, doing so creates your own introductions and conclusions that personally relate to your own learning journey. Education is a dialogical process of a community with its greatest characteristic being of interdependence – we must know ourselves to know others. We must know others to know ourselves.

Research Questions

The salience of this research is found within the implementation of story as method, while symbiotically weaving a contextual literature of self as a means to explore ontological awareness and the transformation from an individualistic lens to one that is aware of a collective self. The following questions guided the research:

1. What is the utility of knowing one's story?
2. How have I realized my ontological journey?
3. How has story become a pedagogical tool for self-awareness?

4. How does story making facilitate a dynamic pedagogy that captures the essence of life and nature?

The research questions were designed to contribute to the concept of understanding, an awareness of how a person creates their own knowledge and then utilizes that awareness to teach others. Rossiter and Clark explain:

When we are learning something new, we're trying to make sense of it, to figure out its internal logic and how it's related to what we already know. We do this by narrating it, or trying to—that is, we work to story it, to make this new idea coherent to ourselves. . . . The construction of that narrative is how we see our understanding come together and make sense The narrativizing of our understanding is how we make our learning visible to ourselves, if only in our heads. (as cited in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 210)

The questions were also constructed to describe the phenomenon of the space in between the systemsworld and lifeworld, between self and universe, between meaning making and storytelling (Sergiovanni, 2007; Maturana & Varela, 1987; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Story is the vehicle by which socially constructed knowledge becomes praxis, and the phenomenon of a life experience, one derived of this universe and by nature, is negotiated. It is within this negotiation, this mediation of concepts, where meaning making occurs and story is created.

Utilization of Story to Make Meaning

“Stories are teaching images, most often about the nature of the world and our place in it” (McKnight & Block, 2010, p. 95). Stories are our way to connect what we are learning to our history, our contextual surround, to our biological self, to the universe.

Stories allow us the time to reflect and grow, explore our own ontological existence and become mindful of our own knowledge. Knowledge is “constructed when individuals engage socially in talk and activity about shared problems or tasks. Making meaning is thus a dialogical process involving persons-in-conversation and learning is seen as the process by which individuals are introduced to a culture by more skilled members” (Driver et al., 1994, p.7). The dialogical process is the space in which story allows the construct of language to develop within a community. There are several ways by which the world can be articulated. However, it is the act of articulation, taking the social tapestry of story and telling it to others, that renders new awareness; it is a phenomenon of its own accord to explore. “This approach, [the constructivist’s orientation] involves learning the culturally shared way of understanding and talking about the world and reality” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 292). Therefore it is imperative to articulate the language that has been socially constructed thus far, in such a way, that the implementation of this research endeavor validates story as an effective pedagogical tool in public education.

Articulating the Journey

I am a mother. I am an educator. I interpret. I converse. These are some of the states of my being. They are my position in this realm of reality; the constructs imposed upon my existence. “Ontology is the study of being. It is concerned with ‘what is’, with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such” (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). Now, I can change these states of being, these positions within my reality, and connect to my contextual surrounds while understanding their meaning, but this will take an epistemological awareness, an analysis of data if you will, beyond the simplicity of just

'being.' “**Epistemology** asks, “How do I know the world?” “What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?”” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008. p. 245). *I have come to reason, that one can be in a state of epistemological awareness as they explore and analyze their own world. I find comfort in knowing that one can exist in a state of unfinishedness, and this can be the definition of their state of being. I am unfinished (ontological state), yet I inquire (epistemological lens). And during this journey of awareness there are moments, these simple yet complex phenomenon, **or mediating concepts**, that make us negotiate our space with the universe and those within its spans.*

The sociocultural theory of development, founded on the works of Lev Vygotsky, espouses the view that social interaction among two or more people is the greatest motivating forces in human development. Communication, via the use of language, provides one of the most effective means of social interaction. By collaborating toward a common cultural goal, people co-construct new knowledge by building on each participant’s contribution . (Eun, 2010, p. 401)

*These mediating concepts, these negotiations with the world, the higher cognition needed to make meaning and synthesize our existence is where our story is authored. These are the moments that make us pause, reflect, and search our world for understanding; and it’s within these moments that we find **pedagogy of life**. For me, the birth of my son was such a moment. The search for understanding is imperative to resonate and connect meaning with a state of being. However, “different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon” (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). Therefore, a level of **self-awareness**, is needed. “To integrate the emotional and spiritual parts of learning into ourselves, we must make sense of the symbols and images in our*

psyche. Only then can we understand how the unconscious influences our daily lives” (Dirkx, 1998). *This unconscious, this state of just being, is the position of the journey one is in prior to their first step towards understanding. However, once that first step is taken, and one looks back at their first step, then their next, they become aware, of their self and their position in this world; they become mindful.* “It becomes a world of meaning only when meaning-making beings make sense of it” (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). *For me to make sense of this and the curriculum that life has to offer, I analyze life, learn and teach with story; the pedagogy of life.* As explained by, Coulter, Michael, and Poynor (2007):

While in conventional school settings, Egan (1988) has argued for the conceptualization of teaching as storytelling; ‘the story, then, is not just some casual entertainment; it reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experience’ (p. 2) Therefore, storytelling can be perceived as tangible when individual awareness advances storytelling into the educational content of the curriculum (Abrahamson, 1998). Yet, ‘stories are not just a means by which human beings make sense of the world around them’ (Roney, 1994, p. 120), they are also the means by which social change is enacted. (p. 105)

We must always be childlike in our quest for new knowledge. We are in a constant state of new learning. We must be aware of these mediating concepts, these pivotal moments that take us from our ontological being to that of our epistemological awareness; we must be mindful of that moment in the making, the state of between where the learning takes place and then is shared with others.

Dear Townes,

I love watching you grow. Today, baby, I watched you walk the hallways of my office building using your walker on wheels. You had the biggest smile, as you took step-after-step, leaning your weight on the support bar and letting the wheels balance your moves. Today, baby, I watched as you took your first, independent step. You were leaned against one of the 1970's orange lobby chairs with your hands and then, you let go and took a step towards the next chair. You reached out to balance yourself on the next chair and looked back. Then, you looked at me and smiled as if looking upon your accomplishment of that step. My son, there will be many steps in life and I encourage you to look back on each one of them so you can guide your own curriculum in this life, learning with each step with the method of reflection. Look back upon where you have been with reverence, look ahead in this life with enthusiasm for the unfinished, and tell of the place by which you stand through story– this is how you negotiate your new knowledge. Learn to walk with confidence, humility and love. Learn to walk a journey of the heart.

Love,

Momma

Conceptualization of Research Study

Dear Townes,

I was sitting in the kitchen of our house in the suburbs. Although it was July in Texas, you were bundled in full pajamas, three blankets and I was desperately trying to keep you warm. Your tender body of only seven pounds was

still trying to stay warm to ward off hypothermia; something you had already been hospitalized for. The summer was drawing to a near, I had not even started my research paper for my independent study, and my life as an assistant principal was about to start. But, all that lay to the side as I held you, negotiating with the world and trying to figure out if I should go back to work or stay home to take care of you. It was then, at that kitchen table, that I discovered, what I called 'the pedagogy of life'. You see, I have been through the ranks of formal education starting with pre-kindergarten instruction, and now, working on my dissertation and completion of my Ph.D. But nothing has taught me more about life, than you. You have taught me to listen to this world, to look upon life with a lens of reflection, and to be patient with each step. You have taught me to love, selflessly rendering myself to another. At a tender age of two months, you changed my world. That day, I realized, no longer could I research and tell the story of my own learning without you. There, at that bistro set, with you swaddled for warmth, a conversation occurred with my dissertation chair, and mentor. He asked the simple question, "Who are you writing with?" That, my son, is when the concept of "pedagogy of life" took its first step.

Love,

Your Biggest Fan

The construction of self transcends the formality of education and resides in the informalities and intimacies of experience, relationships, conversations and the simplicity of story – a more transformative means of epistemological awareness. "In the search for a vision of education, what is called 'reality,' must be understood to be interpreted as

experience. Interpretations and perspectives of the world are bound to differ” (Greene, 2000, p. 268). Ontology, is a construct of one’s own environment. If one seeks only books, one will learn only books. Education is not restricted to the formalities of literature, or brick and mortar constructs called schools. Education lives and breathes by those we surround ourselves with, the universe we infringe upon and the very nature that crafts our soul. Through story, the simple act of conversation, we symbiotically construct a knowledge that no book can fully articulate. Learning is felt in the heart; it is not solely read in black and white. As a former campus administrator, the importance of story resided in its utilization within practice, “we need school and community leaders to model the act of storytelling, because leaders transfer the skill set from a personal and private process to a public skill set and capacity to act for the public good” (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010). A synergistic infusion must take place in public schools; one that utilizes the power of story to bridge the chasm that is too often created by the dichotomous nature of the student and the students’ data – their life story and their academic history. Story is needed to blend the roles of researcher and practitioner; for story is the embodiment of research. Sergiovanni reasoned that the polarization exists because of the differences between, instead of among a “systemsworld” and a “lifeworld” (2007):

Culture, meaning, and significance are parts of the “lifeworld” of the school. This “lifeworld” can be contrasted with the “systemsworld.” The “systemsworld” is a world of instrumentalities usually experienced in schools as management systems. These systems are supposed to help schools effectively and efficiently achieve their goals and objectives. This achievement, in turn, ideally strengthens the

culture and enhances meaning and significance. When things are working the way they should in school, the “lifeworld” and “systemsworld” engage each other in a symbiotic relationship. (p. 147)

This dichotomous nature exists in several forms in public education. The administrator as professional yet also living the journey of becoming a mother; the student struggling with core subjects in school yet the cornerstone of their families success to survive tough economic times; and, the teacher who is instructed to teach a particular curriculum, yet wants to instruct by local context and diverse authors identified by his students as relevant. The two worlds exists and there is one means that can bridge them, a point where yourself and your place in this world can become action – that place, that point of praxis, is known as story.

“As knowledge holders and producers, youth negotiate and construct meaning within particular socio-historical, community, institutional, and systemic contexts” (Ayala & Galletta, 2009, p. 199). Story is the tool by which we can co-construct knowledge (curriculum) that is relevant to the student and engages both teacher and student in a learning process. In this manner, “the teacher/mentor challenges students to examine their conceptions of self and the world and to formulate new, more developed perspectives” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 138). However, the simple act of understanding one another’s stories and utilizing that to lay the framework for education is the diminishing concept in curriculum development and is left out of the scope and sequence that is structured from political debates.

For that reason, I challenge all to embrace a holistic, community perspective to cultivate the intricate skill of storytelling and listening – to be a pedagogy of voice among

one another. Let us argue, debate, defend, promote, analyze; but may we do so with empathy, hope and the foundational truth that improvement is necessary and endless.

Just as I sat in silence awaiting a first breath to be had, hoping, anticipating, while connected in conversation with doctors, nurses, and in sync with a biological and universal connection to my son; I am connected in profession with teachers, parents, students and community. It was in that moment of silence, that I mindfully embraced the dependency of connection and deep empathy for the first time.

And then in the silence, life interrupted the universe with a simple sweet gasp of air. The sound brought tears to the eyes of everyone in the room. My life was reauthored, my priorities shifted to be a centripetal force around my son and I was in a state of newness, learning, understanding. Although lacking in his own voice, I was presented with the need to engage in conversation, learning his needs. Being only a two on the Apgar score, he was soon taken to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) for observation, warmth and recovery. About eight hours later, I was wheeled to the NICU with my magnesium pump still attached to prevent stroke/seizure, and with the help of the nurse, I held my baby.. I kept wondering how a baby of five pounds and two ounces, could complete my soul, while at the same time create a comforting feeling of unfinishedness. I embraced him, our IVs intertwined and he felt my skin for the first time. We didn't even know each other, but somehow, we knew each other's souls in the most intimate of ways. I looked upon him with humble anticipation of our future conversations, his hopes, his dreams, and his identity to unveil itself. In that silence, without words, we talked, and we told each other our first stories.

This moment of awareness came by the means of story and reflection. With each new member introduced in the journey, each new doctor, nurse or specialist, the same question was asked, “tell me your story.” With all the science, the data, the ability to analyze blood, chemistry and radiological reports, nothing was more important to the team of medical professionals than ‘the story’. We began to understand the language needed to provide the medical care needed by my son. I would tell of his birth, how he was premature, that I was put on magnesium for preeclampsia, that he was a two on the Apgar score, how he had been hospitalized for hyperthermia, seen for a non-rotational bowel, had severe acid reflux, the list continued. Each piece of the story revered as a piece of medical data needed to get Townes healthy.

This scenario, this access to data through story, is present in public education, but quickly dismissed by the lofty infrastructure of the bureaucratic system of accountability and assessment. Story is second to scores in public school, self is reduced to a demographic profile printed on a scantron, and education is deemed only valid if presented in a formal, scripted and stoic brick and mortar setting. The voice of story is silenced by lack of access; access to language, economics and the hidden curriculum of a bureaucratically constructed system. However, this experience of birth has transformed my practice, and through story, brings perspective to others.

Empathy and love, are the deep-rooted biological connection to self, others and universe.

Every human act takes place in language. Every act in language brings forth a world created with others in the act of coexistence which gives rise to what is human. Thus every human act has an ethical meaning because it is an act of

constitution of the human world. This linkage of human to human is, in the final analysis, the ground-work of all ethics as a reflection on the legitimacy of the presence of others (Maturana & Varela, 1987, p. 247).

Empathy, the embrace of ethics in its most organic form of love, is the vehicle for story as a means to build trust and intimacy. “Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation. We have to stop pretending we are individuals who can go it alone (Wheatley, 2009, p. 23). Story is the sense of community in your soul as you simply listen to the universe, its pulse, and allow it to navigate your actions in connection to others. One must listen first, to tell their story.

The importance of silence in the context of communication is fundamental. On the one hand, it affords me space while listening to the verbal communication of another person and allows me to enter into the internal rhythm of the speakers’ thought and experience that rhythm as language. On the other hand, silence makes it possible for the speaker who is really committed to the experience of communication rather than to the simple transmission of information to hear the question, the doubt, the creativity of the person who is listening. Without this, communication withers. (Freire, 1998, p. 104)

Does silent reflection happen on an individual basis? Yes. But during that time of solitude, your own mind gives reason to the voices of others, the experiences you have constructed together and yourself as an organization takes shape. “Now one of our problems is that we are so content to associate with people like ourselves, because we are in good company, that it blinds us to the insights we might have if we found out about

how people live who probably are going to be the ones that are going to have energy and the sustained power to change things” (D. Jacobs (Ed.), 2003, p. 233). Reflection has, at that moment, led to reform – a paradigm shift in mind. This change is woven, connected in not only time but with the souls of others. School reform is a community endeavor that occurs in the spaces between. “To ponder about the future of the school, one must expand the spaces where deepening and expanding conversation can take place, there, more and more meanings emerge” (Greene, 2000, p. 278). The differences *are* the space, the between to be navigated and they can be felt in reflection. Silence can sometimes be the space needed to reason, negotiate, think, play and be creative.

The silence in the hospital room was shuddering, filled with anxiety and rendered free-will paralyzed – it was of the universe, and I just interrupted the world, and the world interrupted my thinking – I was at its mercy. Until that moment, I always approached reflection as a solitude experience not feeling the connection to others in the most intimate of ways; in the safe space of self while in a state of empathy and listening to the souls of others as crafted on my own heart. To listen, one must have space – a safe space that allows for creativity, imagination, diversity, hope, energy, filled with humility and open for disagreement. “Learning in public requires humility, a willingness to explore assumptions and let go of the ‘right way’ of doing things, and a willingness to change our minds and open our hearts” (Ruder, 2010, p. 118). Until that moment of birth, I never felt safe in my state of self, in my being in the universe. But now I realize that the life of my son and the lives of others’ children depend on me, and I on them. We are symbiotic in nature, connected in the essence of community by means of story.

I am now connected to the world in flesh and spirit because of the birth of my son; and this experience as told to the universe through a narrative account has transformed my soul as an educator to understand the depth of community. “The culture of community is initiated by people who value each other’s gifts and are seriously related to each other. It takes time, because serious relationships are based upon trust, and trust grows from the experience of being together in ways that make a difference in our lives” (McKnight & Block, 2010, p. 117). Time, although only a minute, in this instance, felt an eternity while I awaited the first breath of my son, and it was the universe, and God himself that I sought to trust. At that moment I learned to trust again. At that moment, I trusted story.

Role of Self

I engage in this research as a researcher (one who gathers and analyzes the stories of others to answer questions), as a to story maker (one who mediates concepts in life that have rendered learning), a story teller (one who teaches others by way of narrative, letters and reflective thoughts of my own learning), as a teacher (one who uses story to teach the curriculum of life), as a mother (one who is humbled by the lessons taught by my son), as a friend (one with empathy and who strives to connect), as a practitioner (one who reads and ponders the words of those before me), as a theorist (one who reflects upon their own ontology and analyzes that state of being to render a deeper understanding and epistemological awareness) and as a dreamer (one who hopes for an educational system that will embrace story as an essential pedagogical tool). Because of these capacities, I will step in and out of the role of the various roles, so that I can learn, reflect, and engage in the process of learning while also constructing a new lens for other to see the world.

You influence my perspective, as do I influence yours. We are a symbiotic authoring of our own experience – together, we are a woven story of our identities.

II. ONTOLOGY AND SELF-AWARENESS

Dearest Townes,

On November 2, 2011 at 9:24:12AM, your heartbeat reauthored my soul and connected it with the universe by way of biology, the most fundamental elements of nature – a breath of life. I was surrounded by nature growing up amongst the wise old oaks and fields of wheat grass; yet, I was beginning to



Figure 2. Sonogram at Five Weeks: First Time to Hear Heartbeat

forget its deep country roots (Figure 2). Only weeks in age and you, my son, had written a beautiful story with me reminding me of my connection to this world. Although we are our own individuals, we were once one, and will forever be our own community of learners. We are a community connected on a biological foundation, and we will construct new knowledge together- a knowledge that will enable us to navigate life in conversation, empathy, hope and love. My son you opened my eyes to seeing the world anew. Thank you.

Love,

Mom

The research presented, is an autobiographical testament to the social construction of story and how story is used to navigate life *with* others during conversations

regarding education. “Because autobiography involves not only recounting memories and expressions but also finding their larger meaning, and to the extent that the activity expands the individual’s knowledge of self and the world, it constitutes learning” (Karpiak, 2000, p. 34).

Baby Townes,

Your grandparents taught me to treasure education growing up (Figure 3). I used to watch grandpa fire up the green John Deere tractor, sew fields of wheat, burn brush piles, prune peach trees, work on the cars, solder circuitry, work long hours and commute from the city, build my room onto the house with a



Figure 3. The Accomplishment of the Family's Master's Degree

hammer and his own sweat, and encourage higher education. Your grandfather is the person that initially inspired me to get my master’s degree and then a Ph.D. Your grandmother also cherished learning as I grew up. She spent countless hours taking me to the library, helping me with homework, getting me involved in extracurricular activities like volleyball and basketball, and even helping me explore my creative side with keyboard lessons and art supplies. Now, I watch as your grandparents teach you through story, exploring the world and connecting

your new experiences with ones they had as kids, parents and now as grandparents. Our story is one that is of the ages, and it is nestled between your history and your future. Baby, the world is yours to navigate, and I wait patiently for you, for your story is already being authored (Figure 4). Listen to the stories of old, so that you can find the context desired to write your own.

Love,

Mom



Figure 4. The Awaiting Bassinet

The research presented is founded on the methodology of narrative analysis as a means to construct and interpret ontological awareness. “As a means of understanding adult development, a narrative framework sees the life course as an unfolding story, one constructed and interpreted by the individual. While the sociocultural-historical context interacts with and to some extent shapes the life course, the meaning of our life experiences constitutes our particular developmental trajectory” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 213-214). It is a means to construct a language with others, a relationship, a connection, a way to make meaning of my existence in the world for I am

symbiotically and collectively connected with the universe as a mother, educator, research and practitioner.

This research is a testament, a story that serves as a form of dialogue to be applied to those that experience public education; those that navigate between the lifeworld and systemsworld while seeking their own epistemological awareness (Sergiovanni, 2007). It stands to articulate the dichotomy of professional world and personal world (Miller, 2005) and brings perspective to the concept of connecting self to that of the collective universe (Maturana and Varela, 1987). For the purpose of contributing to the body of literature about story and its use within public school, the theoretical framework of this research lends itself to several perspectives. It has been developed for the student trying to balance the demands of state assessments with their desire to explore the arts. The research has been conducted for the teacher who leads with the lens of empathy and the concept of building relationships with their students without getting entrenched with the traditional constructs that choke public school. It stands as a history lesson to the generations before us that have shared their experiences as a student with others. It describes the phenomenon of story for future generations in such a way that imagination and creativity will lend itself to the concept of possibility rather than perpetuate the system of assessment and accountability. It provides an extension of industry standard by presenting a deeper awareness beyond rubrics, syllabi and outlines research processes. It provides a vision of what could be without assigning, confining and defining the space for the individual reader; instead invites them to explore, navigate, create and journey their own experience with the story.

Pumpkin,

Each day is a new learning experience. Today you put your first pair of shoes on and stood up (Figure 5). Granted, I was right here to support the weight of your fluffy cheeks and cute belly all atop your wobbly legs, you were still standing proud and stood tall-as you always should. When I was four months



Figure 5. First Pair of Shoes

pregnant, your father and I purchased a bassinet and placed it next to our bed and we waited for your arrival. Upon conception, your biological existence was set in motion by the universe, the construct of your DNA was formed, but ontologically you will forever construct and you will do so with every soul you meet and every experience you encounter. Through which lens(es) will you view your world? What will the essence of your epistemological foundation be? How will you grow in your community of self and in connection to those around you? For these questions I ask in eager reveal of you; all the while, I ask in humble spirit to myself knowing that my existence impacts you. I author your story as much as you author mine. We impact the world individually, and together. Who will you be? For, it is I as well.

Mommy used to be a principal and I had the same anticipation about my students at the beginning of each school year. I would read about my students on paper. Some students had a novel of discipline, others, not a scratch of paper to account for their existence. Some students came from broken homes, broken hearts, and tender spirits, but the black and white of their records seldom told of these accounts. Some students came with labels “at risk” or “needs academic intervention.” Yet, no matter the student, they all had a story; and like that bassinet, their identities were yet to reveal themselves with each step they would take. Oftentimes the systematic infrastructures lend themselves to a forced creation of identity. For example, kindergarten children learn that the color of blue is for boys, while girls wear pink – a gender binary that inhibits those that navigate this world between; such as, the transgender community, intersex, pansexual orientation, etc. Schools enforce dress codes which can oftentimes remove the culture of a self, the culture of a student’s personal identity. For example, a student may dress with saggy pants and a hat to represent their interest in the hip hop culture, or want to wear a rosary to represent their religious affiliations or hot pink highlights for a fashion statement; yet, this does not fit the ‘norm.’

For this reason, Pumpkin, it is important to listen. Listen to the world. And then be able to share your story with confidence as well. Each person has a story, and their story is yours, and your story is theirs. We are connected in this world by the complex simplicities of love and empathy. The ability to listen, to render empathy and use it to craft story as a means to teach and learn is what I call the

pedagogy of life. Always ask others, ‘What is your story?’ Just as you put on your first pair of shoes today, you will continue to do so every day in this lifetime. You will always be new to something, someone, somewhere but you are never walking alone. Walk with confidence. Walk with love.

Love,

Mommy (Not Baba)

Theoretical Perspective

There are moments in life that one experiences; there are others that craft a soul. This stands as a statement of self, derived from a constructivist paradigm. However, as an extension of this reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology), I have come to reason that what I perceive as fact, as universal truth is a construction of self by means of the transformative paradigm – “an acknowledgement of multiple realities with an emphasis on the political, social and economic factors that form those realities” (Fitzpatrick, Sanders & Worthen, 2011, p. 116). We each have a story. By our mere existence between and among each other, we each author story within one another. However, our stories will differ when told because of our interpretations of the phenomenon. And those phenomenon, or mediating concepts, those moments that impact who we are, negotiate space for our reasoning, and challenge our minds to synthesize, develop our existence and bring us to a deeper state of awareness when embraced. “It compels us to realize that the world everyone sees is not *the* world but *a* world which we bring forth with others” (Maturana & Varela, 1987, p. 245). Story allows us to create and share our interpretations so that we can learn the world around us. “We human being are human being only in language. Because we have language, there is no limit to what we can describe, imagine

and relate. It thus permeates our whole ontogeny as individuals: from walking to attitudes to politics” (Maturana & Varela, 1987, p. 212). Story allows us to create the language we need to describe the world from which we learn. “Metaphors are a great language tool, because they explain the unknown in terms of the known. But they only work if they resonate in the heart of the writer” (Lamott, 1994, p. 77).

My Son,

Growing up, there was a grand ole oak tree in the middle of our twenty-three acre farm that created a green umbrella of serenity. The gentle breeze would make the leaves almost twinkle like stars. Hung from the tree were two



Figure 6. Swinging, Imagining and Being Free Under the Ole Oak Tree

swings, a green one that I would play on and a white one that my sister would play on (Figure 6). I would swing on the chained board and lean back, flying freely through the air and looking at the leaves wondering all of their possibilities. Sometimes, we would climb that tree, find kittens that were newly born in the hollowed out bottom, or create a fort and pretend we were fairies in a mystical land. That tree represented serenity, reflection, escape, play, solidarity,

imagination, history and nature's country soul. I loved that tree. As I have grown, I have come to love that tree even more. On your three month old birthday, I took you to grandma and grandpa's farm and took a picture with you in the tree. We sat at the intersection where the two large branches converged, and you were nestled in my lap. The soul of that tree wrapped my heart with yours that day.

Love,

Mom

As I reflected upon that moment and looked at the picture days later, I realized that that tree, and that moment in which we were sitting at its converged limbs, was the metaphorical representation of my theoretical perspective for this dissertation, this story

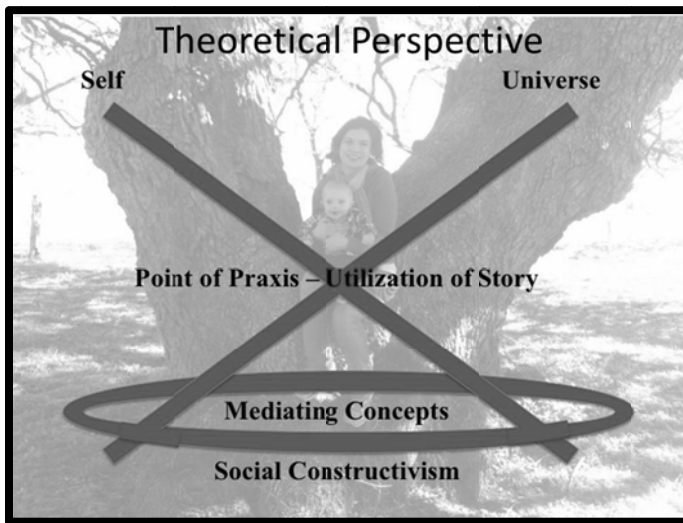


Figure 7. Theoretical Perspective: Pedagogy of Life

of my development for understanding the world. For me, that tree *is* the pedagogy of life (Figure 7); the way by which I frame the knowledge of my knowing. The left branch represents self. It stands strong as a testament to my own context, development, ontology, and the journey that it has taken to achieve self-awareness, confidence in unfinishedness and have the ability to articulate those mediating concepts (rural upbringing, education,

family, friendships, divorce, tornado, the birth of my son, the concept of love) through story. My physical being transformed because of motherhood; but, more importantly, my mind reached a deeper level of cognition through the reflection of that moment.

“[Embodied cognition is] a theoretical frame that locates the human body at the intersection of culture and cognition; the human body is at once an object of culture and a subject of cognition” (Cheville, 2005, p. 86). The branch of self represents my family, my life, genealogy, educational background, friends, experiences, hopes, dreams and the collection of stories I embody. “Our personal histories are as narratively constructed as our collective stories” (Appiah, 2007, p. 263). The branch of self represents my personal journey and cultural identity; a construct of self to all. It is my way to explain self-awareness, my existence in the world and my humble, ethical obligation to share this with the world that I was created by, through story.

The invention of ‘existence’ necessarily involves the emergence of language, culture, and communication at levels of complexity much greater than that which obtains at the level of survival, self-defense and self-preservation. What makes men and women ethical is their capacity to ‘spiritualize’ the world, to make it either beautiful or ugly. Their capacity to intervene, to compare to judge, to decide, to choose, to desist makes them capable of acts of greatness, of dignity, and, at the same time, of the unthinkable in terms of indignity. It’s not possible to break with an ethical code unless one has become an ethical being. (Freire, 1998, p. 53)

The right branch of the grand ole oak represents the relationships of this universe that have created me, that have altered by my own existence, and have forced me to negotiate

and synthesize my knowledge. It represents my personal interruption into this universe, my symbiotic relationship with life, my connection to nature. The branch of universe represents the imagination by which my mind has seen the world. “There is no way of entering the world except through the act of imagination” (Greene, 1981, p. 187). That right branch growing up held my swing, which, in turn, held my body in a state of fantasy as I sailed through the air watching the leaves twinkle a myriad of possibilities. The right branch reminds me of the *what could be* in education today. It reminds me to promote the social construct within the classroom. “What a true and genuinely liberating education would do is replace this [the ‘banking model’ or rote information as presented by Freire] with a socially leveling form of classroom dialogue, reflection, and problem solving, focused on transforming the students’ place in the world” (Curren, 2007, p. 11).

For those that scathe the conceptualization of fiction, I render the perspective of praxis: a convergence of imagination and actualization, a place where hope becomes reality and a place where we author the reality of our hopes –the place we tell our story. Too often people allow the construct of public education to exist in rote facts asked of students seated in rows and columns because they lack the imagination to see beyond that paradigm. We need organic environments that allow the stories of community within self



Figure 8. Story is Written Together, Felt and Shared

and among each other to educate our souls. “In profound new ways, we come to see all of our different identities as a source of vibrant strength, growth and renewal. When we are willing to cross boundaries and to bring together the many perspectives that exist in a community, we stand a better chance of creating hope as well as healthy communities for ourselves and for all the members of our community. This hope extends to creating a more compassionate vision for all the communities of our world” (Santana, 2010, p. 64). It reminds me of my country soul, the organic nature of dialogue and the relationships by which we intervene together in this world (*Figure 8*). That right branch, represents my collective cognition. “All cognitive experience involves the knower in a personal way, rooted in his biological structure” (Maturana & Varela, 1987, p. 18). I have realized my own awareness during those times in which I rendered my body and soul to the universe; in those moments of reflection as a child under the oak tree, as a mother during labor, as a mother holding her child that day on the farm, or as an educator engaged in the most organic of all constructs of pedagogy – that of, story (*Figure 9*).



Figure 9. The Rendered Soul of a Mother to Nature

“To be a person is to have a sense of yourself as a creature with a history (Appiah, 2007, p. 262) Country wisdom has taught that if you wish to find the age of an oak tree, one must measure the circumference of the trunk one and one half meters high off the

ground. Measure it in centimeters and then divide by two and one half. For example, the grand ole oak on the farm has a circumference of seven hundred and sixty-two centimeters. You would take seven hundred and sixty-two, and divide it by two and one half. Based on this grassroots math formula, the tree would be just over 309 years! ($762/2.5 = 304.8$).

Additionally, if you were to cut a slice right there at the belly of the tree, each ring would represent a year in time – history. And with each year of valuable history, comes the concept of time- the essence of meaning making. For it is when we stop to reflect on our time, our history, self and years past, we can make meaning of this world. “If we don’t feel there’s a meaning to our lives, life’s difficulties can easily overwhelm and discourage us” (Wheatley, 2009, p. 62). The meaning making of our lives, however, can only be brought to a state of conscientization if we listen, reflect and humble ourselves to our place in history and render our souls to a state of unfinishedness. “In truth, conscientization is a requirement of our human condition. It is one of the roads we have to follow if we are to deepen our awareness of our world, of facts, of events, of the demands of human consciousness to develop our capacity of epistemological curiosity. Far from being alien to our human condition, conscientization is natural to “unfinished” humanity that is aware of its unfinishedness” (Freire, 1998, p. 55).

Nestled in the middle, at the intersection of self and universe, with a foundation of ontological being and the desire to analyze the mediating concepts that shape my epistemological awareness, I held my son, and we become the point of praxis, we became the embodiment of story. For the story of my journey, and the stories of others, as witnessed by you, the reader, became the point of praxis when told. This dissertation may

never be pulled from the shelves and used in the reference pages of another text, but it has meaning and application to the public school system.

Dearest Townes,

I will go my whole life telling you story after story as a testament of my love for you. With your one year birthday soon approaching, I reflect on our time together, and I connect who I am today because of you, with who I was before your love entered this great universe. In a year we have witnessed life together. I watched you crawl for the first time, with your right leg crooked up. I listened to your first syllables “ga” and “da.” I laughed at your grunting demands for more food which, in turn, made you laugh because of my smile. All the while, you watched me learn to change your diaper, fill your bathtub with exciting toys and bubbles, learn the size of your clothes, and learn how to tuck you in at night. Our days have been captured in time by photos and I can’t wait to tell you the story, one picture at a time of your first days, first year, and first experiences this world had to offer. Telling story, and being told stories is a valuable skill my son. You can read history books all day, but story, brings to life the emotion, the unspoken words of voice inflection and those moments when you can hear a person’s voice catch because of the emotion behind the text. Story completes the soul for that moment, and opens it as a vessel wanting to be filled with more. Tell me your story, baby. For I will tell you mine. One of mommy’s favorite authors, Paulo Freire once said, “Whenever there is life, there is unfinishedness (Freire, 1998, p. 52). Therefore, let us tell stories for ages to come, for our stories will never be finished for you continue to bring new life to my soul.

Love,

Mom

Paulo Freire defines praxis in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 2000, p. 33). In regards to this research, the point of praxis is that moment when the intersection of self and universe is narrated, told in story form to another person of this universe. Story is a conglomerate of meaning making, deliverance of understood language in a manner that facilitates the connection of universe to self. "Across cultures, people care to give a certain narrative unity to their lives: each person, wants to tell a story of his or her life that makes sense. The story, my story, should cohere in the way appropriate to a person of my culture. In telling that story how it fits into the wider story of various collectivities is, for most of us, important" (Appiah, 2007, p. 263). As an educator in public school, praxis is that moment in time, in which we lay the stoic data sets aside (the performance reports, the state assessment scores, the daily schedules, rubrics and syllabi), those items that speak to text, not to heart, and ask students, "So, what is your story" as a means to make meaning, to understand the holistic culture, so students can educate *us* with – have space to co-construct knowledge.

Symbiosis of Literature, Self and Story

My life's work has been and always will be, to encourage, love, empathize and empower others towards the fulfillment of their own journey through moments of reflection and dialogue; while building confidence in others during the uncertainties of transition and fostering comfort in the fact that these moments are transitional and

contingent on those they encounter, engage to exist with and constructed by through experience – a perpetuating state of unfinishedness.

Higher institutions and experts in the field of adult learning would articulate these moments of reflection, as transformative learning experiences. In fact, experience and critical reflection, are central to transformational learning theory (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 147). Furthermore, transformational learning theory, “is about change-dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 130).

However, I hesitate to draw reference to formalized theory, to connect heart to credentialed philosophers, or experience to context in a manner that perpetuates a concept that education resides in formal settings for there is a richness that only family, history and contextual knowledge of self can bring to the curriculum of an individual. “Our communities are abundant with the resources we need for the future. It is the awakening of families and neighborhoods to these resources that is needed” (McKnight & Block, 2010, p. 18). Within family resides the knowledge of a biological history, one that is generational and connected to personal context (Figure 10). Within family resides story. Too often, you will find that educators refer to schools as the place to learn; but more often than not, it is in the heart of family that deep learning resides



Figure 10. The Strength and Story of Four Generations

T,

On your third month birthday, after our picture in the ole oak tree and grandma and grandpa's farm, we went to your great grandmother's house. There in the same house that always had nutter-butter cookies, the cutest cats and a gallery of country art, we were all present for our four generations picture. You, me, grandma and great grandma, all sat on the tattered brown couch, which rested on the tired orange piece-milled carpet of thirty years, surrounded by walls filled with your great-grandfathers art (he was deceased at the time of the picture), all within the same house that your grandmother grew up in. There, in that house, one that barely held the nine kids that grew up there, a house with exposed electrical wires and a single burner stove, nestled in the "poor side of town" a rich curriculum of life, family, history, acceptance, resilience, love and empathy surrounded. That house taught me so much growing up and still does to this day.

Our four generations picture stands witness to this world to the fact that family is a corner stone for pedagogy; a curriculum of contextual self. I will forever keep this picture; however, the story of its worth will be written on our

hearts. With a rich perspective learned by the diversity of soul, create yourself and connect to others. Do not let the physical infrastructure of a building dictate your educational journey. Learning permeates the constructs of a classroom; it is socially constructed.

Love,

Mom

Self-Awareness

There is a delicate balance of constructivism, a creation of self that needs to be had, in relation to the simplicity of vested emotion. However, I understand the relevance in providing a clear, reasoned literature from those in the field of research.

Comer would contend that, “The way we do and transmit research findings is a part of the problem. Our nation spends billions of dollars on what I call “bits and pieces” social problem research. Most consumers don’t have the knowledge base or integrative framework needed to pull it together as a useful whole, and insight. Without a framework or the complementary knowledge (human nature, history, culture, experience, and situation) needed to understand the data, some findings can do as much or more harm than good. (p. 68)

Crotty stated, “All reality, as meaningful reality, is socially constructed. There is no exception” (1998, p. 54-55). This being of sound reason, there is a simple element that needs to be emphasized in the semantics of this philosophical truism - empathy (Figure 11). Empathy as a vested element to life, is the simple act of engaging, conversing, feeling, and loving - the moments that craft soul; those that are defined as ‘meaningful’. “Hand in hand with impartiality is empathy, for the mature moral agent must be able to

put herself in the position of others, and grasp their perspective and feelings, if they are to take seriously into consideration the interests of others; the development of empathy as a



Figure 11. Empathy is Feeling Story, Before Words are Spoken

moral sentiment is thus equally a part of adequate moral education” (Siegel, 2007, p. 441). I have come to reason in life, to reflect on these moments and allow the essence of experience and imagination to navigate my life, instead of allowing my life to navigate the moments. Sometimes, the journey was painful; other times, it was paved with love.

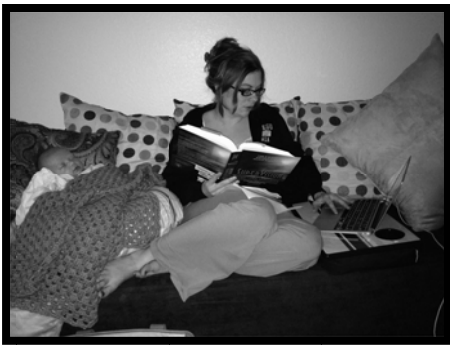


Figure 12. Researching, Reflecting, and Writing while Learning Motherhood

I once spoke of the tapestry of life when I first put pen to paper in my master’s program; a product of woven exchanges between self and others (Figure 12). Now, I feel the warmth of the tapestry. I see the rich colors of the threads forming the textile with every soul I meet. I have struggled with the concept that we are each unique, of a specific

time, context, history, place and heart. I once feared that there are no unique thoughts to be had. I even rebuked the concept that I could not tell my story using my language; instead, I was left finding my words as presented by others past; as if their story had more relevance than my own. I was reminded of the constructs of curriculum in school, the phrases of, ‘that is not how you are supposed to color’ or the teacher saying, ‘that is not how you are supposed to write the essay.’ But then, I listened. I listened, reflected, and connected. To story, one must connect. I immersed myself into the readings of Horton, Freire, Sergiovanni, Greene, Dewey, Marzano, Lather, McKnight & Block, Wheatley, even philosophers back as far as Socrates, Aristotle and Plato.

I struggled, and still do at times, in wondering, if there is any thought that is pure in form, original and imaginative after realizing that over the course of hundreds of years, sometimes the same exact theme or thought was processed. For example, the concept of ‘praxis’ was conceptualized by Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Marx, Arendt, Freire and several other. It is a humbling realization, just like it was sitting amidst the years of history while nestled in the oak tree, that my thought, one that I believed to be unique was a rewrite of others’ thoughts. But then creativity and imagination sounded inspiration.

“All the good stories are out there waiting to be told in a fresh wild way. . . .Life is like a recycling center, where all the concerns and dramas of humankind get recycled back and forth across the universe. But what you have to offer is your own sensibility, maybe your own sense of humor or insider pathos or meaning” (Lamott, 1994, p. 181). I hold onto the concept of empathy – my ability to converse and feel, and realize that yes, there is new thought and it is created with others at this unique moment in time and capacity through our shared narrative.

In her book, *Sounds of Silence Breaking*, Janet Miller opens with a vignette of the physiological effects she felt while experiencing Picasso's *Guernica* with the words of Jeanette Winterson:

Struggling against the limitations we place upon our minds is our own imaginative capacity, a recognition of an inner life often at odds with the external figurings we spend so much energy supporting. When we let ourselves respond to poetry, to music, to pictures, we are clearing a space where new stories can root, in effect we are clearing a space for new stories. (p. 208)

This research is a thought that I share, here and now, with others, in our time, our context, with a shared history, language and love; and for us, this knowledge is new, felt and awakened – it is our contextual surround. This knowledge of self-awareness is my story, our story, for my story cannot stand alone without others, and to share it with others



Figure 13. The Footsteps of a Story – The Journey of Self Awareness

while engaged in conversation is the moment where life's curriculum is authored. It is in that moment of shared narrative in which pedagogy is born. Story paves our walk in this life and guides are very next steps (Figure 13).

Freire spoke of pedagogy of freedom, hope and that of the oppressed – sentinel works to those in school improvement programs focused on social justice and equity. But even Freire, with the last of his days, dedicated his pedagogical soul to reflecting not on practice, not to the audience of many, but on his life and shared these intimate moments with his niece, Cristina, in his work, *Letters to Cristina: Reflections on My Life and Work* (Freire, 1996). We all need witnesses to our soul; I am convinced of this.

For me, I have come to realize that the birth of my child has awakened my pedagogical spirit. It was not just formal education that brought me to this level of critical mindfulness, it was not just the professional development activities from the school districts I have been employed, and it was not just found in the black and white of texts, but rather it was felt in the connection to nature through his birth interwoven with the mediating concepts of story aforementioned. The literature, my professional conversations, my formal education, my experiences finally all converged into a moment of earth shattering awareness; my soul was awakened.

Connection to the Universe

Maturana and Varela speak to the temptation of certainty stating, “We tend to live in a world of certainty, of undoubted, rock-ribbed perceptions: our convictions prove that things are the way we see them and there is no alternative to what we hold as true. This is our daily situation, our cultural condition, our common way of being human” (1987, p. 18). They contend that this “phenomenon of cognition” is a personal reflection of our biological selves amidst a world of others. Albert Einstein, also spoke to the connection of self to biological composition as part of our universal selves:

A human being is a part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest. A kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to enhance all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. (Bodhipaksa, 2006)

Trustworthiness

Being that this research focused on self-awareness by storying through the lens of social constructivism, an introspective approach was balanced with the humble action of interpretation. During the course of the study, it was imperative to remain transparent during the data collection process as to make evident that story is data, and that my story is not the only one told, not a mere interpretation of my own ontological being, but a representation of the co-creation of self that occurred with others; especially that of my son. “Transparency guarantees deal with the need for openness that people can expect: the freedom to deal with one another under guarantees of disclosure and lucidity. . . . Transparency guarantees (including the right to disclosure) can thus be an important category of instrumental freedom” (Sen, 2007, p. 96). Coming from a lens of a former campus principal, teacher, friend, mother, researcher, storyteller and knowledge seeker, it was imperative to ensure that the theoretical perspective presented was one that could resonate to the heart of the reader; one that could be applied to those in the roles of teacher and learner. If trust is lost, then so is the readers freedom to interpret the research. Therefore a road map of the journey was provided (see Chapter I, section, “An Invitation

to Journey”) so the reader could experience the research process while it is storied. Also, the elements and strategies used to construct this story are articulated as a dynamic, organic, woven experience of story gathering, story-telling and meaning making (see Chapter III, section, “Mediating Concepts: The Elements of a Personal Journey”).

During the study, to ensure that my interpretation and ontological journey of self-awareness did not interfere with the interpretations others shared, I involved three research partners as well as myself, who served as primary data collectors, storytellers and interpreters. Each research partner was asked to gather five photographs (or artifacts) that represented their life’s journey, how they have made meaning of their world and pivotal moments they wished to capture in story. From there, the research partners provided a context of self in and outside of their profession and provided explanation as to why they chose the photographs collected or why they chose to represent that moment in life with another symbolic representation. “There is an emerging evidence base to support the use of photography and image-making in the context of self-exploration, communication, creative expression and personal development. It is perhaps a reflection of the flexibility of this medium that research relating to its use spans the fields of health, social care and community arts, and includes work with people across the lifespan, from children to older people . . .” (Craig, 2009, p. 19). The research partners shared their story orally during an interview. Although their identities were kept anonymous with the use of a pseudonym of their own choice, their story, now shared will be forever remembered.

This research met the criteria for exemption category 2(A) of the Internal Review Board (IRB) process, because the topic of storytelling and using story as a pedagogical strategy were processes and activities that the research partners did already within the

normal scope of their work. There was minimal risk participating in the study being that these were all adults and the information being gathered was of their choice and rendering.

The interviews took place in a comfortable and familiar place for the research partners such as their office, conference room, or their home, according to where they wished to talk. I did not ask questions on sensitive topics and prior to starting the data collection process, the research partners were informed of the study and specific details such as expectations to gather five photos, expectations to engage in conversation two times, and write a reflective journal entry of the experience of being interviewed. They also had the opportunity to read my interpretations and provide their feedback through the process of member check on how to strengthen the information they shared with me as a researcher. They knew that participation was voluntary and at any time they had the option to refrain from any or all parts of the research project.

Each researcher's story guided the research and generalizations were not be made to prevent a hindrance of future interpretations of the data and research. Finally, all interpretations, data sets collected, and analysis were transcribed, synthesized using a data analysis model, and then shared with the researchers. The trust and integrity of this research resides in the learning journey itself, from the interview, to the photographs (and artifacts) shared during the interview, the reading of the transcribed interview by the participant to ensure accuracy, the participation in analysis, to the reflections provided by the research partners via electronic mail after the analysis of their story, validated the journey of their story shared as an authentic learning experience.

As research partners and co-constructors of knowledge they each had final input and clarification of interpretations prior to final presentation to the dissertation committee. “Research participants often change their stories from one telling to the next as new experiences and the very act of telling itself cause them to see the nature and connection of the events in their lives differently” (Sandelowski, 1993, p. 4). Having had this form of member check, prevented one interpretation by one researcher (myself) from being misinterpreted by the other research participant. It ensured a co-construction of knowledge – a dialogical pedagogy.

Member validation, or the member check, is a technique scholars have proposed for establishing the validity of researchers’ interpretations of data collected from research participants and for ensuring that these participants have access to what has been made of their experiences. The member check, accordingly, involves a professional obligation to do good science and a specifically ethical obligation to support member’s right to know. (Sandelowski, 1993, p. 4)

The utilization of member check ensured a co-construction of knowledge – a dialogical process and the creative space to share, interpret and tell story throughout the research project.

Along with the interviews, photographs, electronic mail reflections, the stories shared, the utilization of the member-check process, archival data such as letters to my son, photographs of pivotal moments, medical records and a continuous dialogue with colleagues, and my chair/mentor, enabled a focused framework for analysis during the use of reflective practice. “Reflective practice allows one to make judgments in complex and murky situations – judgments based on experience and prior knowledge. . . . The

initiation of reflective practice involves using data in some form, which almost always includes our past and current experiences” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 172). The telling of this data through story is the dialogical piece to this process. Dialogue, is key to trust. “It is also in this sense that the possibility of true dialogue, in which subjects in dialogue learn and grow by confronting their differences, becomes a coherent demand required by an assumed unfinishedness that reveals itself as ethical” (Freire, 1998, p. 59). I am not complete, nor will this work ever be, that in itself needs to be established. The work of reflective practice and storying of data is a vision of improvement for public education; a vision that requires an open lens.

Reflective practice is a deliberate pause to assume an open perspective, to allow for higher-level thinking processes. Practitioners use these processes for examining beliefs, goals, and practices, to gain new or deeper understanding that lead to actions that improve learning for students. Actions may involve changes in behavior, skills, attitudes, or perspectives within an individual, partner, small group, or school. (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, and Montie, 2001, p.6)

For there will have been written information of past that holds true to the present that I have not been witness to; and, there will be future stories told, more articulate than this one presented, but this is the story of now, a contextual being of self, and the transformation of soul. It is the lens of empathy by which it is told. It is within my heart, my country soul and the wisdom of the ole wise oak that this trust begins, and it is by the embrace of community through story telling that it is established and will continue to breathe.

Ethical Considerations

Research is an intimate internalization of new knowledge and experience that occurs when the researcher(s) engage in conversation and a learning journey towards the co-construction of new thought, processes, and practice. To research, one must make known the humble responsibility and moral fortitude needed to engage in such a deliberate process. “[Research] is a profoundly social activity that connects you both to those who will use your research and to those who might benefit – or suffer – from that use. But it also connects you and your readers to everyone whose research you used and beyond them to everyone who research they used. To understand our responsibility to those in that network, now and in the future we have to move beyond mere technique to think about the ethics of civil communication” (Booth, Colomb and Williams, 2008, p. 273).

The connection established is an intimate one because it is a shared experience. Anytime language, meaning, and experience intertwine two hearts, a connection much greater than the individual is formed. One never knows how another will receive one’s interpretation or their story; that in itself, the feeling of insecurity is to be considered-and, the courage one must possess to share their story must be revered. To ensure a safe space to share story, the identities of the research partners were maintained as anonymous, and a pseudonym of their choosing was utilized. Also, if they were connected to any professional institution, that was also assigned a pseudonym as well.

Because the research partners had access to the research throughout the process, and careful attention was provided to ensure anonymity, the level of comfort differed for each participant. Some were comfortable representing themselves clearly with

photographs (Figure 14), while others wanted a pixilation of the picture to be applied to provide the reader with a personal meaning, but not one that would fully identify others



Figure 14. Participant Desired to Share Clearly Identifiable Picture

in the image they wanted to share (Figure 15). Others, chose to use artifacts instead of photographs (literature selections) as a means to convey their story without bringing visual identity to the reader.



Figure 14. Participant Desired Sharing Picture with Pixilation

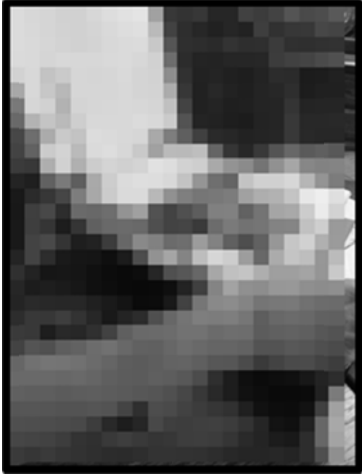


Figure 15. Participant Desired Sharing Picture with Heavy Pixilation

However, these filters to maintain anonymity were not applied uniformly as a means to individualize the level of trust needed by each research partner. One partner, although consented to participating in the interview process and even shared several photographs during the interview, did not feel a sense of insecurity until after the presentation of their story in print form. It was at that moment, the participant felt exposed, uncomfortable, insecure and trust needed to be regained. We talked about the sensations felt and the participant desired to continue in the research process; however, decided the level of pixilation needed to ensure their level of comfort (Figure 16).

Although the picture may be nebulous to future readers of this research, the meaning and inclusion of the abstraction was significant and relevant to the research. To have applied the similar formatting of pictures or a normed reference point indicating a picture was allowable for submission, would have diminished the integrity of the dissertation research by allowing for systematized norms to restrict a learning journey. Additionally, to remove the photo, because of the lack of recognition, would be the equivalent of erasing the participant's story. That is, the act of replacing or removing the photo would have had a

negative impact on this work. It would have done more harm to our relationship and the research process than continuing with the process of co-construction of the process. Instead, the research partners were provided differentiated, individualized levels that suited their story and their level of comfort in the process. This personal approach to sharing story is vital to the ethics of establishing trust, relationships and the safe space needed to share story, reflect and learn.

Because each person had a unique set of stories to share, I had to balance my personal experiences with those shared. I came from the experience of public education, at a small, rural school in which all teachers, knew every student, and knew of my story and family personally, with the viewpoint of another who had had a different experience. I had to reflect upon my experience as a school administrator of a tiny district with only two hundred-fifty students from pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade in which I had the luxury of conversing with all the students every day, to feeling the distance of being an administrator of twelve hundred students at a larger school district, and knowing only the ten percent that required disciplinary actions.

Through that balance of experience, and looking at my story as the research partners presented their contribution, findings presented themselves that were later discussed in the implication section. These findings were the “rest of the story” a piece inspired not by the story, but the space that was created to allow for story to be shared. It was not the public school that failed to reach the student; it was the lack of narrative that caused dialogical isolation. A good example of varied perspectives resides in the polarized views of public education and the metanarrative that public schools are failing and the urgency exists to ‘turn them around’:

Over the last decade, the notion of turning around failing schools has exploded onto the educational landscape in various countries throughout the world. Fueled by government accountability systems and an expanding body of knowledge about productive schooling for all students, educators, policymakers, and actors in the general community have been calling for dramatic action to turnaround schools that fail to effectively educate significant numbers of students. (Murphy, 2010, p. 157)

Careful analysis of semantics was utilized in the writing of this research. Mindful decisions were made to present data, story, and implications for future use without discrediting voices before me or perpetuating the metanarrative that public schools are failing all students. This was a reflective thought carried throughout the process.

Ethical consideration and respect for the multitude of lenses that will read this research was also reflected upon. “One defining feature of social life is that individuals interpret their experiences in the world differently” (Johnson, 2008, p. 304). Therefore, it must be made clear and transparent, that this research, this single account to make meaning, interpret and story using a socially constructed language is only one articulation of the phenomenon of ontological awareness.

Hey Cutie,

There are going to be times in this world in which you and I do not see eye to eye. And although, I am your mom, and society will tell you at times that I am older and wiser; this will not always be true. You see, that day that you and I sat in the oak tree was the day that I connected meaning and told a story. However, you will look upon a different picture later in life, or experience something, or

hear of something, or meet someone that will shape your perspective different than my own –that is more than acceptable. This life is a woven fabric, with each person, event, and conversation, specific to the time and place you experience it are the threads of its creation. We will not see eye to eye. Therefore, use your language, develop patience and revere empathy to guide those spaces of difference with me and others.

Love,

Mom

Lastly, but most significant in my personal journey, is the ethical consideration of my son. I have the humble responsibility to share a story that he himself cannot express in words yet. It is his story, yet, it is the perspective of his story, through my lens, that I tell. He will, in time, have his own interpretations, his own perception of his coming into this world. His story may change from year to year. The versions of life will render a different story as we grow old together.

Significance of Study

To feel the space one has once just occupied, as if a vessel being filled, as if the skin feeling the tapestry that weaves the soul, is a humbling experience. To introspectively realize one was unknowing makes light to one realizing they will forever be unknowing with each new experience they have. It's the perpetual state of learning the world, and the quaint feeling of capacity as your world opens up that is liberating.



Figure 17. First Breath of Life, May 10, 2012

“We occupy a historical moment marked by multivocality, contested meanings, paradigmatic controversies, and new textual forms. This is an age of emancipation, freedom from the confines of a single regime of truth, emancipation from seeing the world in one color” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008. P. 252). I feel the space I have occupied in this universe, and of my connection to the whole. “We do not see the ‘space’ of the world; we live our field of vision. We do not see the ‘colors’ of the world; we live our chromatic space” (Maturana & Varela, 1987, p. 23).

This self-awareness was awakened by deep reflection, a biological interruption of self, as I pleaded with the universe to breathe life into my son as a room shuddered in cold stillness the first minutes of his birth (Figure 17). Lifeless, without color, without sound, a forced silence transcended my heart, body, soul and mind into a state of forced reflection. Images of past flooded my mind: the complexities of the one hundred year old farm house that I grew up in (Figure 18), the freedom of mind from my college days, the feeling of worth when I rented my first apartment, the feeling of betrayal felt in my first marriage, the beauty of soul that transpired from the tragedy of the Jarrell tornado, the oak desk of possibility as a novice administrator, the connection of heart and mind to my dearest friend, the voices of many that I have met along the way and home. All these



Figure 18. My Childhood Home

moments were randomly flashing in and out of my cognition, in no particular order. And then, silence. No feeling, no sound, nothing but my breath holding in a passionate hope for life. At that moment, nothing mattered more than the biological need for the first breath of life. Then, it happened. Life interrupted the universe, and a new thread to the tapestry was woven, and my child brought upon a new meaning to the world; to my world, to ours – a world that we share through the power of story.

In that moment, my life had a deeper meaning, a new lens to view the concepts of love, empathy and dialogue. I believe Freire would have called this, the Pedagogy of Life, had he had time to author one last work. “Language is our starting point, our cognitive instrument, and our sticking point. It is very important not to forget that circularity between action and experience applies also to what we are doing here and now. To do so would have serious consequences . . . At no time should we forget this . . . Everything said, is said by someone. Every reflection brings forth a world” (Maturana & Varela, 1987, p. 26). It is our universal responsibility to pass along story. I will enter into life, into my profession as an educator, into conversation with myself, in accordance with my connection to the world around, through the biological event of childbirth. For at that moment, a new story, a new language was born. The significance of this study is watching life’s moments, become story, and seeing how story will be used to teach others

about life for, “one of the most powerful and time-honored teaching tools is the sharing of personal experience in the form of stories” (Diehr, 1998, p. 197). Story is life, life is story. It is time to reframe life and learning to be symbiotic processes and promote a pedagogy that celebrates life as curriculum.

I will never forget watching story unfold and be used as a diagnostic and teaching tool during the experience of my son’s birth, and the days after while he was in the intensive care unit. Each time the various doctors would enter the room, they would set their chart on the table, greet us by name, introduce the team of resident students that they were mentoring at the teaching hospital, and while holding my son, ask, “So tell me your story. What’s going on today?” I was intrigued, as were the students engaged in the medical rounds, at watching narrative be used in the scientific, evidence-based world.

“Narrative, or the writing and telling of our story, when we look at it closely, has tangible health and behavioral benefits” (Hatem & Rider, 2004, p. 251). The chart had the answers, or so I thought. But, then, I watched narrative, the telling of my son’s symptoms, provide diagnostic information that the doctor’s needed as a holistic data set prior to proceeding with treatments. Story, was a tool, not only to diagnose, but to teach and learn and guide us through the process of healing.

“Reflection, narrative writing and collaborative care” were the methods used to analyze the data those days at the hospital, and, are the methods by which we should approach the educational process (Hatem & Rider, 2004, p. 252). “The aim of narrative medicine is to develop the skills of fostering empathy, reflection, professionalism and trust” (Charon, 2001). Similar to the assessment driven culture of public education, the push for nominal test scores and meeting state/national standards, the medical industry is

also inundated with the “increasing push toward evidence-based thinking” (Hatem & Rider, 2004, p. 251), a parallel concept to Sergiovanni’s life world and system world.

Within the scientific community, a rise towards narrative evidence-based medicine is being used as a tool to diagnose, as a way of pedagogy, and primary data set (Swidler, 2012; Elmore, 2007; Diehr, 1998; and, Cox, 2001). “The medical rounds model, when applied to K-12 education, provides a community of practice among superintendents committed to better instruction” (Elmore, 2007, p. 1). In the ‘medical rounds model’, resident doctors collaborate, discuss, engage in conversation and utilize case studies and stories to teach and learn. This model, can be used within public schools, not just with Superintendents but also principals, teachers and students. As used in public schools, groups of administrators, teachers or even students, form a cohort and share stories in their trusted network, as a way to learn about their work. They develop new ideas, share their experiences, learn about legality, embrace diversity and expose one another to new perspective. “To connect the specific work of instructional improvement to the broader picture of organizing and managing complex school systems, we ask school leaders to develop a personal theory of action. . . The idea behind theories of action is to provide leaders with the opportunity to rise above the specific instructional issues we focus on in the network and try to state, in a useable form, what they think they have learned about their work from being in a collegial network” (Elmore, 2007, p. 6). It is a way of thinking, analyzing, teaching and learning that connects theory with practice.

Similarly, this research connects and weaves elements that are sometimes described as dichotomous: self with universe, data with soul, self with others, research with theory; and, will do so through story. Story is a significant tool that needs to be used

within public education as a norm to bring students, teachers and administrators to a deeper understanding of self and their connection to others as a means to build a community of learners.

The literature exists to substantiate the relevance; however the practice is lacking within the constructs of public education. “I have found that in telling teaching stories—narratives in which a teacher and her [his] classroom practices play a central role—individuals can conduct a self-critique in which they can see themselves and their complex interactions with others in a fresh light” (Gomez, 1996, p. 3). To improve schools, one must be able to envision and embrace not only the concepts of how one learns as an individual or how others learn, but how we learn among and with each other. In an experimental multicultural program of teacher education, it was found that telling teaching stories had the greatest possibility for influencing classroom activities when teachers worked together for a length of time that allowed for the rethinking, revisioning, and continuing consideration of teaching practices that improve all students’ learning. “Through storytelling, we aimed to question our teaching goals; to consider effective alternatives to our teaching practices so that we continually focused on who the children were and what strengths as well as needs they brought to school; and to reconsider our role and actions as individual teachers. We tried to see ourselves as members of not only a classroom community of children to whom we were obligated, but also to see ourselves as members of a school community and of larger communities outside of school to which we were obligated for social action and justice” (Gomez, 1996, p. 6). The use of storytelling is conceptually critical for school improvement because it is a scaffolded

approach to understanding self, administrators, parents, students, the community, and other stakeholders.

Story is the data set that is currently buried under academic assessment data, data that trends students being at-risk of dropping out of school, graduation rates, teacher retention rates, etc. It is also the method for delivery in learning and research that is missing as a normed practice. “Students bring their own stories, needs and question. If we are to teach our students [teacher interns], as we want them to teach children, we must embrace intensive teaching and learn alongside our students [teacher interns]” (Logue and Kim, 2011, p. 13). This concept of story- telling as a teaching strategy, using life as pedagogy, creates an organic learning environment between the ‘student’ and the ‘teacher’ whether it is a Superintendent providing leadership and training for a principal, a principal training teachers, teachers instructing students, parents informing teachers, or students teaching principals.

Dear Townes,

The first day of school has never lost its excitement for me. The smell of freshly sharpened pencils, grouping desks in the classroom, receiving the roster of students that will be in the class, and getting to learn everyone’s name and story always excited me as a teacher. As a principal, I looked forward to learning about my staff, their family, their interests and their goals. I would always ask them to meet with me individually so that I could learn who they are and how we could connect. I always found that when I took the time to meet someone and, I mean really sit down with them and talked about who they are and what they held as important in their heart, I could teach them, and learn from them, in the most

connected way. My son, I hope your teachers greet you by name. I hope they take the time to ask your teacher from the year before what strategies made you most successful. I envision a classroom where students are allowed to work in groups, talking about their learning, conducting experiments and reflecting on experiences. I wish for you teachers that connect curriculum to the real world, by use of story, so your heart as well as your mind, feels and is inspired.

But, my son, I also hope that if you are faced with a situation where you feel lost in the roster, unknown in the masses, you ask your teacher for a moment and say, 'can we talk?' As a teacher, I remember getting caught up the daily schedule, feeling bombarded with testing data and overwhelmed with the structures in place. It happens. And it will continue to happen until story is the first data set used to understand those in the classroom. But that is when you can kindly remind your teacher why they are there: to connect, to learn, to teach, to love, to guide. Tell your teacher a story.

My son, you have been my teacher since birth. You have taught me what your gentle coos have meant, your grunts for more food, your smile of excitement when you want to have a book read to you again. You have taught me a language of love. Never forget your inner strength, the capacity that you have and the gifts you have to share. Meet people. Engage in this world into conversation and know that life and life's stories are both to learn from and to teach by.

Love,

Mom

III. SYMBIOSIS OF SELF, LITERATURE AND STORY AS METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to contribute to the field of public education that story is a valid and powerful data source in understanding the pedagogical process from understanding one's ontology, to that of self-awareness; it is a method of and within itself. Through the use of narrative analysis, story serves not only as the data set, but also as the methodology. "Narratives are stories, 'the oldest and most natural form of sense making' (Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002, p. 66), and they have a place in adult learning because stories enable us to make meaning of our lives" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 208). Story helps us make meaning, to think, to connect and relate. Story, through the lens of self and universe, can lend itself to a learning experience that develops a sense of self-awareness that rote curriculum cannot achieve in a standard text based, rubric graded and syllabus delivered manner.

The stories people tell about themselves are interesting not only for the events and characters they describe but also for something in the construction of the stories themselves. How individuals recount their histories—what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonist or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience—all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. (Gomez, 1996, p. 2)

This storying of self, this ability to be self-aware brings about a depth of perspective by which to learn, live, and teach with others.

Through the analysis of several observables (stories, photographs, archive data, letters written, email reflection, interviews, medical information, weather reports,

reflections) meaning was created through the negotiation of those elements in the construction of story. The observables were then symbiotically, organically, woven like a tapestry of experience and connected to both self and the universe. Elements as aforementioned are observable until meaning is made. As they were being negotiated, synthesized, reflected upon and then articulated through story, they were considered mediating concepts and an integral, woven component of method during this ontological journey of self-awareness and research process. Through the utilization of research partners, engaged in storytelling, the research provides a rich description of others' ontological journey and makes relevant that story is method. Reflection as a research strategy was used to help make sense of the data collected from stories told, photographs shared, archive data collected, and interviews. Member check as a strategy was utilized to build trustworthiness with research partners as well as future researchers interested in the study.

To guide praxis, the following areas of disquisition were explored:

1. What is the utility of knowing one's story?
2. How have I realized my ontological journey?
3. How has story become a pedagogical tool for self-awareness?
4. How does story making facilitate a dynamic pedagogy that captures the essence of life and nature?

Setting and Research Partners

This study captured stories based upon photos (and/or artifacts) selected by four individuals (ages 30-60) who utilized story as a teaching strategy. The research contributes to the field of education as a means to provide implications relevant for

school improvement regarding the utilization of story as a means of pedagogy. The context of this qualitative study *is* self as told through the story of one's ontological journey. "The authenticity and immediacy of a story, of lived experiences, takes us into the experience of another. In that way it deepens and expands our capacity by learning the perspective of another. In short, life story sharing reduces resistance to new or different points of view and deserves to broaden the perspectives of all participants" (Rossiter and Clark, in press, p. 107 of ms). There is much data to be found in self through the sharing of story. "A narrative framework sees the life course as an unfolding story, one constructed and interpreted by the individual" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 214). It is when we, as a universal self, as a learner and teacher, share story with others, that we learn and teach life through life, with life.

The first business of a guide is to listen to the dreams of the pilgrim. How are our students moving? What do they want for themselves? How do they tell their own stories?" (Dalo, 1986, p. 21). Next, the mentor can tell the student stories in an effort to promote development. It is through this mutual storying of lives that development can occur. (Dalo, 1999 (as cited in Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 138)

Our souls, when aware of their connection to the universe, and told in story form, set the context for learning – a pedagogical methodology to teach and learn life. Our personal realities, our personal journeys, lend themselves to a varied perspective; therefore, each of our realities lend themselves to a unique perspective and awareness of the experience. Each of us has a story. This research, brings life story to context through the lens of three

research partners and myself – each of us on a quest, and each of us with a rich data set in this quest to share our experiences.

In this study, the term research partner is used instead of the term participant because each engaged in the data collection, data analysis and process of synthesis through reflection. One of the research partners, Drexel (pseudonym) was a member of the civil service who did not go through the formality of higher education but chooses to learn about life, through life, while serving our country. He grew up in the country with a modest background, with parents that set high expectations regarding learning, and a proud lineage of military service. His experiences of his childhood in the country, work on the dairy farm, life in the military, connection to nature, heritage, and family, his days as a police officer, and now as a towboater, have provided an eclectic dimension to how he views the world. His desire to participate in the study was to bring light to the fact that we each have a story but some people may be scared to tell their story; it is our job to see people for more than who they are in that moment, but to see them for their whole story.

The next research partner, Dr. Drakeson (pseudonym) was a doctor at a learning facility that teaches his resident doctors in training, how to utilize story as a diagnostic tool when appropriate. This doctor is known to consider narrative as a data set and teach others through this form of pedagogy. He contributed to the study with the sharing of a story that highlighted the depth of learning one can experience when systematic norms are challenged and recreated. He provided a perspective of adaptability, responsibility and cautions people to avoid presuming that one person's narrative can serve as a meta-narrative for others' lives.

Finally, other than myself as a research partner, was a public school educator, Ellen (pseudonym) renowned by her former students to leading curriculum with an application of life lessons to guide their education. She did not deliver instruction with rote facts and figures, but is characterized as one who uses story to students in their learning. She had a strong message to contribute to the study that sharing story becomes easier over time; however, it is not an indication that ease is a sign of voided emotion. Sharing story is a powerful tool to understand the puzzle pieces this life has to offer us as we navigate our learning journeys.

Story as Praxis

As a personal quest to embrace my universe with empathy, this research is my life's work; this piece, being a fragment of the whole, a reasoned unfinishedness. For it is not a means to find myself, but a methodological way to articulate a learning journey. "I think of a gesture of love as anything we do that helps others discover their humanity. Any act where we turn to one another. Open our hearts. Extend ourselves. Listen. Any time we're patient. Curious. Quiet Engaged" (Wheatley, 2009, p. 160). The method of empathetically weaving story creates guiding questions not to implicate that a problem in the educational system exists; but rather, to render the possibility that the utilization of story as a point of praxis cultivates a different perspective in developing self-awareness with others.

Too often the unasked question is the key to articulating a reflective epistemology – "What is your story?" Story is the element that binds the statistics of accountability measures to the profile of a child providing an enriching and cultural depth of their holistic being. Story connects the chasm of systematic infrastructures to the humanistic

endeavors of those the system served. Yet, story, the curiosity and inquiry of one another is the missing data set that lays in an abyss, unasked, and unanswered. Therefore, story stands as the method; it is the method to create meaning to the observable data.

Story, the dialogical journey, is used as the research process. I ask the reader of this study to answer, in a reflective manner, as open and as honest to their own self as they can be to themselves, “What is your story?” (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010, p. 134). I ask the reader to do so prior to proceeding through the semantics of the remaining text, the review of literature and the data analysis. Bring an open mind to the conversation so that imagination can be used to *un*think the thinking of the constructs of our schools today (see again, An Invitation to Journey in Chapter 1). Begin and end in self-reflection. For education is a dialogical process of a community with its greatest characteristic being of interdependence – we must know ourselves to know others. We must know others to know ourselves. We must listen to tell story and make meaning of it with our own lives. It is a mindful process of stepping in and out of self, in and out of the journey, to fully see its worth.

Sources for Construction of Story

The interviews with the research partners were conducted to gather story as a way to describe how others’ have developed self-awareness. “Ethnographic inquiry in the spirit of symbolic interactionism seeks to uncover meanings and perceptions on the part of the people participating in the research, viewing these understandings against the backdrop of the people’s overall worldview or ‘culture’” (Crotty, 1998, p. 7). The photos/artifacts and stories shared represent each research partner’s learning journey. The first interview with the research partners started the conversation regarding the use of

story as a teaching tool. Sample questions for the first interview with the research partners included:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Please tell me about the picture(s) you brought today.
3. Is there one picture that makes you want to tell me a story more so than others? If so, which picture, why, and will you share the story with me?
4. When and how do you use stories?
5. Do you have a favorite story that you tell all the time? If yes, please tell it to me.
6. Why is this story important for you to share?

After the first interview, research partners were asked to provide a reflective journal entry regarding the experience of being interviewed, how it felt to share their story, to reflect upon their own learning, and how they tell the story of their own learning to others. The reflection explored the depth of the primary research questions:

1. What is the utility of knowing one's story?
2. How have I realized my ontological journey?
3. How has story become a pedagogical tool for self-awareness?
4. How does story making facilitate a dynamic pedagogy that captures the essence of life and nature?

The interview was transcribed and provided to each research partner so they could review for accuracy. The following questions were used to ensure an accurate analysis of data has been represented:

1. When I retold your story, were there any inaccuracies? If so, please share.

2. If there anything else, after hearing your own story, that you want to add?
3. From what lens do you think the story best fits (as from a lens of the universe or that of self)? Why do you believe that to be?

Then, the interview was analyzed within the four quadrants model of the framework for analysis. Data from the first interview and feedback from the member check process, photos/artifacts shared, and the experience of the interview were analyzed and then storied in a way to keep the authenticity of each researcher's story. After the analysis of each research partner's story, they received the full text of their story and the analysis of their story to check for accuracy once again. They were then asked to provide a reflection of the entire interview process from telling their story, to reading their story, to finally reading the analysis of their story. They each provided via electronic mail, a reflection of the process that was then shared verbatim in the study.

We each have a story. We each have a way of mediating the concepts of this world and no two persons will share the exact perspective. However, we can each tell a story, and we can even tell each other's story. The essence of analysis resides in the authentic retelling of story, while keeping intact the data of story, and making sense of the information in one's own personal quest for knowledge.

To tell a story, one must know the contributing pieces of the story, the observables. To make meaning of the story, one must understand the pieces of story and then connect them to their own life. When standing alone, a photograph is just a photograph. But then, a story is told, life is brought to the image and the storyteller connects to the story listener meaning that transcends the visual. In Chapter I, it was written, "Ontology is the study of being. It is concerned with 'what is', with the nature of

existence, with the structure of reality as such” (Crotty, 1998, p. 10).” To follow the process of articulating the learning journey, it is important to know there are elements that first exist. Analogous to the concept of existence, to ontology is the symbol of the oak tree (Figure 19). Before the theoretical perspective of Pedagogy of Life (see Chapter 2) was layered on to bring meaning to the image of the oak tree, there was in existence, just the oak tree itself. Then other elements of the story began to exist, the observables in this research if you will, the stories, photographs, archive data, letters written, E-Mail reflections, interviews, medical information, weather reports, and reflections shared.



Figure 19. Ontological State: People in a Tree, the Observable

Just as the tree existed, so did other contributing elements, other observables of this research story (Figure 20).

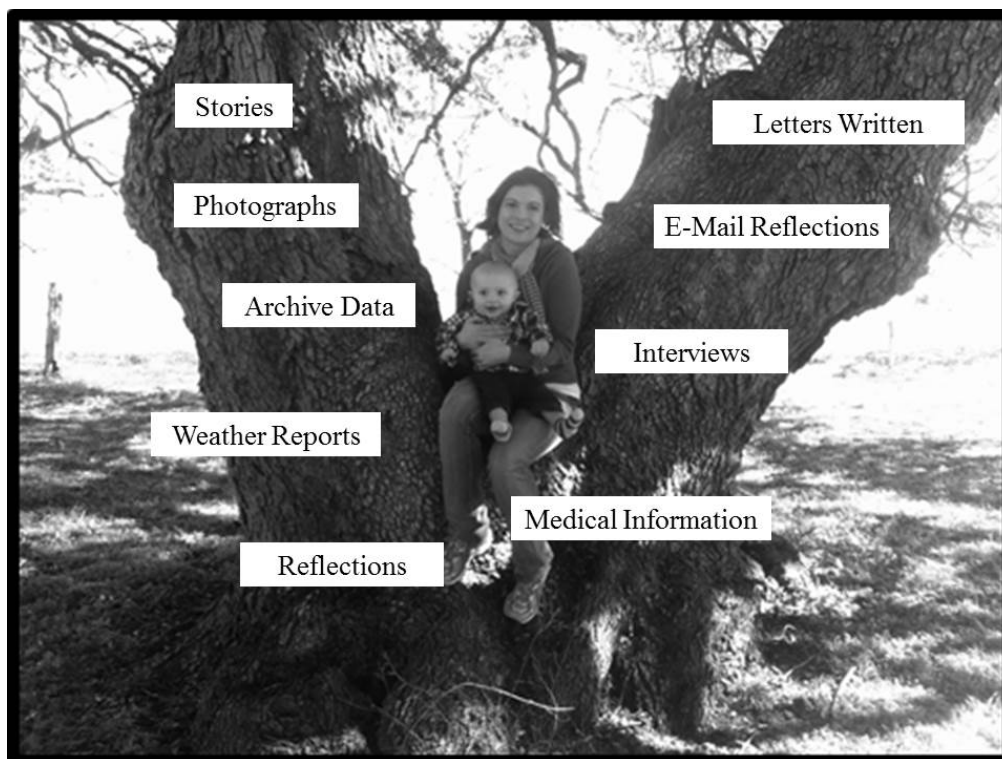


Figure 20. Elements of this Research Story

The observables were then symbiotically, organically, woven like a tapestry of experience and connected to both self and the universe. They were negotiated, synthesized, reflected upon and then articulated through story, they were considered mediating concepts and an integral, woven component of method during this ontological journey of self-awareness and research process. They became meaning and because of this meaning, the observables were no longer stand alone states of ontology, but a woven transcendence into an epistemological state that bred the theoretical perspective known, by this research as, The Pedagogy of Life.

Data Analysis

The observable, or elements of the story, were filtered through the layers of self and universe as a means to articulate the journey from my ontology, a state of *being*, to

self-awareness, a state of *knowing* how and why we know. The perspectives of four research partners, shared in the form of story, and based on photographs/artifacts they selected as representations of their ontological journey, were the data set and framework for dialogue and reflection. Through the analysis of these observables, the storying of photos during interviews and the synthesis of the information during reflections, a triangulation of data will be created. “The use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Objective reality can never be captured. We know a thing only through its representations. Triangulation is not a tool or a strategy of validation, but an alternative to validation” (Flick, 2002, p. 227). Each data source within itself provides a rich presentation of information as told in story form by each of the four research partners. “The combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a singly study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry (Flick, 2002, p. 229). The strength of this research does not lie within myself, or my individual journey; but my journey as connected with others. The utilization of research partners is an interdependence of story, analysis and articulating self-awareness and those mediating concepts that was its originator.

Framework for Data Analysis

The framework for data analysis used in this research is one that uses the strategy of reflection to negotiate the spaces of self and universe while finding position among mediating concepts to articulate self-awareness within four quadrants: utility/why, journey/ontology, agency/story making and dynamic/pedagogy (Figure 21). One might contend that this dissertation poses two theoretical perspectives, that of the oak tree and then that of the quadrants. However, the oak tree simply represents the ontology of me understanding me; whereas the use of quadrants is an epistemological approach to understanding data presented by others. The framework for analysis, by means of the quadrants, is my way of understanding the story of others so that I may tell of others' learning journeys in the world. The two tools serve different purposes, the theoretical

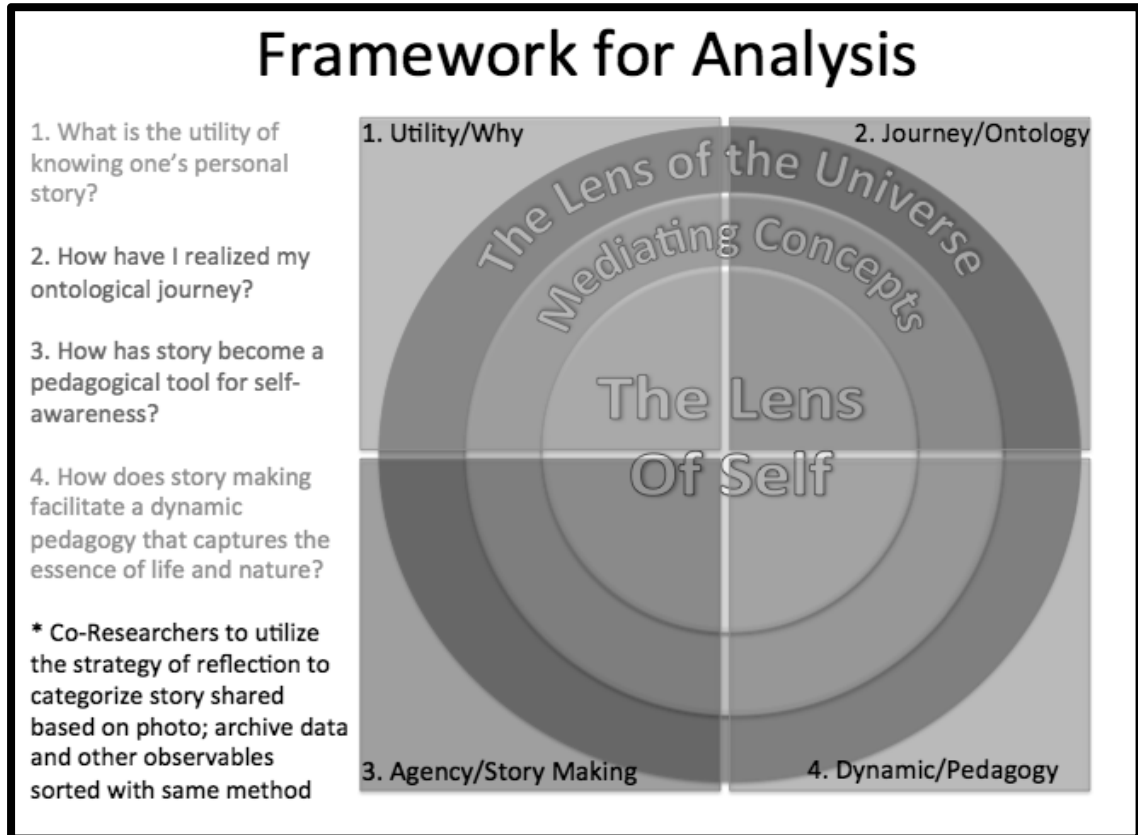


Figure 21. Framework for Analysis

journey/ontology, agency/story making and dynamic/pedagogy (Figure 21). One might contend that this dissertation poses two theoretical perspectives, that of the oak tree and then that of the quadrants. However, the oak tree simply represents the ontology of me understanding me; whereas the use of quadrants is an epistemological approach to understanding data presented by others. The framework for analysis, by means of the quadrants, is my way of understanding the story of others so that I may tell of others' learning journeys in the world. The two tools serve different purposes, the theoretical

perspective serves as the reflective foundation of my knowledge, while the analysis tool helps me make sense of new learning in such a way that I can tell of it through story. The framework for analysis is a way to not only gather data, but a way of articulating the story of each researcher. The framework begins with the self (Figure 22).



Figure 22. The Lens of Self

To understand others, one must first understand themselves by reflecting upon their own lives, and being mindful of their own learning journey. “Reflecting or having reflections, being mindful of life, living and working, and things around oneself, are a daily smart habit and practice; one checks on oneself and becomes self-monitoring. One aligns oneself with one’s values and convictions. Mindful, one is awake, and one lives fully” (Patrick, 2013, p. 740). In this research, the self is representative not only of myself, but also the participant as they share their story by means of mindful reflection. The self begins as an individual identity, but then story is told, and an interruption is made of the universe (Figure 23). The self reaches, connects, negotiates, learns, agrees, disagrees, accepts, declines and now encompasses a new learning experience that is symbiotic in nature to the universe that wraps the identity of self. Self is a centripetal force of learning.

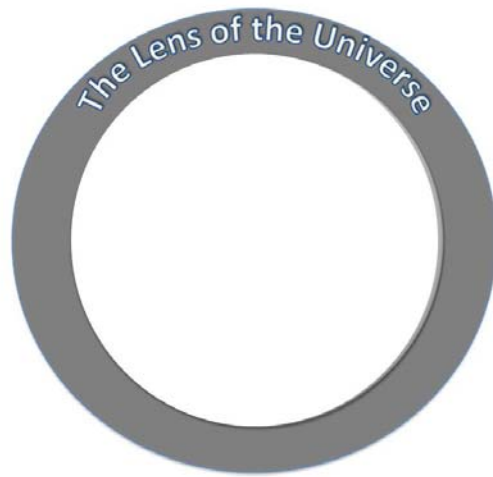


Figure 23. The Lens of the Universe

As previously presented in the theoretical framework, the area of mediating concepts was represented by the area of the ole oak where one is to measure the history of the tree. There, at the cross section, years of history, conversations, experiences, language development, people, moments of reflection and other observables are layered in the rings of the trees trunk. It is here that a tree can speak to you; from its soul. This may or may not be the way that other's analyze, reflect and articulate a particular phenomenon; but, this is a depiction of my ontological process and the means by which, as a researcher, data is analyzed with the research partners (Figure 24). It is the process of stepping in and out of self, to awaken a deeper level of learning. This fluidity to step in and out of self, in and out of a perspective of the universe and mediate, negotiate and experience is similar to the concept of the U movement (Senge, 2004, p. 88).



Figure 24. The Layered Lenses of Analysis

“The three basic aspects of this U movement are extensions of what happens in all learning processes” (Senge, 2004, p. 88). The model includes sensing (the ability to observe and become one with the world), presencing (the ability to retreat, reflect and allow inner knowing to emerge) and realizing (the ability to act swiftly and with a natural flow). “When we are presencing, it moves further, to arise from the highest futures possibility that connects self and whole” (Senge, 2004, p. 89). The U movement helps articulate the motion that the researchers undergo to move in and out of their stories, internalizing, reflecting and then courageously sharing their lives in the form of narrative.

To make sense of the stories shared, the underpinning analysis of self (the universe and the mediating concepts one negotiates with while in a state of unfinishedness, understanding and self-awareness) are layered with the four research questions, or Quadrants (Figure 25).

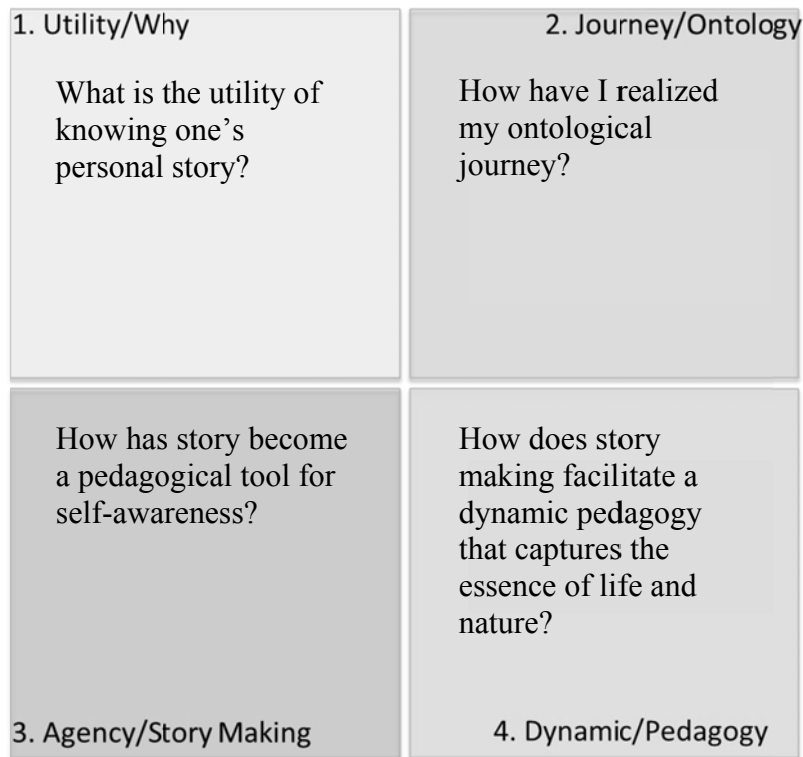


Figure 25. The Layered Quadrants of Research

Being that life is the centripetal force that yields the data for analysis, there is no linear approach as to how the data will lend itself when told in story form. For example, during pregnancy I was immersed in literature; as was the case during the months after delivery while maintaining status at the university towards doctoral studies. However, my personal interpretation of the readings, rendered different sentiments before then after Townes was in my arms. For me, his birth allowed me to see through a different lens; which, in turn, provided a different language base to articulate my story. This experience, this shared story of ontology, would fit best in (Quadrant 2) when analyzed, as it represents how I realized my ontological journey, and would nestle between the forces of the universe which brought about life, and self, as I began to learn about being a mother.

Reflections from the first year of motherhood, would fit best in (Quadrant 3) for they have been used to tell other new mothers in my neighborhood what it was like to become a mother and has been a tool for me to explain my newfound knowledge. “The inquiring researcher is constantly learning, reflecting on the past in order to navigate the present while examining the here and now to select the best course forward” (Machi & McEvoy, 2009, p. 8).

Influences such as Wheatley, Freire, Guajardo, Coelho, Greene, Maturana, Varela, McKnight, Block and Sergiovanni have developed my formal ontological development. “The literature survey gathers the prior knowledge about the subject of study. Surveying begins by examining the information gained from your literature search into findings. It concludes by building the findings into a storyline that describes what is known about the topic under study” (Machi & McEvoy, 2009, p. 82). Whereas, family reunions, first year birthday parties, my son’s first breath of life, a four generations picture, working with a community lensed assistant principal, developing a framework of knowledge through nature and becoming a mother are all experiences that have formed by informal ontological development. These experiences, both formal and informal, would, as a researcher, interpreter and story teller, fit best in (Quadrant 4) because it describes how story making facilitates a dynamic pedagogy that captures the essence of life and nature.

I remember reading the *Alchemist*, by Paulo Coelho, a few years ago when I started my Master’s degree at the University (1998). Then, I was asked to read the book again at the beginning of my Ph.D. program. However, it was not until after the birth of my son, and after surrendering my soul to this universe in a desperate plea for his life,

that I could read the beauty and resonate fully with the metaphors of a personal journey. In the tale, “dreams are the language of the universe” and they are what inspire, young Santiago to fulfill his personal legend and find his treasure. In the tale, Santiago struggles between the dream world and his dream as an aspiration; similar to the struggles between the systemsworld and the lifeworld. For me, I would organize this story shared, in (Quadrant 1) as it describes the utility of knowing one’s personal story. For Santiago, as for me, the struggle of story, the terms by which we reason and craft the semantics of our life’s journey is the creation of knowledge.

It is this negotiation, or mediation of concepts offered by the world, that ignites the utility of story, the “why” we are to use story to teach that inspires this research. Dreams, aspirations, and the unfinishedness of self, when told in story form, is how we learn most from each other and of our histories. It is through story that we can take all the observables, all of our moments in life, learn from them, reflect upon them and share them in connection with our universal souls, and provide trust with one another. It is when we story with one another that we make meaning.. From there, empathy breeds trust, which brings upon a relationship that inspires our future decisions. This relationship is the symbiotic force of self and nature that I feel now. Coelho described it as the Soul of the World, when nature and man unites. I felt this moment when my child was born. But, it was not until I reflected on that moment, when nestled in the grand ole oak on my parents’ farm, with Townes in my arms, that I made meaning of the moment. Now, I am mindful of my thought processes, of my ontological self –the way in which I have been taught by life; a pedagogy of life.

IV. PEDAGOGY OF LIFE

The following stories were collected from three research partners, each with their own, unique perspective of life, of how they became aware of their own learning and how they use their story to navigate learning with others.

Storytellers are great at what we do. When educating people, we provide knowledge, context, and accuracy. When engaging people through engaging experiences, we create story ambassadors. People excited about their experience share their own story with neighbors, co-workers, and schoolmates, thus expanding the reach of the story they enjoyed far beyond the boundaries of the story itself. (Bohl, MrGrew, Lenger, and Pridmore, 2009, p. 13)

There lies within each of us a story, and that story, has purpose. For these individuals, their story has guided their profession, their decisions, and their lives. Where pedagogy can be defined as, “the art, science or profession of teaching” (Pedagogy); the concept of Pedagogy of Life, is the skillful art of teaching life, through another’s personal life story.

As you journey with Drexel, Dr. Drakeson and then Ellen, you will first be introduced to a pivotal moment of the participant. This moment, provides a preview of the journey ahead so you, as the reader and researcher can seek your own understanding of its’ meaning in connection to your own life’s story. It is a moment that contributed to the co-construction of my own self-awareness; therefore, both the story as told by the participant, and the story of my experience are italicized to represent the significance of that storied moment. From there, you will experience the participant’s story as I step in and out of the experience of the interviewer. To bring clarity to the conversation you are engaged in, the participant’s telling of their own story will be italicized, with the

observables and interview data presented in plain text, from my perspective as the researcher. Then you will be led through the analysis of the story; where, once again, the participant's story as told by the participant will be italicized.

As you journey through this chapter, final summaries of each story will not be provided. This would contradict the essence of a learning journey by taking away the creativity of new learning and impose a relationship on you, the reader/researcher/practitioner that is of my own learning, not of yours. There is purpose to this method of woven story (see Chapter VI , Future Research). Instead, each participant decided to share their personal reflection describing the experience of sharing their story for the purpose of this research.

Drexel's Story

“That was the last ride before he died. As you can see he always had a gun. This was January. But I like this picture because it reminds one of the last few months. It's kind of like him riding off into the woods.” The tape was paused and Drexel needed a moment to collect his thoughts. Memories, the pictures, the stories being told, weighed on his heart, as the reflections fell from his tongue in the form of story. He wept.

Drexel was born in Northern Arkansas on 80 acres, in the middle of nowhere. His small house was home to him, his two brothers, and *a very loving mother and father who instilled not only discipline but the need for education.* While chopping wood growing up, his father would say, *‘Get a good education. Don't end up here in the woods chopping just so you can survive.’* His father graduated with a bachelor's degree, was a skilled welder, and served his country in the military. His mother came from absolutely nothing, raised her family, put herself through college and became a head

charge nurse. At the age of seventeen, Drexel, like his father, enlisted in the Marine Corp.

These pictures here are the lineage of the oldest child in the family for the past three generations. That's my grandfather who was in the Air Force from which he retired. The next one in the middle, that's my father. Like I said, he was a Marine and Vietnam Vet. And then there's me at the top, this is just the oldest male of each generation. Now the youngest male, here in the dress blues, is my brother who is also a Marine. My middle brother, the one who is living out of state, followed my grandfather's footsteps and he also went into the Air Force. So we're primarily a Marine and Air Force family (Figure 26).



Figure 26. Drexel's Military Lineage

Drexel began his journey as a U.S. Marine at the San Diego Marine Corps Recruit Depot. Although some recruits found it difficult to adjust to the early wake-up time, Drexel found it to be somewhat of a break not having to wake at 3:00 am, as he had for the previous three years working on a dairy farm. *Everything was structured and everyone was worried about people yelling at them, well, my dad was a Marine so I was kind of used to people yelling at me. So, I excelled in boot camp.* From boot camp, Drexel's military journey took him to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, then to Okinawa, Japan. In Okinawa he married and had a daughter. The marriage was brief, the divorce amicable, and he continued his journey in San Antonio where he met his now, second

ex-wife. *I was with her for a little while before I deployed to Iraq. Nothing extravagant to report there. It was a war, it was what war is.* After the military, Drexel became a police officer and now works as a towboater offshore. *The gypsy spirit was deeply ingrained and I needed to travel.*

On the coffee table were several more pictures. Drexel had taken time to arrange them to reflect different periods or meaningful moments in his life. Framed, were his military pictures. In print, was a picture of his mom and dad on the beaches of North Carolina, holding Drexel's daughter (Figure 27). It was the first time they got to meet

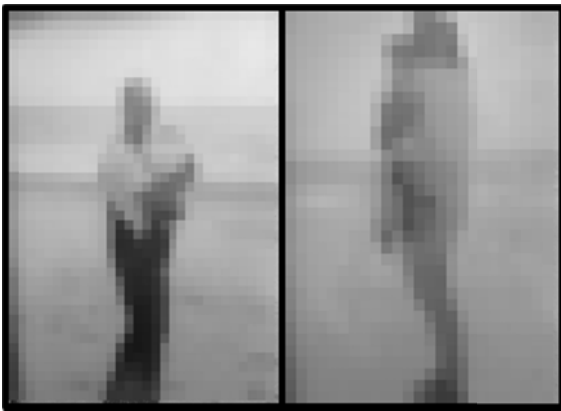


Figure 27. Drexel's Daughter and His Parents

their granddaughter. There was a picture of his father at Drexel's Master Mason Ceremony (Figure 28). *This right here, the picture of him at my Master Mason Ceremony, that is one of the maybe two times in my entire life I ever seen him in anything other than overalls.*

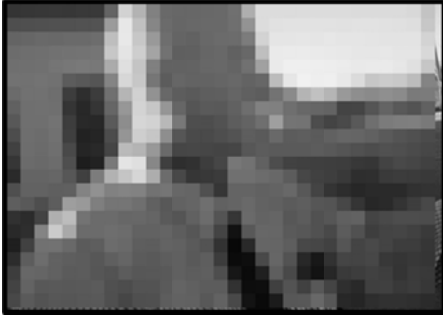


Figure 28. Master Masonic Ceremony

Clothed in overalls, his father had pride for his country, love for his family and instilled education, literacy, discipline, and the concept of hard-work into his sons. And then, there was the picture of his father on the four-wheeler (Figure 29), it was faded, but treasured; a picture his father didn't know was taken of him. *This picture here is about*



Figure 29. Riding into the Woods

nine months before my dad passed away at age fifty-four, from cancer. You see him on the four-wheeler, that's how he got around. He was hurt real bad when a full size van flipped over on top of him and from the neck down crushed him. Doctor said he'd never walk again but he's the most hardheaded person I know. Within about four years he was walking the country roads once again. This picture though was taken with my cell phone. We were going on top of this mountain range and it curves up and goes back down to the creek where this picture was taken. And I can remember, as a little kid,

we'd walk this creek for miles catching crawdads and little fish and getting into big holes where there were bigger fish. We'd always come home saying, 'look at what we caught!' Mom wasn't too fond of it 'cause we usually brought home something that was going to either bite us or need to be fed. There was no telling what we'd come home with. I mean I've come home with fox kits. I'd come home with a red-tailed hawk fledgling. I'd come home with raccoon babies, skunk babies, possum...it didn't matter. But you know those were our woods, those were our hills and we knew them like the back of our hands. We knew where the best squirrel trees were, you know, because a lot of the times we had to eat what we killed 'cause things were pretty rough after dad his accident. Six months later mom had a brain aneurysm so guess who got to be the man of the house? So we ate a deer a week basically for four years and whatever else we could catch or kill. Then mom went back to school, put herself through nursing school and then she became a registered nurse, and all of a sudden we could afford pork and let me tell you, it's the best thing on the face of the earth when you can afford pork and beef and it's not something you have to grow or slaughter on your own. That being said would I go back to it? Absolutely. I had two great parents. Dad was real heavy into discipline but Lord knows we needed it 'cause he was raising three feral boys who spent most of their time in the woods. And mom was always the nurturer and the one who stitched us up when we'd come in with either a thorn through the foot or missing half a thumb or something stuck through our leg. I think she only went to nursing school to figure out how she's going to treat us instead of having to rush us to the emergency room every time we broke something or stabbed something through our foot.

Drexel now works offshore as a towboater. He works several days at a time on the sea, with his days and nights split with six hour shifts. While towing barges, he is captivated by nature's beauty, the stillness of the swamps, the radiance of the beams of a sunset dancing off the waters top and the brotherhood of his fellow towboaters. *I think everybody has a story to tell. We judge people on what we see at that moment and we don't really learn their stories. Honestly I think the world would do better to sit down and listen to everybody's story when they meet them. Everybody's got a story. And everybody wants to share their story honestly. I think people are just scared. But everybody's got a story. Everybody's got something they want to share. Kind of reminds me of a book called the Celestine Prophecy (Redfield, 1994). We're all connected in some way, shape or form. And I think stories allow us to realize the connections we have without just assuming we know somebody based on their clothing or their race, whatever. So I tell my story to a lot of people, where I come from. In the profession I'm in now, everybody's from all over the US. I mean we got guys from California, guys from North Carolina and guys from Kansas, Nebraska and guys from Florida. We cover the entire gamut. And what's entertaining to me is everybody has their own story and yes, they're different, but in a lot of ways they're the same.*

Drexel's Story Discussed

The open seas are home now for Drexel. He spends his days and nights floating both still and tempestuous waters. The gentle glow of the moon provides a nurturing light reminiscent of his mother's love growing up. While the sun, although harsh at times, provides the brightest of guidance during his day shifts, as did his father growing

up. He longs to be with his family while afloat; yet also longs for his brotherhood while at home. Freedom is his harbor; his final destination is yet to be determined.

Drexel's experiences of his childhood in the country, work on the dairy farm, life in the military, connection to nature, heritage, and family, his days as a police officer, and

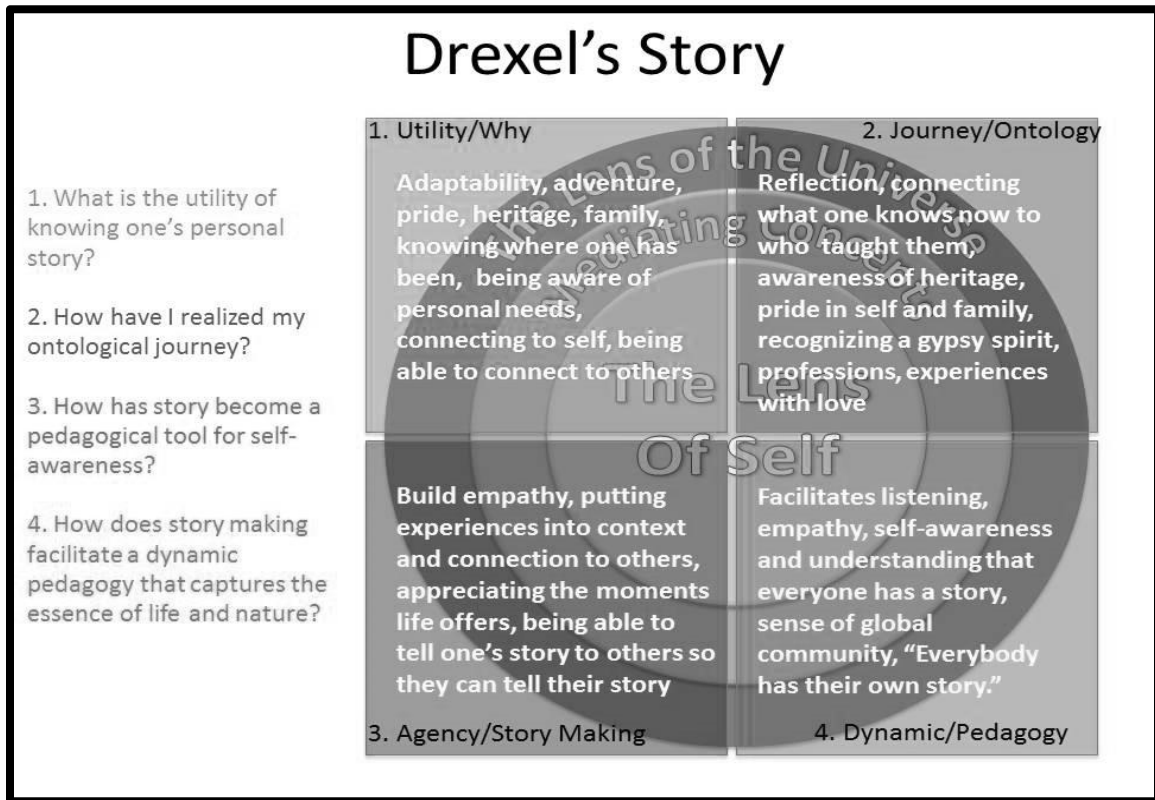


Figure 30. Analysis of Drexel's Story

now as a towboater, have provided an eclectic dimension to how he views the world (Figure 30). The adaptability he has cultivated comes from the power of his own story. He knows his story. He shares his heritage, pride in his family and experiences from his own background, *I'm really proud of the people I come from*. He has come to know where he has been, his travels, his adventures, his moments of reflection that begin with, *Growing up we . . .* These reflections of past are the utility of his story (Quadrant 1), the ability to connect past to present, his context with others. *So I tell my story to a lot of*

people, where I come from. He uses story as a tool to teach others. In his military life, he taught combat, as a police officer he taught legality, and now as a towboat, he teaches deckhands the trade. “By reflecting on the way stories form the fabric of our lives, we can begin to appreciate the insights that stories might yield into our situation as an educator” (Doecke, 2013, p. 12). Story has agency and power. It not only holds within itself our personal strength, but the words we share have their own equal power. “To see yourself as a storyteller is to plump yourself in the midst of the social world of the classroom, alive to everything that is going on there. It is also to be conscious of the fact that you are only one storyteller amongst many, that everyone in the classroom could tell a different story about what is happening, as together you renew your world each day” (Doecke, 2013, p. 17).

Drexel uses his story, which contains a myriad of contexts, to adapt to conversations, to relate, to build empathy and connect to others with whom he interacts and navigates the world. *Honestly, I think the world would do better if people just took time to sit down and listen to everybody’s story when they meet them. Everybody’s got a story. And, everybody wants to share their story honestly. I think people are just scared.*

Story making, for Drexel, facilitates a dynamic pedagogy in times of war, working crime scenes and now amidst the sea working with other merchant marines from across the lands (Quadrant 4). His story and his ability to share his experiences of country living, surviving off of the land during meager times, and connecting himself to those he meets has helped him build a sense of brotherhood with his co-workers. *We are a different type of family out here on the boat.* In Drexel’s story, his towboat family developed from their shared experiences and the relationship they established while at

sea. “The relationship with others is at the core of live oral storytelling. It is not a lone experience; there must be tellers and listeners. In education this cultivates relationality and learning communities” (Phillips, 2013, p. ii).

But the ease of story sharing came with time, reflection and being courageous enough to share. *I think people are scared to tell their story.* Drexel speaks profoundly to the ability to step outside of the world’s dispositions, the perceptions easily rendered onto another by surface level observations. *I think we get so caught up on seeing people for who they are now. You see somebody on a towboat and think, ‘oh he’s just towboat trash, come from a towboat trash family.’ We judge people on what we see at that moment and we don’t really learn their stories.* Drexel connects his personal journey to those steps that his father, his father’s father, and generations before him that have led the legacy of leadership in the family. (Quadrant 2). Even his mother’s love of the ocean connects to his own soul, *she’s attracted to it and I guess I got that from her, because I now work offshore and I’ve never been happier.* But knowing his own story, he also attributes his desire for adventure to his own ‘gypsy soul’ which has led him down several paths in professions and love. He journeys.

I think stories allow us to realize the connections we have without just assuming we know somebody based on their clothing, or their race, or whatever. Story breeds empathy. It allows one to put one’s self into the context of another’s life. “Listeners create meanings applicable to their lives and experiences. The nature of story and storytelling thus allows listeners to form multiple possible meanings” (Phillips, 2013, p. ii). Storying one’s own life allows for a place that is welcoming and takes away the fear someone may have to share their life with another (Quadrant 3); it allows for the thought

that, “story triggers different meanings for different people in different contexts at different times” (Phillips, 2013, p. iii).

Drexel’s Reflection

I would like to take a moment to thank you for asking for my story. I know that it may be a bit untraditional and even a bit "country bumpkin" compared to what most people are used to, but I hope I have given you some insight as to what story telling means to me. As for me, telling my story brought back memories that I cherish and love to share. I realize that people stereotype most Arkansans as backwoods hillbillies with little to offer the civilized world but I offer this, you will be hard pressed to find another group of people who struggle so hard day to day and yet, will offer to feed you the last bit of food they possess. In Arkansas, when we say “y’all come on back anytime”, we truly mean it.

As for where my journey will lead me, I cannot say for certain. The only certainty I can offer is no matter where my travels lead, I will always carry the love of my family with me in my heart and I will always share my story in the hopes that they may share theirs.

From somewhere on the water,

Drexel

Dr. Drakeson’s Story

I think being in that emotional sort of transition, and with what I’ve been through, that was a pivotal part of my life. I then went off to college and was more or less alone. I think having those emotions and still having to do the, what I thought was the diagnostic part of the education of it; I guess I’m able to keep that dichotomy. And then, I met that

one professor and learned how they co-exist I was a lot more at peace with it. Then, Dr. Drakeson paused, as if bridging the chasm of those thoughts, deepening his own understanding of self, once again.

Dr. Drakeson, M.D. is an Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at a leading children's hospital. His shared office resides in the educational annex of the facility. *We went with the couch instead of desk space*, explained Dr. Drakeson as he greeted me into his shared office for the interview. As a former principal, I could relate to the decision. Long nights being spent at the school for board meetings, having to stay after hours for extra-curricular games that went into overtime, having the school open for tutoring or additional activities on the weekends, made me long for the option of a couch in my office to sneak in a quick rest.

Although a subtlety of the interview experience, the couch was a symbol of the dichotomous nature by which the doctor lives his life between the worlds of narration and diagnostics, a life that makes decisions from both the heart and science; one that parallels the concept that a duality of life exists. *There's always the question as to why I became a doctor. There's the answer, but it might not be the 'professional' answer. You see, I was in fifth grade playing on a playground and I remember seeing a kid that couldn't play because he had end stage renal disease; he looked miserable. That kind of got me thinking that I'd probably want to help other kids when I grow up.*

Reflecting upon his childhood, Dr. Drakeson reasoned through his decision to become a doctor by attributing it to his childhood experiences: growing up with an alcoholic father, a mother who was, *not the most stable minded individual*, and seeing that fifth grade child unable to play. *My brother and I were very close and took care of*

each other. So, I've always felt 'family', or at least the feeling of brotherly camaraderie, with the childhood memories that I have. Having had that sense of brotherhood, and the experience of having to raise one another, Dr. Drakeson's lens of being an independent thinker was emerging. I guess I was more of an active, or more of an independent learner, rather than just letting the school system just sort of preach to me. But, in regards to timing, and being aware of this independence, I wish I would have gotten to that point sooner, I would have gotten a lot more out of school, if I'd just gotten there sooner.

The qualities of freedom and having the space to think abstractly enhanced Dr. Drakeson's self-awareness. With the option of being able to choose biological and physical science courses, versus a traditional pre-med program, Dr. Drakeson had freedom, the space to think and an opportunity to explore new learning . . . it was during that experience, that he met a professor who challenged his mind, his personal construct of knowledge, and made him rethink his existing paradigm of learning. *I remember in my moral issues course it was really when things started to take hold and that was the first educator that really just didn't care about the grade, you know. He would say, 'Whether you understand, or you are growing at all, that's all I really care about-is if you're growing. If you want a grade and you care about a number, that's fine. But, I don't think you'll get very far if that's all you're caring about.'*

Dr. Drakeson did not choose to use pictures to facilitate sharing his story; instead, he made reference to pivotal moments in his life, meaningful experiences, feelings, and literature that constructed the way he thinks today. *And as the semester is going by we have other things that we are reading, but he (the professor) was always*

going back to the book, *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad (2013). Dr. Drakeson reflected on the experience of reading this piece of literature, *It's all about searching for truth*. And then the reflection led to a connection, which led to telling a story about how that moment of self-awareness continually impacts his pedagogy and how he teaches resident doctors today. *It (the meaning of the book) kind of turned that direction towards my thinking on interactions. What's real? The surface is hardly ever the reality. Of course, it is still the subtext behind all of our decisions and thoughts. I guess I use that today with not just myself, but when I'm teaching others that, illness is just the surface. It's what most people, especially families, and the people that are suffering from it, focus on, but the reality is, there is going to be a huge change.*

For Dr. Drakeson, story has been a tool for adaptation. An illness exists; therefore, change is happening. It is a way for a family to communicate where they were (before the illness), an empathetic means for him to communicate the state of the condition (the present status of the illness) and a tool for adaptation to lead the patient and the family down the path the diagnosis will lend itself to (the future, whether it be a cure, a lifelong physical change, or possibility of death).

From the book, *The Wounded Story Teller: Body, Illness and Ethics* by Arthur Frank (1995), Dr. Drakeson resonated with to the influence of the literature in his practice today. *One message that always stuck with me, and that I try to pass on, is that when families or anyone is wounded or injured, we have this sort of arrogant or egotistical view that we are on this path of life, it's the one we want to continue on and if I get, if something horrible happens to me, you know, I'm going to get back on that life. The Wounded Story Teller is all about listening to other people's stories and how*

they've adapted, and that adaptation, is really just understanding, that you are no longer on that path any more. You are on this new path. If you refuse to accept that, you will never truly heal. So, in talking with interns and residents who, on the whole, are very much interested in the passing grade, and medicine is really more just memorization and pattern recognition as far as the diagnostic component of it, but in patient interaction, family interaction, if you just focus on the elements and, you know, say, more or less lie to them and say, 'Everything is going to be back to the way it used to be.' I don't think you are really helping them. It's a big, dose of mortality when anyone gets an illness. If you're able to transition them to accepting the fact of the illness and pushing them along that other path or at least showing them that that path exists, mentally, they are better off.

There is a certain level of maturity and responsibility that one must have when utilizing narrative. For Dr. Drakeson, story (or anecdotes as he referred to it) is a delicate balance of empathy and science. The narrative of the situation allows his residents to connect to the family and keep the interactions personal. *It's kind of a slippery slope with the residents because if you start using anecdote for situations they tend to ignore the evidence and just go with their story which I think is the wrong thing to do. I think the story should keep you alert and aware at all times, but certainly shouldn't guide your decisions like on the medical side of it.*

Dr. Drakeson pointed out that story can sometimes help sort out information, bridge the situation with the family, but, at the same time, it could be an outlier. *My purpose (for using anecdotes) is to get my residents to connect a little and to understand a little more; but again, anecdotes can be dangerous.*

The ability to reason between the abstract concept of something such as empathy, and the science of diagnostics, is a holistic lens that was developed early for Dr. Drakeson, not by means of a school system only, but also by way of personal interactions. Having had a private elementary and middle school experience, Dr. Drakeson found his public high school days to be a lot less challenging academically, allowing more time for personal relationships. During high school, Dr. Drakeson dated a girl whose parents were Israeli Jews. His parents were Christian. Her parents did not approve of the relationship. *After high school, they shipped her off to Israel, and I haven't seen her since, but that was a big sort of emotional upheaval. Why did this happen? I don't really understand. Just that question, all of this is part of the path that people take. I don't get it.*

Dr. Drakeson said, as he reflected on the experience of the lost love. *It didn't make any sense. If two people are happy and whether or not it's high school and the relationship might not last, odds are it probably wouldn't, but still, it's the idea behind it.* That experience, where his heart, or his lifeworld, countered those rules constructed by the systemsworld, was a pivotal moment in Dr. Drakeson's life. *I think being in that emotional sort of transition, and with what I've been through, that was a pivotal part of my life. I then went off to college and was more or less alone. I think having those emotions and still having to do the, what I thought was the diagnostic part of the education of it; I guess I'm able to keep that dichotomy. And then, I met that one professor and learned how they co-exist I was a lot more at peace with it.*

Dr. Drakeson's Story Discussed

The rhythmic sound of the audio kinetic sculpture by George Rhoades fades into the distance, as the hall leads to the annex containing the offices of those in the pediatrics residency program. Within the hospital, displays of art paint the stories of those who have had personal connections to the facility. Within the offices, however, texts, technology and laboratory reports paint the picture of diagnostics. Yet occupying the space, are the vessels that navigate the daily dichotomy of the artistry of personal stories and their connection to the analytical side of medical diagnostics, the symbiotic force that brings together the worlds of science and soul – the doctors.

Dr. Drakeson's story is one that speaks to the heart as well as the mind (Figure 31). With a recognition of independence and brotherly camaraderie, based on his experiences in private and then public school while growing up, lessons learned in life, of love, and within academia, Dr. Drakeson provides a perspective of fluidity, adaptability, responsibility, and cautions us to avoid presuming that our narrative serves as a meta-narrative for others' lives.

Dr. Drakeson's Story

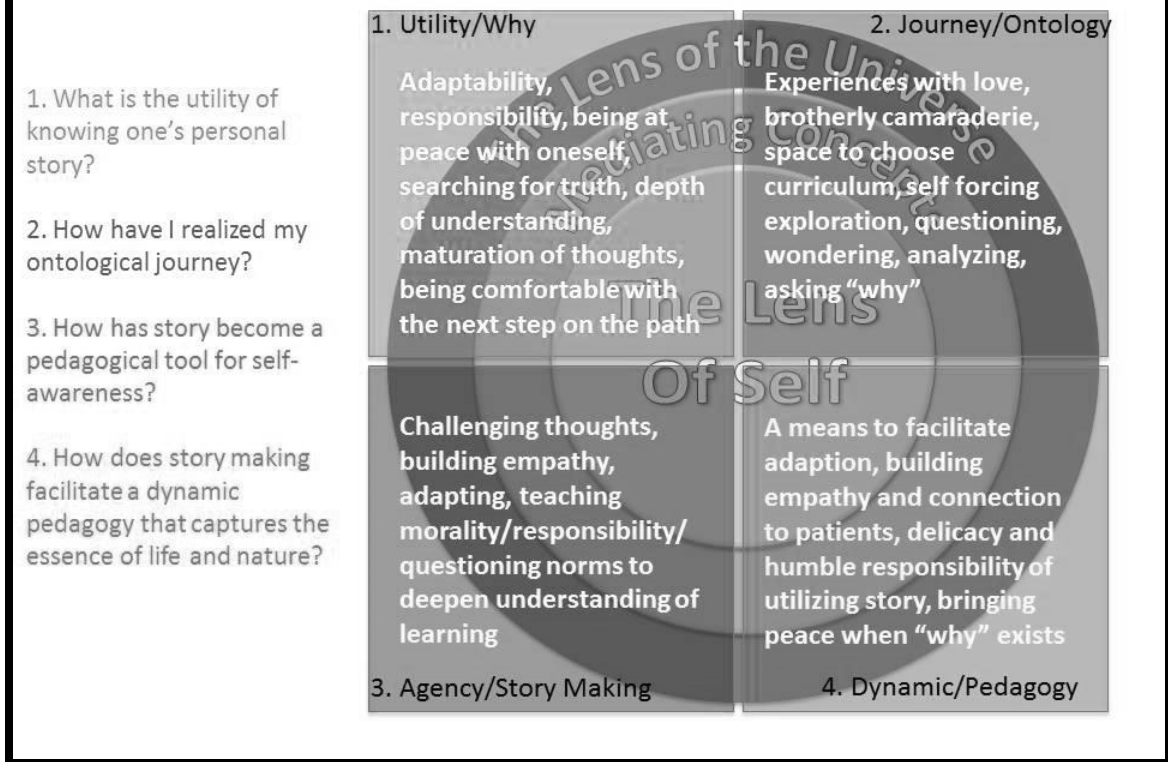


Figure 31. Analysis of Dr. Drakeson's Story

I think we grow if we force ourselves to explore. Dr. Drakeson, (Quadrant 2) reflected upon his days of being introduced to new and varied literature in college. The dialogue he shared with his peers and professors, the freedom to explore with the mind, the space for creativity, the ability to choose his own coursework allowed for a paradigm shift; a reasoning of self, if you will, from a mind's eye of his past thoughts, to a new one which juxtaposed a feeling of peace with a questioning soul.

Life plays itself into existence. Life is a tinkerer; it experiments and tries out many possible solutions. It is only we humans who labor under the terrifying burden of 'getting it right the first time.' Life's creativity and experimentation are unstoppable. (Wheatley, 1998, p. 26)

For Dr. Drakeson, the moment of creativity, experimentation, and taking ownership of his own learning, happened in college, *when I became a more active learner, rather than just let the school system just sort of preach to me from this height (he lifts his hand above his head). I would have gotten a lot more out of school if I'd just gotten there sooner.*

Freire described this as the “banking model”:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the ‘banking’ concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (Freire, 2000, p. 72)

The inquisition, the need for a continuum of learning, and a search for ‘why’, led Dr. Drakeson through a process of reflection on his past learning and a quest for new knowledge. His self-awareness of that moment, the point of praxis when Dr. Drakeson took action towards his own learning is what Paulo Freire referred to as ‘liberating pedagogy’ (Freire, 2000). “For Freire, liberating pedagogy has the fundamental need of

the person to be free for individual and collective creation as its starting point, as well as the need to inquire and question” (Liambas & Kaskaris, 2012, p. 187). One must be curious of themselves, to find their identity and relate to the identity of others.

“What if curriculum was a conversation?” (Bitterberg, 2012, p. 28). After a group of educators engaged in a conversation inspired by the work of Maxine Greene entitled, *Releasing the Imagination* (1995), they began to reflect, interpret, converse, challenge one another and broaden their perspective.

My coworkers started thinking about our conversations when they weren’t at work, found quotes in other books, and started to interpret things that, before, would have gone unnoticed. They saw many perspectives where, perhaps, there was only one a few weeks before. (Bitterberg, 2012, p. 29)

The implications of the study altered their thinking about the design of the school and provided the educators with a, “sense of possibility” to imagine, converse, explore, and rethink education. What if we opened our narratives and the narratives of those students in our classes to interpretation? What if we let students pick their curriculum earlier instead of later? What if curriculum was story? What if pedagogy was an in depth study of life, both of ours and of others? What if life was pedagogy?

Dr. Drakeson was the product of both private and public school, but the inquisition of life, the need to question systematic norms was not a product of only formal educational experiences; but, also an informal education where lessons of life and love were taught. His heart, just like his mind, questioned the norms by which he had lived up to that point, grappling with the mediating concepts of love, religion, societal norms, heritage and relationships.

Informal (non-institutional) learning – represents the natural and integral part of everyday life. Contrary to formal and non-formal learning (education), it is not necessarily intentional, and learners neither are fully aware nor recognize how it contributes to their knowledge and skills. (Krystoň, M., 2013, p. 2)

When Dr. Drakeson's high school relationship ended abruptly because of religious differences, his internal quest for knowledge as to "why" began. The need to find the answer was at first unsettling for Dr. Drakeson until he met *that one professor, and learned how they (the dichotomy of emotion and diagnostics) could co-exist; and, I was a lot more at peace with it.*

It's all about searching for truth said Dr. Drakeson in reference to the story presented in *Heart of Darkness*. Story is a tool of adaptability, a means to communicate the path of life to patients and their families; a vehicle driven by empathy and directed by medical evidence (Quadrant 4). He attributes that piece of literature to a time in his life when he matured in thought, when the depth of his own understanding began to unravel the subtexts surrounding the surface realities. He makes his residents aware that illness is just on the surface, *it's what most people, especially families and the people that are suffering from focus on, but the reality is there is going to be a huge change.*

Understanding the story of patients and their families, along with the knowledge of the medicine, is a tool of empathy doctors can use to communicate the path a diagnosis lends itself. Story becomes a tool for narrative therapy; a means to write an element of empowerment into the days ahead by grasping onto the pieces of a past reality they choose to exist (Mullet, Akerson & Turman, 2013). Regardless of whether the immediate challenge is death, healing, or adjustment in lifestyle, a change is about to

happen – a doctor’s ability to story this, can facilitate adaptation. *You are on this new path. If you refuse to accept that, you will never truly heal and if all you do is focus on the elements (the diagnostic components only), and you know, say more or less lie to them and say, ‘Everything is going to be back to the way it used to be.’ I don’t think you are really helping them.* Story in this case, allows the natural processes of mortality to be taught in an empathetic way to not only the patient, but to all of those connected to the patient.

Truth has many layers and narrative helps us makes senses of our multilayered reality. We live a personal narrative that is grounded in our past experience, and embodied in our present. As such, it filters what we see and how we interpret events. (Mullet, Akerson & Turman, 2013, p. 72)

The narration of life, and the path that life has taken, allow for an empathetic transition that is reasoned with the forces of science, nature and heart. This concept holds true in public education.

At one level, story is a mode of knowing that captures in a special fashion the richness and the nuances of meaning in human affairs . . . From this perspective, story is a distinctive mode of explanation characterized by an intrinsic multiplicity of meanings. (Carter, 1993, p. 6)

Story weaves the past into both the present situation and the future implications with the multitude of perspectives and constructs of knowledge found in the conversation. “Story is at the center of this constructive process. To understand thinking, then, it is necessary to find the story that structures an individual's model or theory of events” (Carter, 1993,

p. 7). To live is to story, to story is to teach with empathy; having your soul connected to the soul of another.

The use of narration to build empathy comes with maturation, responsibility and a level of intuition not derived from texts or the formalities of education; it comes by means of the collective of others' stories, personal experience and an awareness of one's own knowledge of self. It comes with the self-actualization that everyone has a story.

"None of us are to be found in sets of tasks or lists of attributes; we can be known only in the unfolding of our unique stories within the context of everyday events" (Paley, 1990, p. xii). Dr. Drakeson teaches the relevance of story to his residents as a means to connect personally to them and help them understand their situations so they can help bridge the reality of a patient's condition with the future implications of the road they face ahead (Quadrant 3). It is a way to teach a delicate balance of heart and medicine to residents.

On the whole, I don't see the maturity in residents that I would like. They've just been professional students all their lives and they've never really had any outside experience . . . I don't see the real story building in their life. So, it makes it difficult to break through that frame of mind because I don't have much time with them and there's nothing I can do to expedite progress. So, my purpose for using anecdotes is to get them to connect a little and to understand a little more; but, again, anecdotes can be dangerous. I don't want an antidote to drive me.

In the scope of teaching and learning:

Stories convey the multiplicity of ways actions and situations intertwine and thus accurately represent the complex demands of teaching. At the same time, they can confuse and frustrate novices, who lack the situated frames within which such

stories are interpretable at all, who often presuppose that one learns best from clear and direct statements that are true, and who normally have well-developed conceptions of what it means to teach, conceptions that may or may not match the view represented in a particular story (Carter, 1993, p.10).

There is a readiness factor, a level of holistic reasoning that must be developed in both the student and the teacher for story to be an effective pedagogical tool; a tool that encompasses empathy, courage, knowledge of context, history, connection to others, experiences, and an ability to see a multitude of perspectives while also understanding the construct of one's own knowledge. These encompassed factors are, as mediating concepts that drive the analytical process, the ability to think, reason, listen and narrate an experience. For Dr. Drakeson, having a lens of self-awareness, one that encompassed the reflection of times when he had to negotiate spaces of old and new learning (choosing his own curriculum, the dialogue with the professor that challenged his thoughts, the unsettled 'why' of a relationship's abrupt ending) all contributed to an ability to guide interns in the newness of analytically balancing science with story.

In a medical study conducted by MacLeod, Parkin, Pullon and Robertson (2003), it was reasoned that, "The way medical students learn to care is influenced by their socialization as they pass through undergraduate and postgraduate training" (p. 51). In the introduction of their study, they noted that some doctors had "difficulty adjusting to their own emotional responses" when asked to identify how they learned to care. There was "an impersonal dimension to the illness narrative and it resulted in growing distance between doctors and patients" (p. 51). The study concluded that "caring physicians" exhibited qualities of both receptivity (ability to process diagnostic data) and

responsibility (being able to put into action the medicine needed while maintaining an ability to show empathy to those they are treating). The study utilized a methodology of reflection to gather data and it led to five themes. Of those themes, students' personal reflections while working with patients facing death, led them to a deeper understanding of themselves, brought out the emotional element of the experience, and allowed them to visualize future experiences. "Competent practitioners have the capacity to generate new ways of caring by reflecting on their practice and modifying their way or working" (p. 55). This competence, whether a teacher of medical students, other teachers, or students within a public school classroom, comes from the understanding of self, first.

Dr. Drakeson's Reflection

My emotional reflection on our interview is a mixture of happiness and guilt. After reviewing what you wrote and comparing it with my own thoughts, I'm happy with a lot of those choices that have been made to get me where I am today. To me, it seems that connecting with people is difficult. During a time of personal or family crisis, isolation and misunderstanding will only complicate healing. Getting on the right path requires that all of us involved with a person's/family's care identify on a human level. Narrative, as I see it, reminds me that we are all equal and that we deserve help from our fellow person.

Just the other day, one of the residents performed a lecture on narrative and asked us to write about a difficult interaction with a family. The first time through our eyes, then through theirs. I feel guilty because I realize that I'm not doing all that I could. I feel that I still allow arrogance to guide some of my thinking and it ends up making a complex situation worse. I hope to take away from this experience the

understanding that in order to be compassionate one must always work towards that goal.

- Dr. Drakeson

Ellen's Story

“Not only did she love me dearly as I also loved her, but she taught me to be on watch all the time because you don't know unless you're looking for it, what talents lie within. If you don't expect to find these gifts, then you might miss the right time to catch that them and then you might lose the opportunity to see them. She didn't have to notice that I was playing the songs. She didn't have to listen closely enough to know that I was picking out the songs she had taught that day. She didn't have to invest extra time when she already had forty students; she chose to give me several lessons every week, as she did all through my high school years. And so, because she saw that ability in me, I had many opportunities to use my music in every aspect of my life.” Ellen looked at me, and I at her - the melodies of our stories harmonized.

Ellen, a former public school administrator, sat on her couch reflecting upon her past before guiding me around her home on a journey of reflection. Her father was an educator and her mother worked as a CEO at a hospital. Both had, *quite the expectation for all of us, that we would always give and do our very best.* Ellen paused as she reflected on that expectation and said, *I think it's helped me get through tough times and been a major force to become independent.* Although the hard work attitude built internal strength for her and her siblings, Ellen has had to learn to enjoy life because, *it's very hard for us to slow down enough to take a deep breath, regroup and enjoy where we are in the moment because we are always trying to create and get to the next*

project or event. Over the years, Ellen has come to realize, that the need to be the best and look the best is not always the most important factor. In fact she has come to understand that even in times of struggle, a façade of greatness, often *promotes a life of where it's not okay to let personal flaws show.* She has learned that sometimes being less than perfect, is in fact, showing strength. She pauses again, as if balancing the worlds of reality with image and bridging the chasm of pain with the strength of self-awareness.

I realize now that constant unrest with the current status is a skill that is not always the best tool to use. There were times growing up when I had a rough night at home and the next morning, I was expected to get up and go to school looking like nothing happened, even though my eyes were about swollen shut, and I really just wanted to find a place to hide. But, I was a good student and enjoyed school so much that I wouldn't think of not going or being somewhere else, but I probably just needed someplace to vent, let down and say, 'You know what? I had a rough night last night.' And it wasn't really my choice.

Ellen's father, after serving in a branch of the military, obtained his education degree - a decision that caused conflict because he was not part of the family business. Her mother was valedictorian of her high school class, a drum majorette, has a creative spirit and is an amazing writer. Despite not having a college degree, her mother achieved professional success as a CEO of a hospital. Even though her childhood had memories that caused her heart pain, Ellen carried a smile—as was expected.

When Ellen was a young adult, her father died and the event was traumatic. Years later her mother remarried and Ellen learned, *Love is possible; however,*

sometimes it just doesn't come around the first time. Her step-father's love bonded the family and his acceptance of others was his legacy.

Stationed around her house, Ellen had collected pictures and memorabilia to represent stages in her life. The first vignette was a collection of family photos. With each picture she shared, Ellen would say, *and what I learned from xxx was . . .* She picked up a picture of her siblings. *I have a picture of my siblings on each side of me (Figure 32). I gave copies of the photo to them once and said, 'You were hanging onto*



Figure 32. Ellen with Siblings

me then, and I need you to hang on to me forever.'" Then, there was a picture of her mother's parents. *My grandparents taught us to live the good life - to be happy, to love each other, and to keep a strong faith.*

As we walked into the piano room, accolades adorned the walls, and from the window, sun gleamed onto the keys as if whispering for her to play the melodies of her soul. *When I was four, I stayed with a relative sometimes, Suzie. She had a full studio. I would say she had thirty to forty students each year, and she taught piano each day to the older students or adults and after school she taught to the younger into the evening. When I was there, she would finish her teaching and I would go in there and crawl up*

on the piano bench, and I would start playing some of the tunes that I'd heard her students play. So, she said, 'It's okay if you learn to play the piano by ear, but because you're reading it's time for you to learn to start reading music and to learn to play by note.' So, twice a week she would give me a 30 minute lesson. Although Suzie taught Ellen the techniques of piano each day, how to read hymns and play from piano books, she taught Ellen to recognize her own gifts and to find strength in herself (Figure 33).



Figure 33. Great Grandmother Suzie

Ellen had the opportunity to attend a renowned liberal arts college, but decided to study piano at a university near her hometown. *I felt quite honored and I thought, 'you know what? I was put there for a reason.'* From church performances, weddings, school recitals, funerals, graduations, the piano brought many opportunities to Ellen's life. *The other thing for me is the piano is my communication tool. I have been told many times that when I play, the music just talks, and I think that's because I feel certain that it's not my spirit, but His spirit that comes through me when I play and I think that's what connects me the music. . . His spirit.*

In her later years of high school, before going to college, Ellen met her high school choir director. *He came to town and asked 'who in the town are the students who need to be in choir?'* He heard about my ability to play the piano, and he called me, and

he made an appointment to come meet with me and my family. He had heard that I was quite the accompanist. I wasn't in the choral program and he said he would like me to come and try-out for an accompanist position. So, I did. I went to the high school. I took some music that I could play, and he had several choir anthems that he wanted me to sight read. We hit it off. Both her high school choir director and Suzie saw Ellen's gift and became lifelong mentors for her.

From the piano room, we went back to the dining room table (Figure 34).



Figure 34. Scrapbooked Memories

Displayed on the side opposite from the collection of family photos, were scrapbooks of memories from students Ellen had taught over the years. As she shared their stories, she stopped at one picture in particular of a girl she taught voice lessons to, who now works for a performance art program. *You know she represents thousands of students who taught me. We always think as teachers or educators that we're so in charge of the instruction. We are so in charge of the education that we forget that a teacher is always a student and a student, is always a teacher. They taught me so much.*

After working with so many students and having had a childhood of keeping your best face forward, Ellen understood the concept that, *students are not always what*

you see, so take time to ask. I was in a training one time on how to desegregate data through test scores, and finally somebody just raised their hand. As we were looking at how students responded and trying to determine why they would respond that way, finally somebody just asked, 'Did you ever think about asking the student to tell you why they answered the question that way? Why did you choose that answer?' Because in that moment of finding out what process they used to determine what they thought was the best answer, we create a great teachable moment. Our response could be, 'Well, I understand now why you answered it that way. Let's go back and look at how you arrived at this answer, because maybe there were some errors along the way in what I taught you. Let me teach you in a different way.' We fail to do that. We're always in a rush to just get the lesson taught and get to the end of the lesson or get to the end of the period that we forget to stop the lesson and say, 'Students, you tell me, where are we? What have I not taught you?'

Ellen was once one of those teachers who believed of her students, *'You should have already learned this. You mean you've arrived at this grade level and you don't know that?!'* Then one day, a colleague at the same middle school, said, *'Did you ever think that maybe it's your expectations for students are so high that even when they're really doing well, you're not satisfied?'* It was at that moment, and in that time of reflection, she remembered her childhood experience, her desire to make her parents proud, her parents' expectations to give it her best, yet feeling the childhood heartache when she felt she wasn't her best. This reflection from the past caused Ellen to take a step back and reflect on her colleagues' feedback. That night, she looked into the mirror of her pedagogical style and realized she was a reflection of her own story; in

that moment she was mindful that she was imposing upon her students the same sense of *don't give less than your best* her parents had imposed on her. *When I went back to class I taught differently and broke the lessons into attainable chunks of learning and discovered what they knew as compared to I wanted them to know. I made a plan to close the gap. I was so happy with the progress. I didn't talk about "those kids" anymore.* It was that year that Ellen felt the utility of reflection in the teaching process.

While still at the dining room table, Ellen graced the frame of what she called a *transition picture* in her life – a picture of her graduation with a master's degree

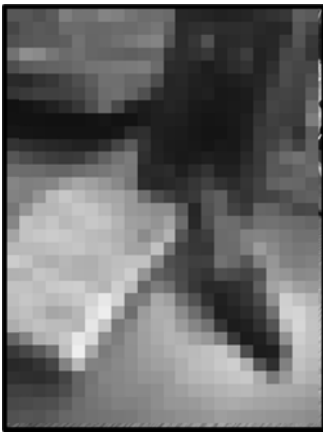


Figure 35. Master's Degree

(Figure 35). With a full time job, a family, and a lengthy evening commute to finish the endeavor, Ellen accomplished the accolade. *I want to tell you what I was thinking as well as what I was feeling that day. I had watched the doctoral students be hooded, and I sat there and I thought that was the coolest milestone in those people's lives, a great accomplishment, dedication, perseverance. They ran the race. They finished. And, I just thought that whole ceremony was so meaningful, with such deep meaning, represented a lot of things, and I thought, 'Someday, I want to do that too.'* So, I am in a doctoral program. *I have finished all my course work up to the point of dissertation writing.*

She set the framed picture back down on the table with reverence, hope and knowing more was to come of its story. Granted the picture captured the moment in time that she received her degree; the meaning was layered in the story that led up to that moment - the story of “transition,” a change in mind, thought and perspective. A transition that can only be understood through the storying of the moments that led up to the image of the degree in hand; the moments she shared with her mentors along the way.

He walks in the door of the classroom and comes over and just slaps his hands down on the table, on my table, and he bends over and he looks me straight in the eye and he says, “Are you an ethical person?” Ellen described her first encounter with a professor in her master’s program that had a major impact on her life. Being of a faith-based background, Ellen was caught off guard and speechless and replied *I think so*. Over the years, this professor, became a close mentor for Ellen. He challenged her thinking. They shared a passion for writing, reading, and would talk about life, goals and how to overcome life’s struggles. *When he passed away, I really felt I’d lost greatly and deeply, but I haven’t forgotten what he taught me; and I haven’t forgotten to work on my writing or to enjoy life. Just write and read. The more you read the better writer you are.*

Ellen’s mentors taught with empathy. *You know, I learned from my mentors that you have to look, you have to listen, you have to notice what’s going on, you have to find the talent in people, nurture it, mentor it, encourage it, pat it on the back, and yes, even look the other way occasionally if that person just needs a day of rest.*

Learning to live life, rather than jump from one project to the next has been a skill that Ellen has had to force herself to learn. After setting the scrapbooks aside and setting the framed graduation picture back on the dining room table, we walked together

into the kitchen where she had a collection of pictures gathered representing her learned *adventurous* spirit. She had several pictures of her ski trips, a white water rafting excursion and a trip overseas where she got to meet a family where everything they ate

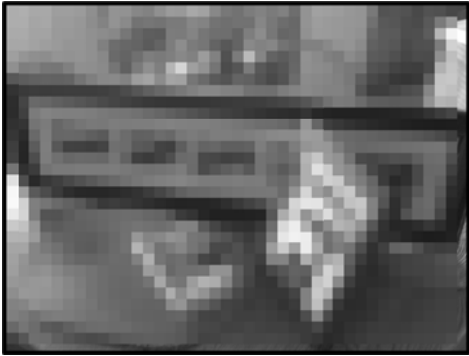


Figure 36. Learn to Play

or wore was something they raised (Figure 36). *My travels have taught me to stop work.* Her travels taught her to live, take risks, and be free in mind, body and soul.

Finally, Ellen walked me back to the beginning of our tour, back to the piano room, where we began our reflective journey. There on the wall, was a faded framed article from a newspaper of a charter school she once worked at. She chuckled and said, *Well, you know, most cases alternative in most people's mind means bad, because the traditional way's not working for those students, so this is not going to be good. We should have said that it was an opportunity for students to have choice.*

Ellen was the principal that helped found the charter school which was designed for students who were willing and committed to being independent learners, responsible for their own learning, a place where teachers were facilitators of education, a place where students could fit (Figure 37).

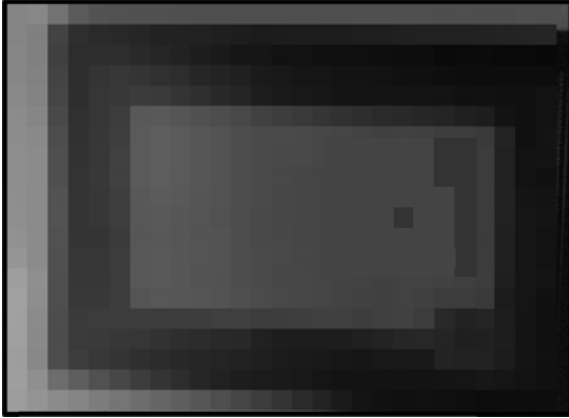


Figure 37. The Charter School Story

Often times in music there is intended dissonance and there's beauty in the resolution. The tension brings peace. If major composers used this technique, if music majors are encouraged to build this tension and release in part writing classes, then perhaps we could do the same thing in teaching. We need to have lessons that create moments of dissonance, where things are challenged, not only for the students' thinking, but for educators to stay aligned with critical issues. What are we doing? Why are we teaching this? You know, why is this important and is it important? If it's dissonance caused by something that just doesn't fit, and we've done everything to try to make it fit then maybe there's a reason it's not fitting. Maybe it doesn't belong. It might fit better over here, but not in this particular setting. I think we should cause dissonance in the classroom and then say, 'Students, what are you going to do about it?'

The school was founded on the principle of servitude; an effective tool of leadership. Each student had to participate in service either by way of community service projects, going into the workplace or job shadowing. *The students really liked working together and having opportunity to engage deeply in a project. They are so creative. You know, sometimes we just box the students in until they're not creative. We*

have to find and validate the talents and give many opportunities for the students to develop them on their own. That's what we did at this school. The student took ownership of his/her learning.

Even though the charter school was part of the state accountability system, they started with story instead of data. *We provided instruction and support to our students. I think that school was on the front edge of a new kind of thinking. All schools don't have to be the same. It doesn't have to look the same for every student. Students can demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of ways if we just build the capacity to let them take ownership.* Each student had a story, and during their initial interview for admission, the student would share their story and explain how they felt how the school could help their journey. Over the years, the school successfully served students that were behind on credits, felt isolated in a traditional high school, were close to dropping out, were advanced and seeking early graduation, were connected to work versus extra-curricular activities, were parents, were homeless, or were seeking an independent learning style.

Instead of the student being outside of the circle, we made the student the middle of the circle. Students had voice in school improvement strategies. Ellen shared the story of Franco, a student who enrolled at the school after being in the States only six months. She states that Franco is now working on his Master's degree at an Ivy League University. *He didn't have command of the English language, but he was so smart that with our teachers' help and his commitment, he mastered it rather quickly and to think that today he's been a college teacher and now he's going to complete his master's at a prestigious university. He has such a zest for learning. When I saw him recently, he told*

me that it was the way this school taught and what he learned and how he was supported and encouraged that really made a difference in his life today. His application essay to college was noted by one of the readers to be one of the most outstanding thesis papers that he had read.

The charter school not only made a difference in the lives of the students, but the students there, the culture of the school, and the experience Ellen had, as campus principal during those years, brought a new awareness, a depth of perspective to her own journey. *It wasn't just the relationships we had, but it was the influence they had on my life.*

Ellen now guides principals, superintendents and teachers in professional development opportunities. Although her network is a greater capacity, she attributes her successes in life to the development of relationships by sharing with one another their story- especially, the stories of the charter school. *It's about making connections person to person; person to cohort, cohort to an entire network of colleagues. I think I've always thought the first thing I need to do in my teaching is to build relationships, and the only way to build a relationship is to take a risk by telling something about you to one other person. Never viewed as bragging, but it's received as, 'I'm giving you a piece of the puzzle of my life, do you have a piece of the puzzle in your life where we could connect? Who else could connect to build a stronger network?*

Ellen's Story Discussed

Like warm blankets wrapping the body on a cold winter's night, the framed memories and scrapbooks within Ellen's home provide her with comfort, retreat, safety, and warmth, as her soul reflects upon her life to seek understanding and spiritual

connection of her past, to her existence in the present, and inspiration towards her future aspirations. From the piano room which provides the melody of her life's story, to the wall of professional accolades, the nook where her smiling grandchildren's pictures are displayed, pictures of her adventures, to the scrapbooks that treasure the mementos and pictures of all those who have contributed to her own life, Ellen's home is a reflection of her soul. She walked between the rooms with poise and grace, a mindfulness of her reflective stories - knowing which stories she was ready to tell and which ones she thought I needed to hear. All the while she steps in and out of her story, to the stories of others, how they impacted her life, and how she connects herself back to the worlds of her professional and personal lives. Ellen's story is one of a reflective heart (Figure 38); for reflection is the means by which she has realized her ontological journey.

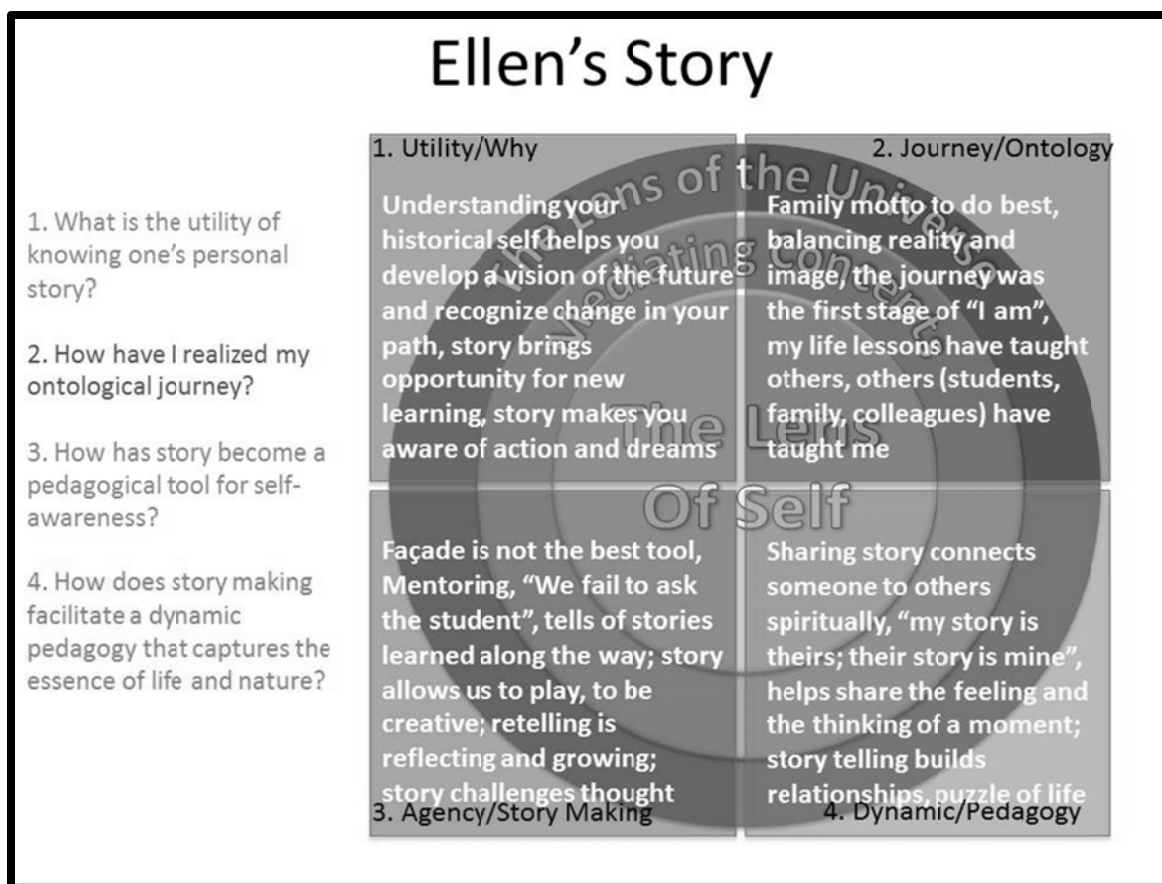


Figure 38. Analysis of Ellen's Story

I want to tell you what I was thinking and feeling that day. Ellen opened the story of her master's graduation ceremony with these words. As she held the picture in hand, I could see her stepping in and out of that moment on stage, and into the moments that led up to her acceptance of the diploma. Her eyes were reminiscing of those that contributed to her story as her words harmonized the tapestry of others in her life (Quadrant 4). According to Mahmud, "Social constructivism sees knowledge as the result of social interaction and language usage, and thus is shared, rather than an individual experience" (al Mahmud, 2013, p. 240). When Ellen walked across the stage to receive her degree, she walked with her great-grandmother Suzie who had a gift for seeing the talents within her. She reached out her hand to accept her diploma knowing she had given her very best

- the quality instilled in her by way of her mother and father. She carried herself with pride, yet humility, knowing there were days of struggle endured (relationships, balancing a full-time job while in school with a family). She walked with honor knowing her story, that moment, was a tribute to her collegiate professors who challenged her thinking, the students who shaped her thinking and her colleagues who shaped her pedagogical style. She was a construct of her own knowledge of the world that she had experienced. And together in that moment, she accepted her degree; a melody of story.

For Ellen, that moment, one she described as a *transition picture* is one that encapsulates a pivotal moment; a moment where she transcends the understanding and context of a singular event to the holistic fitting of historical self to the universal forces. It was a moment that she allowed herself to enjoy and appreciate. Ellen's weakness throughout her years has been to take time to play, *I forget to take time to celebrate and play, because it's very hard for me to just slow down enough and take a breath and regroup and enjoy where I am in the moment because I am always trying to create and get to the next project or event.*

Ellen has lived her life with a separation of worlds: a systems world (her job, responsibilities) and a life world (risk taking adventures, play and family). But during that moment, as she graduated and the picture was snapped as she reached for her diploma, she had woven her worlds together and made play and life a symbiotic melody.

Vygotsky described play as one's ability to, "spontaneously make use of his ability to separate meaning from an object without knowing he is doing it" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 187). For Ellen, she was amidst the reality of graduation; she was physically walking across a stage and receiving a diploma. But, the moment of transcendence, the

“pivot” was the conscious realization, a moment of meaning making, that this was not merely the act of graduating, this was the internalization of achievement, the personification of her parents’ mantra of ‘always do your best.’ “Vygotsky wrote, “This meaning is nothing more than a potential that can only be realized in living speech, and in living speech meaning is only a cornerstone in the edifice of sense (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 187).” When Ellen started her story with, *I want to tell you what I was thinking and feeling that day*. . . she was making meaning of the moment beyond the interaction of receiving a diploma that has now become a framed picture; instead, that moment has now become part of her living speech, her story, her ability to reflect, and her awareness of a self as a collective.

In the making of meaning, we ‘author’ the world. But the ‘I’ is by no means a freewheeling agent, authoring worlds from creative springs within. Rather, the “I” is more like Levi-Strauss’s (1966) *bricoleur*, who builds with preexisting materials. In authoring the world, in putting words to the world that addresses her, the ‘I’ draws upon the languages, the dialects, the words of others to which she has been exposed. (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1996, p. 170)

It was Ellen’s moment, to step out *of* the moment with self-awareness, and realize the grandeur of the experience; it was story as life, life as story - the collective self in action.

Ellen’s confession to weakness, *I forget to take time to celebrate and just play*, is a shared sentiment of those in the field of public education. Wheatley asked a poignant reflective question, “Can you envision what it would feel like to experience life as play?” (Wheatley, 1998, p. 4). Burdened with the timelines of dictated curriculum scope and sequences, state assessments, professional evaluations, report cards, and accountability

standards layered by both federal and state mandate, teachers and administrators by design of the system, educate within the system and lack the space to be creative, to fit the curriculum to the learner - redesign is not an option, play is not part of the story.

Fullan stated:

I am not saying that standards, assessment, curriculum, and professional development are wrong things to do. I am saying that they are seriously incomplete theories of action because they do not get close to what happens in classrooms and school cultures. (Fullan, 2006, p. 6)

Ellen spoke of dissonance, the rethinking of pedagogy, a way to lead with a lens of creativity, unfinishedness, *If it's dissonance caused by something that just doesn't fit, and we've done everything to try to make it fit then maybe there's a reason it's not fitting. Maybe it doesn't belong. It might fit better over here, but in this particular setting. I think we should cause dissonance in the classroom and then say, 'Students, what are you going to do about it?'* She was designing a school around her own learned weakness: play.

As we realized that life plays itself into existence, that we are all the time playing ourselves into new ways of being and doing, we would see that our paths are, in fact, broad open spaces for experimentation. We'd understand that there are no straight lines, no perfectly directed paths to creativity. We'd discard the curse of getting it right the first time. We'd become active tinkerers, experimenting, moving quickly past what doesn't work, moving to the next possibility. Filled with possibility rather than perfection, we might even find ourselves dancing together, moved by a living spirit of discovery and play. We'd also realize that even in the classroom we don't need a clear plan. We need a clear intent--a sense

of direction and purpose. As we played with possibilities, as we took different steps, we'd know that we would discover new abilities. We wouldn't know those abilities ahead of time. We would expect to be surprised by what emerged as the result of our learning activities together. (Wheatley, 1998, p .3)

With this mindset of a culture that started with the individual student first, this holistic vision of education as a child's personal journey, the utilization of their story to facilitate their education instead of a standardized curriculum to follow, and a way to inspire creativity, the charter school was founded.

As principal of the school, Ellen carried forward with that concept of self-awareness, this vision of a facilitated education based upon the child's story, to the initial interview process for students seeking admission. *Tell me about you. Why do you think this school would be the best fit for you? What are you looking for here?* These questions of inquiry were the first steps of personal engagement with the student. Langer would describe this as the process of mindfulness, "actively noticing new things. When you do that, it puts you in the present. It makes you more sensitive to context and perspective. It's the essence of engagement (Langer, 2014, p. 68). For Ellen, as well as for the students who sought educational refuge from the constructs of systemized education, the journey began with the awareness of self, the discovery of a new way to learn, and it led towards a path of servitude, connection of self to others (Quadrant 3).

Ellen values the single most important question in educating a child, "What is your story?" With simplicity and grace, Ellen journeyed through her home as she recounted her personal ontological awareness through the sharing of story as represented in pictures and memorabilia (Quadrant 2). For Ellen, understanding her own story, and

being mindful of her own journey, one she did not travel alone, came by way of reflection. *If we just give other people time to tell their life's journey, even if it's in snapshots rather than a whole life's story at one time, we can connect on that.*

Taking the time to reflect and then share with others her life story, brought about a deeper level of understanding for both herself, and those that Ellen has encountered throughout life. “Like art, stories can create a place where we can begin to understand or make sense of our world” (Peralta, 2010, p. 25). She learned about expectations from her parents, but shared the double-edged sword of façade in her story. She learned independence and responsibility because of her upbringing, and shared her struggle to incorporate play into her world. From her mentor and great-grandmother, she felt the power of appreciating, communicating and developing the unique gifts of another. She learned to love by witnessing her mother remarry. Ellen learned to rethink, reframe, and be comfortable with her own values challenged by her college professor; then later, by a teaching colleague. For Ellen, reflecting on these pivotal moments in time, these memories encapsulated in the photographs that sparked the conversation, was the journey she lived, she storied those moments, and while doing so, she learned even more about what she had lived. Story is life, life is story.

I'm giving you a piece of the puzzle of my life, do you have a piece of the puzzle in your life that we could connect there and then who else could come in? Ellen describes the utility of story as a springboard for deeper understanding of self and those that one teaches and learns with (Quadrant 1). Story allows her to understand a historical self, juxtaposed to the unfinishedness of the future self. L.S. Vygotsky characterizes this mental development by stating:

The zone of proximal development furnishes psychologists and educators with a tool through which the internal course of development can be understood. By using this method we can take account of not only the cycles and maturation processes that have already been completed but also those processes that are currently in a state of formation, that are just beginning to mature and develop. Thus, the zone of proximal development permits us to delineate the child's immediate future and his dynamic developmental state, allowing not only for what already has been achieved developmentally but also for what is in the course of maturing. (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 33)

Ellen realized through her career, and in life, that everyone has a story. That story can be the tool to communicate, to learn, to grow. It tells of our experiences, connections to self, and connections to the universe both in a historical sense and to our future aspirations.

Vygotsky's work proposed:

that an essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child's independent developmental achievement. (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 35)

Ellen's Reflection

Preparing for the interview was as powerful as participating in the interview.

Prior to your arrival, I had percolated on the process that I thought would be most beneficial to the project. How easy and timeless it was for me to pull the collections of

memoirs and group them according to the influences and periods of my personal and professional life. Once I created my pictorial journey, the verbal journaling was easy to tell but at times, difficult to revisit. Collectively, I talked about family issues, talents, relationships and roles. Each area, as in life we often experience, brings happiness and sorrow...never disconnected emotionally. Therefore the interview was not only a travel in time but a collective chorus of laughter, tears, happiness, sorrow, silence and majesty.

Sharing my story did make me revisit the influencers, both positive and negative. I am assured that the people I mentioned and some who were nameless are the reasons I am who I am today, not only in my professional life but also my personal life. I am at a stage in life where talking about life's lessons is not difficult, not indicating that it is void of emotion. In fact, voicing those experiences aloud to another person is a mark of courage and a sign of healing. Having the ability to identify the influencers, why it was so, and how it impacted my life results in a deeper understanding of why I made some of the choices I did. I recall the choices I made that I didn't feel comfortable with at the time but was in a position where fear forced me into an undesirable decision. When we reflect on our life, I think the important question remains: Is having the ability to identify the influencers in our lives causing us to make wiser choices today? That is where I may start the process again.

As related to leadership, I think the process reminded me that I do not stand alone. As with those who look to us to model all the aspects of highly effective leadership, we need to remember that others come to us impacted by people and experiences that have been and are a vital part of their lives. All have been influenced

by others and by life experiences. Therefore, I need to be open to others who seek to tell their story and who look to me to listen, to encourage and to understand. This process can build relationships that validate the importance of recognizing diversity among team members.

- Ellen

Articulating the Meaning Making of Story

*I am a mother. I am an educator. I interpret. I converse. These are some of the states of my being. They are my positions in this realm of reality; the constructs imposed upon my existence. This is my **self**. However my self is a collective being and is now a construct of not only my own story, but those of Drexel, Dr. Drakeson and Ellen. I am an embodiment of research and methodology of story, their story, my story. I started this research being aware of my own knowledge, my own theoretical perspective and having a mindful self-awareness of my own learning. This allowed me a fluidity to listen, reflect, analyze and make meaning of the stories shared by the research partners in connection to my learning while envisioning a context by which this process could be utilized in public education. Being mindful of my ontological state, an awareness of unfinishedness, and having the courage to listen and transform into a state of presencing while listening to the research partners' stories as they have journeyed the **universe**, led my existence into a newfound, epistemological state of self-awareness. The meaning making, the **mediation of concepts**, is the contextual symbiosis and the essence of using story to teach and to learn. For now, a part of their story, will forever be mine; and, a part of my story will forever be a construct of them. My perspectives of love, education, change, story, family,*

leadership and a plethora of other elements have now deepened my own learning because of the shared experience.

Each partner lived a different story. Each learned by the way of the world. Some had more extensive formal schooling than others. As their stories were shared, meaning thoughts were organized into the Quadrants as a way to make meaning and be able to articulate not only my journey, but the journey of the research partners. We have each lived life differently, we each learned lessons this universe had to offer in a myriad of ways. This organic process is needed in education today to deepen our knowledge of self so that we can teach and learn with others in a way that awakens creativity. Until public education lets go of the need to systemize learning, the organic nature of life as pedagogy will be stifled and the contextual knowledge of a connected self will be lost.

However, this is not an easy process – the journey of story. Story is personal, rooted deep into the soul and connected to the souls of others. There is the act of self-reflection, which can be humbling at times. There is the courageous act of telling a story, rising above the feelings of insecurity and trusting the audience will receive you with empathy. And then, there is the act of listening, or reading, your own story told; your life told from the perspective of others. It is not an easy journey to teach using life as story, but the contextual richness, the depth of learning is something a rote curriculum cannot offer.

V. STORYING LEADERSHIP

The student was in tears, sitting in the front office of the school in one of the maroon chairs that lined the windows waiting to talk to a principal about her office referral. She had never been to the office for a discipline issue before, and the front office secretary thought for sure Maggie was there to deliver a referral on behalf of another student who might have gotten sent to the in-school suspension (ISS) room. Instead, Maggie was there on her own accord and for her own actions of “stealing.”

Mrs. Lou opened the door to my adjoined office and said, “Maggie has a referral and was sent to the office by the choir teacher.”

Then my phone rang, it was the choir teacher ablaze in fury, “That little girl is a thief! She disrupted my whole class! I better see her get at least three days of ISS for stealing!”

I replied, “Let me look into the situation and I’ll follow up with you during your conference period.”

“Urgh! She stole! I saw it with my own eyes! There’s nothing to investigate!” The choir teacher slammed the phone down.

“Maggie, come in please,” I said as I extended my hand to her for a handshake and the other hand to receive her discipline referral. The ninety pound, small framed girl was shaking as she cried. Her glasses were crooked, her jeans worn, and she lacked a coat despite the forty degree temperature outside. Her hair was a bit oily, her eyes were puffy, and despite the rush of adrenaline she must have been feeling, she couldn’t resist yawning as she entered the office.

She sat in the chair in front of my desk. She looked around my office with her eyes, but her head was bowed slightly as if shamed for her presence. I asked her to tell me what was written on the referral. She began to say, “It says I caused a classroom disruption by stealing the extra granola bar and apple from the breakfast in the classroom basket. It says I stole. . .” her voice trailed off and tears consumed her (Figure 39).



Figure 39. Granola Bar

Now, as a principal, I have encountered several students who had mastered the art of tearful confessions in hope to lessen the consequence of their actions. Unfortunately, discipline was part of the job as a junior high assistant principal. Fights, stealing, truancy, dress code violations, drugs and weapons were daily occurrences. Students were not always the most truthful when incidents were investigated; this is why investigations, video surveillance and witness statements were part of the process. No matter the infraction, over the years, I found that empathy was the greatest discipline tool. I once learned from a mentor that, “Discipline is only effective if the behavior actually changes with the careful implementation of empathy.” I never forgot that.

“Maggie, tell me about the referral. What happened? Why did you take the apple and granola bar without asking the teacher first?”

The student took a deep breath, and I could tell she was reaching from a deeper place to tell me her story. It was almost as if I could see her mind moving from last night, to several weeks ago, back to today, trailing off to yesteryear and then snapping back into the current reality. It was almost as if I could see her mind, and her heart, replaying the events that led up to this moment – this was typical of a student in the office; their hearts told tales through their eyes. Sometimes when a student would pause like this, I was skeptical and braced myself for lies covered in more lies as a way to get out of after school detention or a phone call home to their guardian. But, this time, there was a deeper fear.

She whispered, “My brother cried himself to sleep last night he was so hungry. Mrs., he’s only five years old. My mom got arrested in town five days ago, and my aunt who lives with us is always out with her boyfriend or is passed out on the couch when she is home. For a week now, I’ve been trying to get my brother and me ready for school and we have run out of groceries. I’m so sorry. . . .” she was now trembling in her chair, crying. She collected herself for another moment and revealed that she had taken a roll of toilet paper out of the girls restroom, had been going to the nurse for Band-Aids and keeping them in her purse in case her brother got hurt, and was sneaking food at breakfast and at lunch to have something to eat at night for dinner.

I asked her, “Who do you have who helps you?” She just cried. It was obvious her known support networks had failed her, she felt alone, and scared. In that moment, I could empathize with the feeling of forced isolation, losing the trust you loved to love in

*someone, fear of surviving, wondering how to continue in a life that has given up on you. The lens of **self**, entered the story. Although the context of my feeling were rooted in divorce, we could relate in the feeling of the **universe** imposing forced interruption of relationships onto our hearts. And within that moment, I could feel her story develop, an awareness of several **mediating concepts** were emerging, and I listened patiently.*

Now, when a principal hears stories as such, there are conversations that have to be had and protocol that has to be followed. There are the confirmations with local authorities, supports to put in place with the counselor, the principal of the younger brother to contact, possible child protective services to get involved, emergency contacts listed for the child, etc. There is a system, there are protocols, there are steps to follow for the protection of the child and the continuance of their education. All the while there is the heart of child, scared in the office, and a referral in hand for stealing. We were able to contact her grandmother, who upon hearing the story, was also in tears, and began heading to the schools to pick up the children. She had no idea her daughter had been arrested leaving behind her two grandchildren with limited support or supervision.

Once Maggie heard her grandmother was driving in from three hours away, she just wept, but this time in relief. I called over to the campus that housed her brother and talked to the principal there about the situation. She said the little boy had been having a difficult time staying awake in class this week and once even fell asleep on the bus almost missing his stop at the school.

I asked Maggie to stay in my office during lunch for “lunch detention” for stealing, but it was also to ensure that she had a safe, calm place to eat a full meal without having her peers ask why she had been crying or sent to the office. She

understood and was more than compliant with the decision – her eyes gleamed as the pizza, corn, salad, and chocolate milk arrived via the office aide.

Meanwhile, I had asked the choir teacher to my office during her conference period. She walked by the office where Maggie was eating her lunch during “lunch detention” and automatically sat down proclaiming, “Injustice! The thief should be in ISS! Don’t tell me she’s not getting in trouble for stealing!” Unaware of the story, the situation at hand, only seeing the code of conduct for the action of stealing with a consequence of in-school suspension, the teacher was upset.

I let the teacher rant for a bit and then asked her to finish filling out the referral. She looked at me a bit confused. She said, “I checked the box for stealing and told you exactly what she did! What else do you want from me? I did my part! Now you want me to teach and play Crime Scene Investigator?”

I motioned to the top of the referral that asked for conference notes. This is the section which a teacher filled out after an incident in which they talked to the student. I asked her, “Please tell me why she took the apple and granola bar. Please finish the referral by noting your conversation with the student.”

“Well! I didn’t talk to her! I sent her out as soon as I saw her steal with my own two eyes and the other students starting saying, ‘thief!’ which interrupted my whole class! There’s nothing to say! I saw it all with my own two eyes.”

I asked her, “What did you see last night with your own two eyes regarding the child? What did you see last weekend?”

“Last night? What do you mean? I don’t see her outside of school” the teacher replied.

“Exactly, her story begins and ends each day, with us and school being only a portion of her day. Now, I must ask you, what is the purpose of discipline?” (An answer, just three weeks prior, she felt was a truism).

“To encourage responsible behavior with empathy” she recited.

Then, I shared with her Maggie’s story.

The teacher wept.

The context of the story, and how it led to the action of stealing, was too much for her to bear. “Have you ever been hungry? Have you ever been homeless? Have you ever had to parent at the age of eleven? Have you ever had your mother arrested? Have you ever feared the police coming to take you and your sibling away to live in a foster home? Have you ever felt scared?”

*The teacher humbly answered, “no.” At that moment, her identity was disrupted by the harshness the **universe** imposed on the little girl. The thoughts of neglect, hunger, abandonment, fear of police, fear of CPS, worry about raising a sibling, were all foreign **concepts** that the teacher had to negotiate in her own life, they were not part of her **self** identity – until now.*

The teacher sunk into her chair and asked if she could talk to the student, “I don’t want her leaving school today with me having called her a thief. I can’t believe I was so blind to her needs. I can’t believe I didn’t just ask her to put the breakfast back in the basket, then hold her after class to see why she felt the need to sneak it into her book bag. I’ve been teaching for over seven years, you would think I would have known to just be patient; instead, I just yelled at her.”

I went over to the neighboring office where Maggie had cleaned her lunch tray. On her own accord, she was in the middle of writing her teacher an apology letter. I let her know Mrs. Annie wanted to talk to her. She bowed her head and said, “she hates me, huh?”

“Actually dear, she fears you might hate her” I replied. Maggie looked confused. Maggie handed Mrs. Annie her unfinished letter and said, “I’m sorry I stole from you.” Mrs. Annie, humbly said, “And I’m sorry I didn’t see the situation for everything it was. I never should have called you a thief.”

Maggie left with her grandmother that day, knowing that stealing was not the best option in the situation. The teacher left knowing story can help a person have a deeper understanding of a situation.

Leading with life as a pedagogical tool, an awareness is needed to step in and out of a conversation and provide space for a state of reflective practice to allow for one to tell their story while leading them to a deeper level of learning, such as: Do your experiences start with story (Utility of Story)? Are you comfortable balancing the organic nature of conversation with systematic protocol (Dynamic/Pedagogy)? How would have the absence of story in this situation rendered a different outcome (Journey/Ontology)? How often is story the last piece of information gathered, if at all (Agency/Story Making)? Did learning take place at the writing of the referral or the conversation of the events that took place (Agency/Story Making)? How can story be used to build a relationship with students (Dynamic/Pedagogy)? How can story change a person’s perspective (Journey/Ontology)? How can it change life (Journey/Ontology)? Do you take the time to talk to one another (Utility/Why)?

...

“I never had anyone take the time to make me feel so important, so connected to a team, and I definitely never had anyone like a boss do that in front of everyone. It meant a lot to me.” Ms. Isa shared this sentiment with me after school one day as we were cooking nacho cheese in the crock pot, turning tables down and rolling up the ticket windows for the basketball game that was to start in a few hours. “It’s like you really mean it when you use the words ‘us’ or ‘our school.’ I mean, hell, I’ve seen you scrape gum off of the picnic tables just like I do (Ms. Isa was a custodian). We really are working together out here.” Her words warmed my heart for they were what I envisioned at the small rural school district.

*Two months prior to that moment, I was standing in the cafeteria. It was the first day of teacher inservice and everyone was returning from summer vacation, ready for another school year. I was nervous as life had taken a new path down administration. I had recently divorced, moved to a different home, changed school districts, went from teacher to assistant principal, and now had been named principal of the small district of two-hundred fifty students from Pre-Kindergarten to twelfth grade. My **self** was changing.*

The teachers were all filtering into the newly renovated space. Mrs. Pertly talked about her mission trip. Her stories of living in Haiti for a few weeks, with no running water, scarce medical supplies, and teaching children the word of God while not knowing their native language captivated her listening peers. Mrs. Jaine shared her vacation Bible school stories, complained about the lack of copy paper for the summer, and the fact that there was not enough time to plan a proper scope and sequence for her

Kindergarten class while also trying to clean out her storage sheds. And Mr. Blitzer was already getting everyone worked up about how much work the new year was going to take to get ‘these kids’ to pass the test, “new standards, new principal, new paperwork but same ole kids that can’t read and don’t mind their manners.”

*Although rested from the summer break, anxiety was amidst the staff for a change in administration occurred resulting in me being the sixth principal the district had had in seven years. Teachers were nervous about the new system they would have to work within. They were curious, hopeful, yet had trepidation in their hearts as the **universe** had imposed change on them once again. Half of the staff, thirteen teachers, were new that year and had heard stories of old, and walked in hopeful to be a change agent, but nervous to take the wrong first steps. Although I had served as their assistant principal the prior year, the change in my title made evident the need to build relationship, and do so through the lens of community through the use of empathy and story.*

*My first year in the district was filled with change and the remnants of anxiety were still evident. There were a few teachers non-renewed because of unethical practices, lack of credentials, or poor performance, and hostile relations with students. Curriculum changes were made that required teachers to strengthen their scopes and sequence, resources and ways to disaggregate data. The expectations were higher as were the measures of accountability. The staff was stressed and trying to understand the construct of the system and the **mediating concepts** of reframing public school reform from the angles of community building, curriculum frameworks and collegial supports.*

That first year in the district, as an assistant principal, I was told that my role was to “be supportive.” I didn’t receive any training, or any instruction on how to fulfill the

responsibility, but I took that role with heart. I made it a point to build relationships with the teachers, provide support in the classroom, maintain calm hallways free of fights and disruptions, was a curriculum resource and above all, a listener. Each day problems would arise, and each day, I would listen to the myriad of solutions and come to a decision. My strength came from the faculty of whom I supported. I learned how to be an administrator from the parents, teachers, and students. I was both a teacher and a learner; and this, was making for a positive working environment. For this reason, when the tides of politics turned and the superintendent named me principal, I needed the strength of the team to be spoken as my first words – for they were my story then and our future resided in the heart of our story to come.

As the faculty filed into the cafeteria, they noticed community members, board members and even a few students had joined us for inservice that day (Figure 40).



Figure 40. The Cafeteria

There was a buzz about having everyone in the cafeteria at one time – this had never been done before. Custodians, teachers, the superintendent, instructional aides, bus

drivers, site-based decision making team members, community members and school board were all asked to be present for the opening of that day. I could hear the whispers of uncertainty stirring about the faculty picture to be taken, “does she really want us all to be there or does she just mean teachers?” To which the cafeteria manager replied, “No she really meant everyone, she really wants us all.”

Everyone had filled the cafeteria, a group of no more than forty people, and the superintendent walked in with a small white cardboard box. The murmurs of conversation turned to an attentive silence as he began to greet everyone back from the summer. He then introduced me as the principal. I can still feel the stillness of breath that I took at that moment. And in that moment, I was by design of the system, in a role that was even more so visible, accountable, responsible than before - it was humbling. But, again, my strength and success was not of my own, it was a construct of the team that was facing me at that moment. And then one by one, I introduced the faculty to one another by highlighting one of their strengths. As the person was introduced, they were extended a handshake and received a lapel pin that was engraved with our motto for the year. Each person was recognized, individually; yet, the experience highlighted the interdependence, our collective soul, a spirit of collaboration. We each had utility. We each had a story. We each needed one another. We were a community.

“Mrs. Edwards, you were a student here at this school thirty years ago, and now you are not only a teacher but a parent of student too. We need your perspective from all those lenses. We don’t want to lose our heritage along the journey.”

“Mr. Marvin, you have fixed us up and patched us up for years as the custodian. You are the oil to this machine and we need you to you speak up when renovations are needed both at the school and in the heart.”

“Ms. Isa, you are connected to this community deeply; you are the ears that we need. Help us listen to what we need to hear, and help us speak with grace when needed.

The introductions were made, and the faculty could see the whole. We proceeded to the gym, sat shoulder to shoulder on the blue bleachers with the mascot painted on the wall above. We sat individually, yet as a collective body of educators. We were each other’s story that year. I know that moment meant something to Mrs. Isa for she took the time to tell me, I know that moment meant something to me for I continually reflect upon the experience.

To step out of the self, the researcher as practitioner can ask themselves reflective questions such as: How will others tell of that experience, if at all (Agency/Story Making)? How have I celebrated the utility of those I work with (Utility/Why)? What is the utility in knowing my own story (Utility/Why)? What is the utility in knowing the story of another (Utility/Why)? How has my journey as an administrator been impacted by those I have shared life with (Journey/Ontology)? How have I used story to teach, to learn, to live (Dynamic/Pedagogy)? Do I encourage individuality as well as community (Agency/Story Making)? Do I story well and for what purpose (Agency/ Story Making)?

...

It was a Tuesday, six weeks into the school year and the initial newness of the school year was wearing off. The new way of submitting lesson plans was finally established, the morning duty schedule had finally been accepted by the teachers

begrudgingly and the students were done with the honeymoon phase of teacher pleasing. There was only one more class period until school was out for the day and I was catching up on emails during my teacher conference period. As I opened the message entitled, “tornado drill”, I stiffened (Figure 41).

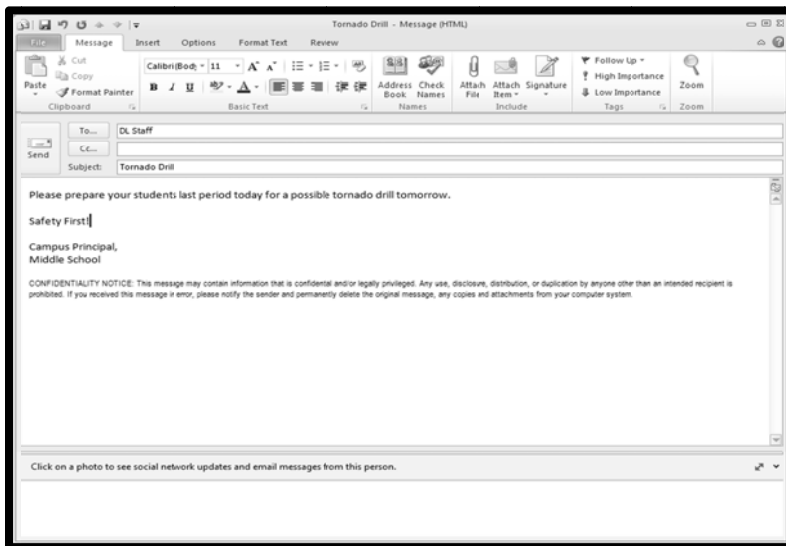


Figure 41. Tornado Drill

For some reason, my mind traveled back ten years to Tuesday, May 27, 1997, the day of the F5 tornado in Jarrell, Texas, where I graduated high school. It was 3:30 in the afternoon and I was outside enjoying the summer day with my cat under the ole oak tree. My home was twelve miles outside of Jarrell, north of Georgetown. I had just graduated that previous Friday as the Valedictorian of my class, was so excited to have packing for my college dorm room to look forward to, and was thrilled at having won the stereo system at project graduation. My mom came rushing out of the house and said I needed to get inside there was a storm coming. Then I could hear the weather radio that sat on top of the avocado green, black and white TV inside my parents’ bedroom. It was screaming the alert:

THE NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE IN AUSTIN/SAN ANTONIO HAS ISSUED A TORNADO WARNING EFFECTIVE UNTIL 430 PM CDT FOR PEOPLE IN THE FOLLOWING LOCATION...IN SOUTH CENTRAL TEXAS...WILLIAMSON COUNTY AT 325 PM A TORNADIC THUNDERSTORM WAS LOCATED ABOUT 5 MILES WEST OF JARRELL MOVING SOUTHEAST AT 10 MPH. THIS STORM HAS HAD A HISTORY OF PRODUCING TORNADOES AND LARGE HAIL. THE CITY OF JARRELL IS IN THE PATH OF THIS STORM. IF YOU ARE CAUGHT OUTSIDE...SEEK SHELTER IN A NEARBY REINFORCED BUILDING. AS A LAST RESORT...SEEK SHELTER IN A DITCH OR LOW SPOT AND COVER YOUR HEAD. PEOPLE IN OR NEAR THE PATH OF THIS STORM SHOULD TAKE IMMEDIATE ACTION TO PROTECT THEIR LIVES. GO TO THE CENTER ON THE LOWEST FLOOR OF YOUR BUILDING... COVER YOUR HEAD. STAY AWAY FROM DOORS AND WINDOWS. DO NOT STAY IN MOBILE HOMES OR VEHICLES...GET INTO A STURDY BUILDING (May 27, 1997, 2012).

I remember hearing the radio blast and seeing a beautiful blue sky. But then I looked North. Atop the wheat field in back of the house, was the dark black sky of death looming, ferociously stirring its destruction atop of Jarrell. The air stiffened. I grabbed my cat Sunshine and we ran inside of the house. Dad was at work that day and my sister now lived in Dallas. My mom and I climbed down into the storm shelter which dad had built underneath the front of the house. The shelter was concrete, painted a sea moss green, was outfitted with flashlights, a pump to rid excess water, and had a musty smell. We could hear the radio from below:

A TORNADO WAS SPOTTED AT

The wind was picking up and the reception was failing. But I heard,

COUNTY ROAD 305

Muffled noises made way to the announcer's voice saying,

STRIKING THE DOUBLE CREEK ESTATES

The radio stopped. We waited. Then, we could feel the barometric pressures change, the wind was picking up, the sounds of hail pelted our shingled farm-house roof, and then

silence. The eye of the storm was passing over us. Then, the hail slammed against the windows, high pitched squealing could be heard as the wind forced its way through the weathered farm house walls, and then it was over. We waited a few moments more, then we got out of the storm shelter. My mom rushed to the black rotary phone hanging on the kitchen wall and she called my dad at work. He would soon be home. Our house was undamaged, but, I had family and friends that lived in the locations listed on the weather radio.

Bleep*Bleep*Bleep* The class period bell sounded, and I was brought back to the moment, my current reality; I was no longer inside of my **self. I was a teacher, a computer teacher, I was safe, I was in a brick building, I have about twenty-seven, sixth graders coming to the classroom to learn about multi-media design, I have a tornado drill to inform last period of. “As always, your daily warm up is on the projector. But instead of immediately going to your computers once done, please wait for a special announcement.”*

“Mrs. is this about the dumb drill that is happening tomorrow? We already know about it.” Junior always had the first comment in the class.

*“Sort of” I replied, an intriguing answer to middle school students. It always had the appeal of validating the question yet creating curiosity as to the unknown of the reply. But the student was right, it was our **universe**, the construct of the school structure that mandated the safety drill.*

A few minutes passed and students were finishing up their notes on html. Then there was the sound of wind, rattling, and an air horn. The students looked towards my desk. Then the sound of the national weather service bulletin announcer, a recording

from May 27, 1997, the day of the Jarrell tornado as written above, streamed from my computer. Then there were images, the before, and then the after – images from the Jarrell tornado. There was a house, then the stripped foundation. The grassy pasture, then the field of dirt after seven inches was lifted away. Mangled vehicles, debris and fields of nothingness where an entire forty structure subdivision once stood were shown to the group of students. After thoughtful negotiation within the mind, a careful **mediation of concepts** known and those to be presented, I decided to spare them the images of over three hundred dead cattle, human body parts and the fire station morgue lined with body bags of victims – their reality only had to be so much at this time. Then I read the names of the twenty-seven victims. Finally, with a captive audience, I read the instructions for the duck-and-cover tornado drill.

“This was my high school, it was spared from the damage, but the tornado touched down only a mile from it three days after I graduated. Had the tornado happened on a Friday, instead of on a Monday, I don’t know if I would have been ready. I don’t know if my teachers would have been ready. We never practiced a drill. But you will be ready, because I know what it means to be ready. Tomorrow during this class period, we will have a tornado drill. I ask that you respect the drill for what it could mean in the future, not just what it means for you now.”

The class just nodded their heads and, then, of course, Junior had to also have the last comment, “Dang Mrs. that’s like messed up. We got this tomorrow, we cool Mrs., we got this.” Then they went to their computers to incorporate animations into their coding.

That next day, my sixth graders made me proud. The seventh period tardy bell rang and they were already in their seats. Then, the three siren alarm sounded, the tornado drill had begun. They left their items at their desk, hands to their sides, walked out and to the left of my classroom door. One by one, they quickly and orderly, crouched low, had their heads down and protected the back of their neck as instructed. They remained quiet even though other classes proceeded to giggle around them. Once the “all clear” sounded, we came back into the classroom and started class. Midway through class, the assistant principal walked in and praised them on their attention to the drill and the responsibility they showed. He turned to me and asked, “What did you do to get them so well trained?” I just replied, “I took time to tell them a story.”

We are the embodiment of story. We are both researcher and practitioner. Story is all around us, it is within us and it walks among us. Story is life, life is story. I often think of my days of teaching, those moments that I took the time to story a lesson, those times that I just taught the facts and I ask myself reflective questions: How was the depth of teaching and learning impacted with the use of story (Dynamic/Pedagogy)? Did listening to the stories of my students make me a better teacher (Journey/Ontology)? Did teaching with story strengthen our learning relationship (Agency/Story Making)? Did teaching with story connect the content to both the heart and mind (Dynamic/Pedagogy)? In times of stress and protocol, when I surrendered to the system, how could I have started with story first (Journey/Ontology)? How did I know what stories to share, when, my students’ readiness to hear, my readiness to tell (Utility/Why)? Did I allow space for my students to share their stories (Utility/Why)? As I moved from teacher to principal,

did I lead with a life lens, through story and empathy, or was I too focused on the systemsworld of the public school structure (Journey/Ontology)?

Implications for Praxis

Inspired by the spirit of social constructivism through the craft of story, this research emphasizes the need for schools to focus on story as a pedagogical tool. Using life as curriculum, students can connect themselves to the universe, create depth in contextual understanding, and reflect upon their own ontological journey to reach self-awareness. The salience of this research is found within the implementation of story as a teaching and learning method; while, symbiotically weaving a contextual literature of self as a means to explore ontological awareness and the transformation from an individualistic lens to one that is aware of a collective self.

Guiding the research, analysis and discussions were four questions:

1. What is the utility of knowing one's story?
2. How have I realized my ontological journey?
3. How has story become a pedagogical tool for self-awareness?
4. How does story making facilitate a dynamic pedagogy that captures the essence of life and nature?

Through the ontological journeys of four research partners as they make meaning of their worlds as they teach and learn, this research will also challenge you to ask of yourself, and of others, "What is your story?"

Before one can teach or learn, one must know oneself. This research showed the salience in knowing one's own theoretical perspective, the utility in knowing one's own story, before engaging in pedagogy. The research contributes to the field of education by

sharing the perspectives of those that have engaged this world in story as a pedagogical practice all the while utilizing leadership tools of reflection, humility and self-awareness to guide their professions. Story is the vehicle by which socially constructed knowledge becomes praxis, and the phenomenon of a life experience, one derived of this universe and by nature, is negotiated. It is this negotiation, the mediation of concepts that story is created and meaning making occurs.

Although the stories of the research partners were presented one after another, with discussion of each, this is not to imply that their stories are linear presentations of data sets. Nor should the analysis of each story be considered a meta-narrative, or a general reasoning of a story that can be systematized into public education. Instead, each story is shared as a celebration of the individuality and perspective that each person has now woven into my personal ontological journey. Each story is a unique testament to the validity of social construction as pedagogy.

Drexel reflected on this research process by stating, “I hope I have given you some insight as to what story telling means to me.” He offered perspectives of love, life, the important of sharing memories, family, empathy and the self-awareness that he is on a journey of life. Dr. Drakeson reflects on this experience by humbly sharing, “Narrative, as I see it, reminds me that we are all equal and that we deserve help from our fellow person.” His story brought to my own journey the concepts of guilt, happiness, isolation, arrogance, compassion and most of all the ‘experience of understanding,’ the quest for knowledge and perspective, to question, inquire and become curious of the world again. Ellen, with a collection of memoirs and verbal journaling, stated,

I am at a stage in life where talking about life's lessons is not difficult, not indicating that it is void of emotion. In fact, voicing those experiences aloud to another is a mark of courage and a sign of healing.

The analysis of their story was a connection, a means to make meaning of their lives, so that in turn, I can make a deeper meaning of my own. The sharing of others stories is theory in practice - that theory being, the Pedagogy of Life. For when we take our lives and share our stories with self-awareness, courage and empathy, we are teaching and learning with a depth of knowledge that is of a collective self. This synergistic force is known as story, it is known as life. It is our social responsibility to live a legacy.

The future of our educational system resides in the ability to imagine and reframe accountability to start with the human endeavor that has become second to the systematized definition that exists today. Accountability is the ability to stand affirmed for one's thoughts, actions and lives; to account, one must have witness. How can there be an accountability system without story? We are each other's witnesses in this world. We make meaning together. Our story is the pedagogy of life.

What would it look like to teach, to lead, with story as the frontrunner of curriculum reform? The answer to that question is as organic as the individual stories of those persons whom you encounter. Maybe it will mean conferencing with each teacher before building a master schedule, getting to know them as a person, not just as a professional. Fitting them into your school based on their talents, their interests and their identified strengths. Maybe it will mean building a master schedule that represents the courses students are most interested in, versus fitting kids into a schedule based on the times and number of seats a course is offered once or twice during the instructional day.

Maybe it will mean utilizing stories found within on another's' personal histories, versus the presentation of sequential dates, times, people and places. Maybe it will mean reviving the arts. Maybe it will look like professional development trainings that start and end with personal reflections of the learning process. There are a myriad of ways story can begin the process of teaching and learning; instead of just fitting into the system. To provide a rote definition of how, would weaken the creative soul of you, the reader. Know however, the call to story, the need exists and starts with you, with me, with us. So start with the narrative you know best and answer the most challenging of pedagogical questions this dissertation has to offer first, "What is your story?"

Lil Man,

These past two years have been filled with many reflections. I have been witness to you taking your first steps, to now learning to put your own shoes on. From gentle coos, to now discernible words, your vocabulary is developing as is your language to use in this world. You understand emotion, family, and show kindness to others. You play, you learn, you live. Although you have much to share of your story in this world already, you have many days to come. When I look back on these two years and the milestones you have accomplished, I look forward to our years to come, the experiences we will share, the memories we will have and the stories we will craft together.

My son, you have brought so much to my life. You have made me aware of who I am and the importance of my own story. These past two years have been a personal journal for me as well. While you were learning how to take physical steps in this world, I was learning to do the same with my soul. Know this world

needs you and you need this world. Keep your mind sharp and your heart open to the vastness of possibilities this life can bring. Above all, allow empathy to guide your steps – let life's story be your greatest teacher.

Love Always,

Mom

VI. AN INVITATION TO STORY

When the warm airs of spring breeze upon the wildflowers, I can sometimes still hear the words of Paul Harvey, crackling over the dusty AM/FM radio that lay on the floor of the barn where the tractor was parked out back. No matter the story to be told, the wisdom always resided in, “The Rest of the Story” (Harvey, 1997). His broadcasts for this particular series always revealed the untold story behind some of history’s little known facts; in which, the pivotal moment, the most prominent detail of the entire story, was left to be said at the very end.

Likewise, this study has been presented in such a way that the reader could journey through the pages, navigating along with the woven literature review and methodology, resonating with the analysis and reflecting on the discussions and examples of storying leadership. The reader could make sense of the research, analysis and even implications; however, the critical component to the success of this work and its implication in education, its contribution to future bodies of literature, resides within the piece yet to be told-“the rest of the story.”

Inviting Story into School Leadership

As a former classroom teacher, and then later as an administrator, the system taught me to be concerned with the end: The summative teacher evaluation, the end-of-year state assessment results, evidence of mastery in the lesson plan, and the creation of an outlined scope and sequence for curriculum. In an inservice training, I remember reading an article regarding state assessment the year the state was “increasing the rigor” of the exams, “Ultimately if we are to have high-stakes tests, the search must be for tests worth teaching to: Accountability tests that are so closely aligned with desired outcomes

that the only way to improve scores is to improve the desired outcomes” (Wiliam, 2010, p. 120).

“So we are to teach to the test?” a teacher of ten years refuted.

“Not necessarily, but our campus rating is based on the performance of the students; who, can only do as well as you teach them to do on the test,” replied the principal.

“So we are teaching kids to take a test, not really teaching kids?” the teacher continued to stand affirm.

The principal pushed forward with the original outlined agenda despite the opportunity to engage the staff in a meaningful discussion of curriculum mapping. There was no room for curricular creativity in the discussion, no opportunity for a co-construction of knowledge; there was only a task at hand - the to-do list. The system was already in place.

The results were important, so the system made evident – not the journey of epistemological awareness, the development of self or the curriculum that life had to offer. I will never forget that year and watching the strength and confidence by which that teacher guided her practice. Students were not only successful, they enjoyed going to her class.

A few years later, I remember sitting in an inservice training with eighty-seven other faculty members, having received my portfolio binder for the year. In the front pocket of the binder was the teacher evaluation walk-through calendar indicating the days that our formal observation could be conducted. It was up to us as teachers, to email our campus administrator with a requested time for them to come observe and evaluate our

teaching. I remember two years in a row, receiving the binder, sending the email and knowing I would not see that principal until the designated day in the spring. I knew ten days after the observation, the principal would provide limited feedback in regards to my teaching. From there, the evaluation would be utilized to determine contract renewal and future teaching assignments. However, never, in the course of the year, was that principal in my classroom. Never did they visit to know the organic nature of my lessons, how I built the relationship with the students, the scaffolding of lessons, and the time vested tailoring instruction to the interests of the different classes. No, they never saw that. Instead, my evaluation was reduced to a form that “exceeded expectations” in all areas, but the process of pedagogy was never discussed. Sadly, the process did not make me question or desire more, I came, I taught, my evaluation was complete. I did not know the process could *be* more until I was exposed to the concept of journey.

The experience guided my practice as a principal, supervisor and instructional evaluator.

Coach Henry entered my office promptly at 9:00am; the time he was scheduled to meet with me. He was always prompt, always professional, the students respected him and they grew intellectually under his tutelage.

As he sat down in the chair he said, “Was I supposed to come meet you in person at 9:00 a.m. today, or just reply via email by 9:00 am today as to when you wanted to schedule my formal observation? I mean, I know your email said come to the office, but I’ve never had to do that before – we usually just email our appraiser and wait for them to show up in the spring.”

Coach Henry was not new to the campus, nor was I. However, this would be the first year that I was in charge of the sixth grade team – I had overseen the eighth grade the two years prior. There was something more important to focus on at this point in the conversation than his end of the year evaluation – it was the now. New to one another in the roles of evaluator and teacher, a relationship had to be established; one that needed trust, neutralization of power, respect and reflection of practice.

“Coach, I need you to be comfortable with the concept that you will see me more than just the one time in the spring. You will see me in the hallways talking to students every day, you will see me in your classroom checking on students, listening to your lessons and will be here to support you throughout the year. I believe that relationships are the foundation of education. We must know who we are, as well as who we are teaching with. In fact, I want to go ahead and just get your evaluation done and over with early. Would that work for you?”

“Early, as in February instead of March?” he asked.

“Early, as in October.” I stated.

Hesitant, he agreed to the first week of October.

A few weeks went by since the initial meeting in my office and, like I assured him, I was constantly visible to the staff in that sixth grade hall. I made sure the teachers knew I was there to support them by being with the students as they went to class, calling parents on discipline and following up with the teachers on the situation, and emailing resources as teacher’s needed something for their lessons.

October came and Coach Henry’s observation was a confident display of pedagogical skill and contextually relevant learning. He engaged the students in

conversation throughout the lesson, they were eager to ask questions and brave enough to raise their hand to ask for items to be repeated as needed. Yet, I could sense he was nervous and was constantly looking back at my desk to see if I was taking note of what he was saying and doing as the hour progressed.

The class was over and he asked if we would be meeting next week or the next so he could sign off on his teacher observation. I just smiled and said, “We meet tomorrow.”

That next day, I walked to his classroom at the beginning of his conference period and was successful at catching him before he came to my office. I asked if we could just meet in his classroom – his comfort zone. He said, “Sure!” He then hastily straightened the items on his desk and invited me to take a seat in his teacher chair.

I said, “That’s your chair, I’m comfortable right here,” and proceeded to take place in a student’s desk adjacent to him.

“Coach Henry, let’s begin with the end in mind.” (This was a phrase the middle school teachers were too familiar with when constructing lesson plans and scopes and sequences). I continued, “We will do this so you can... let go of it.”

He looked puzzled.

I slid his evaluation across the desk and it reflected high marks across all domains. He was a competent teacher.

He looked it over and asked, “Is this where I sign?” as he pointed to the signature line on the bottom of the second page.

“Yes.”

He signed.

“Now that we have that all out of the way, it’s time to focus on supervision and professional development,” I stated as I collected his form.

“I’m confused,” he stated.

“What do you want to do? I mean, what do you really want to do?” I asked.

“What do you mean by that?” He asked cautiously.

“You and I both know as soon as your evaluation is submitted to central office, your contract is renewed and I technically no longer have to supervise you or provide a further evaluation, but, that’s not me. There were too many years as a teacher where my pedagogical feedback was reduced to a one hour observation and a fifteen minute regurgitation session followed by a quick signature and I was left wanting more so I could grow as a person and teacher. So, I made it a point, that when I was put into this position of power, I would build the capacity within those I supervised. So now that I am no longer your evaluator of the system, we can focus on me being your mentor within the system.”

I continued, “Coach Henry, by conducting your evaluation early, we have more time to focus on your goals as an educator without the weight of a pending evaluation looming over you. So I ask again, ‘what is it you really want to do?’”

“I want to be an athletic director but . . .” and he stopped.

I could tell politics choked him silent.

“Coach Henry, this conversation stays here. Your evaluation has been submitted. Your contract as a teacher will be renewed. You are an excellent teacher with both students and students’ parents providing you positive feedback. There are no hurt feelings if one day you want to leave the classroom. Granted I would be honored for you

to stay and teach the students as long as you want, there is no fear of political upheaval in this office. I'm not the one that staffs for the district. There is just you, a person who wants to be an athletic director; and me, a person who knows how to help you align your skillset towards that goal."

I could only hope laying down the ranks of principal would put him more at ease.

"No one's asked me that before." Coach Henry continued, "I've seen it too often that if you tell someone what you really want to do, they think you are trying to take their job or make you miserable for speaking up."

"That's not who I am, I think you know that by now," I assured.

He then told me his goals, his aspiration, and how he wanted to become credentialed as a principal, but for the purpose of securing administration experience that would help him secure the role of an athletic director for a large school district.

Over the course of the year, Coach Henry, like other teachers I supervised, engaged in conversations with me regarding their goals in life. I walked the hallways with not only a science teacher, coach, math teacher and PE teacher; but I knew their aspirations of being a curriculum director, head coach, politician and fiction novel writer. And although we systematically had to start with the end in mind, and have formal observations completed, etc.; we chose in conversation to begin with the beginning in mind, and focus on the heart of pedagogy from the start – our individual and collective story, our goals, our vision, the depth of our unfinishedness. We did so in an environment that was co-constructed, free of systematic norms, and founded on the elements of trust, empathy, and free of retaliation or reprimand. You see, the "rest of the

story” is in all actuality the beginning of the story – the space needed to tell, to listen, to reflect and resonate.

Our whole system is ever so focused on the end result. How were your state assessment scores? What was your overall attendance rate on the campus? How did students perform on their year-end grades? How many students were promoted? Did you get through all the lessons as outlined in the scope and sequence? Did you get all your paperwork submitted for your teacher evaluations? Were there any incidents of violence on the campus this year? Teachers spend so much time putting together curriculum calendars and not enough time preparing a space to learn, “The test is administered in April (mark calendar). We need three weeks for review and remediation (count backwards and mark calendar). I need four weeks to teach this unit (count backwards and mark calendar), I need six weeks for this unit (count backwards and mark calendar) . . . and finally I need a week to introduce . . .and, then, the teacher realizes the first week of instruction needed is crammed into a mere mini-lesson on the first week of school leaving only thirty minutes on the first day of class to, “get to know your kids.”

It is time to start with the beginning in mind. Who are you learning with? Who are the students that you are engaging into conversations with? Who are the teachers you are engaging with? What is their story? What is your story? How are you creating the space to have these conversations and fostering the concepts of empathy while co-constructing knowledge and curriculum? Are you listening? Are you reflecting on the process? Does your pedagogical style foster creativity or is it dictated by systematic constructs? How do you neutralize power?

Inviting Story into Leadership Development

The research tells us, we have it all wrong. The system has taught us that learning objectives are more important than the learning process. The system has taught us that having read particular readings is more important than the discussion of the piece before and after. The system has taught us to not miss attendance on the day of a state assessment and that investing time at the beginning of a school year building relationship can be reduced to a thirty minute, “team building exercise.” And even more unsettling is the fact that the system did not teach this to us while we were just students; it shaped us as we were becoming practitioners. The system is choking out our creativity. The standardization of curriculum and pedagogy is contributing to our lack of ability to be creative and hindering our capacities as learners to reach deep levels of awareness and understanding:

Children come to us as individuals: unique and one of a kind. They thrive when they are treated as individuals, but they rebel, drop out, bully, or become apathetic when we ignore their uniqueness and try to standardize them as if they were machines. No matter how hard teachers try to standardize students, children simply do not all learn how to read, write and do math at the same age. (Stoddard, 2012, p. 38)

Our ability to inquire, question and explore is a necessity for the development of deep learning:

Learning through inquiry can serve the personal interests of individual learners and be of benefit to society. For learners as individual, it enables them to develop the understanding, powers of reasoning and attitudes that help them to lead

physically and emotionally healthy and rewarding lives. Developing understanding about the world around as well as stimulating and satisfying curiosity also informs their personal decision in life, affecting their wellbeing and choice of career. (Harlen, 2013, p. 11)

Syllabus day. In and out within fifteen minutes, reading selections and assignments outlined and in hand. Time to catch a nap before going to the next first day of class in the collegiate program.

“On the blue form you will see a list of textbooks you will need to have for the class,” said the professor.

I could always tell if you really needed the books for a class or not because they were either still on the shelf (don’t waste the money, the professor is not going to ask you a single question from the text) or they were sold out before the shipment box could be unwrapped (you’d better get it expressed shipped online because the professor is going to ask you a question day one).

As the professor passed out the blue form, I caught up on my email – there were about forty books on the shelf for his class when I went to make the purchase; no immediacy needed.

“On the yellow form is a list of class dates,” said the professor.

Awe! Something to do! I’d better get my calendar out and mark the class dates and the two designated for ‘independent-study’ so I don’t accidentally waste gas money by driving up to the university.

“And on the white form is a list of articles you will need to download and read before that class,” the professor continued. These articles were outlined from first class

to last class, regardless of the dynamic of conversation of the previous class. I'll print them out this weekend, put them chronologically in my binder and then read them five minutes before class that night.

"And finally on the last page are your assignments and the explanation of how your grade will be calculated," the professor said as they handed out one last paper on syllabus day. Fifteen minutes, in and out.

This is when I would proceed to look at my calendar and outline all my projects, papers needing to be written and reading selections so I could have it all done in the next three weeks –not like anything would change, I might as well.

Then, I went to the next class.

"Tell me about yourself and what do you want to write about" the professor started off class. No papers were to be found.

"What?" was all I could think.

Four students into the circle and the professor paused, "I don't know what I want to write about is not an acceptable answer. Listen to your heart, why are you here in this program? What interests you? This will be the first question asked of you next class."

I promptly wrote the question down.

"There is a syllabus available online but it is a work in progress, we can discuss what is needed for next class by the time the current class is over. There are some topics I want to make sure we address, but how we talk about them will depend on our class. There are some pieces of literature I want you to be exposed to, but the depth of its interaction will depend on the class. And finally, there is a paper – the content will be to answer the question presented tonight, 'What is your interest?'

Fifteen minutes passed and we were still . . . in conversation. The whole first class was talking about our life experiences as students and as educators. We talked about our interests, conflicts within the system, and our personal agency to create learning spaces. We talked. The entire two hours, we talked.

I remember going to the computer lab after class and just reading; scouring article after article. I remember thinking, “what does he mean by ‘interested in’ . . . was this a politically loaded question?” I remember looking over the syllabus; there were just topics to be discussed – no assigned readings. And then, I heard a ding – an email notification. I had received an alert that an article had been uploaded to the bulletin board system for the class. It was a piece on self-awareness and reflection. How fitting. It was the first time I had read, in depth, an article for class. I even read articles that were cited in the reference section of the article in preparation for discussion – I felt obligated to contribute to the conversation. Days upon days I read, searching, navigating, thinking, probing and then it came to me – conversation. Conversation was what I wanted to explore.

That semester, I learned how to feel engaged. One class guided the next. The professor, facilitating the learning process, offered literature to fit our ontological journey; the texts sometimes caused dissonance. We negotiated, argued and justified and conversed along the way. Week upon week, articles were uploaded and discussions were expected. Conversation was our accountability tool; it was our assessment. Granted there was a paper to be written, a few journal entries required along the way, the assignments were meaningful, and contextually based on us as the learner.

Life is dynamic. To emulate life, curriculum should be just as dynamic. Providing structured syllabi and non-negotiable curriculum scope and sequences, diminishes creativity while creating a power dynamic of ‘teacher handing knowledge to student.’ The experience I had, the unsettled feeling I had when the professor asked, “What do you want to write about,” and me not having an answer, made me think about my thinking. “For Freire, liberating pedagogy has the fundamental need of the person to be free for individual and collective creation as its starting point, as well as the need to inquire and question” (Liambas & Kaskaris, 2012, p.187). I had to learn, how to learn. I had to learn how to let go of the norms I was accustomed to. I had to learn the feeling of a liberation and freedom.

I also learned to reflect on the experience: Are you brave enough to let go of a syllabus you have had in hand year after year? How do you negotiate learning spaces? How can you foster creativity? How do you encourage debate, curiosity, reasoning, dissonance while providing a safe space to be clumsy, awkward even in the creation of new knowledge? Are you giving knowledge or creating it together?

And Now, For the Rest of the Story . . .

In the stories of the research partners, there were moments of dissonance, as Ellen described it, which were the pivotal moment in each of their learning journeys. For Ellen, it was having a professor challenge her by asking, “Are you an ethical person?” For Dr. Drakeson, it was the emotion of a love that was forced to end because of difference in religious doctrine which later caused him to question systematic thinking. For the marine, it was the actual moment during this study, that I had the humble honor of experiencing with him, as he felt the weight of reflection turn into tears as he told the

story of his father's encouragement growing up and then of his death. And although these were the pivotal moments of their lives, they were not the pivotal moment of the overall study. Instead, it was the feeling of trust; it was the creation of space to tell their story that was the pivotal moment in this research.

The "rest of the story", was not found in the narratives they shared. Although, each contributed a salient perspective of learning, a process occurred before words were formally spoken; an invitation to story was made – space was created. As the interviewer, I shared my story first as a way to offer a piece of my life, to offer the vulnerable side of me. I wanted them to know me, to know my intentions. I assured them that the space of our conversation was safe. They were anonymous, but their story was not. There was no need to politically, professionally or personally identify them; they could speak freely without feelings of reprimand. They were free, they were empowered by the importance of their own story, and they were brave to share what life has taught them.

Can you imagine the impact one could make if we let go of the systematic norms? Can you imagine the increased dynamics of our curriculum if we let go of structured scope and sequences and syllabi that dictate the learning objective while reiterating the power dynamic between teacher and student? That's what this whole study is asking you to do as a theorist, as a practitioner, as a student of life. Imagine pedagogy to be as dynamic as life. Imagine the learning process if we started with the *beginning* in mind – the creation of a trusted space. This is what I call the pedagogy of life. It's the journey of the learning process that is to be celebrated and the space needed to create this experience that is to be considered sacred and protected along the way.

Future Research

We have an obligation to one another to enter into conversation for education is socially created. And we have a responsibility to ourselves and others to foster a sense of readiness to learn. At the beginning of this work, I talked of the absolute silence I not only heard but felt as I awaited the breath of life to awaken my son into this world. I was rendered helpless. There was a force beyond my control that was challenging the way I thought things should be. (He was supposed to come out healthy, crying immediately – not struggling for life as he was.) Afterwards, I reflected on that moment and realized some of my greatest learning moments were because life challenged my current construct of knowledge. At other times, my greatest learning moments occurred because the system was rendering me paralyzed, unable to move, think or grow-and I questioned the integrity of the constraints.

Whether it was someone asking me a question that was at first unsettling, or experiencing a new way of thinking, or a transformative moment like becoming a mother, the moments resonated with my soul not because of the moment itself, but because the space was created to feel the moment. The creation of space in school systems is necessary; however, the creation of space in your role as a researcher and practitioner is just as salient. It is time to bridge the once dichotomous worlds of research and practice, and explore the tension that the current system imposes on us as learners. I challenge you to look at the space between, the space needed for trust, for story, the space needed to negotiate norms, to reason creatively; and I challenge you to do so while stepping in and out of the various constructs of reality by which you embody. For it is awareness that

allows you to step in and out of analysis; but it requires much less to disconnect and act out the roles independent of one another.

Topics for Future Research and Leadership Development

The community of self is strongest, when all stories are woven into practice. Story is research. Story is practice. Story is the vehicle by which you navigate research, develop awareness in self and discover the depth of knowledge this world has to offer. Before you research your own story, you must first explore your state of readiness. Do you know your own story enough, to connect to another empathetically as you explore, inquire and impose upon this world? How do you know what you know? How do you make meaning of someone else's perspective? Do you know how to engage in an open conversation? Do you know how to inquire and engage others into a state of inquiry? Do you know how to encourage reflection in yourself and in others? Do you know how to create a space that is free of a power struggle, free of ridicule, free of emotional barriers? How has the relationship been developed to invite trust into the conversation? How are you using conversation as pedagogy? How do you use conversation and story as a research method? How has the institution of education guided you or, has it provided hidden constraints to your creativity?

To facilitate the process, Developing Self, Story, Space and Leadership (Appendix) has been designed as a tool for reflection. It is designed to help those that are researchers and practitioners to explore the space of their current self, within their own practice, and provide opportunities for reflection in the areas of: Utility/Why, Journey/Ontology, Agency/Story Making and Dynamic/Pedagogy. The purpose of the tool is to provide a reflective means to step out of their current state of being, and reflect

on their experiences, the mediating concepts one uses to make decisions, and help develop awareness for future research and practice.

Future development and research can be had in the process of stepping out. How can we create an educational system that allows one to take a reflective approach to practice within their role of teacher/learner? How can we create a school system that allows for this protected space so one does not feel they have to leave the space altogether to grow further in self? This tool opens the doors to future conversations and future research possibilities in the varied contexts that the utilization of story can have in public school and the development of school leadership.

Lil' Man,

I'm sitting on the couch in your room, the lights are low and your favorite bedtime movie is playing. I'm wrapped up in the blue blanket, with your sippy cup of milk ready to tuck you into bed. Your usual routine coming home after daycare/school is to play, eat dinner, play, take a bubble bath, play and then snuggle to sleep on the couch with me until your eyes close and I lay you into your crib.

Right now though, you are playing. I look upon your excitement and know you are engaged in the learning process. Oh how I wish for you a life where learning is always exciting, playful, creative, messy and desired. One of your favorite pastimes is to play with wooden peg puzzles. When you first started playing with puzzles, I could tell you looked upon the board for what it was: A flat board with large pieces on it. At first, when you were about twelve months old

you would take a puzzle piece and put it in your mouth. Then a few months later, you would take the puzzle pieces and, with guidance, learn that they fit into the various places on the board. Your tiny hands would fumble as you developed dexterity and the spatial reasoning needed to put the piece into the appropriate place on the board. I oftentimes just let you fumble, you were having fun thinking, reasoning and analyzing the piece in connection to the whole. I easily could have taken the piece out of your hand and put it in the right spot to hurry the process, or ‘teach’ you where it should go. But, that would have hindered your learning journey; it would have taken the play out of the experience. Sometimes, you would grow frustrated and look at me and say, “hop”, and I would help guide you. Now, you enjoy taking the pieces and telling me about them as you fit them into your puzzles, “This Lion, rrrrooooooarr” or “doggie here, woof woof.” Then once all the pieces are done, you stand up, and celebrate, “Momma, yaaaay” as you clap your hands and walk towards me for the high-five or fist bump before going to get another puzzle.

There is much to learn in watching a child grow. When I watch you play, I sometimes take a moment to step out of the role of a mother, and step into the role of the researcher and reflect. I have learned a lot over the course of writing my dissertation and in the PhD program, but you, my son, connected the learning beyond the syllabus. You have taught me one must play to learn. You have to have the freedom to be creative and reason without fear of wrongdoing. You have to relate to your learning, and relate with others while you learn. You need someone to guide you but to know that sometimes the best guidance to deeper

learning is to allow you to negotiate your own thoughts, to allow you to experience, and have the patience to not impose. I have been blessed to have a few great mentors during the course of this study; people who ask to inquire, not to ridicule; people who story with me, instead of telling me my story as society says it should be; people who allowed for mistakes, but celebrated the tensions with support and even healing when necessary.

When I look back on my formal school experiences, I oftentimes started the process by seeing a board and puzzle pieces. Too often I had teachers or professors that would 'ensure my success' but telling me where the pieces went thinking that if they told me 'why' the piece went there, they were teaching and I was learning. However, there were other teachers/professors that would question the very existence of the puzzle board! They would engage me into conversation and create a dissonance, a space needed to explore and reason the board's existence, why the puzzle pieces fit the way that I had them placed; and then, if that wasn't deep enough, I had a few encourage me to create my own puzzle.

Life is complicated, there is no doubt to that. However, being able to step in and out of life's experiences with a level of self-awareness and ability to reflect, reason, relate and negotiate brings a level of confidence to the chaos. I know, because it is where I started this journey, that some will pick up this dissertation and not be able to clearly define the pieces within, as if looking for the missing puzzle pieces to the board. But, my son, they are all there. The pieces, the stories that this life has to offer are all there. However, sometimes the pieces are repositioned and sometimes they take on new form, new meaning, new

utility. Sometimes, you have to be the author of that new meaning, you have to be the one to create, reposition, reimagine. Other times, without even knowing it, you inspire meaning for others; son, you helped author my soul. Stories, like puzzles can be confusing, disturbing, and uncomfortable even. However, there is mindful purpose in the weaving of story like this one. Story is organic. When people engage in story as the listener, they are engaged in not only the moment but the anticipation of ‘where is the story going?’ And when people listen to story, they connect and relate to the experience in very unique ways. Story is the embodiment of a learning journey. Learning journeys are not sequential; in fact, the best journeys are messy yet intriguing.

I easily could have explained to the reader that the use of my letters to you throughout the paper, but I did not want to take away from the experience of the reader witnessing story as research if it were their first time to do so. Were they embedded to strengthen empathy and trust in my role as researcher? Were they woven to show the organic nature of stepping in and out of the role of mother, researcher, practitioner, theorist, and back into the role of mom? Or, maybe they were included to provide a means to create areas of exploration for future research? These are questions I simply ask, for I do not know how one related to their inclusion nor do I want to impose upon them a meaning; learning occurs when you making meaning of your own contextual surrounds. Similarly, I could have utilized industry standards aforementioned, but the validity of this research resided in the utilization of story as method; it is an example of a woven research, an application of the framework for analysis. This paper stands as an

example to create space . . . for the future researcher. Explore the tensions that you feel in the world and then story the learning journey. Doing so brings you on a deeper learning experience; one in which you no longer see just the board and puzzle pieces but you see the conversation to be had about their connections, juxtapositions and creative repositioning. My son, the pieces to life's puzzle, resides in the hearts of yourself and others that you meet. And, with each person, each experience, each story shared, you will have a piece of the puzzle to give and receive.

Love,

Momma

APPENDIX

Developing Self, Story, Space and Leadership

Introduction: This tool for leadership development allows for the process of reflection to lead you through an analysis of self and the space needed to facilitate learning using four areas of exploration. In each area, you will be asked a series of questions to reflect upon and score on a level of (1 – Strongly Agree, 2 – Agree, 3 – Disagree, 4 – Strongly Disagree). Then you will be asked to indicate those areas that contribute to your framework for personal analysis; the mediating concepts by which you navigate decisions. Finally, you will be asked a final question for reflection.

Area 1: Utility/Why – In this area, reflect upon these questions regarding the utility of knowing one’s personal story.

Question for Reflection	1 – Strongly Agree 2 – Agree 3 – Disagree 4 – Strongly Disagree
I tell stories about my life to others.	
Others tell stories about their life to me.	
I encourage others to talk to me about their life.	
I know when and what stories I want to share with others.	
People are comfortable around me and openly talk.	
I emphasize story as an important learning tool.	
I emphasize a linear curriculum as an important	

learning tool.	
I believe learning is organic in nature.	
I believe learning is sequential in nature.	

Area 2: Journey/Ontology – In this area, reflect upon the process of realizing your own ontological journey.

Question for Reflection	1 – Strongly Agree 2 –Agree 3 –Disagree 4 – Strongly Disagree
I reflect on my role as a learner.	
I reflect on my role as a teacher.	
My various roles conflict with one another.	
I feel I must live a personal life and a professional life, separate of one another.	
I feel like I learn most when I learn from others.	
I feel like my learning environment allows for conversation, storying and collaboration.	
I have a learning environment that allows for personal creativity and exploration.	
I have a learning environment that decides for me, the professional development opportunities I need.	
I utilize colleagues for support.	

Areas 3: Agency/Story Making – In this area, reflect upon how story has become a pedagogical tool for self-awareness.

Question for Reflection	1 – Strongly Agree 2 –Agree 3 –Disagree 4 – Strongly Disagree
I use story to teach others.	
I use lessons I have learned in life to teach others.	
I learn from others’ stories.	
I have mentors and leaders that are strong examples of people who utilize story to teach and learn.	
I am comfortable in teaching others about utilizing story as a teaching/research method.	

Area 4: Dynamic/Pedagogy – In this area, reflect upon how story making facilitates a dynamic pedagogy that captures the essence of life and nature.

Question for Reflection	1 – Strongly Agree 2 –Agree 3 –Disagree 4 – Strongly Disagree
I encourage individuality.	
I encourage the spirit of community.	
I use story purposefully as a teaching/learning tool.	
When someone teaches using story, I connect new learning to an experience I once had.	

Mediating Concepts: In this areas, indicate the level of influence that each of these elements has on your daily decision making ability. (1 - High, 2 – Medium, 3 – Low)

Element	Rank
Family	
Stories of Others	
My Life Story	
Email	
Social Media	
Conversations with Others	
Literature	
Journal Entries/Diary Writings	
Time	
Culture	
Ethnicity	
Geographic Location	
Health and Wellness	
Economics	
Photographs	
Other:	
Other:	
Other:	

Final Question for Reflection: What is your story?

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