Don't Let Me Down: An Autoethnography of an Urban Teacher

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Don’t Let Me Down: An Autoethnography of an Urban Teacher

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Jacqueline R. Arriaga
August 2015
Advisor: Dr. Nicholas J. Cutforth
ABSTRACT

Students in urban schools who are negatively impacted need stability and continuity the most. However, at least half of new teachers leave their profession within five years. In order for this situation to change, support is needed for new teachers and encouragement is needed for experienced teachers.

The purpose of the study is to offer a first-hand description of factors that affect the profession of teaching and especially teachers who may be wondering how to stay in teaching for more than five years. Veteran teachers gain the opportunity to reflect, validate, and (probably) celebrate their own journey through this profession. This autoethnography uses my experience of a 29-year veteran teacher, who started with an alternative teaching license, to mirror what researchers have identified as key factors for sustainability and how they affected my continued commitment to teaching in urban schools.

The following questions framed the study:

1. Why did I choose teaching as a career?

2. What supportive factors contributed to my decision to continue teaching in an urban school rather than leave the profession?

3. What internal and external struggles have I encountered in teaching and what strategies did I use to overcome them?
4. What beliefs and experiences led to my steadfast commitment to teaching in an urban setting?

5. How do I define success as an urban teacher?

6. What are the implications of my story for urban education?

This autoethnography involves data collection and in-depth analysis of documents and artifacts that were generated during my teaching career as an urban educator. These documents and artifacts come from both internal and external sources.

The study’s implications reach beyond teachers and include two sub-groups: teacher education programs and school administrators. The implication for teachers is the importance of a two-fold support system in order to thrive: first teachers need spiritual support and second they need to surround themselves with likeminded teachers. The implications for teacher education programs include making pre-service teachers aware of the realities of urban settings and provide them with resources, which could help overcome the attrition rate. Additionally, pre-service teachers need to know how to form credible relationships with their students.

This study also reveals the important role that school principals play in the success of their teachers. First, principals are responsible for creating a positive school climate that promotes a professional learning community. Second, they need to establish relational trust in their building. Third, they need to nourish their staff both physically and emotionally. Finally, the implications of autoethnography for teachers and researchers are also discussed.
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CHAPTER ONE

Got to get you into My Life

Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself

—John Dewey

About the Researcher

My education (as seen through the lens of a young child) began with my school experiences in a new land with a different culture and a strange language. My earliest memory is of watching television with my mother. We saw a casket being lowered from a plane, and she told me that an important man from a different country had died (it was not until 28 years later that I realized I had witnessed President John F. Kennedy’s body being returned to Washington, D.C.). And as I watched TV with my mother that day, I had no idea that I would soon be living in “that same country.”

Pre-school. My life drastically changed in 1964 when my mother, who was pregnant at the time, and my brother, who was two years older than me, immigrated to the United States to join my father, who had set up a small third floor apartment in Chicago to welcome his growing family. We soon moved out of that apartment and into a small house in a working class Italian neighborhood. It was there that my mother decided to enroll me in preschool. My brother was struggling in his first grade classroom due to his lack of English, and my mother hoped to avoid the same situation with me.
My preschool class consisted of ten students and four teachers. Looking back at old pictures, I can see that it was a multicultural group of students and teachers. What I recall is that the teachers always wore blue smocks. I am not sure why that has always stuck in my head. After a few weeks in pre-school, my mother was called in for a conference. Since she did not speak English, she went with a friend who helped her with the translation. The teachers were concerned that maybe preschool was not the place for me. It seemed that I had not yet uttered a single word to anyone in the school. The teachers said that I acted age appropriately -- playing, bathing and dressing dolls, painting, and sitting down to listen to the lessons -- however, I seemed to be living in my own silent world. They felt that maybe I should be placed in a “special school.” My mother explained to the teachers that yes, I had words, but they were all in Spanish. In defense of the teachers, all of this occurred prior to bilingual education in Chicago. With my mother refusing to sign any special papers, the preschool had no choice but to keep me there. I remained in preschool for two years with each teacher keeping an intense eye on me. It did not help matters that each and every week for those two years, I checked out the same book from the library, *Madeline* by Ludwig Bemelmans. It was a book that my mother patiently read to me every day, a book that I later discovered had been written in English but that my mother read to me in Spanish. Had I realized that she was making up the story, I would have selected a different book, but I believed I had somehow come across, by magic, the only Spanish book in the school library.

**Kindergarten.** When I started kindergarten, it was at the neighborhood school. My English was still very limited, so I did not speak much and the only memory I have is
of naptime, which I believe stuck in my head because in Ecuador there is no naptime. I thought it was a strange custom to lie on the floor on a mat for what seemed like hours. I soon realized that right after naptime we received milk and cookies. The teacher always selected a different student every day to pass out the milk. More than anything else, I wanted to be selected to pass out the milk to the rest of the students. I tried to be still hardly breathing during naptime. I would keep my eyes shut very tightly and hope to be selected, but I never figured out what I had to do to pass out the milk. The teacher never selected me.

**Primary grades.** In first grade my family moved again, this time to a working class Polish neighborhood in Chicago. By the time we moved out eight years later, the neighborhood changed into a predominantly Mexican area. We moved into a first floor apartment. The landlords were friends of my parents who attended the same Spanish-speaking church. I do not have any pleasant memories of first and second grade. I recall my first grade teachers pulling my hair because I apparently did not identify my paper, which I apparently had forgotten to write a proper heading. I lived in mortal fear that a teacher would ask me if I had done something intentionally or accidentally. Since I could not distinguish between the two words, *intentionally* and *accidentally*, I would alternate which word I would choose—sometimes with disastrous results. I never reported this to my parents because I knew that it would only create more problems for me at home. At that time, my mother began to worry about my short-term memory (or rather lack of short-term memory). My mother, having been a teacher in Ecuador, decided to home-school me after school. She became both frustrated and alarmed when she would teach
me the multiplication tables of 2s and 3s, and by the next morning, I could not recall any of it. Her solution was to enroll me in school in Ecuador during our summer breaks. Therefore, beginning in first grade, I would attend school in the United States from October until late May (yes, I was the student who arrived to school weeks after it had started) then from May until September I would attend various schools in Guayaquil. Since my mother’s former colleagues were teachers and principals at several private schools, it was never a problem for her to enroll me into their schools. At first, I was excited because I was going to attend school with my female cousins. The school in Ecuador, at that time, was an all girls’ school, and everyone was required to wear a uniform. However, my joy was short-lived as I realized that the school rules in Ecuador were vastly different from the school rules I had been trying to navigate back in the States. Any time an adult entered a classroom, I had to immediately stand up on the right side of my desk. A student was not to sit unless that adult allowed it. That was the first rule I learned. Of course, students never argued, questioned, or asked a teacher to clarify anything. Slowly, minor rules like that became a problem for me. The barrier was no longer linguistic but cultural.

Since my family was well known, the school tried to forgive and ignore my “odd behavior and my academic deficits.” It did not matter that until then all my literacy skills had been taught to me in English. Being sent out of the classroom was a form of punishment, and I believe I spent more time outside the classroom than inside. At one school in particular, the “Republica de Cuba” (which was later renamed “Escuela Kennedy”), whenever I was asked to leave the classroom, I decided that instead of just
standing outside, I would go for a walk, exploring. This school had a courtyard in the middle and the classrooms surrounded it. The gates to the school were always closed. One day I looked out of the gate and saw an old woman selling fresh fruit and candies at a little stand right next to the school gate. I befriended her and before I knew it, I was helping her sell her goods. When the school bell rang, I quickly ran back into the schoolyard and stood in line with the rest of the girls. This continued for about a week until the women who cooked for my grandmother reported me to her. Both the school and my family were aghast! Not because I sneaked out of school but because I stood with the street lady selling stuff like a cualquiera (translation anyone, common person), and in the school uniform to boot. I had basically ruined the school’s reputation and shamed my family.

As a child in Ecuador, I did not understand why I had to keep switching schools. The joke in the family was that I had the privilege of being thrown out of (“asked to leave”) some of the best schools in Guayaquil. This pattern continued for the next couple of years. When I questioned my mother as to why she insisted I attend schools in both Ecuador and Chicago, she told me she was afraid of losing me to an American culture.

**Reflection**

At times, I smile as I wonder what happened to the old lady who taught me how to sell fresh fruit and candy. I wish I could tell her that I still “sell” at school, but with a different purpose – to fundraise for my middle school students’ trips to Washington, D.C. and Europe (I’ll speak more to this later). The little girl who laid perfectly still during naptime, waiting to be chosen, is now the teacher who looks around her classroom
making sure every child has an opportunity to help pass out papers. And the daughter, who could not figure out why her mother had expectations that were so different from those of her friends’ parents, now helps her female students and their own immigrant mothers navigate those same choppy waters. When we reflect on our past, our experiences affect not only our present but also our future.

**Organization of the Study**

    My dissertation is organized into seven chapters. Each chapter is titled after a Beatles’ song. Though I am not musically inclined, I have found great comfort in music. When I began writing this dissertation, I created a playlist mostly of contemporary Christian music that helped inspire me to write and reminded me that I was not alone on this journey. The original title of this dissertation was *Still Standing*, a song by Sir Elton John, a song that I would sing to myself on particularly rough days at work. However as this dissertation evolved so did its title. At the end of my writing, I realized a more appropriate title would be *Don’t Let Me Down*. I selected the Beatles’ songs for the titles of my chapters because each one brings back memories of my childhood. This was one band whose music I could count on hearing in the United States as well as in Ecuador. The Beatles’ tunes, along with the *I Love Lucy* show, are largely responsible for my learning of the English language.

    The first chapter, “Got To Get You Into My Life,” provides an introduction and an overview of the study. Chapter Two, “With A Little Help From My Friends,” describes the methodology and why I chose it for my study. Three main components can be found in chapters three through six: (1) the vignettes that are intended to give the
reader a front row seat of my teaching journey; (2) the mirroring of the literature, which is a review of the literature that is relevant to each vignette; and (3) a reflection on the literature where I compare my experiences to what has been written in the literature.

Using Huberman’s (1989) ideas as a guide, I have divided chapters three through six into the following manner: Chapter Three, “In My Life,” reflects the beginning phases of my career; Chapter Four, “Blackbird,” represents the stabilization phases of my career; Chapter Five, “Here Comes The Sun,” incorporates the affirmation phases; and Chapter Six, “The Long and Winding Road,” is a sub phase consisting of reassessment and renewal. Finally, Chapter Seven, “We Can Work It Out,” is a summary of the answers to my research questions and a discussion on the future implications of my study.

**Introduction to the Teacher**

*In the silent evening hallway of an urban public school, it is difficult to imagine that a couple of hours earlier over 1,000 hormonally-charged middle school students filled the hallways and classrooms. I can still feel their lingering energy. As I stand in the hallway amidst broken pencils, torn up papers, and books, which I can’t help but rescue, I realize that I am alone at the school except for the custodians. There are people who think I am crazy to be in “that school” in “that neighborhood” at this time of the night. But I am not afraid...after all, I am home.*

I have decided to write my dissertation in the form of an autoethnography. Ellis (2004) provides a brief explanation of an autoethnography as “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and
political” (p. xix). The story that I seek to tell and understand more deeply through connections to the literature is the how and why of my teaching career.

I have chosen to teach in an urban school for over 29 years. I have taught through the phonics movement and the whole language approach. I have seen curriculums come and go and then be repackaged and sold to the school district as a new curriculum. I have survived the attrition rate that several researchers, including Hunt and Carroll (2003), have estimated to be at nearly 50% for new teachers. According to Hanushek and Rivkin (2004), those who teach in poor, low-performing, and non-White schools are more apt to leave if given the opportunity. I was once given the opportunity to leave, and yet, I stayed. It was at that time when my family and friends were asking me to go back home to the Midwest to teach there, but it was then that I realized that teaching was more than a job to me but an actual calling; a calling that led me to teach far away from my family in Denver, a city where I had no family.

In 2007, I was informed by my principal that according to the U.S. Department of Education’s (2001) No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, I was no longer “highly qualified” to teach my students English—something I had done for the previous 19 years. I was lacking a credit in a class with the word “literature” in its title. I did not let that law stop me though. Instead, I took a wonderful class at a local university about 1950s movies and literature (which had nothing to do with improving my skills as a teacher or educator) and then once again I was considered “highly qualified” under NCLB.

The teacher who stands before her students daily and who is writing this dissertation is a first generation immigrant and a second language learner. When I see
my students, I see a reflection of myself as a child. As I mentioned in my opening, my family immigrated to the United States from Ecuador when I was very young. I struggled through school due to my limited understanding of English and the culture of the American education system. As a child I never wanted to become a teacher instead I dreamed of being a lawyer. I stumbled into teaching during my senior year of college when I was asked to serve as a translator for a Mexicali mission group. Their original translator cancelled at the last moment. As a senior in college majoring in criminal justice, I did not realize that one-week of translating and working with children in Mexicali would turn my life upside down.

When I returned from the mission trip, I realized that taking the traditional route of switching my major to education was not an option for a senior who was a few months from graduation but studying about law and the juvenile justice system no longer felt like my destination. Instead I applied to work in the Chicago Public Schools’ alternative teaching program. I began teaching as a substitute teacher and then was offered a full-time teaching position in an overcrowded urban school in the Back of the Yard neighborhood. With no substantial teaching background and just a few education classes, I was destined to fail (Ingersoll, 2001). Yet, after more than 29 years, I am still teaching and embracing the challenges of the urban educational system.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

According to Perez, Huber, Huidor, Malagon, Sanchez, and Solorzano (2006) the educational pipeline is not functioning for all of our students. The students who are negatively impacted need stability and continuity the most. My first instinct as a teacher
is to help students, but I have come to the realization that in order to help students I need to help their teachers. As flight attendants state in their list of safety procedures, “If you are traveling with children, make sure that your own mask is on first before helping your children.” Therefore, this autoethnography is a way for me to connect with teachers who may be wondering how to stay in teaching for more than five years. Using research to mirror some of my teaching experiences, I hope to understand why I am still in the teaching profession and the key factors that have kept me teaching in the inner city. It is my intention to make this dissertation a scholarly narrative through the lens of a public middle school teacher, first-generation immigrant, second language learner, and Hispanic woman who has not only survived, but also thrived, teaching in the inner city. I believe that when we reflect on our past, our experiences affect not only our present, but also our future (Dewey, 1944). It is with this mindset that I write. The expectation is that the research will support my story and create hope for new teachers and encouragement for experienced teachers.

The purpose of this study is to examine my experiences through my own and other researchers’ lenses to understand the factors that have contributed to my success as an urban teacher and determine what can be learned from my experiences, both positive and negative. The following questions framed my study:

7. Why did I choose teaching as a career?

8. What supportive factors contributed to my decision to continue teaching in an urban school rather than leave the profession?
9. What internal and external struggles have I encountered in teaching and what strategies did I use to overcome them?

10. What beliefs and experiences led to my steadfast commitment to teaching in an urban setting?

11. How do I define success as an urban teacher?

12. What are the implications of my story for urban education?

**Significance of the Study**

The potential impact of this study is threefold. First, its experiential nature allows for an in depth examination of one’s own practice as an educator. Reflection, as stated earlier, is an integral part of our evolution as teachers. Second, my colleagues in the teaching profession may benefit from this study by identifying themselves along the spectrum of our shared experiences as they navigate their ways through the urban educational landscape. Third, this study will further the methodology of autoethnography as a valid and valuable tool for gaining knowledge from direct experience rather than from theory or beliefs.
CHAPTER TWO

With a Little Help from my Friends

…in order to be an effective teacher, educators have to be aware of who they are, be aware of their blind spots, their biases and be aware of their values, so that their biases do not get in the way of their teachings and their values is what guides their teaching.

—Nieto

When I am asked by some teachers how many years I have been teaching and I respond, “29 years,” they are shocked. I used to think this was because I looked young, but now I realize it is because they cannot imagine teaching for so long. Their follow-up question is usually, “How?” I am often perplexed by that simple question so I usually smile and respond, "I love working with the students." But I realize that this is not an adequate answer, and this feeling and the need to better articulate my journey as a teacher motivated me to conduct this study.

Autoethnography as a Research Method

Autoethnography and ethnography. Ethnographers describe the culture of a group of people and learn what it is like to be a part of the group from the viewpoint of the members of that group usually through observations (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). An autoethnography is the blending of ethnography and autobiography (Ellis, 2004). One of the main differences between an ethnography and autoethnography is that in
ethnography, the researcher may not know their research subject and culture but in autoethnography, the subject and culture is well known to the researcher (Chang, 2008). According to Chang (2008), autoethnography focuses on writing about self, but it is not focused on self-alone; the study can serve as a vehicle to search for understanding of other cultures through your experiences with that culture. As such, an autoethnography is written in the first-person voice. This allows the author and her readers the opportunity to better understand themselves. The writer of the autoethnography would like her readers to experience the place of others and create not just social awareness, but empathy (Ellis, 2004).

The focus of this study includes my experiences as a teacher in urban elementary and middle schools, and the culture of my study includes the factors in those schools that led me to not just survive but thrive in them (Valtierra, 2013). Being an integral part of this teaching community affords me a unique opportunity to conduct a study that will provide insights into the challenges faced by teachers in urban settings. This study is not intended to be a recipe on how to succeed as a teacher rather its goal is to generate conversations amongst colleagues, administrators, mentors, and education programs on how to support and sustain teachers in the profession so that they can effectively serve our children.

**Evolution of autoethnography.** Anthropologist Karl Heider (1975) first used the term “autoethnography” when he studied the Dani people and published an article titled, “What do People Do? Dani Auto-Ethnography.” The “self” that he wrote about was not the ethnographer but rather the people he interviewed and those who self-reported about
their culture. Soon after, David Hayano (1979) established criteria for the autoethnographic researcher as someone with knowledge of the people, their language, and their culture, or as he refers to them: a *native member*. He described the two most common types of autoethnographers: first, the researchers who study their own self-identity, which may include their own culture, religion, and ethnicity; second, those that have “acquired an intimate familiarity with a certain subcultural, recreational, or occupational group” (p. 100).

According to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), in the 1980’s scholars began to recognize the limitations of the ontological (i.e. the nature of our reality), epistemological (i.e. how we know what we know), and axiological (i.e. what we value) (Creswell, 2007). They comprehended the importance of interaction between authors, audiences, and texts. Also they pointed to the value of stories that were “complex, constitutive, meaningful phenomena that taught morals and ethics, introduced unique ways of thinking and feeling, and helped people make sense of themselves and others” (p. 2).

Scholars from various fields began to contemplate how social science would change if the shift were more toward literature than physics. Autoethnography embraces the notion that stories can be proposed rather than theories and that they are acknowledged as value-laden rather than pretending to be free of value judgments. Most of these scholars adopted autoethnography in search of an alternative way of viewing and conducting research.

**Criticism of autoethnography.** Autoethnography is not a traditional research method. As part ethnography and part autobiography, criticism arises when
autoethnography is viewed as one or the other and when researchers evaluate autoethnography by traditional standards (Holt, 2003). Autoethnography is criticized for being too artful and not scientific enough, or for being too scientific and not artful enough (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). These criticisms place art and science in conflict with each other. Autoethnography seeks to remedy this. Autoethnographers believe that their research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical as well as therapeutic while inclusive of personal and social phenomena. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) state, “The questions that autoethnographers ask are who reads our work, how are they affected by it, and how does it keep a conversation going?” (p. 11)

**Examples of autoethnography.** The following four examples illustrate the variety of autoethnographical approaches in the literature. The topics include chronic illness, mental health, and race. Authors use personal narratives to describe and connect their experiences to the appropriate literature. These autoethnographies enable the reader to gain understanding and insights into sensitive areas based on the authors’ experiences.

In *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss and Chronic Illness*, Ellis (1995) writes a personal book about emphysema and the death of her partner, Gene. This is one of Dr. Ellis’ earlier writings; what she described at that time as “experimental ethnography.” Her data consisted of personal recollections and field notes, which were transformed into dialogues. Through her writing, the reader is invited into the complexities of a personal relationship of a couple that must face illness and death. This account provides those in the caregiving profession with an understanding of how the struggle with chronic illness and death consumes families with intense emotions and
other challenges. True to an autoethnography, it is up to the reader to construct meaning from the events that are shared.

The topic in Jacquie Dianne Kidd and Mary Finlayson’s (2010) autoethnography, *Mental Illness in the Nursing Workplace: A Collective Autoethnography*, is the issue of stress and distress on nurses. The authors describe how nurses cope with mental illness while in clinical practice. This study was based on documented cases of nurses who are susceptible to mental illness prior to entering their profession, nurses who suffered from mental illness independent of their work setting, and nurses who developed mental illness as a result of their work setting. Nineteen nurses were asked to contribute a personal narrative responding to the researchers’ question of what they felt people needed to know about nurses, nursing, and mental illness. Autoethnography provided the opportunity to use details to reflect, interpret, and determine what course of action the employers and nurses could take to reduce stress and distress, and avoid mental illness. These autoethnographic stories from nurses who have experienced mental illness allow the connection between mental illness and nursing to be investigated. In its conclusion, this research raises questions about the need for further investigation as well as support and education for vulnerable, distressed nurses who may or may not have mental illnesses.

Boyd (2008) in his article, “Autoethnography as a Tool for Transformative Learning about White Privilege,” writes about his experience as a white male of privilege participating in a course that was intended to bridge race and class gaps among Christians. The data consisted of his memories and personal documents such as journal entries, email messages, and personal notes. He gathered field notes from his own
experience and consulted with two individuals who shared the same experience. He writes about the numerous meetings he participated in and the unexpected reactions he received from the other participants. Boyd considered himself different from other white males with regards to race issues, but it is not until a member of the group calls him a Hitler and a know-it-all that he steps back and reflects on his own actions and words. He reflects:

Conversely, my confusion and frustration in the group arose out of the fact that as a white male I am used to being in a position of control. When group dynamics denied me my usual place of dominance, I was at a loss as to how to act and respond. As Wildman and Davis (2002) observed, “Privilege is not visible to its holder; it is merely there, a part of the world, a way of life, simply the way things are” (p. 89). Once I noticed my White privilege, I was able to see that it was pervasive throughout my interaction in the group. (p. 222)

The author concludes that sharing this personal experience through autoethnography led to a transformative learning experience about the dynamics of the white privilege that operates in his life. Using the cultural lens of whiteness he was able to gain a different perspective on how whiteness distorts and influences the interactions he has with people of different races. The intended audiences for his work are white scholars who are committed to making the invisible (white privilege) visible and the unspoken conscious.

In her doctoral dissertation, Liddell (2007) uses autoethnography to analyze her journey as a Black woman going through a doctoral program. Her study titled, *What's Black about It? An Educator’s Autoethnography*, recalls incidents that occurred early in her educational life and later as a leader and educator. She writes using heuristic inquiry and incorporates Ellis and Bochner (2000) roles of a storyteller, a story analyst and a participant observer. Her data is from her personal story and a collection of other Black
women’s stories found in the literature. Rather than following a typical outline for a dissertation, she begins to write her story in Chapter Two. After each vignette she writes her reflection and shares the literature to support her story. Her study is intended to help Black women navigate through university life. By sharing her experiences, women of color have access to increased knowledge and understanding of the processes of higher education.

**Procedures adopted by autoethnographers.** There is no singular description of what an autoethnographic study entails rather a wide spectrum of criteria exists for the methodological approach in conducting such a study. According to Ellis and Bochner (2000) who list over 35 different types of autoethnography, the emphasis of the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto) determines the balance of autobiography and ethnography. For them, autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that “displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). It is a process that looks at both cultural issues and personal experiences and connects them in a way that becomes blurred.

For Reed-Donahay (1997), an anthropologist, autoethnography is a “form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both method and test” (p. 9). Her main concept is of a “double consciousness” in which the researcher is both an “insider” and “observer” to the social group, a theory or model of a “boundary-crosser.” (p. 17)

Anderson (2006) adopts a similar approach in his use of the term *analytic autoethnography*. He lists five criteria that this approach must meet: (1) the researcher
must be a complete member of the research group or setting, (2) the researcher must engage in analytic reflexivity defined as having an awareness of one’s effects on the research situation, (3) the researcher must be visible as a member in the researcher’s published texts, (4) the researcher should engage with informants beyond oneself, and (5) the researcher must be “committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena” (p. 373).

Chang (2008) suggests a “triadic balance” in which “autoethnography should be ethnographic in methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation” (p. 48). She maintains that autoethnographers should use the standard ethnographic method of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data, as well as a variety of tools, including self-observation, document review, and verifying data by triangulations. She writes, “Autoethnographers are expected to treat their autobiographical data with critical, analytical and interpretive eyes to detect the culture undertones of what is recalled, observed and told” (p. 49).

My autoethnographical approach in this study is driven by Reed-Donahay (1997), as I am both the insider and observer. At times my study reflects the analytic (Anderson, 2006) as I used the five criteria to help guide my study and the evocative (Ellis, 2004) and as I shared the experiences I have encountered. I acknowledge that autoethnographers such as Anderson and Ellis and Bochner (2006) do not agree with each other regarding autoethnography. However, I utilized those aspects of several researchers that best represent my teaching career in an effort to generate conversations about the factors that contribute to the success of the urban teacher.
Data Collection

Autoethnography is a process and a product (Chang, 2008). The process of creating the narrative for an autoethnographic study involves data collection and in-depth analysis. I used my own experiences to mirror the research literature and at other times to reflect what other beliefs or factors may have contributed to my teaching experiences. Both my challenges and successes as an urban teacher are dissected, analyzed, and shared providing the reader with the opportunity to feel and to reflect upon their own experiences. This purposeful connection between the experience-based data and the reader’s own teaching journey serves to accentuate the learning opportunity I hope to provide to my teaching colleagues (Ellis & Bochner, 1996).

In this study, my data is comprised of documents and artifacts that were generated during my teaching career as an urban educator, thus creating consistencies and truthfulness (Ellis, 2004). These documents give credence to my study and help support my findings, and the documents and artifacts come from both internal and external sources. The internal sources are my personal notes, journals, letters from parents and students, and photographs. The external sources are derived from individuals such as administrators who conducted professional observations in my classroom. Additionally I use data gathered from a group of professors who spent a year in my classroom observing, videotaping, and interviewing different people (Clarke, Davis, Rhodes, & DeLott Baker, 1998).

I generated field notes from an analysis and synthesis of the various pieces of data. According to Jerks (2002), field notes are notes that one writes not just of their
observations, but also of what they know. These notes may include thoughts, feelings, and conversations (Ellis, 2004).

**Data Analysis**

My analysis of the data was a comprehensive journey. First, using the research questions as a guide, I reviewed and reflected on gathered data to identify patterns and/or themes that occurred. Second, I wrote numerous drafts of the narrative seeking to clarify and interpret the data while analyzing what previous research concludes and connecting it to my work. Third, of the various vignettes I wrote, I selected the ones that I felt would resonate more with teachers. Finally, I wrote up the study as a chronological story that illustrates my teaching journey from the perspective of a novice teacher through to that of a veteran teacher. I analyzed my narratives through the lens of Huberman’s (1989) diagram of the professional life cycle of a teacher.

**Validity**

I drew on Anderson’s (2006), Ellis’ (2004, and Chang’s (2008) standards to assure the validity of my data. First, through the use of personal documents, I created the field notes of my experiences. Second, I consulted with four other teachers, who served as peer debriefers. Three of these teachers were from the Denver schools in which I had taught at various times in my career. I shared different vignettes with them and then met to discuss the vignettes and reflect about that time period. The other teacher was from a district in the Midwest who has taught for over 20 years in a school with similar demographics. I emailed her several vignettes and asked if she herself had shared some of my same experiences (Anderson, 2006).
Validity can also be viewed in terms of what happens to the readers and the researcher. A compelling account evokes in the readers a feeling of truth and may help them communicate with others who are different from them. It may even improve the lives of the readers and the researchers (Ellis, 2004). The following table illustrates how my study reflects these three main authorities (Anderson [2006], Ellis (2004], and Chang [2008]) in the field of autoethnography.

![Figure 1: Huberman’s Phases and Career Sequences](image-url)

*Figure 1: Huberman’s Phases and Career Sequences*
| Researcher must be a complete member of the research group or setting | Application: High. I am a teacher. | Retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from the culture or culture identity. | Application: High. All narratives are from key moments in my teaching career. | Narrative Inquiry | Application: High. This study is written as a narrative emphasizing my voice |
| Researcher must engage in analytic reflexivity defined as having an awareness of one’s effects on the research situation | Application: High. I have written this study for teachers and the broader educational community | Compare and contrast personal experiences against existing research | Application: High. A reflection piece at the end of each narrative connects it to the research literature | Field Data: Participation, observation, interview, and document review | Application: Medium. Artifacts include field notes, observations, documents review (no interviews) |
| Research should engage with informants beyond oneself | Application: High. Teachers have read my narratives. | Presented as a story with a narrative, characterization, and plot line. | Application: Medium. It is written as a narrative; my character emerges from the narratives as I told my story the plot line developed. | Triangulating sources, multiple origins | Application: High. Clarke et al., (1998) study, Denver Public School - field notes |

**Figure 2:** Reflection of study compared to three main authorities

**Audiences for this Study**

I chose autoethnography for its impactful quality of reflective thinking. My study is intended to provide insight to teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and mentors.
about what is undoubtedly one of the most challenging fields of all: urban education. First, my journey, with its challenges and accomplishments, is given a voice so that others who are either beginning or struggling in their own journeys may find some authentic insights that will inspire them to persevere. Second, administrators who read my study can reflect on their practices and implement some of the strategies deemed effective in order to support their teachers. Third, the teacher educator or mentors may renew their understandings of the challenges of a new teacher.

**Summary**

Using the title of a Beatles’ song, “Got to Get You Into My Life” (Lennon & McCartney, 1966), the first chapter introduces both me as the autoethnographer and the study. It is important that the reader have some understanding about my background and how the study is organized. I chose the title of the Beatles’ song, “With a Little Help from My Friends” (Lennon & McCartney, 1967) for the second chapter because it introduces the reader to the world of autoethnography and its key researchers. I selected this particular Beatles’ song keeping in mind those responsible for developing this method of research, in particular Dr. Carolyn Elis. These researchers have empowered me to tell my story and I consider them now my friends.

The following four chapters are arranged in chronological order of my teaching journey. Each chapter consists of three main components: (1) the vignettes that are intended to give the reader a front row seat of my teaching journey; (2) the mirroring of the literature, which is a review of the literature that is relevant to each vignette; and (3) a reflection on the literature where I compare my experiences to what has been written in
the literature. With the exception of Chapter 6, at the end of each of the chapter is a brief explanation as to why I selected the particular Beatles’ song and an introduction to the next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE

In My Life

Mentoring is a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction.

—John C. Crosby

My First Teaching Position in Chicago (Beginning Phase of Career)

In the fall of 1985, after a year of substitute teaching in the Chicago Public Schools, I was assigned to a third grade class. “Finally,” I thought, “my own classroom!” When I arrived at the address of Branch West Elementary, I was confused. I was looking for the traditional brick building of an elementary school and instead found an older Catholic church. Two ladies walked up a sidewalk on the side of the church and disappeared into a doorway. I double-checked the address I had been given and when I saw two more ladies walk up the sidewalk, I asked if they knew where Branch West Elementary was. They said it was right inside the church, so I followed the ladies into the old building with its walls of dark paneling and poor lighting. There was nothing that would give anyone a clue that children spent most of their days there. After two flights of stairs, the ladies pointed me to the main office. I walked in, introduced myself, and said I was there to teach 3rd grade. The office lady took one look at me, told me to have a seat, and said that the principal was not in. About 15 minutes later the phone rang and I overheard the office lady say, “Yes, she is here.” She put the phone down and asked if I
spoke Spanish. When, I told her I did, she said, “You need to report to room 101 to Ms. DeLaMontes. Let her know that you will be working with her until your classroom is ready.” With that, my teaching career began.

As I walked through the dark hallway in search of room 101, I wondered who that was on the telephone and why my room wasn’t ready. As I entered room 101, I was transported from a dark hallway to a room filled with colors and light. Looking around, I noticed students’ artwork and schoolwork around the room. At the teacher’s desk sat Maritza DeLaMontes, a short woman in her early 40’s. Ms. DeLaMontes had 15 years of teaching experiences in Puerto Rico and two years of experience in the Chicago Public Schools. I told her that I was sent to help her. She smiled and said that she was glad she was finally getting some help for her first graders. She told me that I would be teaching her students how to read. I must have looked horrified because she asked me if I knew how to teach children to read. As I looked at her and said, “No,” it suddenly dawned on me how inept I was as a teacher. I had no clue how students learned or how I was supposed to teach them.

Suddenly the bell rang and I was surrounded by what seemed like an army of little 1st graders all buzzing around. Ms. DeLaMontes was speaking with what appeared to be a parent of one of the students. As she ended her conversation, she looked at her classroom of 28 first graders and said, “Buenos Dias.” All the children stopped their talking and responded, “Buenos Dias, Maestra DeLaMontes.” I was in awe! As she took attendance, I noticed that the children were sitting at their desks quietly. She reminded them that today was gym day, asked them to please line up quietly, and escorted the
students out of the room. When she returned, she started explaining to me the steps in teaching phonics in Spanish to the students. When the students returned from gym, she assigned me to work with one little girl. As I tried working with her, Ms. DeLaMontes gently reminded me that I would be more effective if the child was close to me and not at arm’s length. She explained to me over lunch that one could not teach children from a distance. As I reflect on the weeks I spent working with Ms. DeLaMontes, it was like boot camp training for teachers. She taught me the importance of setting up routines for students. She modeled this everyday so both the students and I knew her daily expectations and procedures.

She shared with me that parents want to help their children, but that we, as teachers, need to be explicit on how they can help. During one of our planning times, she shared with me that parents liked to be involved in the classroom, but that sometimes that is not in the best interest of the children. Still, she believed that we needed to honor parents and recognize that they would like to be involved on some scale. Ms. DeLaMontes’ insights and understanding of parents was revealed as she placed a phone call to a parent. She called Theresa’s mother (who lived across the street) and asked her if she wouldn’t mind bringing her a cup of coffee. Ms. DeLaMontes then asked me if I wanted a cup, and I said, “No.” She ignored my answer and told Theresa’s mother that I, too, would like a cup of coffee. She hung up the phone and said that when Theresa’s mother arrived, I should take the coffee and thank her. Fifteen minutes later when Theresa’s mother came, visibly happy with coffee and sweet bread, I did just as my mentor said. After Theresa’s mother left, I asked Ms. DeLaMontes why she had
requested the coffee when there was always coffee in the teachers’ lounge. She responded by saying that sometimes all a parent can offer is a cup of coffee and as teachers we should take that cup of coffee because it will make the parent feel welcome at the school. This simple act was a pivotal experience for the parent and the child of that parent, allowing a connection between school life and home life.

Conversations with Ms. DeLaMontes about what I later came to understand as best practices were natural and though I recognized my own lack of training as a teacher, she never made me feel anything less than her colleague. Even after my classroom (which was actually the janitor’s broom closet) was finally ready about three months into the school year, Ms. DeLaMontes and I still shared a cup of coffee together.

**Mirroring of the literature.** Teaching is the only profession that expects novice teachers to perform on the same level as veteran teachers by the end of their second year (Brown Laboard, 2002). Instead of trying to help new teachers by giving them more equitable class sizes, classrooms, and materials, schools engage in a form of hazing. Patterson (2005) defines hazing in a school as “institutional practices and policies that result in new teachers experiencing poorer working conditions than their veteran colleagues” (p. 21). This is one factor that contributes to the high turnover rate, especially in low-income schools.

If we wish to ensure that every child receives the quality education they deserve we need to begin by keeping quality teachers in the classroom (Hunt & Carroll, 2003). Teacher mentoring is one of the key strategies in helping to reduce the attrition rates (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Strong, 2005). Smith and Ingersoll (2004) used data from the
1990-2000 Schools and Staffing Survey and its Teacher Follow-up Survey, which included 3,000 beginning teachers, to support their claim that teachers who received induction and mentoring support in their first year of teaching were less likely to change schools or leave teaching altogether. The findings of the study indicated that providing mentoring to first-year teachers reduced the five-year attrition rate by one percent. However, when first-year teachers were provided with mentoring, opportunities to plan and collaborate with their colleagues as well as teach a reduced number of classes, and have a teacher assistant, the attrition rate was reduced by more than half. Ingersoll and Kralik (2004) reviewed empirical studies of induction and mentoring programs. These studies indicated the effects that mentoring programs have on the retention of new teachers. Figure 3 shows the predicted turnover probabilities for teachers.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 3:** Predicted probability of turnover after the first year of teaching by various induction packages. (Mentoring is included as part of induction.)

As research has shown, the practice of mentoring is a contributing factor to increasing teacher retention. The work of a mentor is inherently different from the work of a classroom teacher. Evertson and Smithey (2000) analyzed the teaching skills of new teachers and the mentors they were paired with. Some mentors had formal mentor training while others did not. New teachers who were paired with mentors who received
formal training acquire more effective teaching skills. Ideally, a mentor should have experience in teaching the same subject or grade level as their mentee. Also, according to Anhorn (2008), a mentor should demonstrate compassion and support for the novice teacher. The phrase “stop eating their young” referred to by Anhorn (2008, p. 21), describes the negative, unproductive environment that is contrary to what effective mentoring seeks to achieve. According to Haberman and Post (1998), teachers learn best by observing other teachers who teach in the same school with similar students. He refers to them as credible mentors: teachers who practice what they coach. Wildman, Magliaro, Niles, and Niles (1992) identified the following mentee personality traits that help to promote a successful relationship between the mentor and mentee:

1. Willing to be a mentor
2. Sensitive that is they know when to back off
3. Helpful but not authoritarian
4. Emotionally committed to their beginners
5. Astute that is they know the right thing to say at the right time
6. Diplomatic, for example, they know how to counteract bad advice given to their beginner by others
7. Able to anticipate problems (p. 211).

According to Wong (2004), induction and mentoring are not synonymous. Induction is a process such as professional development, whereas mentoring is an action. The purpose of this action is to help the new teacher survive. As Figure 3 shows, in order for a mentor to be most effective there needs to be a combination of both induction and mentoring. Mentors should not just focus on the areas that the new teacher might be struggling with, but also help them see their own strengths (Grossman & Davis, 2012). Haberman and Post (1998) stated,
“The process of mentoring is extremely more powerful training than taking classes or going through traditional forms of laboratory experiences” (p. 104).

Self-reflection on the literature. When I first walked into Branch West Elementary and discovered that my classroom was not ready, I was disappointed. Little did I know at the time that not having a classroom ready would be the best thing both for my students and my teaching career.

It was expected that I would go into the classroom and begin teaching as though I had been teaching for years (Brown Laboard, 2002). The reality was that I had been a substitute teacher sporadically for a year and only had a pseudo student teaching experience for a couple of weeks during the previous summer. That, coupled with two teaching classes over the summer, was the extent of my training. Prior to walking into Branch West Elementary I had never prepared lesson plans or been in charge of a classroom. Today, I still wonder what I would have done on my first day if fate had not intervened.

Ms. DeLaMontes was my unofficial mentor. It was a role she did not choose for herself nor was she ever compensated for it. I was unexpectedly thrust into her first grade classroom where she not only welcomed me but also taught me how to be a teacher.

Unbeknownst to Ms. DeLaMontes, she encompassed the qualities of a credible mentor that Anhorn (2008) and Haberman and Post (1998) state that a novice teacher needs. By observing Ms. DeLaMontes with her students, it was clear to me that what she was sharing with me about being a teacher was something she not only preached but also
practiced. I do not recall her teaching a lesson to her entire class instead she preferred working in small groups with each child coming as close as possible to her. The conversations I had with Ms. DeLaMontes regarding teaching were never authoritarian. For example, she would share her lesson plan book and explain to me why she wrote each lesson. Throughout my time with her in her classroom a pattern ensued: she would ask/tell me to do something and follow up with the reasons why it was best to do it in a certain way. I learned that this was her way of teaching me some of her practices.

Ms. DeLaMontes never referred to herself as my mentor rather when she introduced me it was as her co-teacher. Her compassion and willingness to mentor and teach an untrained teacher provided me a firm foundation. At times, I wonder had I followed the traditional path of teaching if I would have been open to Ms. DeLaMontes’ suggestions. I do know that had I not been placed with her I would have been one more statistic in the teacher attrition rate.

Haberman and Post (1998) state, “The process of mentoring is extremely more powerful training than taking classes or going through traditional forms of laboratory experiences” (p. 104). It was that powerful training that Ms. DeLaMontes provided me that allowed me to have a successful first year of teaching.

**

(We need) leadership that is tough enough to demand a great deal from everyone, and leadership that is tender enough to encourage the heart.

—Thomas Sergiovanni
My First Teaching Position in Denver

In the summer of 1988, I visited Denver to attend a friend’s wedding. My friend’s mother was part of the Denver Public School system. In one of our conversations, I shared with her that someday I would like to try teaching in a different district. She asked me if I would like to interview in her district. I told her yes never dreaming that I would be hired since I had received my teaching certificate through an alternative licensing program and had less than two years of experience. However, to my surprise, I was offered a job!

When I left Chicago in 1988, I thought I would stay in Denver for about two years and then move back to Chicago to be with my family and friends. I desperately missed them and after a long 5 months I realized that I had made a horrible mistake. The school that I was assigned to was not much different from the one I left in Chicago. It was located in an area serving poor working first and second generation Hispanic and some Vietnamese families. The homes were mainly government housing built for multi-families. The visible tagging in the alley indicated that gangs were a problem, and while there were a couple of small family grocery stores nearby, there were no large chain stores within walking distance.

However, these problems did not define the quality of the neighborhood or the students. Strangely, I felt safe and welcomed by my students’ families. The problem was the school, Genesis Elementary. First, I was troubled by the frigid environment where teachers kept their classroom doors closed and distanced themselves from colleagues.
Second, the unexplained departure of the principal was followed by the favored replacement candidate declining the position and then the new principal being injured on his first day and never returning.

After a couple of weeks, another principal was placed at our school. I was not present when she was introduced to the staff because I was in a different meeting that morning. However, I did not feel that I had missed anything since I had already decided that I was going to leave at the end of the school year and return to Chicago.

Later that day, my students were excited because they had heard that Whitney Houston was going to be our new principal. I assured my students that the Whitney Houston they had heard on the radio was not the same Whitney Houston who was our new principal. Moments later a tall, slender, African-American woman with high heels walked into our classroom. She said she was the new principal and her name was Whitney Houston. When one of my students asked her if she sang, she smiled at him and said she loved to sing but was not a professional. At our afternoon faculty meeting, she mentioned that she had a young daughter in her neighborhood school and the education that she wanted for her daughter, she also wanted for our students. This was the first time I had heard a principal state that.

One of Ms. Houston’s highest priorities was to change the school’s physical environment and immediately the classrooms were painted and new carpet installed. Walking into my new classroom, I realized how dingy it had once been. In addition to these cosmetic changes, Ms. Houston also focused on improved instruction by observing teachers regularly. When she observed me for the first time she carried a legal size pad,
sat down crossed legged, and began taking notes. Afterwards she asked me for a conference to discuss her observations. Her office was neatly organized and resembled an office catalogue. She got up from behind her desk and asked me to sit down at a small round table. She smiled and said, “I observed your lesson on map reading. I would like to begin this conference with you telling me what you thought went well in your lesson.” I was stunned because I expected this conference to be like ones with the previous principal who would do most of the talking while I just nodded and then I’d be on my way. Initially, I was not really sure how to respond; however, Ms. Houston noticed my perplexed look and said, “It was a good lesson. Just tell me what you liked best and then we can discuss how to improve it.” So began the first of many conferences with Ms. Houston. As I was still a relatively new teacher, she could have mentioned several mistakes, but she never did. Our conferences always began with her genuine interest in what I thought had gone well followed by her sharing what she enjoyed about my lesson. I left our conferences with one suggestion that she wanted me to focus on so that I could improve my instruction. Her approach was simple and yet so effective.

In my early years of teaching, a stranger entering my room would have perceived me as disorganized. Mounds of paperwork and books were strewn about my desk. On several occasions, Ms. Houston asked me about this mess and I always responded that I would try to organize it. During one of my conferences with her she said, “Every time I enter your classroom you are working with a group of children. I think the solution to your messy desk would be to put up a divider and just hide it.” I walked away from that
conference a bit perplexed. Did she want me to hide my desk so that it wouldn’t be an eyesore?

Ms. Houston became my strongest mentor. She embraced the community and welcomed parents into the school; she learned Spanish so that she could communicate with parents. She emphasized to the staff that we were professionals and, as such, we should dress and conduct ourselves in that manner, especially around our students. She never addressed us by our first name; it was always Ms. or Mr. followed by our last name. To this day, I address my colleagues in the same professional manner. Her door was open to teachers, and she was receptive to ideas that would benefit students. Her legacy was to be a principal who was tough, demanding, and fair. She obviously cared for students, but she also cared for her staff thinking of them as people first and then as teaching professionals.

**Mirroring the literature.** According to Hussar (1999), schools in the 1990’s were anticipating a substantial teacher shortage due to retirement and normal attrition. In response, district and states attempted to attract quality teachers to their schools by offering incentives such as signing bonuses, student loan forgiveness programs, and mortgage subsidies. In contrast, a study conducted by Ingersoll (2001) noted that the problem was not that there was a teacher shortage, but rather the inability to keep quality teachers who have already been recruited. According to Ingersoll (2001a) teachers left their schools primarily because they were dissatisfied with the working conditions of the schools (see below Figure 4).
School Conditions Drive Teacher Turnover

We Need Schools Where Quality Teaching & Learning Can Thrive

![Bar Chart](chart.png)

**Figure 4:** School Conditions Drive Teacher Turnover

Working conditions contribute to what Ingersoll (2001) referred to as the “revolving door” – the demands of recruiting and hiring large numbers of new teachers annually. The strongest predictor of turnover in schools is the teachers’ rating of the conditions under which they teach. A teacher’s decision on whether to stay or leave depends not just on salary but working conditions, which include class size, teaching load, resources, teacher preparation, and mentoring support (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Other factors include unclear expectations, inadequate resources, isolation, role conflict, and reality shock (Anhorn, 2008). Just as schools need to cultivate the students’ needs and nourish their desire for success, schools should meet those same needs for teachers in order to assure an environment that stimulates growth, both academically for the students and professionally for the teachers. Working conditions according to Moore Johnson (2006) consist of the following:
• The physical features of the building, equipment, and resources. Is the building maintained and functional – is it clean or dirty? A school building that is properly maintained signals respect for those who teach and learn there. A building that is in disrepair gives the message of indifference or disdain for those who teach and learn there. It can also interfere with effective instruction, as in when equipment does not function or the lighting makes it difficult to read.

• The organizational structures that define teachers’ formal positions and relationships with others in the school, such as lines of authority, workload, autonomy, and supervisory arrangements. Work conditions become difficult when teachers are given assignments such as split grade levels, different subjects to teach, deteriorating classrooms, and a large teaching load. Not surprisingly, job satisfaction is greatly affected when a teacher is faced with the monumental task of closing the achievement gap and working in an environment that is ill suited for the needs of the students and the teacher.

• The sociological features that shape how teachers experience their work, including their roles, status, and the characteristic of their students and peers. As the job of teaching can be an isolating experience, based on the boundaries of particular subjects taught or the physical layout of the school, creating strong professional communities among staff members can provide opportunities to share ideas, strategies, and other types of support. School administrators can help facilitate this by aligning teachers’ preparation periods so that teachers can plan collaboratively.

• The political features of the organization. Whether teachers have opportunities to participate in important decisions.

• The cultural features of the school as a workplace that influence teachers’ interpretation of what they do and their commitment, such as values, traditions, and norms.

• The psychological features of the environment that may sustain or deplete them personally, such as the meaningfulness of what they do day-to-day or the opportunities they find for learning and growth. “Schools that delegated more control to teachers had fewer problems among teachers and less conflict between teachers and administrators” (Ingersoll, 2003 p. 202). This was especially true when teachers were involved in school-wide decisions about discipline and tracking students. “Ownership” by all stakeholders is essential to creating a positive school climate. Collaborative efforts insure that school decisions are done with you rather than to you, which in turn promotes an atmosphere of mutual respect.

• The educational features, such as curriculum and testing policies that may enhance or constrain what teachers can teach. This includes having a curriculum that is aligned to the standards teachers are required to teach. Since the implementation of No Child Left Behind and Common Core teachers are feeling pressure to teach to the test. In low-income, low
performing schools test-taking strategies are emphasized at the expense of
deep instruction. When comparing the amount of time spent on test
preparation, Moore Johnson (2006) found that low-income schools spent 43 %
of math instruction time and 40% of language arts instruction time on test
preparation. Yet, in high-income schools the time spent on test preparation
was 18% and 25% in math and language arts, respectively. Student
achievement, as measured by test scores, is becoming a determining factor in
teacher performance evaluation and pay. Teachers who had entered the field
with the motivation of seeing their students learn and develop list the
pressures of increased accountability as their number one reason for leaving
(Tye & O'Brien, 2002).

Ingersoll (2001) describes the attrition rate for teachers as having grown faster than
expected and compares this to the pouring of teachers into a bucket with a fist-sized hole
in the bottom (Hunt & Carroll, 2003). Those trying to improve schools must recognize
the connection between workplace, effective instruction, and teacher retention.

**Self-reflection on the literature.** In my career, I have had two important
mentors. The first was Ms. DeLaMontes; the second one was Ms. Houston. Prior to Ms.
Houston’s arrival, I was ready to be part of the revolving door (Ingersoll, 2001). I had
taken a severe pay cut when moving to Denver and was not happy and felt isolated in my
classroom (Anhorn, 2008; Ingersoll, 2001). The decision to stay was not one I made
overnight but came to gradually much like the changes Ms. Houston made in the school.
When I walked into the school, it was a typical school built in the 60’s with tile floors
and either yellow or green dull walls. A year after Ms. Houston’s arrival, the classroom
floors had new carpets, the walls had a fresh coat of paint, and children-sized bookcases
lined the walls. Reading Moore Johnson’s (2006) study on teachers’ working conditions
provided me with an appreciation of the changes that Ms. Houston implemented. Her
changes began with the physical environment. Next, she created organizational and
political structure that helped forge an open door policy to her office and created opportunities for staff to share in the decision making process.

In viewing Ms. Houston through the lens of Ingersoll’s (2001a) chart of the conditions that drive teacher turnover in a high poverty (urban) school, Ms. Houston was able to address several of them almost immediately. The first issue that drives 50.1% of teachers out of their school is the lack of support from administration.

Dewey (1915) stated, “What the best and wisest parent wants for his child, that must we want for all the children of the community” (p. 3). As Ms. Houston introduced herself that memorable first day, she was quoting John Dewey himself when she stated that what she wanted for her own daughter is what she also wanted for the students of Genesis Elementary. Ms. Houston quickly put her words into action. She was a regular presence in all of the teachers’ rooms, her office door was never closed, and one could just walk in without needing an appointment.

Ingersoll (2001) states that 47.5% of teachers leave due to the lack of faculty influences. In staff meetings, Ms. Houston did not direct, she facilitated. It was clear that the sharing of ideas and open discussion by the staff was greatly valued. I may not have agreed with everything that was decided on; however, I never felt as though I was not heard. The next two items on Ingersoll’s list, classroom intrusions and inadequate time, were handled by Ms. Houston making sure that no phone calls were put through to the classrooms and requesting that parents were welcomed into our classroom for conferencing before or after school or during our planning time. It was clear that preserving instructional time was a priority for Ms. Houston. In addition, ensuring that
instructional time be maximized, collaboration among colleagues was also a positive byproduct of this administrator’s leadership style. I knew that I had the support of a team of teachers if I needed help. I attribute this to Ms. Houston because of the positive educational climate she had created. Ingersoll’s (2001) fifth issue, why 26.9% teachers claim they leave, is poor salary. Ms. Houston had no control over how much teachers’ are paid; salaries are based on years of work and educational background. However, she treated us as professionals at all times. I recall that prior to a new school year she invited the entire staff to a retreat in a small mountain town. I remember that we had arrived just in time for lunch and were escorted into a very elegant room. Just as Ms. Houston was walking in, a teacher commented, “This can’t possibly be for us.” Ms. Houston responded that the room was, in fact, for our lunch. She went on to state that as professionals we should be treated as such, very much like the business world where nice lunches are expected.

Ms. Houston was always present in the hallways, lunchroom, and outside during recess. With this constant active involvement, all the children knew her; therefore, Ingersoll’s (2001) issues of student indiscipline and student motivation were never a major problem. The students liked her and knew she was the principal. Her willingness to learn Spanish helped build a bridge between home and school. The last issue on Ingersoll’s list is large class size, which Ms. Houston addressed when she hired paraprofessionals for large classes needing support. By establishing a strong atmosphere conducive to learning, Ms. Houston was confident that the needs of the children (and the staff) would always be taken care of.
Nel Noddings’ (2005), statement, “an ethic of caring can guide our decisions” (p. 94) helped me understand Ms. Houston’s comment, “Every time I enter your classroom you are working with a group of children. I think the solution to your messy desk would be to put up a divider and just hide it.” In retrospect, I realized that Ms. Houston felt it was more important that I work with my students rather than spend time cleaning and organizing my desk. This clearly reflected her priority of emphasizing factors that directly impacted students. She recognized my strengths and found workable ways to address my weaknesses. Soon I found myself emulating her same conference style with my students. I asked them what they did best, shared what I liked, and then we agreed to focus on one area.

Although teaching was challenging during Ms. Houston’s tenure, I felt I wasn’t alone (Darling-Hammond, 2003). I made the life-altering decision to stay at the school and worked alongside her for the next 10 years. In those 10 years, Ms. Houston and the work force she built around me strengthened my foundation as a teacher.

Summary

The title of this chapter is from the Beatles’ song “In My Life” (Lennon & McCartney, 1965). The beginning lyrics, “There are places I remember all my life, though some have changed. Some forever not for better. Some have gone and some remain” (Lennon & McCartney, 1965) indicate that someone is looking back at their life. I found this to be the perfect song as I revisited the beginning of my career. Huberman (1989) divided the professional life cycle of a teacher (see Appendix A) into 4 sections. Phase 1: Beginning is the first phase. It can be considered “easy or painful.” If
the teacher had an “easy beginning” it signifies that the teacher had positive relationship with students, had a sense on how to teach, and was excited about teaching. In contrast, there is the “painful beginning” these teachers felt alone, overworked, were constantly observed by teacher education staff, and reported having “difficult” students (Huberman 1989). I had an “easy beginning.” I credit this to my two mentors, Ms. DelaMontes and Ms. Houston, who with their guidance helped me build a strong foundation as a teacher.

In the next chapter, I write about a two life-altering incidents that occurred during what Huberman (1989) calls Phase 2: Stabilization.
CHAPTER FOUR

Blackbird

There is no footprint too small to leave an imprint on this world.

—Author unknown

Death of a Child (Stabilization Phases)

In one of the first classes that I taught in Genesis Elementary School in Denver, there was a little nine-year-old boy with a big smile, Jesus Perez. He would always be the first to come and sit in the reading area when it was read aloud time. This little boy loved to color and tell me stories about the arrival of a new sibling. I came to know this child’s family as I taught three of his younger siblings.

Everyone in the neighborhood knew Jesus Perez’s family. Their small house at the corner of the elementary school beckoned to all the neighborhood children with its large trampoline on the patio. His mother, Joanne, was involved in the school and supported her children’s education by making sure they did their homework and by coming to school to check on their behavior. She knew that her children were gifted athletes and encouraged them to play in as many sports as possible. She shared her hope with me that future athletic scholarships would open doors for them at a university.

As the oldest male of seven children, Jesus was responsible for his siblings and would look out for them through thick and thin. The day they moved out of the
neighborhood was filled with anticipation. They were buying their own house with rooms for all seven children. I was saddened that I would not be able to teach the last two of the Perez children.

With summer right around the corner, we had less than three weeks of school left. It was a Sunday morning. As I poured myself a cup of coffee, the TV news was reporting a shooting that had occurred the night before during a typical Mexican celebration where people would cruise up and down a main strip of the neighborhood. I saw a young man being wheeled into the emergency room and the newscaster reporting that he had been shot and killed. I remember thinking about the senseless violence and whether or not this was a gang-related shooting. I turned off the TV and began to read the Sunday paper before getting dressed for church.

When I returned from church later that afternoon my telephone was ringing. I was surprised that a paraprofessional who worked at our school would be calling me. I could barely understand what she was saying as her words seemed jumbled. I told her she needed to calm down because I could not understand her. She asked me if I had seen the news about the shooting and I told her that I had. When she then told me that the victim had been Jesus Perez, I told her that wasn’t possible. Jesus was not in a gang and the shooting was gang related – besides, Jesus Perez is a common name. But she insisted that it was he. I told her that I would watch the early evening news to see if any more information was given. As I hung up the phone, I kept telling myself, "Jesus is not in a gang, his family has just moved into a better neighborhood – it couldn’t be he." As the early news came on, one of the first stories was about the shooting. They showed the
news clip of the victim being taken into the hospital and then announced his name as Jesus Perez. From the glimpses of the scenes that played on the news, I knew, without a doubt, that it was my former student.

I did not get much sleep that night. The next morning at school the principal, Ms. Houston, was hosting an early morning breakfast meeting for the teachers. I had a tough time getting ready that morning, as my mind just couldn’t accept the death of this child. As I walked in late to the breakfast meeting, I apologized to Ms. Houston and explained that I was in shock over the death of Jesus Perez. Even as I said it, it did not sound real. I quickly noticed that Ms. Houston’s eyes had filled with tears as she wondered aloud how Jesus’ mother, Joanne, was doing and lamented the fact that she had no way to communicate with her since they had just moved and had a new phone number. Soon the morning bell rang and my classroom filled up with 4th graders. My heart ached as I remembered Jesus as a little nine-year-old. It never occurred to me then that he had already lived half his life.

About mid-morning, my classroom phone rang. Normally phone calls are not allowed to come in during the instructional day but I answered it and it was Emma, Jesus's younger sister, who had been in my fourth grade class seven years ago. I heard the pain in her voice as she said, “My mother asked me to call you and tell you that Jesus has died.” I told her that I had heard the news and asked if there was anything I could do. She said she didn’t know. I asked if I could come over later and she said yes. I wrote down their new address and told her I would be over as soon as school was out. As I hung up, I noticed Ms. Houston in my classroom. She told me that she had instructed the
main office to pass the phone call up to my room. I thanked her and shared with her what
Emma had told me and that I had promised to go to their house as soon as school was
over. Ms. Houston then said, "No, I will get someone to cover your class and we will
both go over to their house right now."

We drove to the Perez family’s new house in virtual silence. I could see why they
had moved – the houses were better kept, weeds did not overrun the lawns, and it was a
quieter neighborhood. As we walked into the house, I could see that moving boxes were
piled up, untouched. A lady I did not know told us that Joanne was out making funeral
plans but that she would get Emma. As Emma walked into the room, she fell into my
arms and sobbed. She cried and kept repeating that Jesus had died and she didn’t
understand why. She looked at me as though I could give her an answer that would make
things better, but all I could say was “I am so sorry” and cry with her. She shared that
they had just finished moving in and that Jesus had begged his mother to let him hang out
with some of his friends. His car had broken down and as they were pushing it into a gas
station, Jesus had been caught in the crossfire of the gang shooting. The bullet that killed
him was meant for someone else. As Jesus was being rushed to the hospital he kept
asking for his mother, but since they had just moved in their telephone had not been
connected. By the time someone was able to locate his mother at the new house and rush
her to the hospital, her son Jesus had died – alone.

Word quickly got out that a gang member had killed Jesus. Rival gang members
who lived in the Perez’s old neighborhood and knew the family had said that they would
retaliate. Jesus was buried on his birthday. They carried him into the church as mariachis
played “Las Mañanitas,” the traditional Mexican birthday song. A younger brother spoke at the service asking that no retaliation take place in the name of his brother. I grieved along with his mother and family, though I know that my pain was but a fraction of theirs.

The bullet that was meant for a gang member hit an innocent young man who was on his high school swim team. That bullet destroyed many lives that evening. For me, it took away a sense of security because the reality of my students’ lives is unpredictable, unjust, and unimaginable at times. I realized that the reality is that my students' lives can be in danger every day. For the longest time, I could not drive by the gas station where Jesus was murdered. As the years pass and I drive by, my tears have been replaced with the memory of the little boy with the big smile who loved to sit cross-legged on the rug and be read to by his teacher while he dreamed of being a policeman someday.

**Mirroring of the literature.** Durka (2002) states that teaching is not just a *profession*, but for some it is a *vocation*. In a profession, outside criteria establish one’s qualifications. A vocation is a calling. Some teachers view their teaching as a professional job, but not necessarily as a calling. Those who view teaching as a calling obtain their identity from an inner motivation, which helps shape their role rather than to just occupy a position. Durka defines the idea of a profession as seeking out public recognition, individuality, and reward whereas vocation looks inward to the core of teaching itself and the teacher devotes him or herself to it with all of its unpredictability and uncertainty, doing so with a sense of adventure. Teaching is also lonely and can leave teachers emotionally drained at the end of the day. It is a calling that makes claims on a
teacher’s soul. Houston (2002) writes about the leadership in schools whose job is viewed as a calling or a mission and, as such, is draining and may exhaust one’s physical and moral energy. He writes that school leaders must replenish their supply. One way to do so would be to look beyond their flesh and bone. In 2004, Patterson, Collins, and Abbot conducted a study of teacher resilience and wrote that teachers emphasize their personal spirituality as a source of resilience, regardless of the type of spirituality, whether or not it was organized religion or metaphysical beliefs. These teachers reported turning to a higher power for strength when they were faced with difficult situations.

Some of the strategies that these teachers used to maintain their resiliency were:

- Resilient teachers have friends and colleagues who support their work emotionally and intellectually.
- Resilient teachers are not victims – they take charge and solve problems
- Resilient teachers stay focused on the children and learning. (Patterson et al., 2004, p. 5).

Resilient teachers function from a core of personal values that they bring to the job prior to being hired (Patterson, 2005). In an interview, Parker Palmer states that he does not see how it is possible for teachers or other individuals to not bring their spirituality into what they are doing (Van Gelder, 1998). Palmer (2007) states that the more teachers are familiar with their inner spirit the more confident their teaching and lives become.

**Self-reflection on the literature.** When Jesus died, I realized that nothing had prepared me for his death. No mention is made in education classes or books that can prepare you for a student being killed. Being naïve, I just believed that one’s students are not supposed to die before they graduate from high school. When I looked at my 4th graders I never wondered if they had lived half of their lives.
Reading Durka (2002), I realized that my career as a teacher had evolved into more than a vocation; it had turned into a calling. I cannot pinpoint the moment my job switched from a vocation to a calling; however, I do know that I stopped referring to teaching as a “job” and looked forward to getting up every morning and going to work. It is because I view teaching as a calling that I am able to return to the classroom even after difficult days and focus on my students’ learning (Patterson et al., 2004).

My resiliency stems from my spirituality; a spirituality that I began to develop prior to going into the field of teaching. Reading Patterson et al. (2004), I agree with the teachers interviewed who emphasized their personal spirituality as a source of their resilience. They also stated that in difficult times they would turn to a higher power. I myself turn to a higher power when I am facing challenging moments both inside and outside of the classroom. I strongly believe that without this spirituality to lean on and guide me I could not serve as a teacher.

As I reflect back to the time of Jesus’ death, I can see that some of the strategies, according to Patterson et al. (2004), helped during this difficult time. One of the strategies is that “resilient teachers have friends and colleagues who support their work emotionally and intellectually” (p 5). When I received the telephone call from the Perez family, Ms. Houston offered to drive me to their house. I appreciated this act of kindness, as I did not feel as though I had to face the family on my own and it was a relief to have Ms. Houston’s support at such a difficult time.

I wish I could say that Jesus Perez’s death was an isolated incident but it wasn’t. After attending three funerals, all related to gangs or breaking the law, I informed my 4th
grade class that I would no longer go to students’ funerals. I could not bear the wailing of the mothers in such agonizing pain and I had no words of comfort to offer the family. Furthermore, I told my students that if they are going to make decisions that are so hurtful and painful to the people they claim to love the most, I might not think so kindly of them. This may seem harsh to an outsider, but when I said it to my 4th grade class, I had already established a caring relationship with them and I respected my students enough to be honest with them. I stressed the importance of making choices and the consequences of living with those choices.

Another strategy cited by Patterson et al. (2004) is “resilient teachers are not victims – they take charge and solve problems” (p. 5). When I spoke to my class about no longer attending students’ funeral, this was my way of taking charge. I knew I had no power to always keep my students safe, but I could talk to them about the results of some of the choices others had made and what I had witnessed at these funerals.

The third strategy from Patterson et al. (2004) states, “resilient teachers stay focused on the children and learning” (p. 5). I recognize the possible danger that my students face on a daily basis; however, I choose not to focus on that. Instead I focus on teaching them and creating lifelong learners. I do not allow myself to be paralyzed with fear for what might happen instead I concentrate on my students’ futures. I make it a point to have my students either write or talk to me about where they plan to be and what they see themselves doing when they are 23-years-old. I do this for two reasons. First, it helps me know my students and what interests they have, and second, if a student cannot
see a future for themselves then I know I need to help them create a future story.

Students should know that they have an active role in what becomes of their lives.

As I continue my teaching career, the importance of spirituality, both in my profession and in my daily life, becomes more apparent. Palmer (2007) writes

Fear is everywhere—in our culture, in our institutions, in our students, in ourselves—and it cuts us off from everything. Surrounded and invaded by fear, how can we transcend it and reconnect with reality for the sake of teaching and learning? The only path I know that might take us in that direction is the one marked “spiritual. (p. 125)

I have come to the conclusion that the basis for my resiliency is my spirituality. I have chosen not to just survive as a teacher in the educational field. To survive in teaching is equated with living in fear and with no hope. Rather, I have chosen to thrive as a teacher in my career.

**

A dream doesn’t become reality through magic; it takes sweat, determination and hard work.

—Colin Powell

**Educational Trips**

One of my greatest joys in teaching has been the opportunity to travel with my students. These students come from urban, low-income, multi-generational, immigrant families. Through my travels with children, I have been reminded that it is not the destination, but the journey that makes a difference. My journey began in my 7th year of teaching when two of my previous 4th graders, who were now in 5th grade, were excited about traveling to Washington, D.C. with their 5th grade teacher. Lulu and Veronica
spoke to me about how much they wanted to travel but did not have any support at home to help them raise the necessary money. Their families did not want them to travel and told the girls that they could go only if they raised the money on their own. After speaking with their families, I offered to help Lulu and Veronica raise the money by selling chocolates in front of a neighborhood bank every Friday. Much to the surprise of their parents, both girls earned enough money to travel to Washington, D.C. It was later that year that their 5th grade teachers asked me to help chaperone the trip. With that, I began 21 years of preparing and traveling with students to Washington, D.C. and Europe.

Throughout these years, I have forged strong relationships with the families who have entrusted their children to me. As I met with parents every month to discuss how to raise funds and support their children’s dreams of travel, our understanding of each other deepened. There were times when I needed to make home visits to convince a parent to allow their child to travel. This usually pertained to girls whose parents were from a culture that disapproved of travel, particularly by girls, without parental supervision. When this happened, I would speak to these parents and share that I, too, was raised in this protective manner, where I was not allowed to even go to the street corner by myself. I explained how traveling would open their daughters’ eyes to a world of opportunities that we had never had. The conversation usually ended with the assurance that their daughters would come home safely. My visits with the parents were usually enough to convince them to allow their children to travel.

As the planning and details of the trip evolved, a non-profit was created with the help of a generous benefactor. With his help we were able to create a work program,
which I oversaw. The work program required students to work before or after school to raise money for the cost of their trips. The primary work opportunities included running a café, a school store, and the Denver Broncos concessions stand, and sweeping the school. I soon realized that the relationships I was forming with these students added a new dimension to my role of teacher; I was now also their boss. As their boss, I would talk to them about their work ethic, primarily about the responsibility that came with a job. Because of the strong motivation that these middle school students had for traveling and the strong work ethic that their parents modeled for them, it did not surprise me that they rose to the challenge. Therefore, it should not have surprised me when they began to hold their teachers to the same standards. One of my students actually began to keep tabs on the teachers who arrived late to work. She proudly showed me her checkmarks next to the names of the teachers who were repeatedly late. I thanked her for the data and reminded her that it was my responsibility to make sure she was on time much like it was the responsibility of the principal to make sure the teachers were on time.

Throughout the years of making sure all children who wanted to travel would have a place on the trips, I have learned repeatedly that it is the journey that makes the trip. By the time I board the plane with either my Washington, D.C. students or my Europe students, I know we will have a good trip: not just because of the destination, but because of the relationships we have formed with each other and with the students’ families.

The trips have been amazing. The startled faces of my students as the plane began moving and then the impromptu clapping as we landed were certainly memorable
moments. The week in Washington, D.C. or the 11 days in Europe were constant reminders of why I was a teacher. I did not have to be concerned with going to staff meetings, filling out paperwork, or trying to figure out how to implement the latest new program demanded by the administration. From morning to night, I guided and led reflections with the students about their experiences to help them process what they were experiencing. At times, I would just stand in awe as they made connections, such as when they stood in the same place where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” speech and they would look out towards the Washington Monument and ask, “You mean that this whole place was filled with people listening to him?” I would repeat the story, which many of them had heard several times in school about the march on Washington, but somehow, with this experience, it took on new meaning for them and me. Other memorable moments happened throughout the trips, such as the realization that we were standing at the top of the Eifel Tower. I made sure that every one of my students had pictures of themselves with the backdrop of Paris.

I did this knowing that the following year as they would go on to high school, and most of their peers and teachers would not believe them when they shared their European travel experiences. The only proof they would have would be their pictures. On the trips, there is always a moment when students ask the tough questions that either have very complex answers or, at times, have no answer at all. We walked through the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. and witnessed what hate and individual complicity can cause to other human beings. Students always want to know
why someone didn’t just stop the Holocaust from happening or why didn’t the Jewish people just leave?

I am called “the medicine woman” on these trips because I take care of the students when they become sick. In my backpack is a mini pharmaceutical to take care of all their aches and pains. I am also the one to accompany them to the hospital when they become severely ill usually due to an asthma attack. Taking care of the students when they are sick scares me as I am reminded that this is someone else’s child, and I bear the responsibility. I reassure the child that they will be okay and will be able to enjoy the trip. Among the many aspects of their adventures, my students are exposed to a variety of cuisines from mussels in Brussels to Mongolian barbecue in Washington, D.C. Though hesitant to try new foods they realize it is part of the experience of traveling and are usually quite pleased with themselves when they have discovered a new food they love. Many are proud just to have tasted something different even if they didn’t like it.

One year, at the American Smithsonian, a German tour guide ran after my group with a yellow umbrella in her hand yelling, in a thick German accent, “Who is in charge of this group?” The male chaperone at the end of the line with the students pointed at me. I approached her and asked how I could help. She responded, “I was just on the third floor with your students.” My first thought was the fear that someone had broken the glass White House we had just viewed. She continued, “I have been a tour guide for over 20 years and never in my years of touring have I seen such respectful and well behaved children!” As I got my composure back I managed to smile and say thank you. My students and I just stood for a moment relieved and smiling. I have since come to
expect compliments regarding our students’ behavior. I think people normally don’t expect polite behavior from middle school children, particularly those who are Latino, or think that they must be from a private school. When I explain that we are from a public urban school and the children have worked hard to earn the money to travel, they look at me with disbelief. It makes me feel happy to know that I might have helped to give them a new perspective of urban kids.

When I tell people about the traveling I do with my students, the responses I receive range from “What a great opportunity for the students” to “What a great job you have to be able to travel with students.” Though their assertions are correct, they don’t seem to realize that these trips don’t just magically happen. A great deal of work and commitment is needed to make these trips transpire. For example, for the last 10 years I have spent every Sunday working alongside parents at the Denver Broncos’ concession stand. When the team had Monday or Thursday night games, the parents and I were there. However, working at the stadium demonstrated to the students that teachers and families were willing to work together to help fulfill their dreams. These trips, like teaching, have become a passion. The work that is needed in organizing the trips I do voluntarily. My “pay” is the privilege of teaching children to dream beyond their world. This is a “pay” that unless you are a teacher you cannot fully understand. While preparing for the travel, I had numerous opportunities to talk to my students about their dreams and aspirations. The moments I have treasured the most are the times when we walk in our small groups and students share stories about themselves; stories that have made me laugh and stories that have broken my heart. We talk about their dreams and
aspirations that they would like to realize. The trips have taught me not only to encourage my students to have dreams but also to show them that planning and perseverance are needed in order to realize those dreams.

**Mirroring the literature.** Nieto (2003) concludes that being aware of and valuing one’s autobiography is at the heart of teaching. Teachers can become more effective with their students once they have an understanding of their own lives. In her later book, *Why We Teach*, Nieto (2005) sums up five important qualities of a teacher:

1. A sense of mission: teachers are to serve not save the children.
2. Solidarity with, and empathy for, students: A key for students to be successful is for teachers to have strong relationships with them. Students will work for their teachers if they sense that relationship. Solidarity for students means teachers value students and their lives and try to incorporate it in their teaching.
3. The courage to challenge mainstream knowledge: Teaching is about learning and relearning to think critically and not just accept the status quo.
4. Improvisation: to learn to think on your feet.
5. A passion for social justice: This is demonstrated in different ways. For some teachers it is mainly about racial, ethnic and economic equality; for others it is about mentoring students who been marginalized by society and letting them know they are valued, thereby empowering students to act. Finally, for some teachers it is about educational inequality; these teachers at time need to take matters into their own hands in order to get the needs of their classroom met. (p. 203)

In his discussion of teachers’ life cycles, Huberman’s (1989) states that teachers in their mid-career go through a period of *reassessment* when they look for ways to challenge themselves by trying new materials and new approaches to instructional materials and activities in the classroom, and a period of *taking stock* when they reflect on their careers to either continue their work or find nothing to look forward to but the same tried and tested routine.
Self-reflection on the literature. The first trip occurred during my 7th year of teaching. At that time, I did not expect to make traveling and fundraising an integral part of my teaching career. According to Huberman’s teachers’ life cycle, I was in the mid-career stage where I had settled into a comfortable teaching situation. As I reflect back, I don’t recall doubting my career choice. I know I was happy and looked forward to going to work every day. However, I do wonder at times what would have happened to my career if there hadn’t been any trips. Would I still be teaching or would I, as Huberman suggested, have found nothing to look forward to but more of the same routine eventually leaving the classroom or teaching altogether? The trips are never boring and the challenges are different every year. The same can be said for the classroom. The many relationships that I have established with my students over the years have varied: some have focused solely on academics and helping them achieve success, others on taking care of them emotionally and economically while others have involved me become part of their families, being included in quinceañeras, weddings, baby showers, and even Thanksgiving dinners. However, I cannot say that that alone these relationships would have kept me teaching in the classroom for 29 years.

As I contemplate Nieto’s (2003) five important qualities of a teacher, I agree with her main conclusion of a teacher needing to be aware of and valuing her own autobiography. Having conversations with parents regarding their daughters’ opportunity to travel enabled me to reflect upon my own upbringing. However, it is not until I am in the classroom and moments come up when I share with my students, usually with humor, my own stories of growing up. I do so for a couple of reasons: first sharing helps create
those relationships that Nieto (2005) writes about as being key in order for students to be successful. Second, the solidarity that she refers to where a teacher not only says they value their students’ lives, but shows it by incorporating it in their teaching must be modeled. How can I expect my students to share their lives if I don’t share my own? When I do share I make a point of telling both my triumphant moments and my failures? I do not want my students to view me as a perfect human being who has never struggled or made mistakes. The students I have chosen to serve are highly impacted by economics, race, and social class, and I believe I can make a difference, or I can find someone who can help make a difference for them. The minute I view my job as a way of saving children, I have failed them. I need to be their teacher who is able to recognize that teachable moment and switch gears even if it is not in the lesson plan. I need to be their advocate, not their savior, when the status-quo expects that within three years students, who are new to our country and speak a foreign language, are mandated to be reading and writing on grade level in their new language, English. Nieto (2005) writes about a passion for social justice. I had never thought about a “label” for doing what I considered as part of my job nor did I stop to consider that my beliefs would also fall under the umbrella of “social justice.” Isn’t that part of what an involved teacher offers? To do less would lead me to a different career than education.

When I have demanded equitable materials for my students I wasn’t thinking about social justice; I was driven by my belief that they deserve to have the materials they need in order to learn. When I first started to help with the trips my thoughts were that they would be a wonderful opportunity for my students. I do recognize, however, that I
underestimated the positive impact that the process of preparing and traveling would have on the students and their future. When they apply for college and the application asks them if they have experienced traveling, they are able to answer yes. My former students tell me they were able to be part of a conversation related to travel that they would normally be excluded from and that because of their travel experience they have now decided to study abroad. This simple act of exposing my students to travel in middle school has put them on a more level playing field as high school and college students. They now have some background knowledge and experiences that will anchor their learning and their success in setting goals and attaining them.

Nieto (2005) writes about mentoring and empowering students who have been marginalized by society. Sometimes it is not society but their very own family and community that marginalize them. Students walk in my classroom teary-eyed and tell me that their own family don’t believe in them and have told them that they will never be able to earn enough money to go on the trips and should just quit thinking about it. I have been able to witness these same students who return from the trip and are empowered, confident, and informed and can now share with their own family and community. They realize that no one, including family, has the right to write a chapter in their own life story.

**Summary**

The Beatles’ song that I selected for this chapter is “Blackbird” (Lennon & McCartney, 1968). The song is symbolic in that it describes people struggling to get away
from a bad situation (Davies, 2014). I selected this song in honor of my students who demonstrate that same courage in the following lyrics.

Take these broken wings and learn to fly

All your life

You were only waiting for this moment to arise. (Lennon & McCartney, 1968)

My students encounter various challenges in their lives and in my role I seek to empower them with the tools to make informed choices.

In the self-reflection of the literature, after the vignette about the trips, I wrote about this stage according to in Huberman’s (1989) life cycle of a teacher. He calls this Phase 3: Affirmation. In the next chapter titled, “Here Comes the Sun” (Harrison, 1969), I include vignettes about two humbling teaching experiences that surprised me.
CHAPTER FIVE

Here Comes the Sun

Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.

—Albert Einstein

A Child named Jackie (Affirmation Phases)

My first year of teaching 6th grade, and in a new school, Kismet Middle School, was almost over. It had been a tough adjustment for me moving from elementary to middle school. I knew I had to leave the elementary school when the change in administration prevented me from being an advocate for my students. I was not good at playing politics and felt that since I could not support the new administration it was best that I leave. So, after twelve years at Genesis Elementary School I left to teach at the neighborhood middle school. I was not sure if teaching at a middle school was where I belonged. However, I excited to see several of my previous students. Having survived the first year was a relief. The first class trip to Washington D.C. with my 6th graders was an overall success except for one memorable incident: the lice outbreak. My colleague, who had also been an elementary school teacher, asked the school nurse to conduct a head check, but the she refused saying it was not an issue in middle school. So, as it turned out, I spent several evenings in Washington D.C. washing some of the girls’ hair
with a special shampoo and pulling many unwanted guests from their scalps. I had called the parents of these girls to let them know what had happened and how we were taking care of the situation.

A month later, as we hosted the end of the year celebration for parents, students, and teachers, one of the girls approached me. Her name was Jackie and she told me that her mother wanted to talk to me. I felt a bit uneasy since I was well aware that her mother had not been happy with the lice outbreak in D.C. I took a deep breath, smiled, and followed Jackie to the table where her mother sat. I was expecting her mother to yell and reprimand me for her daughter’s lice, but instead she asked me where I had previously taught. I explained to her that I had taught for 12 years at the elementary school down the street. The expression on her face led me to believe that she expected a different response. She prodded me persistently asking if I was sure I hadn’t taught at another middle school. I assured her that this was my first middle school. Then suddenly it dawned on me that I had worked at another school, Kimball Middle School. The first year I arrived in Denver I had worked at the parent’s evening school at Kimball in order to earn extra money.

My job at Kimball had involved taking care of the elementary age children after school. I helped them with their homework: we read and did art projects together. I smiled at Jackie’s mom as I shared those memories with her. She told me that she attended those parent classes and would drop off her three children with me. I apologized for not remembering her, but she said it was okay since she was pregnant at that time. She then proceeded to tell me about a tradition she had in her family. The older sibling
had the honor of naming the new baby. The baby she was carrying at that time was Jacqueline. Her children, whom I had taught in the evening school, had decided they wanted to name the new baby after their teacher, me! I was in shock at the realization that the child I had spent a year with and had traveled with was named after me. The mom told me that many family members, throughout the years, had asked where the name Jacqueline had come from and she had told them it was from a special teacher. Now after 12 years she was happy to have found me again. We laughed and I told her that naming her child after me was very humbling. She then reintroduced me to her daughter and told her, “This is the teacher that your brother and sister loved and named you after.” As the evening ended I looked around the near empty lunchroom and realized that I was home again.

**Mirroring of the literature.** Palmer (2007) refers to teachers as *true culture heroes*. He writes that teachers must deal with students every day that have been injured by social pathologies that no one else is willing to heal. Despite this, the politicians, the public, and the media criticize teachers daily for their so-called inadequacies and failures.

Nieto (2005) writes about how hard and stressful teaching is. Teachers receive low compensation with little autonomy or support. The idea of educating all students to help create a better future is being lost to high-stakes testing. Schools are being compared to the business world with self-interest groups driving education. The transformation of education will fail unless we stop degrading and discouraging teachers.

Campbell (2011) states,

The more any quantitative social indicator (or even some qualitative indicator) is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption
pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor. (p. 34)

According to Ravitch (2013), Campbell’s Law is a social science axiom, which is forgotten when it comes to the high-stakes testing that permeates in education and results in teachers losing the belief that education is not solely about a test score.

Palmer (2007) states that professions that appeal to people for reasons of the heart are occupations in which the people and their work may suffer from losing heart. Freire (2005) calls education an act of love, the love of teaching and loving our students. He also calls it an act of courage, the courage to keep trying a thousand times before giving up. Teaching is not coddling. Teachers should challenge their students and correct them as necessary. He stresses that teachers need to know their students so that teachers can build on their students’ knowledge and teach them what they don’t know yet.

**Self-reflection on the literature.** I felt driven to include the story of Jackie in this autoethnography. I was blessed to find out that I had touched the lives of this family to the extent that the children named their baby sister after me. However, the story left me thinking about other teachers who have also touched their students’ lives and never shared their stories or have lived unaware of the differences they have made in children’s lives. As teachers, we spend a great deal of time with our students. At the end of the school year we say our good-byes and are left wondering what the future holds for them. One advantage of teaching in the same community for several years is that students know where to find me and I am able to hear about their successes as well as their challenges. Though Palmer (2007) claims that teachers are true culture heroes, as a public school
teacher working in an urban, high poverty school, I do not see myself as a hero nor am I treated like one. Yes, as Nieto (2005) says, teaching can be hard and stressful; I agree when she states that most of the challenges and stressors do not come from within the classroom but rather from the self-interest groups such as politicians and think-tanks. Furthermore, Palmer (2007) and Freire (2005) are correct in their belief that teaching is a profession that appeals to the heart and is an act of love and courage. However, the reality in the current state of education with high stakes testing is that the love, the courage, and the heart of a teacher cannot be evaluated and therefore not valued. Just because politicians and other members of the public may not value me as a teacher, what really matters in my classroom and what drives me as a teacher has nothing to do with test scores. It has to do with the individual lives that have been shared and how learning in my classroom has made a difference in their lives. As a teacher, I am in the front line of education every day. I need to maintain, as Freire (2005) states, a balance of love for my students and teaching. A result of this balance is the creation of a relationship with my students. This relationship allows them to know that it is safe to accept the academic challenges that I present in the classroom, as well as know that due to my genuine concern for them I will address any behavior concerns.

I feel that writing this vignette about a child named Jackie is important because it is something that only a teacher can appreciate and it cannot be distorted or given some points in an evaluation. It is simply about the relationships between a teacher and her pupils.
**

Remember, remember always, that all of us, and you and I especially, are descended from
immigrants and revolutionists.

—Franklin D. Roosevelt

**Immigration Walk-Out**

In December 2005, the United States House of Representatives passed HR4437, a
bill, which increased restrictions on immigration and undocumented immigrants. In the
spring of 2006, marches and rallies and mass walkouts were held in various parts of the
United States protesting the bill and calling for immigration policy reform.

On April 11, 2006 rumors had been circulating regarding a walkout at our school.
The administration had directed us not to sanction nor stand in the way of students
leaving. When my 6th students asked permission to walk out at 10:30 a.m. with other
students, I asked them why they wanted to walk out. They said they had heard rumors
that the United States wanted to send all the Mexicans back to Mexico and that they were
going to be labeled criminals. As I listened to them I realized that they had received
misinformation and tried to weed through the rumors and the facts. At the end of our
discussion, the question remained: Would I, as their teacher, allow them to leave the
classroom? I told them that I would not open the door for them nor would I stand in their
way. I also said that this was a decision that should have been discussed with their
parents and that the only people whom they had to answer to would be their parents, the
school administrator, and themselves. They wanted to know what consequences they
would face upon their return to school and I told them I did not know, but that there are
times when one must make a decision not based on consequences, but on what one believes.

At 10:30 a.m., I heard students leaving the building in a disorderly fashion, running, and yelling. They ran even though no one was chasing them. I suddenly realized that this walkout was not as organized as I had hoped. Instead it was chaos! Two of my students decided to walk out but my instinct to protect them overcame me and I asked them not to leave. I reminded my students that a walkout is peaceful and has purpose and dignity. Afterwards, I heard about how some of the students who had walked out had no purpose and just wandered around the neighborhood causing trouble.

Eight days later was the announced day for another walk out. As that day approached, the topic of a walkout resurfaced in my classroom. I reiterated to my students that their decision to walk out was between their parents and themselves. At this time, the school administration had decided to inform the students that if they wanted to walk out they would need to bring a note from their parents. My personal opinion, which I shared with the administrators, was that the students needed to do something. I had suggested a “walk-in.” I explained that we would encourage the students to meet on the black top, have a couple of the student leaders give a speech about the immigration problem, and then lead the students into the school. Nevertheless, the powers that run the Denver Public Schools system wanted the school day to go on as usual. On the day of the walk out three of my students were absent. However, what was unusual that day was that my cell phone began ringing by 7:00 a.m. with concerned parents calling wanting to make sure their child was in school. Also, several parents came into my classroom
throughout the day to make sure their child had not left. Of the three who were absent, two were later hunted down by their parents and brought to school. As one parent informed me, as she brought her child late to class, the reason she had left Mexico and sacrificed everything was so her son would have a better future and that future depended on him getting an education.

A major march had been organized for May 1, 2006. I had begun to notice a change in my students. They seemed a bit more subdued. One morning as they gathered in the front of the class to begin our lesson, one of them, Marcos, raised his hand. He recognized that this was English time, but asked whether he could say something in Spanish. The rule in class is during English time you can only speak in Spanish if it is an emergency. Since I knew he knew the rule I told him he could thinking it must be very important. What happened next totally surprised me. He asked, “Why do white people in the United States hate us?” As I looked around I saw all the other boys nodding their heads in agreement. I asked him to elaborate and as his story poured out, other stories were shared. I realized that the issue I thought I was dealing with – the walkout – was not the issue at all. Another student, John, shared how an old man had yelled at him as he walked home from school, “Go back to Mexico!” Roberto shared how the immigration bus had been seen in the neighborhood, apparently as a form of intimidation (this was also reported to be happening in Chicago.) Carlos then raised his hand and told of a neighbor who had been arrested by the immigration authorities and led away in handcuffs. But the hardest question I was asked that morning was by Alex who wanted to know what to do if his father did not return home that evening. Due to a raid in nearby
Commerce City, many of my students were now worried that their parents would be arrested at work and deported. As I took all this in, I realized that these eleven and twelve-year olds were being terrorized and that they needed a plan. So I shared the information I had gathered for a paper I was writing for a class from the Office of International Students and Scholars. I told them they should remember two basic rights: the right to refuse entry into their house without a search warrant and the right to remain silent if you are stopped on the street and asked about your immigration status.

I focused on the purpose of these two rights and also made sure that my students had phone numbers of people they could call (friends, their relatives, and my own cell phone number) in case their parents did not return home from work. Afterwards, as they worked on their journals, I noticed that all of them were writing and drawing about our conversation. One child drew a picture of himself at home with bars instead of windows and described how he felt like a prisoner in his own home. His parents were not allowing him to play outside for fear of the immigration authorities. Several pictures showed the students with signs that said, “We are not criminals.” Another child wrote, “A criminal is someone who commits murder. I have not murdered anyone. My parents only want to work and send me to school.” Several of the pictures depicted white people looking angry and yelling at Hispanics. I grew concerned that the issue of racism was beginning to take over my students’ lives.

The week before May, my students’ mood was becoming one of anger towards white people. I spoke to them about how not “all” white people did not like immigrants. I reminded them of the picture of Dr. King at the Lincoln Memorial surrounded by
different races supporting and believing in his dream. I also told them to look around our school that they had an Anglo teacher who loved and supported them. Their response to me was that she was an exception. As their teacher, I felt the need to do something to stop this hate from taking root in their young lives.

After much consideration, I decided to show the movie *Remember the Titans* (Yakin, 2000) and told them that this movie was one of my favorites because it contained many important messages. The movie is the true story of a newly appointed African-American coach and his high school team on their first season as a racially integrated unit. Based on the actual events of 1971, the team becomes the unifying symbol for the community as the boys and the adults learn to depend on and trust each other. I prepared my students to take Cornell Notes (double column note taking) because I wanted them to pay close attention to the movie and reflect on what they were watching. The three main concepts that I wanted them to learn from the movie were teamwork, peer influence (both positive and negative), and racism. I stopped the movie at various times in order to discuss a scene or a motive for the way a character was acting. At times, I had the students write in their notes and at other times I had them discuss the action with a neighbor. It took us two days to watch the movie. The following list includes the reflection questions that we discussed:

- Examples of ways that you see teamwork in the movie.
- Examples of how students in the movie pressure each other to do both good and bad things.
- Examples of racism and how it affects the students and their families.
• Examples of teamwork in the film. Why is teamwork important?

• Examples of how peer pressure works to influence someone to make good decisions and/or choices. What does it mean to you to use peer pressure to help a friend? Who is someone who supports you in making good decisions?

• Examples of how racism affects the students in this film. What does racism mean to you? Give an example of how you have seen racism in your own life.

• In your opinion, what happened to facilitate friendship?

• After they returned home after training camp how did their community and family react towards their friendship?

• In the movie, Coach Yoast had to make a hard decision. Think about a time when you had to make a hard decision. List four words that describe your feelings at the time.

• What lesson did you learn from watching *Remember the Titans*?

My students made several connections between the movie and what was happening in their lives. The key point that they walked away with was that you should get to know someone before you judge them based on their color.

On the Friday prior to Monday May 1st, my students were wondering what was going to happen on the following Monday and if I was going to come to work or boycott my job. To address their first concern I shared with my students some more information that I had found from the National Council of La Raza (2006):

> Know Your Rights When Taking Action! These are Some Basic Rights and Security Precautions
• Everyone (documented or undocumented) has the right to advocate peacefully for change.

• Everyone (documented or undocumented) has the right to maintain silence and not answer questions that a government agent may ask you.

• If a government agent or the police ask you something, including your name, immigration status, or where you were born, you do not need to answer. If they are questioning you, you should ask Am I free to go?

• If you have immigration papers showing legal status, U.S. law requires you to carry them and show them upon the request of a government agent. If you do not have these papers and are asked for them, you should ask, Am I free to go?

• Do not say anything to a reporter that you don’t want anyone to know, such as your last name or immigration status.

• There is no guarantee that immigration authorities won’t come, or that the police won’t approach you, but if everyone remains peaceful, nothing should happen.

• If there are counter-protesters, do not get into fights with them so that you will avoid getting arrested.

*****REMEMBER THIS IS A PEACEFUL DEMONSTRATION*****

They practiced saying “Am I free to go?” I told them that I normally do not share my political opinions with students but felt they had the right to know what to expect on the Monday. I told them that originally I was going to boycott, but that I realized that since my students are not a product or a business, I did not feel it was right for me to boycott for them. However on May 1 in order to support the boycott, I would not spend
any money. I also told them that if their parents chose to keep them home they should spend time reading and journaling, if their parents took them to the march, they should wear comfortable shoes and take plenty of water, and if their parents decided to send them to school I would be here for them. One student, Nina, wondered if she came to school whether she would have free time. I told her that if her parents decided to send her to school then I would honor their wishes and continue her education.

Monday morning came and only four students came to school. I was proud of both the children who boycotted and those four brave students who came to class. During the day, I watched the television coverage of the march and discussed the day’s events with my four students. I also made it a point to teach a modified English and Social Studies lesson.

The next morning, as my students walked into class, I sensed a positive change. They seemed empowered and filled with hope. I reminded them about respecting each other’s choices regarding the boycott. We talked about how the majority had marched with their parents and people of different races. What caused the most excitement was what my students witnessed along the parade route: the encouragement of bystanders, the politeness of the police officers, and general goodwill among the marchers. One boy recalled white people in office buildings giving them the thumbs-up as they marched. I wondered if the nameless people that my students encountered that day will ever realize the positive impact they had on them. I asked if anyone encountered any negative responses. One boy, Leon, mentioned some counter protesters and that when they were yelling at him he thought “They just don’t know me” and that he actually felt sorry for
them and ignored them. I concluded our debriefing by reminding my students that the victory of the previous day was not ours to claim yet and they should pay attention to what was going on in Washington D.C. and remember the reason why they marched and the purpose their parents had for bringing them to this country.

I have come to realize that as a teacher, I don’t always teach what is written in the curriculum each year. As an educator I am responsible for seizing the teachable moments. Even though the words “walkout,” “immigration rights,” “boycott,” and the movie, Remember the Titans was not in the sixth grade social studies curriculum, it would have been negligent for me not to address the issues that were occurring at that time. As my students left my classroom that year I realized that I had not covered everything in social studies that I was supposed to. Yet I believe I taught them a greater lesson on how to be a better human being.

**Mirroring of the literature.** Proponents of cultural responsive pedagogy believe that the United States educational system is grounded on Euro-American culture (Spring, 2008). Other ethnic groups who are served by public education are forced to adapt to this system and in an effort to serve today’s diverse school communities, a paradigm shift must occur. A strong emphasis should be placed on the diversity of cultures that is present in today’s classrooms if there is to be an effective educational system. The shifting of this paradigm includes identifying and minimizing the potential conflicts that may occur between families and the school (Gay, 2005).

Culturally responsive teaching has many components and is part of multicultural education. It involves teachers using their students’ culture and experiences to structure
their classroom and teaching style to better meet the needs of their students. It does not view children of color coming to school with deficits; rather with their own strengths and a culture legacy (Gay, 2005).

Teachers who succeed in predominantly low-income and/or high minority schools build partnerships with students’ parents and families. This trusting relationship is built by learning about their students’ cultures and individual experiences. Another dimension to this relationship is built by a teacher’s increased understanding through cultural literacy. Effective teachers begin instruction where students are and with what they can already do rather than where standards for learning assume students should be (McKinney, Haberman, Stafford-Johnson, & Robinson, 2008). These teachers recognize that students’ cultures need to be considered when giving feedback or setting up their learning environment. Effective teachers use the knowledge of their children’s life experiences as an important part of the classroom experience. An element of building a relationship between teacher and students is for a teacher to present his or herself as a person rather than just an authority figure, demonstrating care and promoting equitable and respectful relationships (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Care is one of the most significant builders of a classroom community and an important part of caring is that a student feels cared for (Noddings, 1988). Klem and Connell (2004) found that “students who perceive teachers as creating a caring, well-structured learning environment in which expectations are high, clear, and fair are more likely to report engagement in school” (p. 270).

Nieto (2003) states that teachers do not describe themselves as good teachers based on high-stakes tests, implementing best practices, prescribed curriculum, or the
type of certifications they have. Instead they consider themselves good teachers if they have established relationships with students, have continued to develop as an educator, and if they deal with issues of social justice. In her book, *What Keeps Teachers Going?*, Nieto interviews experienced and effective teachers at various stages of their career who teach in different schools with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. She concludes the following:

1. Teaching is hard work.
2. Becoming a good teacher takes time.
3. Social justice is part of teaching.
4. There is no level playing field (situations outside the classroom influence what happens inside the classroom).
5. Education is politics.
6. Teachers do not leave their values at the door. (pp. 10-15)

In her recent TED presentation, Pierson (2013) quotes Dr. James Comer: “No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship of mutual respect, teacher to student.”

**Self-reflection on the literature.** A teachable moment is an unplanned opportunity to teach or discuss an idea with your students. This moment might derail your lesson plans for a few minutes, hours, days, or weeks and cause you to follow a different course of learning activities. As a teacher, I can say that these are the moments I relish. The questions generated by the students are based on their own life experiences. These connections lead to some other great learning experiences. Years ago, a 4th grader asked me, which Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle was my favorite: Leonardo, Michelangelo, Donatello or Raphael. This question led to a research project on the great artists of the Renaissance.
Another situation presented itself when the news in April 2006 was highlighting the immigration policy reform issues. Not all of my students are undocumented, and I am unable to distinguish who is and who is not in the United States illegally. Nor do I care to do so. Normally 6th graders are not interested in immigration policy. However, this was not about a policy, it was about an attack on them and their family. My students were scared yet they felt cared for in their classroom (Noddings, 1988). The day that I helped my young students make a plan on who to call in case their parents did not come home was not in the lesson plan nor was it the objective of the day. However, as Ladson-Billing (1995) states, we should use the knowledge of the child’s life as part of the classroom experience. It was one of those teachable moments that gave me the opportunity to fully integrate the life of my students inside and outside of class. Nieto (2003) writes that social justice is part of teaching. I agree with her and have learned that when you care about your students, social justice is almost a natural progression. And Freire (2005) states,

Educators need to know what happens in the world of the children with whom they work. They need to know the universe of their dreams, the language with which they skillfully defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world, what they know independently of the school, and how they know it. (p. 73)

Showing care may be as simple as encouraging my students to drink water and wear proper shoes, which is as important as teaching them about their rights.

The teachable moment regarding the immigration issue was not just for my students but for their teacher as well. I witnessed their parents’ commitment towards their children’s education through the numerous phone calls I’d received. The streams of calls were to verify that their children were in school and were well. I witnessed the
parents hunt their children down in their own neighborhood and bring them to school. I witnessed the parents’ need to have their children alongside them as they took them out of school for a day in order to join the march for their rights. Today, I regret not taking the day off work to march in the immigration rally. At that time, I viewed it as boycotting my students. However in retrospect I would not have been boycotting my students, I would have been sending them a stronger message about standing up for their rights and beliefs. I always tell my students to walk your talk, but on that day, I did not do so.

**Summary**

I selected the song, “Here Comes The Sun” (Harrison, 1969), first for its message of hope and second because of the story behind the time when this piece was written. George Harrison wrote this song in Eric Clapton’s garden. He had decided that he had enough of all the paperwork and endless meetings at Apple. As he walked around the garden he realized that winter was almost over and he hoped that all the problems at Apple would also come to an end (Harrison, 1969). As a teacher I feel as though there are times when we have our winters, whether it be a meeting to talk about a new test that is going to be given and the teacher training and the classroom time it will require or just a rough day. Yet, then something happens to re-energize you; it may be sensing your students feeling empowered or just finding out that a child carries your name. As the song states “Here comes the sun, here comes the sun, and I say it's all right” (Harrison, 1969).
As I looked over Huberman’s (1989) life cycle, I realized that Phase 2: Stabilization and Phase 3: Affirmation seem to overlap. This overlapping is reflected not only in my vignettes but also in his diagram of the professional life of a teacher.

In the next chapter, the final vignette, “The Long and Winding Road” (Lennon & McCartney, 1970), follows the same format as the previous chapters; however, the vignette is written between the lines of the song, to illustrate the parallel between lyric and the undoing of a school.
CHAPTER SIX

The Long and Winding Road

—Lennon and McCartney

Prelude

“The Long and Winding Road” (Lennon & McCartney 1970) is a song from one of the Beatles’ final albums Let It Be (Davies, 2014). Making the album was not a pleasant experience for the group because of numerous delays in its production. Paul McCartney wrote this song and it was recorded with a simple melody. John Lennon thought that the song had been recorded poorly and asked Phil Spector to fix it. John did not tell Paul what he had done. Phil Spector produced this song, adding backup orchestra and a female choir. When Paul heard the new version of his song remixed he was angry. In his authorized biography, Many Years from Now (Miles, 1997), Paul states, “I was a bit flipped out and tripped out at that time. It's a sad song because it's all about the unattainable; the door you never quite reach. This is the road that you never get to the end of” (p. 539). By the time the album was released, the Beatles, as a group, had ceased to exist. Parts of the lyrics of “The Long and Winding Road” help introduce the different sections of this vignette. The lyrics are in bold.
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The wild and windy night that the rainwashed away

Has left a pool of tears crying for the day

Kismet Middle School (Sub-phase of Reassessment and Renewal)

The dismantling of Kismet Middle School was not accomplished overnight; it was chipped away over the course of several years. I often wonder if this was done on purpose. When I first started teaching at Kismet in 2000, there were over 1200 students. The building had three floors and an additional wing had just been added for elective classes. It included a choir room, an art class, two computer labs, and metal and wood shop classrooms. It was one of the few middle schools in the district that offered an array of elective classes including home economics, band, and gym. The school had a soccer field, two softball fields, basketball courts, a running track, and a tennis court. The campus was utilized not only by the school but also by the neighborhood it served. But, during the last three years at Kismet Middle School, the outside campus began to disappear. Returning from summer break in 2013, I noticed that the fields were dug up. The tennis courts, soccer field, and track were gone. In their place were two new parking lots and an early childhood center under construction. By the time the construction was over, Kismet had also lost the two softball fields, which were replaced by a small patch of artificial turf for playing football. However, the students were not allowed to play on the turf for fear that they would ruin it. The two basketball courts on the black top became

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overflow parking for the teachers. The bulldozing of the field was merely a reflection of the bulldozing that would take place inside the school.

**

Crying for the day

Why leave me standing here?

Let me know the way

During my 13 years at Kismet Middle School there were three administration changes. The first principal was there for five years; I recall her being tough yet supportive of her teaching staff. There was a level of trust and a willingness from the staff to go that extra mile, including teaching six classes even though their contract required that they only teach five. This principal’s strongest asset was that she protected her teachers from unreasonable mandates from the district central office. Unfortunately, after five years, she decided to retire and teachers speculated that this was because she was weary of fighting with the central office. The next principal was familiar with the neighborhood. He was the principal at a nearby elementary school and although he had no desire to be principal of a middle school, he was assigned to Kismet. He once told me that he had received a phone call from a district administrator and was told that he was to be the new principal of Kismet Middle School. He would also last just five years; however, in his first two years as principal, there were not many changes. Teachers were left alone to teach. The students all knew him, as he was a regular fixture in the lunchroom and the hallway, encouraging students and, when needed, reprimanding them. Around his 3rd year, I began to hear him speaking disparagingly about the district
mandates. The atmosphere in the school was slowly changing. I never had any direct conflict with him and don’t believe anyone else did either. He was skilled at agreeing with you and saying what you wanted to hear but then not following through. He announced his retirement at the end of his 5th year as principal.

I had hopes that his departure would bring a new beginning for our school and staff. Instead, things went quickly downhill. The new principal was an outsider from the district. He was very clear that he only intended to be principal at Kismet for five years. I did not like hearing that. It felt as though he was using our school and students as a stepping-stone into our district. Within 3 months of his arrival, the district announced that they were going to “right size” the school. “Right sizing” is a euphemism for “downsizing” used in the business world. Within 3 years our enrollment declined 1200 students to 750 students. The district at that time promised that this change would not negatively affect services for the students; there would still be social workers, counselors, and psychologists available at the school. But this would be the first of many broken promises and decisions that would be handed down from the district.

**

Many times I've been alone

And many times I've cried

When the third principal arrived at Kismet, the faculty as a whole had no influence on the decision making process in the school; however, a select few of the new teachers were in the principal’s inner circle and had access to him, which gave them the power and influence to make decisions that affected the entire school. As I reflect back
and look over some of my emails and notes, I realize that one person or one principal alone can’t be blamed or take the credit for shutting down a school.

I first came to this realization after being asked to be part of a group of teachers who would look over the principal’s yearly evaluation from the staff. His immediate supervisor, who tried to focus only on the positive, led this meeting. However, the principal’s results showed nothing positive in the way he was running the school. In the group I was in, the highest score was 30 out of 100. I thought if teachers had shown similar results, they would have been placed on a remedial plan or dismissed altogether. However, another reason for Kismet’s demise started to creep into my thoughts. Could it be that no one interceded for Kismet because no one outside the school really cared? Teachers from the school reached out to different groups for help and advice, including other administrators, board members, and representatives from our own teachers’ union. But nothing happened. To those of us at the school, it felt as though we were alone and our situation did not matter. We did not matter.

One change that I did witness in the last few years at Kismet was in the students’ behavior. Before the first of these administrative transitions, the students were generally well behaved and respectful. There were always exceptions, but they were in the minority and teachers could count on the support of the administration when dealing with these difficult situations. But during this last administrator’s tenure, students began to disregard the uniform policy. It became common to see students with sagging pants, flashing their gang colors, and making a habit of walking into class late. I spoke with teachers who felt they had no administrative support regarding students’ discipline and
who began to look the other way. On one occasion, while I was in the hallway trying to supervise, I heard a commotion in my classroom. As I turned to look inside, I saw a student throw a punch at another student. Before I knew it, for the first time in my teaching career, two students were fist-fighting right in front of me. As I tried to break up the fight, I could see that the boy who had thrown the first punch was blinded by anger. Though a phone call had been made to the office requesting help, no security guards came. After I managed to separate the boys the security guards finally appeared, and the first words out of their mouths were, “You two fighting again?” Both boys had gotten into a fight the day before in another class: a fight with books and desks being thrown that took 3 adults to break up. Unfortunately, other than breaking up the fight, nothing else had been done to help these boys work out their differences. There was also no documentation of the boys’ previous fight even though the teacher who had helped break up the fight had written a letter to the administration voicing concern that there had been no follow up to the boys’ first altercation.

Also, it no longer came as a surprise to me when I found out that a teacher had walked out of the classroom never to return. Finding substitutes who would work at the school became a challenge. The substitutes I spoke with told me that they would only cover certain classrooms. They felt they had no support in the school and would only take jobs where they knew the teachers and their students. My planning time at the school was taken away on a regular basis so I could help cover a class that had no substitute. When I asked why this administration did not help cover classes, as had been
the practice of the two previous principals, I was told they had more important things to do.

The school had two security guards and a police officer yet I worried about the safety of my students both inside and outside of school. I witnessed how the students did not take the police officer seriously. They ran away from the officer and talked back to him. I worried about the students having the same disrespectful attitude with city policemen and winding up arrested or dead.

The tension between the rarely seen principal and the majority of his staff was not diminishing. We heard that he was personally selecting teachers to attend various conferences around the country, yet these teachers were not reporting to or sharing with the rest of the staff what they had learned. A committee of teachers demanded a list of teachers who had attended different nationwide conferences. One teacher in particular asked all the other teachers point blank if they had attended a conference. A list was published and from that I created a spreadsheet and noticed that some teachers had attended four or more conferences; however, others like myself had attended none. I was most disturbed about teachers who were sent to conferences that had nothing to do with their area of teaching. The staff was then informed that from that point on an application process would be instituted. I had been turned down several times when I had asked to attend a conference right in our own city; however, I thought with this new system I would submit an application to attend a conference that would greatly benefit our students who were learning English. I was turned down again while another select group of teachers was sent to that conference. After that, I requested an appointment with my
administrator to discuss why he, for the last 3 years, refused to invest in my skills. The day of our appointment arrived and I sat waiting outside his office for over 20 minutes. He finally came out and blamed his secretary for not informing him of our meeting. He agreed to reschedule the meeting, but the meeting never took place.

Professional development training was another area of contention for the staff and always appeared to be something someone would throw together at the last minute. I would attend these trainings with other new and veteran teachers and have to sit and listen to something that had no relevance to my teaching or to me. Normally, I tried to be respectful of the people who were presenting as they were just doing what they had been asked to do. That was my usual practice until a professional development session on culturally responsive teaching was presented. That afternoon I sat and listened to a group of our own teachers explain how they used a popular rapper’s music to help relate to our students. I was appalled when I heard and read the song’s lyrics to find that they included swear words and the use of the n-word. The minute I saw that word I was uncomfortable. I could not even imagine what the handful of African-American teachers present at this professional development was feeling. I felt I could not hold my tongue any longer and spoke up. What ensued was a heated debate among the teachers who had presented and a small group of teachers, like myself, who objected to what they had talked about. The rest of the staff, including the principal, just sat there and said nothing. After that presentation, I was still upset and wrote a letter to our school leadership committee, which I knew would go to our principal’s supervisor. After writing the letter, I felt I could not just submit it so I decided to attend their meeting and ask to read my
letter aloud so that it would be reflected in the meeting’s minutes. The following is part of my letter:

This past Friday the topic of our professional development was culturally responsive teaching. Though I am sure the presenters worked hard on this presentation, it was not about culturally responsive teaching; it was about social justice. But this letter is not about what the professional development was or was not, but rather about how offensive it was. I was required to sit and read not just cuss words that had been poorly crossed out, but also a word that has a history of violence and hatefulness and was NOT crossed out. I am referring to the “n-word”. This toxic word has no place in our school and certainly not in a professional development. The discussion during Friday’s professional development created for me a hostile environment. The presenters suggested that many of us were shocked at the realities of our students’ lives. In reality, I was shocked at the lack of cultural sensitivity and the stereotyping of our students.

I respectfully request that future professional development on culturally responsive teaching include the best practices of renowned experts, such as Geneva Gay, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Sonia Nieto, James Banks, Lisa Delpit and Nel Noddings, who approach culturally responsive teaching from an asset-based perspective. In addition, if a discussion of the “n-word” is to be held in the classroom or in professional development it might be helpful to follow the suggestion of Neal A. Lester, dean of humanities and former chair of the English
department at Arizona State University, who suggests bringing in somebody from
the outside who is African American to be a central part of any discussion.

One last thing. Please keep in mind that when I walk into this building,
like my students, I do not leave my rights at the door. The Title VII of the Civil
Rights Act of 1964 and other federal laws prohibit creating a hostile environment
for certain classes including, but not limited to race, ethnicity, religion, disability,
age, sex, and color. (J. Arriaga, personal communication, October, 2013)

No one ever responded to my letter.

**

Anyway you'll never know

The many ways I've tried

And still they lead me back

In my own mind, I began to draw a line as to when I to would have to stop
fighting and leave the school. I told myself that when I could no longer be an advocate
for my students that would mark the line I could not or would not cross. What I did not
realize at the time was that while it might be noble to hold the line for my students’ best
interests, no one was looking out for me, not even myself. During my final two years at
Kismet Middle School, I was often physically sick and stressed out. I dreaded going to
work on Mondays. Whereas in previous years, I would stay after my last class and work
for a couple of hours, I would now count down to the minute I was able to leave. During
the day, I tried not to leave my classroom because I did not want to see the students’
deteriorating behavior in the hallways. The building itself had become dirty; we no
longer had a regular custodian because we needed to share one with the charter school across the street. Even though I continued to enjoy teaching in my classroom and for the most part no administrator bothered me, I knew my time at Kismet had to end. No one particular event or action made me snap and decide to leave. Instead, it was a combination of factors that are often addressed in research about the reasons why teachers leave the profession. The only issue that did not contribute to my decision to leave was the students. Once I made the decision I felt relieved but also experienced a sense of loss. I did not make any announcement regarding my leaving and, with the exception of my family and close friends, no one knew of my decision.

**

To the long winding road
You left me standing here

In early January of my last year at Kismet, the teachers received an email from the district regarding an “…informational meeting regarding the next steps in the school improvement process and community engagement process” (Personal communication, February 2014). The letter stated that representatives of various district offices including Human Resources would be in attendance. At the meeting, the objective of the district was finally accomplished when it announced the closing of Kismet Middle School. The announcement only took place after the representative for the district blamed the teachers for their failures. As far as the district administration was concerned, they had given the school all types of support and yet it was not enough. As I sat there listening, all I could do was wonder why the district had not supported the school with the one thing the
teachers had begged for: a good leader. I believe now that there was never any intention to keep Kismet Middle School, a public school, open.

**Postlude**

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah” is the last line in the song “The Long and Winding Road.” I wondered if Paul McCartney, as he was writing that line, was recalling or longing for yesteryears since that same line was used and sung in Lennon and McCartney (1963) “She Loves You” the Beatles second number 1 hit in the United States. I find myself longing for the yesteryears of Kismet Middle School: the years when I couldn’t believe how lucky and even blessed I was to be a teacher and a time when I enjoyed going to work. There was an atmosphere of support for teachers and a focus on what was best for the students. It was a time, perhaps, when I did not fully appreciate the greatness of my situation. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Mirroring the literature.** Teachers’ working conditions contribute to what Ingersoll (2001) refers to as the “revolving door,” the demand of recruiting, hiring, and retaining large numbers of new teachers annually. Ingersoll (2002) also states that school principals could avoid some of the revolving door in teaching if they would work on three main issues that they can control:

1. How the school responds to students’ behavior.
2. Allowing for more teachers’ input on school policy.
3. Increasing administrative support for teachers with a focus on new teachers.

Overall, Ingersoll (2001) asserts that teachers leave the profession due to negative working conditions. In addition, various other studies address the causes for why
teachers leave: lack of resources (Darling-Hammond, 2003), isolation and role conflict (Anhorn, 2008), as well as the organizational, political and cultural features of schools (Moore Johnson, 2006). Teachers leaving due to under-achieving students play only a minor role in their decision (Haberman & Rickards, 1990).

**Self-reflection on the literature.** When I first read the research related to high turnover rates in schools, I felt there was a conflict between what was written and what real life was. I did not think about the individuals and how it affected them rather I thought about it in the form of statistics – numbers that are easy to understand but do not convey feelings. That thought changed when I began to see my colleagues leaving the school and community they loved and had served for years. Their spirits were crushed, and they felt they had no other choice but to quit, retire early, or transfer to a new school.

The last six years of my teaching career have felt surreal from bearing witness to the dismantling of a school from which I thought I would eventually retire. How is it that a school that once was a place that teachers brought their own children to be educated slowly disintegrates into the type of school that feeds into the stereotypical urban school? As I read the research, it was like reliving a checklist of everything I had experienced at Kismet Middle School.

The working conditions had deteriorated to the point that teachers who felt they had no administrative support regarding students’ discipline began to look the other way (Ingersoll, 2001a). My planning time at the school was taken away on a regular basis so that I could cover a class that had no substitute (Ingersoll). When I asked why the administration did not cover classes, like previous principals had, I was told he had more
important things to do. I agree with Moore Johnson’s (2006) view that a building in
disrepair gives the message of indifference or disdain for those who teach and learn there.
The building, which at one time had been kept clean, was dirty and had developed a
mouse problem. The bathroom lacked soap most of the time, so I kept soap and liquid
hand sanitizer at my desk for my students and I to use.

The reasons some of my closest colleagues who had taught at the school for years
decided to leave was due to the lack of faculty influence (Ingersoll 2001a). They felt as
though they had no say in the programs that were constantly being introduced to our
school, and as one teacher boldly said at one of the staff meetings, after another new test
program was introduced, it felt as though we were just “pimping out” our students to the
highest bidder.

Patterson (2005) states that resilient teachers act from a personal set of values to
help guide their professional decision-making. One of his key findings is that a resilient
person knows when to get involved and when to let go. As sad as I was about the closing
of Kismet Middle School, I was also relieved. I felt our students deserved better. The
district’s decision to close the school within three years did not alter my decision to leave
and find a teaching job elsewhere. As sad and as nervous as I was to start working at a
new school, I knew I had to leave. Following my own advice mentioned earlier in this
study, putting on your oxygen mask before trying to help someone else is not only good
for air travel but also for teachers
Summary

As I reflected on this section, I knew the perfect song “The Long and Winding Road” (Lennon and McCartney, 1970). The lyrics of this song are relevant to the teaching profession as is the history of how the song originated.

In Phase 3: Affirmation, Sequence 3: Reassessment Huberman (1989) state that teachers may follow one of two direction, resolution similar to breathing in and catching a second wind or non-resolution where they are resentful of the system and have no hope. When I made the decision to leave Kismet Middle School, I was not familiar with this reassessment sequence. I only knew that I needed to leave Kismet because I was becoming disillusion with lack of support and the priorities of this administration, which did not align with mine. In Huberman’s (1989) Phase 3 Affirmation, he proposes that this is the point at which the teacher either affirms their decision to stay in teaching or become emancipated from teaching. When I reached this crossroad, I decided to affirm my decision to stay in the teaching profession but found it necessary to change schools.
CHAPTER SEVEN

We can Work it Out

There’s a hole in the bucket, Dear Liza, Dear Liza

—Traditional Children's Song

Summary

My driving force as a teacher is the overall development of the students not only in the area of academics but also as human beings. According to Perez Huber, Huidor, Malagon, Sanchez, and Solorzano (2006), the educational pipeline is not functioning for all of our students. Those who are negatively impacted need stability and continuity the most. The National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future (NCTAF) concluded that the teacher shortage is caused mainly by early attrition of those in the teaching field, not by a lack of people going into the teaching field (Carroll, 2007). Researchers compared the teacher attrition rate to filling a bucket that has a hole in the bottom, with 46% of new teachers leaving the profession within 5 years (Ingersoll, 2002). Low performing and highly impacted schools are particularly impacted. Carroll (2007) suggested, “Many of these schools struggle to close the student achievement gap because they never close the teaching gap - they are constantly rebuilding their staff” (p. 2). In an interview with National Public Radio (Phillips, 2015), Richard Ingersoll stated that there is not much research on teachers’ decision for teachers to stay or not. However, there is
plenty of research identifying school conditions as the basis of why teachers leave the profession.

I have come to the realization that in order to have a positive impact on students, there must first be a change in the provisions and support given to the teaching force. Flight attendants state in their list of safety procedures, “If you are traveling with children, make sure that your own mask is on first before helping your children.”

The purpose of this study was to examine my experience through the lens of researchers, to understand the factors that have contributed to my success and longevity as an urban teacher, and to determine what can be learned from my experiences throughout the different teaching stages that Huberman (1989) describes. This autoethnography paves the way for me to initiate conversations, generate reflection, and bring about the changes that will affect students, which is my ultimate goal. Through my writing, I hoped to understand why I am still in the teaching profession and the key factors that have kept me teaching in urban schools. It was my intention to make this dissertation a scholarly narrative through my lens of a public, middle-school teacher, first-generation immigrant, second language learner, and Hispanic woman who has not only survived, but also thrived teaching in the inner city. I believe that when we reflect on our past, our experiences affect not only our present, but also our future (Dewey, 1944). It is with this mindset that I wrote this study.

My Choice of Autoethnography

Autoethnography is the use of your personal experiences to examine and/or critique cultural experiences. In addition, autoethnography needs to accomplish the
following 3 tasks:

1. Make a contribution to existing research
2. Embrace vulnerability with purpose
3. Create a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response. (Jones, Adams, & Ellis 2015, p. 22)

The key for autoethnographers is to make their writing accessible to the general audience, which also creates a topic of interest for researchers.

Being an integral part of the cultural aspect of a teaching community afforded me a unique opportunity to conduct a study that provides insights into the rewards, heartbreaks, and challenges faced by teachers in urban settings. Using vignettes as snapshots in the various stages of my career, autoethnography allowed me to use this method for its reflective quality. This study is not intended to be a checklist for teachers rather its goal is to generate conversations on how to sustain and create support for teachers. It provides an opportunity for reflection at all levels of the teaching continuum – teacher education, K-12 teaching, mentor, and school and district administration – as these are all catalysts for change.

**Summary of Methods**

In this study, my data included documents and artifacts that were generated during my teaching career as an urban educator, thus creating consistencies and truthfulness (Ellis, 2004). These documents gave credence to my study and provided support for my findings. The documents and artifacts came from both internal and external sources. The internal sources were my personal notes, journals, letters from parents and students, and photographs. The external sources were derived from individuals such as administrators who conducted professional observations in my
classroom. Additionally, I used data gathered from a group of professors who spent a year in my classroom observing, videotaping, and interviewing different people (Clarke, Davis, Rhodes, & DeLott Baker, 1998). I generated field notes from an analysis and synthesis of the various data sources. According to Jerks (2002), field notes are notes that one writes not just of their observations, but also of what they know. These notes may include thoughts, feelings, and conversations (Ellis, 2004).

My analysis of the data has been a comprehensive journey. First, using the research questions as a guide, I reviewed and reflected on my data to identify patterns and themes. Second, I wrote numerous drafts of the narrative seeking to clarify and interpret the data while analyzing what previous research has concluded and then connecting it to my work. Third, I wrote 20 vignettes and from these selected the ones that I felt would resonate most with teachers. Finally, using Huberman’s (1989) diagram of the professional life cycle of a teacher, I wrote up my study as a chronological story that illustrates my teaching journey from the perspective of a novice teacher through that of a veteran teacher.

**Summary of Research Questions**

The following research questions helped frame my study:

1. Why did I choose teaching as a career?
2. What supportive factors contributed to my decision to continue teaching in an urban school rather than leave the profession?
3. What internal and external struggles have I encountered in teaching and what strategies did I use to overcome them?
4. What beliefs and experiences have led to my steadfast commitment to teaching in the urban setting?

5. How do I define success as an urban teacher?

6. What are the implications of my story for urban education?

**Conclusion: Still Standing**

Don't you know that I'm still standing better than I ever did/

Looking like a true survivor, feeling like a little kid/

I'm still standing after all this time

—Elton John

Writing this autoethnography has been a journey. Some people may think that the greatest challenge in this journey was to balance my personal life with working full time and trying to earn my doctorate degree. However, the toughest part was having to revisit some moments in my teaching career that have at times felt as though I was opening up old wounds. Writing this autoethnography was been a cathartic process.

Palmer (2007) asks: *Who is the self that teaches?* The work of knowing thyself is neither self-centered nor self-absorbed. The self-knowledge that is gained by teachers helps serve the students. Palmer claims that good teaching requires self-knowledge (p. 44). Teachers who know themselves are able to relate to their students, subject, colleagues, and the world. Good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher (p.56). Palmer also views teaching as a vocation; not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received. He recognizes the disheartening, oppressive, and overwhelming conditions in which public school teachers must work, yet also acknowledges that
teachers themselves must look within for sustenance instead of waiting for others to provide it. It is the teachers’ deep commitment to their students that keeps them coming back. Ultimately what makes the teacher are the core values that are reflected in day-to-day teaching. The core, at times, cannot be described with words because it goes much deeper than the superficial, more obvious duties of a teacher. Students know when a teacher has it and relationships are built because of it. The self-knowledge that I have gained as a teacher and the core of who I am as a teacher is embedded within this dissertation.

As I read the research and reflected on my experiences, I wondered how this core was developed. Is the core something that is within you naturally or is it something that can be worked on through professional development? My six research questions guided my journey in this dissertation. These questions not only helped frame a chronological approach to this study they also served an important purpose; that of guiding me to better articulate my journey as a teacher.

In Chapter One, I responded to my first question: Why did I choose teaching as a career? I described how, in 1985, I stumbled into teaching after spending one week working with children in Mexicali and how it caused me to reconsider the law career path that I was on. I was able to teach only because of a new alternative teacher license program that was in its infancy. This program required no teaching background and just a few education classes. My resume at that point boasted a bachelors’ degree in Criminal Justice and a couple of weeks working as a student teacher during the summer. Given this limited preparation in the field of education, the expectation was that my career as a
teacher would come to an abrupt end and that I would be one more statistic in the teacher attrition rate (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2003). My first class of students deserved a qualified teacher who studied and understood sound pedagogy, not someone who received on-the-job training.

In looking through some of my artifacts, particularly the National Teacher Exam (NTE) Programs, which I was required to take and pass, I realized that merely passing a test did not make me qualified to stand in front of a group of students and teach them. The NTE test did not make me a teacher, as I knew nothing about best practices and teaching. My first teaching job was in Chicago, where I was assigned to an elementary school, in the inner city with a large Hispanic population. The main building of the school was so overcrowded that they had to rent a former Catholic school for the overflow of students. I was assigned to that old, dark former Catholic school.

This led me to the second question in my study: *What supportive factors contributed to my decision to continue teaching in an urban school rather than leave the profession?* The only reason I even survived my first teaching job was due to my unofficial mentor. In Chapter Three, I describe her as the *credible mentor* that Anhorn (2008) and Haberman and Post (1998) point out a novice teacher needs. Ms. DeLaMontes was recruited from Puerto Rico due to the severe shortage of qualified bilingual teachers. She had 15 years of teaching experiences in Puerto Rico and two years of experience in the Chicago Public Schools. Looking through an old transcript of some of the classes I had to take for my alternative licensure, I could not recall any content or experiences that were useful during my first years of teaching. However, I can
still recall different snippets of Ms. DeLaMontes’s classes as she taught different subjects. Not only did she teach me some pedagogy, she also taught me some valuable basics like limiting the distance between a student and myself when teaching. Not knowing any better, I thought standing over a first grader’s desk as they tried to sound out words was what I was supposed to do. After all, in the Charlie Brown cartoons, their teachers stood in front of the classroom and talked. Ms. DeLaMontes quickly corrected this and instructed me to get a chair and sit next to the child, like she had done. One of the other lessons Ms. DeLaMontes taught me was the importance of the parents’ roles in their child’s educational life. One of our jobs as teachers is to help make parents feel welcome in their child’s classroom (Finders & Lewis, 1994). We do this by accepting and encouraging any kind of help that parents are willing to contribute, even if it’s just a cup of coffee.

Teachers new to the profession or to the building need to have strong mentors within their schools and content areas. These mentors not only help bridge the theoretical learning that new teachers bring to real classroom experiences, but also help them understand and adjust to the culture of the school and community they serve. The administration needs to assure that these credible mentors have the time to conference and model for their mentees. This supports the findings of Haberman and Post (1998) who state, “The process of mentoring is extremely more powerful training than taking classes or going through traditional forms of laboratory experiences” (p. 104).

Having a strong mentor during my first two years of teaching fostered my continuation in teaching. In 1988, when I moved to Denver and began to work in a
school district similar to the one I left behind in Chicago, I did not doubt that teaching was a career for me but instead felt that I was in the wrong school, in the wrong city, and I just needed to go home to Chicago. After just one year I was ready to leave not because of the students but rather the challenging working conditions (Ingersoll, 2001). In Chapter Three, I described the feeling of isolation I encountered in my new work place. Since the school principal left and a new principal had not been assigned, it seemed as though everyone just kept to themselves behind the closed doors of their classrooms. Little did I know that when the new principal, Ms. Houston, walked into the school, she would eventually become one of my strongest mentors.

I saw several parallels with my work experiences and the literature. It seemed as though Ms. Houston had created a checklist using Ingersoll’s (2001) study of school conditions that contribute to high teacher turnover and addressed them by providing the support that epitomized a supportive environment. Working with Ms. Houston, I witnessed what effective school leadership brings to a school. At one of our first faculty meetings she stated that the school and education she wanted for her own daughter was the same one she demanded for our students. At that time I did not realize that she was mirroring what Dewey (1915) stated “What the best and wisest parent wants for his child, that must we want for all the children of the community” (p. 3). Under her leadership for 10 years, I felt supported as a professional educator. Nel Noddings (2005) states “… an ethic of caring can guide our decisions” (p. 94), and that was what I believed guided Ms. Houston’s actions. She modeled this not only in her interactions with the staff, but also with the parents by making them feel welcome in the school and taking time to learn
Spanish so that she could communicate with them. But, overall, it was obvious that the students were her number one concern. She was a constant presence in the school’s hallways and cafeteria. On one occasion as I was walking down the hall, I saw a little first grader in tears. When I asked her why she was crying, she told me that Ms. Houston had called her to her office and she was scared. I escorted this child to Ms. Houston’s office and explained to her why this child was crying. Ms. Houston looked mortified and began to comfort this child and explained to her that she was not in any trouble. She just needed her to give a note to her mother. After that incident, Ms. Houston made it a habit to invite our youngest students into her office just to say hello so that they would not be afraid of her. Her open door policy was not just for students and their families but also for the staff. Her observations in my classroom followed by our conferences helped me reflect on my teaching. I never felt as though it was a highly critical “got you” situation. It was more of an affirming “You are doing some good things in your classroom, so now let’s build on that.” As a result, I developed into a stronger teacher for my students and colleagues. For those 10 years, under her supervision, I never thought about moving back to Chicago even though I missed my family. I considered myself fortunate and looked forward to going to work every day.

Autoethnography has given me an opportunity to view my early career in a reflective manner. It was not until I began writing that I fully understood how ill prepared I was to teach. I was like a deer caught in headlights. It was overwhelming realizing everything I did not know. As I mentioned previously, had my path not crossed with Ms. DeLaMontes, I would have walked, or rather run away from, teaching. There
are some who will read this and think that I was just lucky to have had two outstanding mentors in the beginning phases of my career. However, I do not believe in luck. In Chapter One, I shared aspects of my personal educational experiences growing up such as never being selected to pass out the milk to my fellow kindergarteners or after being asked to leave the classroom for some minor infractions and end up selling fresh fruit and candy in front of the school. Those experiences, however minor they might appear to be, are part of my foundation as a teacher. I believe that I never really chose teaching as a career; rather it was my destiny. As I mentioned above, Palmer (2007) views teaching as a vocation not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received. Therefore, my teaching career is a gift I chose to receive.

The third question that guided this study was: *What internal and external struggles have I encountered in teaching and what strategies did I use to overcome them?* Reflecting on this question gave me pause. Though I was not quite sure what my answer would be, I suspected this would cause me to reflect on a more painful time in my teaching career. I was right.

In the 10th anniversary of his book, Palmer (2007) writes that teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, and can even break the heart. The more you love to teach, the more heartbreaking it can be.

The courage to teach is the courage to keep one’s heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that the teachers and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning and living require. (p. 62)

There have been times in teaching when I did not think my heart could hold much more. From comforting students who are sobbing because they are missing their parents, or
being sent away to live with distant relatives due to the turmoil in their native country to
the moment a child exposed his back to show me the welts caused by his father in a
moment of rage. In Chapter Four, I describe the murder of a former student. That
incident was a defining moment in my teaching career. I knew that I had chosen to teach
in a highly impacted neighborhood with gang activity. I was just too naïve at that time to
think the issue of gangs was just something that lies in the shadows of my classroom,
ever suspecting that it would rip my sense of security in regards to my students’ lives.

It was not until I started to work on this dissertation that I realized how much of
an impact this child’s death had on me. Looking back almost 18 years ago on that
Monday when I received the telephone call from Jesus’ sister confirming his death, I
realized two things: the first is that being part of my students’ lives and their community
goes beyond the walls of a school. It is a privilege to be invited into my students’ homes
for coffee or dinner, or to be part of family celebrations such as First Communions,
quinceañeras, weddings, and baby showers. However, to be included during a personal
tragedy or moment of crisis is when you as a teacher know that you have created that
relationship, that bond, which extends beyond the school walls. Your role at that time
may be as simple as being there to offer support or to just be there physically. As Palmer
(2007) stated you are then “woven into the fabric of community that learning and living
require” (p. 62).

The second thing that I realized as I was writing the vignette was that I did not
drive myself to Jesus’ house that day. The principal, Ms. Houston, offered to not only get
coverage for my classes but she herself drove me to his house immediately. I had never
really thought about that little piece of the story until I wrote about it for this dissertation. At a time when my heart felt so heavy, Ms. Houston did not allow me to go by myself – she modeled the act of caring (Noddings, 1988). In Chapter Four, I described the strategies that Patterson et al. (2004) mentioned in their study regarding teacher resiliency and highlighted one strategy in particular: “Resilient teachers have friends and colleagues who support their work emotionally and intellectually” (p. 5). I had created a network of supporters by surrounding myself with friends and colleagues who supported each other emotionally and intellectually. This network was and still plays a crucial role in my career as a teacher.

One of Patterson et al.’s (2005) key findings is that a resilient person knows when to get involved and when to let go. In Chapter Six, I write about the dismantling of Kismet Middle School. Kismet is a public middle school located in Denver in a working class neighborhood with a large immigrant population. It is a school that became overcrowded as other public middle schools in the neighborhood were closed and charter schools opened. In my 13 years there, I had created a strong bond with several colleagues. We served as each other’s support system. However, as the working conditions deteriorated and I witnessed each one of my colleagues make the tough decision to either leave teaching, transfer to a different school, or retire early, I knew that I, too, would soon have to make this decision. I made the conscience decision that once I no longer was able to advocate for my students, I would need to leave. In retrospect, I now realize the toll my negative work environment took on me both physically and mentally. It was a challenge for me to go to work every day and deal with what reminded
me of the dementors from the Harry Potter movies. The dementors were creatures whose job was to suck out every good feeling or happy memory you had. I wished on many occasions that I had an outside door that would lead directly into my classroom so that I would not need to leave my room and have to put up with the negativity that pervaded the rest of the school building. I created ways of avoiding having to leave my classroom.

The office requested us to sign in and out everyday; however, the teacher’s working day began at the exact same time as the students arrived and ended right after my last period class. Because of this technicality, they could not require teachers to sign in and out unless the teachers were willing to arrive earlier and leave later so that students would not be unsupervised. Knowing this, I chose not to sign in or out. I tried not to answer my classroom telephone knowing that the only reason they would call was to request that once again I cover, during my planning time, a classroom without a substitute. I dreaded the weekly faculty and professional development meetings. Since there was no real discussion and the faculty was not asked for any input, it seemed like a waste of time. The professional development was not differentiated and appeared to be thrown together at the last moment. It became stressful to go to work everyday. One day as I stood in the hallway I realized, sadly, that out of the 14 classrooms that occupied the first floor, only three original teachers remained.

In Chapter Six, I write about how I attempted to advocate for myself by reaching out to people outside of the school for advice, by scheduling a meeting with the administration only to be canceled at the last minute by him, and finally by writing a letter. All of these efforts failed. By the time I made my decision to leave Kismet
Middle School, most of my support system was gone. As sad as I was to leave, I did not want to be that teacher who hid in her classroom. I wanted to be the teacher who was part of a vibrant teaching and learning community.

On the day when administrators from the district’s central offices called a special informative meeting, I knew they were going to announce the closing of the school. At the meeting I braced myself. I thought they would say something like, “We tried our best but we need something new here.” Instead, I heard them put all the blame on the teachers. According to them, even with the “great administration” they gave us, new teachers, additional support, we, the teachers, still failed. Yet, they never mentioned how teachers had sought out help and it had fallen on deaf ears or how the lack of leadership in the building was the root to most of the problems. I remember sitting there, feeling stunned by what I perceived as utter arrogance. I thought how ironic it was that after work I would go home at night and read the research by Ingersoll (2002), Moore Johnson (2006), and Darling-Hammond (2003) about schools like Kismet and why teachers leave teaching, and yet during the day, I was not only witnessing it, but living it. At times it felt as though I was a subject in a research project that I knew would have a terrible conclusion.

As teachers, we need to have a support system in place. This conversation of who is your support system should not take place during an actual crisis but before a crisis, preferably during teacher education. It is ineludible that bad things happen. It does not matter if you teach in a rural, urban, small town, or suburban school. There are some things that are beyond the control of our classrooms. The best that we can do when our
hearts are heavy is to share it with those who care about us. Whether this care is shown by driving you to a grieving family’s house or having someone to call late at night after accompanying a child to the hospital and waiting on social services to find him a foster family. The resiliency that I have developed comes from my support system; however, more importantly, it comes from my spirituality. I had this spirituality prior to going into teaching; it has only grown throughout the years and has sustained me during more difficult times. I believe that without this spirituality to lean on and guide me I could not be a teacher. It is due to this spirituality that I view my job as a calling (Durka, 2002); however, I recognize that it is easy when things are going well in both the classroom and one’s personal life to view teaching as a calling. But when challenges arise and the heart is breaking, all you have left is that core of who you are, your inner beliefs, strengths, and determination to keep you going. It is that core of the self that teaches (Palmer, 2007).

The fourth guiding question was: What beliefs and experiences have led to my steadfast commitment to teaching in the urban setting? As I previously mentioned, I view my job as a teacher as a calling (Durka, 2002). This calling is not just a general one but one that is specific to the inner city. In the latter part of Chapter Four, I refer to Nieto’s (2005) summary of the five important qualities of a teacher and how I have applied them on a daily basis:

1. A sense of mission: teachers are to serve not save the children.
2. Solidarity with, and empathy for, students: A key for students to be successful is for teachers to have strong relationships with them. Students will work for their teachers if they sense that relationship. Solidarity for students’ means teachers value students and their lives and try to incorporate it in their teaching.
3. The courage to challenge mainstream knowledge: Teaching is about learning and relearning to think critically and not just accept the status quo.
4. Improvisation: to learn to think on your feet.
5. A passion for social justice: This is demonstrated in different ways. For some teachers it is mainly about racial, ethnic and economic equality; for others it is about mentoring students who been marginalized by society and letting them know they are valued, thereby empowering students to act. Finally, for some teachers it is about educational inequality; these teachers at times need to take matters into their own hands in order to get the needs of their classroom met. (p. 203)

Though all five of the qualities are important, the one key quality that has kept me steadfast in my commitment to teaching is my belief regarding the students I serve. I use the word *serve* and not *save* because I do not view myself as their savior. I recognize, that by teaching in an inner city school, in order to level their playing field I need to teach, advocate for, and empower my students.

The vignette I shared in Chapter Four described my opportunity to travel with my students. These trips are amazing not only because of the destination but mainly because of the journey. This journey helps establish relationships with students and their families. We embark on a journey that empowers my students to do something that for many is far from their realm of comfort such as choosing to work at school after hours to raise money for their trip instead of hanging around with their friends or overcoming family naysayers. Though these trips are important to me on a personal level, on a professional level, through this autoethnography, I have come to realize that these trips actually played a critical role in my continued commitment to urban education. In Huberman’s (1989) life cycle of a teacher, he states that teachers go through periods of reassessment where they look for ways to challenge themselves. I believe now that this trip served this purpose to challenge myself each year and to look forward to new travelers and their families every year.
The fifth question is *How do I define success as an urban teacher?* In Chapter Two, I wrote that this autoethnography is not intended to be a recipe on how to succeed. In Chapter Five, I concur with Nieto’s view (2003) that teachers do not describe themselves as good teachers based on high-stakes tests, implementing best practices or a prescribed curriculum, or their certifications. Instead they consider themselves good teachers if they have established relationships with students, have continued to develop as educators, and if they address issues of social justice. However, all three things are not easily measureable and it is far easier to criticize teachers for their so call-called inadequacies and failures based on a high stakes testing. I never base my success on test scores either. Instead my relationships with my students and their parents and my reflections on how to improve as an educator are important to me.

Success as a teacher is not simple to define. However, as I wrote this autoethnography, I came to the realization that there are some elements (or traits) you must have in order to be “successful.” First, you need to build resiliency (Patterson et al., 2004). In Chapter Four, I acknowledge that my resiliency stems from my spirituality, which began to develop prior to going into the teaching field. Palmer (2007) states that the more teachers are familiar with their inner spirit, the more confident their teaching and lives become. In addition to resiliency, you have to maintain the balance that Freire (2005) discusses between your love for students and teaching. When I started writing the different vignettes for this autoethnography, I noticed that none of them related to a teaching method. Though teaching methods are important, they are not enough to ensure your success as a teacher. However, I was included in a study (Clarke, Davis, Rhodes, &
DeLott Baker, 1996) that described the characteristics of highly successful classrooms for minority students. This study focused on the three classrooms whose students consistently performed higher on various achievement tests. My classroom was one of these three classes. The researchers spent a year in my classrooms and the two other classrooms, videotaping, and interviewing students and their teachers. The teaching methods, materials, their philosophies and instructional activities that the teachers used were all different. The only thing these three teachers had in common was that they focused on reading and writing. It was not until I began to work on this autoethnography that I recalled being part of this study. I chose not to read the study nor did I look over any artifacts related to this study until now. I find this interesting.

This research has turned into one of my favorite artifacts because as I read it for the first time, I was transported back in time: a time before No Child Left Behind or Race to the Top existed; a time when teachers were trusted to use their own professional judgment in creating and guiding/leading instruction. As I read the transcripts of the students’ interviews, I was reminded how important it is to hear the student’s voice. I was also struck by the fact that their conclusions are timely in education today.

The research re-confirms the observation that teaching is highly personal and human endeavor. Well intentioned efforts to improve schools and teaching by mandating the use of particular materials and techniques may actually interfere with careful cultivation of relationships that enliven children in classrooms and ultimately result in accelerated learning. (Clarke et al., 1996 p. 3)

Though this study originally labeled me as a successful teacher based on test scores, I do not believe that scores alone define success as an urban teacher. I have received throughout my career outstanding evaluations, this also I believe does not define my
success. Teaching is more than a subject or a curricula, it is preparing our students with the skills needed in order to be successful in life. It is reminding our students of their strength and resiliency when they hurt. It is preparing them not just for career and college but also providing them with the strategies to be problem solvers, resourceful, and confident.

The word *success* implies an ending as if you’ve achieved something or you’ve reached a pinnacle. Having taught in the same community for over 20 years, the relationships that I have established do not end. They continue with siblings and most recently, with the children of former students, these relationships continue to grow.

Initially, I hesitated to include in Chapter Five, the vignette of the story of a child named Jackie because in my career as an urban teacher this is one of the most humbling experiences. As I wrote in Chapter Five, as my first year teaching in middle school drew to a close and I attended the end of the school year celebration, I was expecting to be confronted by a parent due to a lice outbreak on a recent Washington D.C. trip. Instead this parent shared with me that the child, Jackie, whom I had spent hours working on to pull the lice out of her hair, was the child she was expecting 12 years ago. At that time this parent was taking evening English classes and her older children would come into my class and I would help them with homework and do different activities with them. Traditionally, in their family, the oldest children had the honor of naming the newest member of the family. Her children decided to name their little sister after their favorite teacher, me! The hesitation to include this vignette was out of respect to my fellow
teachers. I realized that not all teachers have the opportunity to know whose lives we have touched or the impact of our work.

Teaching is about building relationships. In Chapter Five, I include Dr. James Comer’s quote from Pierson’s (2013) TED presentation: “No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship of mutual respect, teacher to student.” Many different researchers refer to the word relationship. Nieto (2005) states that key to student success is the quality of their relationship with their teachers. Gay (2005) argues that teachers who succeed in predominantly low-income and/or high minority schools need to build a trusting relationship with both students and parents. Ladson-Billings (1995) describes the elements of building relationships between teacher and students. The type of relationships that these researchers refer to goes beyond caring (Noddings, 1988; Klem & Connell, 2004).

The relationships that I establish with my students I now refer to as a credible relationships. It is not a friend relationship because as I explained to a student once, I am their teacher not their friend. This credible relationship is built on consistency, honesty, trust, and care. I am conscious of the question Toni Morrison once posed when being interviewed on the Oprah Show, “...when a kid walks into a room, does your face light up? …because that allows your face to speak how your heart feels” (Morrison, 2011). These credible relationships continue to grow as I share stories of my own family and of school experiences. Sharing with my students the core of who I am allows them to share who they are. Some of the toughest conversations I have had in my classroom regarding gangs and racism would not have taken place without establishing this credible
relationship. Consequently, my students know that they have someone who not only holds them up to high academic standards but also cares and believes in them, and by the same token, they know I will work to support them as we work to get back on track, if needed.

While this credible relationship is at the core of a successful urban teacher, at times it cannot be described with words because it goes much deeper than the superficial, more obvious duties of a teacher. Students know when a teacher has it and relationships are built because of it learning can then take place. In the study that was conducted by Clarke, Davis, Rhodes, and DeLott Baker (1996) they state, “The focus of teaching should always be on learning, but attempts to measure learning in more precise ways to insure accountability run the risk of distorting the very human relationships at the heart of classroom instruction” (p. 27). After almost 29 years of being in a classroom, I feel that I have cultivated these characteristics and they have become part of who I am, a successful and thriving urban teacher.

Implications of Study

In response to the 6th question, What are the implications of my story for urban education? in Chapter One, I state that the purpose of this autoethnography was to provide realistic insight and opportunities for reflection for teachers. Specifically, this study would benefit teachers who are facing the difficult decision to stay in teaching beyond their initial five years. I realize that the implications in this autoethnography reach beyond teachers and into at least the following two sub-groups: teachers’ education programs and school administrators. I came to this conclusion as I was analyzing my
vignettes and realized 2 important facts. First, even though I am the teacher in the classroom, there are factors outside of the classroom that influence my ability to stay in teaching. These factors normally are political in nature, which includes but is not limited to mandates that are handed down from the district, state and federal government. Second, in all the vignettes that I wrote I may be the central character; however, I was not the only character. My interpersonal encounters along with my intrapersonal thoughts reinforce my belief that teaching is not a solitary profession.

Twenty-eight years ago when I first entered the teaching field it was different from how it is today. No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top were not what drove the decisions regarding how to spend a school budget. Students were given standardized tests; however, testing was neither excessive nor were tests considered the high-stakes assessments they are today. This too is part of the political in nature of education today. As I wrote this autoethnography, I often wondered whether if I had entered the teaching field in today’s environment, would I have been part of the revolving door (Ingersoll 2002) of the teaching profession?

One of the purposes of an autoethnography is to create a reciprocal relationship with the readers (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2015). The purpose is to ignite contributions from the audience and have the autoethnography be an ongoing conversation. It is my hope that as the audience read through the different vignettes they are able to create their own unique meaning and implications. However, in the following section I discuss several significant implications that I have drawn for teachers, teacher education programs, and school leaders.
Implications for teachers. One of the implications of this study is that in teaching we need to thrive, to push through the rough times, and keep hope alive. In order to thrive, teachers need a support system. My support system consisted of two parts. One part is the spiritual support that keeps me resilient and serves as a reminder that teaching is not a job but a calling (Durka, 2002). The second part consists of a small group of teachers that you have built a relationship with and that you can celebrate your accomplishments with as well as your struggles. This support system will help you build resiliency (Patterson, Collins, & Abbot, 2004). It is key that in this support system you share common beliefs regarding students. In addition, within this support system you should be able to laugh and talk about things that have nothing to do with teaching. This support system is key to thriving as a teacher.

Another implication for teachers is to understand that thriving in the teaching profession is the ability to know when to get involved with school and wider political issues and when to walk away (Patterson, Collins, & Abbot, 2004). My decision in Chapter Six to leave the school that I had taught in for thirteen years was a difficult one. I realize now that I was allowing myself to be imprisoned in my own classroom. Palmer (2007) and Freire (2005) state that teaching is a profession that appeals to the heart and is an act of love and courage. As teachers, we sometimes hesitate to leave a school because we care for our students, no matter what it costs us. Through this dissertation, I have learned that as teachers we sometimes need the courage to leave a teaching situation that is not healthy for our spirit. It is okay to leave and search for that urban school where you can find a culture that will support you and allow you to thrive.
Implications for teacher education programs. In Chapter One, I write about how I stumbled into teaching. Chicago Public Schools were desperate for bilingual teachers and they started a new program issuing an alternative teaching license. This alternative teacher license was given to college graduates with no teaching degree or background. If it had not been for my mentors who possessed over seventeen years of experience, I firmly believe that I would have left teaching within 2 years.

The following implications that I write about are intended for university-based teacher preparation programs. As important as proper pedagogy is to the classroom, I believe that it is equally as important that pre-service teachers be prepared to overcome the attrition rate of 46% of new teachers leaving the profession within 5 years (Ingersoll, 2002). A class examining the reasons teachers leave the teaching field should be as mandatory as taking a class on reading. Dialogue with pre-service teachers regarding how to create a support system is crucial. A discussion that includes teachers with various years of teaching experience would be a beneficial. I was fortunate that I had an unofficial mentor, Ms. DeLaMontes. What I believe that made her that credible mentor (Haberman & Post, 1998) was her willingness to share her seventeen years of experiences.

Another implication from this autoethnography for teacher education programs is to emphasize the importance of having credible relationships with students along with sound instruction. Rita Pierson’s (2013) TED presentation quotes Dr. James Comer: “No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship of mutual respect, teacher to student.” It is important for pre-service teachers to understand that their job is to
educate the students, not be their friends. The students need to understand that the teacher
is the authority in the classroom. This authority is not a given, but it is the result of the
relationship that you establish by treating students like individuals, with dignity and
honesty. If students know that you believe and care about them they will trust you so that
when you set high expectations they know that you will help them be successful.

**Implications for administrators/principals.** My ability to thrive as a teacher has
been either nurtured or hampered by the school’s principal. The vignettes I wrote
strongly support the findings of Ingersoll (2001), Darling-Hammond (2003), Anhorn
(2008) and Moore Johnson (2006) that working condition matters. Just as teachers need
to nourish their students so that they can succeed, principals have the same responsibility
to their staff. In chapter 3, I write about my strongest mentor, a principal, Ms. Whitney
Houston. She wanted the best for her students and recognized that by supporting her
teachers she was able to have a greater impact on students. There were things that she
could not control such as teachers’ salary. However, she could control teachers’ working
conditions, teacher participation in school-wide decisions, and valuing teacher input. She
created a positive educational climate that fostered a professional learning community
based on trust. Relational trust according to Bryk and Schneider (2003) is key for a
school to be effective. In order for trust to exist in the school, it is it the responsibility of
the principal to set the tone (Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

In Chapter Six, I wrote about the three different administrators that I worked with
at Kismet Middle School. I have come to realize trust played a key role in my
relationships with these administrators. With the first one, there was a level of trust
among the staff, to the point that teachers were willing to stray from their contract and teach an extra class a day, trusting that the principal would not give them any extra duty or take away any planning time. The second administrator slowly began to lose the trust of his staff simply by trying to avoid any unpleasant decisions or conversations. With the third and final principal, there was no trust, and the results were detrimental not only to teachers but to the students.

Principals are responsible for the school climate. Creating a trusting environment in the school will foster cooperation and caring, which will result in an effective school (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

**Implications of autoethnography for teachers and research.** Autoethnography is a powerful tool for both teachers and researchers. In a recent interview with National Public Radio (Phillips, 2015), Richard Ingersoll stated that research has addressed teachers’ decisions on whether to stay or leave the profession. However, there is plenty of research identifying school conditions as the basis for why teachers leave the profession. Dr. Ingersoll himself was a teacher for six years in both private and public schools and he stated, “One of the big reasons I quit was sort of intangible, but it’s very real: It’s just a lack of respect” (Riggs, 2013). That intangible decision can become tangible with autoethnography. The method is particularly appropriate for identifying the factors that influence how teachers arrive at the decision to stay or leave their profession.

Nieto’s (2013) intention was to write about how teachers thrive. However, after interviewing and analyzing what teachers had to say, she wrote about their resiliency and how they had become culturally responsive teachers instead. In a presentation

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introducing her new book, she stated that some of the teachers she interviewed had not realized that they were viewed as teachers that thrived (REACH Summer Institute 2013). Nieto (2013) also states that teachers’ voices are missing from educational debates and conversations, which is the reason she interviews teachers. However, if autoethnography had been integrated along with the interviews, Dr. Nieto and her teachers would be able to create a joint, more authentic interpretation of the teachers’ experiences (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2015). Furthermore, I believe that autoethnography could be a useful tool for a professional learning community in which teachers would meet regularly while at the same time writing their autoethnographies. The meetings would involve the sharing of their experiences so that they could grow together. There are two possible ways in which this could occur. One scenario could involve just the teachers meeting on their own. Currently the district in which I teach, Denver Public Schools, offers the opportunity for teachers to create Professional Development Units (PDUs). One of the purposes of these PDUs is to “Encourage professional practices that contribute to student learning” (Denver Public Schools, 2006). Creating a PDU using autoethnography would allow teachers the time to process and reflect on their teaching. However, another scenario could involve a teacher educator and researcher like Dr. Nieto being part of the group in a facilitator type role, but not interjecting her theory or beliefs into the group but instead allowing the teachers to reach their own conclusions about their practice.

Autoethnography allows for an in-depth examination of one’s own practice as an educator. Reflection, as stated in Chapter One, is an integral part of our evolution as teachers. This examination goes beyond the lessons that are taught and considers the
person delivering the lessons. In Chapter Five, I described the immigration issues that my students and I faced in 2006. It was not until I was writing this autoethnography that I was able to reflect and reinterpret this experience. At the time, I was able to seize a teachable moment for my students regarding the issue of immigration. However, as much as I understood my reasoning at that time for not participating in the boycott, writing about my experience enabled me to challenge my assumptions about the situation and be better able to make future decisions about who I want to be as an educator (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2015).

Palmer (2007) states that “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 56). The question at the center of his book is “Who is the self that teaches?” (p. 52). I believe that autoethnography can play a role in helping teachers answer that question.

Epilogue: “Get Back”

I selected this Beatles’ song not for the lyrics but for where it was performed. The Beatles performed an impromptu concert on the rooftop of London’s Apple Headquarters in 1969. It was their final public performance. Looking at the film, they appear to be having fun performing. Meanwhile, the Metropolitan Police Service is trying to figure out how to get to them to stop or lower their volume. The people who are walking by on the streets below are a bit confused. Some just continue walking while others stop, slowly realizing what is going on, and even try to climb the roof to the musicians (Musica E Todo Tipo, 2014). True to an autoethnography, it is up to the reader to construct meaning from the events that I have shared (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2015).
have dissected, analyzed, and shared both my challenges and successes as an urban teacher with the hope of providing the reader with the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and to encourage further discussions among teachers and readers of this dissertation. So just as something special was going on with the Beatles’ performance on that London rooftop, in a similar way, autoethnography could be a method that some people would regard with skepticism in a similar way to those who continued walking away from the rooftop concert. However, just like the people who stopped to see what was going on that day, there could be others who realize the potential for autoethnography to make contribution to existing research on teachers and teaching.

I chose autoethnography as the method for this dissertation but now at the end of this journey, it has become part of who I am as a person. Autoethnography has not only helped me examine my life as a teacher but has also made me conscious about the teacher I want to be (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2015).
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counts cannot necessarily be counted.” Albert Einstein


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APPENDIX A

Professional Life Cycle of Teachers
Embedded with the title of Beatles’ songs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Teaching</th>
<th>Phase or Sequence</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| 1-3               | Phase 1: Beginnings
|                   | In My Life |
|                   | Easy          |
|                   | Painful       |
| 4-6               | Phase 2: Stabilization
|                   | We Can Work It Out |
| 7-18              | Phase 3: Affirmation or Emancipation (Exit) |
| 5-10              | Sequence 1: Harmony Recovered |
| 11-19             | Sequence 2: Reassessment & Self-doubt |
| 11-19             | Sequence 3: Reassessment |
| 20-29             | Sequence 4: Renewal |
| 11-19             | The Long and Winding Road |
| 20-29             | Exit |
| 30-39             | Exit |