The Truth of What Matters:

An Autoethnography and Visual Inquiry of Art Teacher Burnout

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A Thesis

in

The Department of

Art Education

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Masters of Art (Art Education) at Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

June 2021

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Shannon Roy

Entitled: The Truth of What Matters: An Autoethnography and Visual Inquiry of Art Teacher

Burnout

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Art Education)

Complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to

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Abstract

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Shannon Roy

Teachers have long struggled with stress and burnout due to the job's physical, mental, and emotional complexities. This autoethnography explores teacher stress and burnout through six social fiction short stories and accompanying photographs. My personal accounts of teaching art inform the discussion around why so many teachers are experiencing burnout and why art teachers struggle to maintain an artistic practice while teaching. To understand more precisely the issues that teachers are facing, I have identified four prevalent challenges for art teachers. These issues are insufficient teacher preparation, lack of teacher support, excessive workload, and breakdown of identity. Additionally, a fifth theme, "connection" emerged as a positive intervention. This thesis also explores how connections to the school community and staff, students, and through engagement with an active art practice are beneficial to an art teacher's well-being.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my loving parents.

And,

To all of the caring yet struggling teachers.. I see you.

Acknowledgements

This work could not have been possible without my supervisor, Dr. Anita Sinner. Dr. Sinner embodies what I believe a true teacher to be. She is supportive, knowledgeable, diligent, caring, and creative. Without her encouragement, I would not have had the confidence to apply for a Ph.D. program as I have. Dr. Sinner encouraged me to keep going, write from the heart, and follow my dreams, and for this, my gratitude cannot fully be expressed in words.

I am pleased to thank my committee member, Dr. Lorrie Blair, whose knowledge and care were imperative to my success. I am honoured to have had your feedback and support through this process.

I would also like to recognize my new forever friends Denise, Zoe, and Eva. The bonds we formed at Concordia University will last a lifetime, I am sure. Thank you, friends, for being there to listen, laugh, support, and review ideas with me.

I would also like to thank my Aunt Cindy and Grandmother for their love and understanding during this life change and your help and support in my move to Montreal. Your physical and moral support were more helpful than you could know.

Finally, this research could not be possible without the unwavering love and support of my parents. Although it hurt my heart to be away from you as I studied, I could feel your love across the miles without a doubt. You supported me in every way possible. I am filled with gratitude that I have parents who love me so.

And I would also like to recognize Jack, my silly pup. He sat by me day and night as I read, wrote, and reflected. His warm fur made quiet nights much less lonely

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Art is the visual reorganization of experience... Research is the enhancement of

meaning… Teaching is performative knowing in meaningful relationships with learners.

(Irwin, 2013, p. 21)

Most teachers enter their careers excited, hopeful, and nervous. Those with helping

personalities are often drawn to becoming teachers. As a young child, I idealized the role of

teacher, and like many educators new to the profession, I soon found out that this ideal is much

more complex than it appears from the outside. My research stems from this knowing.

When deciding what topic to research for my thesis, I did not foresee myself taking on a theme

with such a pessimistic connotation. I wrestled with the theme of teacher burnout as my thesis

topic because I was shying away from the truth of what matters to me. In reality, I came to

appreciate this project and self-study as a way to understand myself in relation to teacher culture,

and hopefully open up a more extensive dialogue for others. Teacher stress and burnout have

historically been severe issues for many teachers, and this is an important part of teacher culture

(Kyriacou, 1987).

I have taught in Calgary for over 13 years at seven different schools and grades one to

twelve, special education, and adult continuing education. This experience has given me some

unique insight into the issues that teachers face with burnout. Having the opportunity to teach in

several schools and to various populations has shown me that teacher stress exists in many facets

of the teaching community, possibly at all levels of teaching in fact, and I believe that, as part of

well-being and sustainable teaching, it is essential to talk about the issues that bring these

struggles upon us.

My thesis is an exploration, through image creation and short stories, of my struggles with stress and, in turn, my mental health through my teaching career. My stories implicate how the public system, heavy workload, school culture, and societal expectations operate as key factors in the challenges that myself, and according to the literature, many others experience in teaching (Chang, 2009; Karsenti & Collins, 2013; Kyriacou, 1987; Laurie & Larson, 2020). Through this showing and telling, I will seek to understand further why many teachers have wrestled so significantly with burnout and why many reach the crossroad, that I now face, of considering leaving the profession they love (Cohen-Evron, 2002; Karsenti & Collins, 2013).

Purpose and Positionality

In my experience, teachers tend to be quiet when it comes to the negatives of their job. In schools, teachers are not encouraged to talk about the problematic aspects of teaching, as it can be misconstrued as having a negative outlook. From the teacher perspective, many educators seek to please, and voicing indiscretions would be contrary to making people around them happy. In many instances, I have witnessed educators work to the advantage of everyone around them and rarely pause to reflect upon how that might negatively impact their own mental and physical health.

My study aims to investigate and communicate my personal experience as an art teacher and how it has impacted my life. My ultimate goal (and the reason I have chosen autoethnography for my methodology) is to inform, initiate, and possibly elicit system changes in teacher training and learning institutions. Teachers often struggle due to a lack of support and resources available for them to do their job properly, and as a result, some students are unable to reach their full potential in classrooms. By opening up a dialogue about the issues teachers face,

we take the first steps to address problems inherent in the education system; as such, my inquiry aims to contribute to this critical conversation in our field.

To situate my story, I write with the intimate, inside knowledge of a teacher and artist, adopting an autoethnographic lens that further draws out aspects of the culture of teachers. As an educator, I did not have the time or energy to maintain my art practice. As Leggo (2005) reiterates, creative expression is particularly important for teachers to not only grow professionally but also to remain mentally healthy (p. 439). I believe that this is a domain of life that is crucial for art teachers but is often neglected as we wrestle with our identity as artists and teachers. This inquiry explores the following questions through my stories:

- Why are so few art teachers able to dedicate the time to their creative practices?

- Why are stories and photography suitable methods of inquiry when investigating burnout in the lives of art teachers?

- How did teaching conditions in schools contribute to my personal account of burnout and stress, and, in turn, how might that experience inform the field of art education?

From my experience, aspects of teacher culture seem to tie the hands of teachers in unexpected ways. I believe that social complexities, competition, political issues, and the school's culture all contribute to the issues.

The Problem with Self-efficacy as a Potential Solution

In researching teacher stress and burnout, it was disturbing to notice how much of the literature is focused on self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995; Cansoy et al., 2017; Herman et al., 2018; Klassen & Chiu, 2010; von der Embse et al., 2016). Bandura (1995) defined self-efficacy as "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (p. 2). Therefore, self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief that they

can be successful in certain situations if they only believed in themselves and their abilities more. This term, self-efficacy, is often brought up when discussing the stress teachers face in the classroom. In reviewing the literature, Cansoy et al. (2017) and Bandura (1995) have all used this theory to explain why many teachers struggle. Thus, this reasoning becomes problematic because it is as though we are putting the fault, or blame, back onto the teachers.

The old adage, 'must try harder', is echoed in this research. Assessing the level of self-efficacy in relation to burnout subliminally tells teachers, "if only you had more belief in yourself, you would be more successful." I strongly disagree with this sentiment. If we step back and review the assignment of self-efficacy, in effect, it puts the school system's problems back on our teachers instead of focusing research in ways that puts the onus on the lack of school and institutional support and resources for the teachers. Through my personal experience as a teacher for 13 years in Alberta, I observed a lack of discourse concerning teachers' health and well-being, which significantly impacts teacher retention. We need to begin looking at why so many teachers struggle to believe that they can succeed in the profession instead of directly blaming it on their self-perception.

In this thesis, I will present six social fiction stories based on actual accounts of my life as a teacher. Characters and locations have been altered (see Research Design chapter) to maintain privacy. Each story will also open with photographs of the visual surroundings of schools where I worked. These photos were created as narrative commentaries on the lives of teachers and school culture and were inspired by my stories. The images are deliberately constructed, not to be illustrative, nor descriptive, nor representative of my years in specific schools, but instead to serve as ruptures that visually articulate the essence of each story, much in the way Barthes (1981) describes the punctum which is the element of photographs that gets at one's emotional

self (p. 37). Using thematic analysis, I have identified five main themes that can give insight into the world that art teachers, like me, face. While these accounts are quite personal, I am confident that many educators will relate to many of the stories I will present.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

While plenty of studies exist on teacher burnout (Chang, 2009; Kyriacou, 1987; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011, 2017) and teacher stories (Dunlop, 1999; O'Brien, 2014; Strong-Wilson, 2006), finding work that integrates the two areas was challenging. It is exceedingly rare to encounter this type of work that specifically relates to art education. Being an art teacher is a wonderful and rewarding job; during my first encounters with people, they often express what a great career being an art teacher must be. While it can be rewarding in many ways, the intricacies and complexities make this job far from easy. It is taboo for educators to talk about their reasons for frustration with the career, and in my experience, it is frowned upon to talk about burnout. I believe that a substantial part of this is related to school administration. From my experience, administrative leaders dislike having conversations about the difficulties teachers are experiencing as their hands are also tied in many cases. Government initiatives, funding, space issues, and lack of time appeared to be continual issues in my experience with school administrators. The lack of proper funding, along with the continual introduction of new education initiatives, leaves schools with overworked teachers and leaders who struggle to support this issue. Perhaps many teachers are too ashamed to admit that they are struggling because if that is the case, it feels like failure.

In the Alberta school districts, when funds are low, teachers can be 'surplused' (required to leave their school to be placed into a new school) based on the administration's discretion–not necessarily on seniority. I have seen many colleagues and friends required to leave the school in June because of a cut in funding that could not support the current staff of teachers. Unfortunately, that year, the surplused teachers did not attain the elusive bar that was placed too high for them to reach. When administrators are forced into downsizing staff, I have seen these

choices be made based on which teachers are putting more of their time into the job. Overwhelmed teachers who are not able to put more of themselves into the work are often the teachers who are moved.

Sinner (2012) discusses the ways in which surveillance has an impact on teacher performance. Drawing from Foucault (1984), Sinner explains the way in which preservice teachers are placed in a situation of power dynamics in the apprenticeship model. Working under teacher mentors puts preservice teachers under surveillance which has the ability to alter their natural actions. This model could also be applied to certified teachers in that administrators act as surveillance who have the power to control teacher's actions, and this results in compliance. Foucault (1984) explains how examination,

> combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify, and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them" (1984, p. 197).

I equate Foucault's statements on examination to a teacher's performance in the classroom and the the keeping of one's job to the passing of this examination. Teachers are essentially continually under observation by their administration, parents, and society at large. A misstep can result in that teacher moving down the hierarchy that silently exists in schools. Teachers may feel reluctant to speak their minds or reach out for help as they do not wish to cause problems or be seen as less competent than other educators.

This conversation should neither be avoided nor should art teachers who voice differing views about school policies feel ostracised. The dialogue needs to happen, and teachers should

feel comfortable talking about why they are struggling as part of a constructive discourse that moves our profession forward in ways that support and align with teachers' health and wellness.

In this literature review, I focus on four main topics that frame the theoretical perspectives of this project: 1) teacher stress and burnout, 2) life writing, 3) processing emotion through images, and 4) photography within research. I have chosen studies relevant to education and when possible, art education.

Teacher Stress and Burnout

The most important 'takeaway' from my readings on teacher stress and burnout was the fact that statistics and qualitative data have long shown a critical problem: the pressure of the profession has been an acute issue throughout time (Kyriacou, 2001). Chang (2009) indicated that 25% of teachers in the United States leave the profession within three years, and 40% resign within five years of starting to teach (p. 194). Statistics from the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary also report that 40% of Alberta teachers leave the profession within the first five years (2017). In my experience, this was precisely the case with the fellow new teachers. As an educator, I have encountered class sizes far too large to manage reasonably, spaces much too small to house the expected number of students, students with learning and behavioural challenges with little to no support, and an administration who turned me away at the request of help. This anecdotal observation clearly indicates a lack of support for teachers who are entering the profession. My personal experience can provide insight into these alarming statistics. Kyriacou (1987) completed a longitudinal study that documented unpleasant emotions, including tension, frustration, anger, and depression that ensued from teaching stress for over a decade. The study survey results indicated that at least a quarter of the participants found teaching to be an "extremely or very stressful" career (p. 147). Although this study is now dated,

it still rings true in my experience. Kyriacou (1987) defines teacher burnout as "[t]he syndrome resulting from prolonged teacher stress, primarily characterized by physical, emotional and attitudinal exhaustion" (p. 246). Hence, my thesis will adopt this same definition for teacher stress and burnout. According to the definition of the Maslach Burnout Scale[1], the term refers to "emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment, observed in employees who are in intense relationships with others as part of their jobs" (Kyriacou, 1987, p. 146). For instance, teachers are working in close quarters and developing relationships with vulnerable youth who need guidance, which, in itself, places a great deal of pressure on the profession.

While exploring the reasons behind the statistics, we see that the role of teachers can play a significant part in the prevalence of burnout, depression, and anxiety among teachers (Koenig, 2014; Kremer & Hofman, 1985; Kyriacou, 1987; Marko, 2015). The teacher's role becomes a substantial part of one's personal identity as mainstream discourse tends to pair a teacher's professional role and their personal identity as one, when this is not necessarily the case (Britzman, 2003). Cohen-Evron (2002) describes this as: "There is often a conflict between what is expected and what is believed, and teachers must negotiate their identity within these conflicted representations and expectations" (p. 80). Considering Cohen-Evron's statement, it should be noted that a teacher's identity and role play a large part in the profession – yet another dilemma for teachers. In this instance, I reference identity as "the distinguishing character or personality of an individual" (Merriam-Webster, 2021) and role as "a character assigned or assumed" (Merriam-Webster, 2021). The main difference being that identity has a stronger

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[1] The Maslach Burnout Scale was developed by Maslach et al. (1986) to measure the level of burnout in people. The scale assesses three main areas including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment.

element of choice and inherent qualities, whereas role is assigned, or one fits into a role. So, it is not surprising that teachers struggle when the two realms of personal identity and professional role are clashing with each other.

Hall (2010) explores teacher burnout explicitly related to art teachers. They explain that professional and personal identities and practices interweave when one becomes an art teacher, which is an elaborate process. The implications for compromising the identity as a teacher and artist, which are entangled, add another layer of complexity to the dilemma between the professional role versus personal identity. I have noticed this in my own stories. From the day I graduated from university, I was inclined to change myself to fit within the expected teacher role. This conflicting identity transformation can be viewed through my personality transformation over the years as I transitioned from being a student to teacher. Sinner (2010) discusses, through narrative inquiry, how preservice teachers are conditioned into "a culture of sameness" through the expectations of schools (p. 31). I further elaborate that this requirement to adhere to strict expectations remained an expectation throughout my teaching career, making the daily need to conform a daunting task. Some school environments were more demanding in this regard than others.

When Blair and Fitch (2015) studied art teacher identity and preservice teachers, they discovered an overwhelming response from interviews regarding students who were wrestling with the dichotomy of being an artist and teacher. The demands of each role to exist in harmony with the other appears to be conflicting, so even as artists train to become teachers, they are already facing the stress of this dilemma. Blair and Fitch indicate a need to prepare preservice teachers for this challenge before they enter into the classroom and are expected to manage the demands of both identities separately and then together as well. There is no doubt that this

approach will benefit future teachers. I felt startled when one day I realized that I had not picked up a paintbrush for the sake of creating art myself in years. Was I still considered an artist? Could my students and colleagues respect my art teachings while I claimed to be an artist but was not practicing?

Within the literature, I also found a culture of unhealthy acceptance of overworking, which leaves many teachers unable to properly take care of themselves (Seton, 2019). As Seton (2019) argues, teacher stress is not a new phenomenon. They also point out that despite teachers' health being vital for a functioning classroom, the topic is often neglected. He recognizes the competitive nature that is bred in schools and narrates his experience, "[w]e became locked in competition with one another to see who arrived earliest, stayed latest, and showed up at the most weekend sports games" (Seton, 2019, p. 78). It is easy for me to relate to Seton's story, as I pushed myself to try and 'keep up' with the other highly involved teachers.

Seton (2019) explains that teachers inevitably absorb their students' stress and become secondary trauma victims. However, speaking about it and needing help with this trauma is still viewed as taboo in school culture. Miller and Flint-Stipp (2019) draw on Fowler (2015) to assert that every classroom has students with some level of trauma and "if we accept that trauma directly affects students' lives and their abilities in the classroom, we can anticipate it will have at least indirect effects on teachers" and, "any teacher who cares for traumatized students is thus susceptible to the burdens of trauma" (Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019, p. 29). It is imperative that the school system begins to address this reality in order to create an action plan to assist teachers in maintaining their wellness.

Life Writing

As I reviewed a plethora of narrative methods, it became apparent that the information I wish to untangle is best done through stories. As Leavy (2016) explains that, social research and construction of knowledge are connected, and it is through language and stories as modes of communication that we build understanding. Leavy continues to explain that autoethnography is well suited for this type of inquiry due to a multitude of factors; for instance, the emotions and intricacies of stories can often be the only way to effectively communicate and explore sensitive or emotionally involved topics. Mitchell et al. (2013) discuss how important it is to investigate what happens in classrooms from the perspective of the inner lives of teachers. They explain that so often, the public is presented with the glamourized version of teacher stories from those who have no authentic insight into the inner workings of teachers. Life writing as a self-study from the perspective of a teacher has the ability to encapsulate an actuality that exists outside the public's idealized view of teacher life.

The roots of life writing come from the genre of autobiography, first defined by John Dryden in 1683 (Kadar, 2014, p. 195). Life writing now remains more inclusive of various forms of biography and autobiography and is not merely pinpointed as one specific genre (Kadar, 2014). Hasebe-Ludt et al. (2009) explains that life writing can take forms such as memoirs, life stories, personal essays, diaries, journals, letters, poetry, and blogging. A shift from 'bios' to 'autos' took place in the mid-20th century as autobiography moved from life to self. As this transition took place, it is believed that it gave room for more philosophical, psychological, and literary analysis of these stories (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009).

Another aspect of life writing that is well documented is the fact that autobiographical content published in the past was largely male-dominated. As women's autobiographical writing

emerged, the subject matter often revolved around everyday mundane tasks and morphed into a more confessional style of writing in which many females were expressing a type of prison within themselves (Heilbrun, 2008). As we move forward as a society, we see a much stronger female voice within life writing. We now understand that gender, race, and class are essential social aspects of lived experience that need to be communicated, and this can be done through life writing. My voice as a female art teacher joins this conversation.

Chambers (2004) explains that as university professors, preservice and veteran teachers are encouraged to use their own lives as a source of inquiry, autobiography is still neither always about the 'I,' nor should it ethically be only about the 'I' when using life writing as inquiry. When life experience is being used as a form of inquiry, it is imperative to consider what researchers, scholars, practitioners, artists, and thinkers have written about the topic and examine these outside perspectives so that the researcher moves outside of the 'I'. Therefore, it is vital for my research to come from my personal experience while considering how readers and other professionals will benefit from what I write. Chambers asserts that we should research what matters and write from the heart, stating that this journey can often be arduous, and the stories that need to be told are usually the stories that are the hardest to tell. As I write my stories, I do so with the following statement on my mind: "The path with heart is good, and the journey along it will be joyful…If you find yourself on a path, then you must stay on it only if it has heart, and it is only your heart that can tell if it is so" (Chambers, 2004, pp. 5-6). Through my stories, I follow my heart and explore demanding topics about teachers with an authentic voice. Stories allow researchers to engage in continuous and deep reflexivity writing about their experiences (Kaufman, 2013). Through this understanding, I have concluded that this type of exploration would be suitable for the sensitive topics related to teachers that I wish to explore in my research.

An example of such work being a catalyst for this type of research is *Boundary bay: A novel as educational research* (1999) by Rishma Dunlop, which was an integral piece of writing as I planned my study. In her 'novel as a dissertation,' Dunlop expresses the importance of narrative writing to the discipline of education when she states,

> [m]y decision to use a novel to communicate findings from the engagement and narrative and arts-based inquiry with beginning teachers is based on the belief that this form will enlarge understandings in the field of education and other disciplines whose boundaries are crossed in the writings. (p. 7)

Dunlop situates her research novel as a *Bildungsroman*, a literary genre of German origin that focuses on personal growth through a story (Golban, 2018). This genre is particularly suited for educational content as through our stories as teachers, through joy and peril, growth is inevitable. The profession lends itself to this journey, but my interest is to build on this tradition by exploring geographies of self; in this case, art teachers, as a lens to interpret and assess teaching in contemporary Canadian classrooms.

Life writing can be a way for an individual to process emotion. Visual art creation is another method that I have used to process emotion. Next, I will discuss how processing emotion through art creation aligns with my goals for this research.

Processing Emotion through Art Creation

In light of teacher stress and burnout, art educators and teachers in general benefit from related practice. Response art is a tool that many art therapists use to inform their practice. Art educators can also use this technique to open up mindful, educational dialogues with themselves and their colleagues. Response art is not intended as therapy but instead as a tool to communicate and further understand educational experiences. Fish (2012) utilizes response art to formulate

insight into her thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about situations and interactions with clients. From another perspective, Miller (2007) uses response art to understand their clients better and create or deepen the client-therapist bond. Research in art therapy pairs well with the topics of artist-teacher identity because art teachers, who often leave behind their studio work when they begin to teach, could benefit greatly from such processes. In this thesis, I look to bridge the gap between the tools used in art therapy with art education, as I create a visual component to respond to my stories. I borrow the process of response art to further my understanding of my experiences as an art educator by creating art in response to visiting environments that I believe contribute to my storying as a teacher. As Fish (2012) and Miller (2007) engage in art-making to stimulate emotions and knowledge of their experiences with clients, I also initiate a greater understanding of my educational background through this practice.

Another scholar who discusses how artistic expression can help one to process emotion is Leggo (2005). They reflect upon the importance specifically of teachers' expression and why creating is imperative to educators:

> I am convinced that by writing about our experiences, ruminating on those experiences, and interpreting those experiences, we can become more effective teachers and teachers motivated by more joy and hope. One of my great concerns about teaching is that the demands are so relentless that even the most dedicated teachers often experience burnout, dissatisfaction, ennui, hopelessness and despair. (p. 441)

My experience struggling with my artist-teacher identity reflects this concern. I was a much happier and more effective teacher when I had the time and energy to engage in my creative practice; however, teaching rarely allowed me that opportunity due to the demands. While Leggo

(2005) uses poetry, or 'living poetically,' for emotional processing and release, I have found that same solace in visual art and story writing. Furthermore, Weber (2008) explains that:

> Images can be used to communicate more holistically, incorporating multiple layers and evoking stories or questions. Images enable us to simultaneously keep the whole and the part in view, telling a story and helping us synthesize knowledge in a highly efficient way. (p. 45)

Both Leggo (2005) and Weber (2008) explain that images assist us in seeing through another's eyes, allowing us to adopt their point of view for a minute in time. This offers the viewer the opportunity to compare their own ideas with that of the artist (Weber, 2008). For these reasons, the use and presentation of images is central to my research. I use photographs to explore my thoughts and ideas.

Images can be used for multiple purposes in arts-based research. Researchers can use images to elicit secondary data, interpret, and represent data (McNiff, 2008). For this reason, I have used a form of image elicitation (Creswell, 2013; Glaw et al., 2017; Harper, 2002; Mitchell, 2011) in which I have used photography to elicit additional memories, thoughts, emotions, and reactions to add to my stories. Photo elicitation, commonly used in ethnographic studies, helps bring forth memories, emotions, and inspiration for my stories (Glaw et al., 2017; Harper, 2002; Mitchell, 2011). Harper explains how images elicit profound reactions from viewers and provide "[a] versatile and movable [scaffold] for the telling of life history and events" (p. 13). Harper states that photo elicitations have the ability to bring forth memories, emotions, and information that may not arise from memory alone (p. 2). I photograph environments and spaces surrounding schools and neighbourhoods to elicit further investigation into my stories and in order to create my art responses.

Photography in Research

Ultimately, photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes,

but when it is pensive, when it thinks. (Barthes, 1981, p. 38)

There are many ways that photography can be used within research, and I have

considered how photography can help me explore the issue of teacher burnout. Part of what

makes photography so fascinating to discuss is that it can serve so many different purposes. It is

a technical process and a scientific method used to document events, but it is also a mode of

artistic expression and an art genre. I have elected to adopt a form of photo-elicitation (Mitchell,

2011).

Cruickshank and Mason (2003) argue that all photos are intended to mean something

from the onset of snapping the photograph. The photographer has an intended message

embedded in the photo they take. While each photo I have included contributes to the meaning of

this thesis, and also has inherent meaning to me, I have not gone into depth explaining the

meaning of each photo. Instead, I invite the viewer to construct their own significance using the

imagery and titles that I put forth and in relation to the stories I share. I feel that photography,

and all visual art for that matter, transcends language and communicates a visual message

without necessarily requiring words. My photos were a response to my experiences as a teacher

and a means to go deeper into each story in ways that words alone could not achieve.

Sontag's (1977) iconic book, *On Photography*, is a classic and fascinating exploration of

the philosophy of photography. The photographic community heavily criticized Sontag's early

commentary due to its initial view of being an "attack on photography" (Epstein, 2017). Sontag

sees photography as an appropriation of real life. She believes that photos pull us away from

what is real as opposed to actually showing us reality as we are led to believe. Sontag believes

that photography is somewhat of a myth and was concerned with the lack of actual "truth" within photos considering society's perception of photos as absolute truths. In the book, they are pessimistic about photography being beneficial as an instrument of social change or even as fine art (Epstein, 2017). Nevertheless, within the book, I have found excerpts of validity that affirm why photography is indeed both a tool of accuracy and a beneficial fine art. Sontag (1977) states that "photographs may be more memorable than moving images because they are in each slice of time, but not a flow" (p. 13) and "each still photograph is a privileged moment turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at it again" (p. 13). This quote necessitates that photos allow us to keep a great deal of the truth of a moment at our fingertips. The photo holds the "truths" of a moment in ways that could otherwise not be recalled. Can we say there is absolute truth in the flat visual record that we look back on and use to reminisce? Sontag argues no, but I think they mistake the concept of "truth" for absolute truth. From my knowledge, there is no way to reserve the absolute truth of the past and look back on it with the entirety the experience once was. Photography gives us the privilege of holding *some* of the truth of our pasts in the same way that stories can. With the photographs I have taken to accompany my stories, I invite my viewer into a more personal experience. The photographs I have included provides my reader with an additional sensory experience to further deliberate on my truth.

Barthes (1981), on the other hand, sees photography as an explicit form of reality that cannot be disputed. I argue that a photograph is neither complete truth nor an appropriation of real life. Rather, photography is a slice of information in and of itself that requires individual consideration from photo to photo. Barthes' (1981) writing has resonated with me due to their description of photography being a form of self-expression—a consideration that Sontag (1977) seems to neglect. Barthes (1981) explains that,

in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes. 'The

necessary condition for an image is sight,' Janouch told Kafka; and Kafka smiled and

replied: 'We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds. My stories are a

way of shutting my eyes' (p. 53).

I have found solace in generating photographs in relation to my own stories in this research. The

photography process, in this case, is response art (Fish, 2011; Miller, 2007) and has given me the

opportunity to process my truth.

Mitchell's (2011) work on visual methodologies is a common ground between the ideas

of photography as a scientific method and a mode of artistic expression. Mitchell describes

various ways to use visual methodology, explicitly focusing on photography and the different

photographic research methods that we have available to us. They state:

Research designs that use the visual raise many new questions and suggest a new blurring

of boundaries: is it research, or is it art? Is it truth? Does the camera lie? Is it just a quick

fix on doing research? How do you overcome or highlight the subjective stance? The

emergence of visual and arts-based research as a viable approach is putting pressure on

the traditional structures and expectations of the academy (p. 11).

These questions bring forth the ways that Sontag (1977) and Barthes (1981) discussed the

validity and benefits of photography. Mitchell (2011) also discusses the reflexivity that visual

work allows. In my opinion, this is a benefit of visual art in research that is too often ignored. I

end this portion of the literature review with a quote from Mitchell (2011) that resonated greatly

with me. Mitchell reflects on the images in their research as they state: "They have compelled

me to dig deeper into what the images might mean or their significance to the people who have

produced them. Not all the images that haunt me are images of pain" (p. 215). This statement

expresses the reality that images have the ability to stay with us and cause us to reflect further.

The inclusion of images in my thesis creates another layer of meaning and opportunity for

viewers to contemplate.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

My methodology was a blend of multiple approaches and methods. I implement autoethnography (Creswell, 2013; Le Roux, 2017; Mendez, 2013) with image and textual components as a conceptual framework.

Autoethnography

I undertake an autoethnographic approach to investigate my experience of teacher burnout and render this inquiry as stories (Creswell, 2013). This type of research looks at a narrative from the perspective of the conscious self, coherent self, and vulnerable self (Creswell, 2013).

My approach aims to use "research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). In this case, my personal experience as a teacher and the school environment as a cultural experience work together to construct an understanding of my struggles in teaching.

Autoethnography brings forward inner exploration in an effort to tease out some of the critical issues that may relate to engagement within a cultural environment (Mendez, 2013). Teacher burnout is a phenomenon in the teaching world that is yet to be addressed seriously by broader society, in my view. Navigating the challenges that I faced trying to conform and achieve unrealistic expectations as a teacher—in a school board that has not provided its teachers with the tools to achieve what is asked of them—has me believing that burnout is far more significant in my career as a teacher than I may have realized when I was teaching full-time. Large class sizes, students with profound emotional struggles, lack of resources, unrealistic workload demands, and unsupportive administration are among the topics, issues, and experiences that I will explore in my stories, which will be rendered as an evocative

autoethnography (Le Roux, 2017). The process of writing and reflecting on my past teaching has

allowed me reflexivity (Kaufman, 2013). The process has allowed me to step back, collect

important data, and analyze this information to understand where some of the struggles may have

stemmed from. The process of arts-based autoethnography has gifted me the insight needed to

see my teacher-life objectively and subjectively.

Evocative Autoethnography

Le Roux (2017) puts forth a continuum that documents the main types of

autoethnography, ranging from evocative autoethnography to analytic autoethnography, as seen

in figure 1 below. My research will be situated on the side of the continuum as a

'creative/artistic' autoethnography. According to Le Roux (2017), emotional resonance is the

purpose of evocative autoethnography. Vulnerability, strong descriptive language, and less

concern about objectivity are the main goals of this side of the autoethnographic continuum.

Figure 1

A continuum of autoethnographic research (Le Roux, 2017, p. 198).
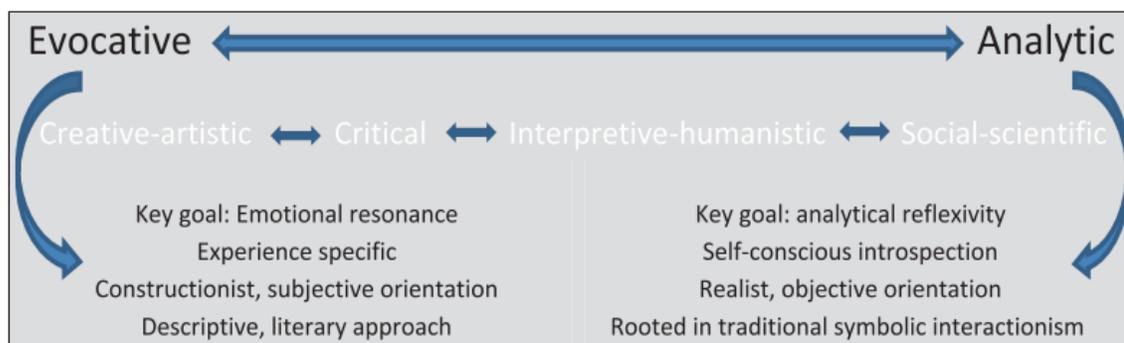
As emotional resonance is a valued aspect of the experience that I strive to present, I

intend to use in-depth description and vulnerability within my stories, written through the lens of

evocative autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). As I explore the genre of autoethnography,

it becomes apparent that assessing this means of research cannot be done through the

conventional ways that qualitative research offers, because my process is not strictly methodical

or systematic (Le Roux, 2017). Le Roux applies the following criteria to evaluate the success of

an evocative autoethnography:

- Is the narrative written interestingly and accurately? (p. 200)

- Is the fundamental issue addressed in the narrative? (p. 200)

- Do readers have the potential to learn anything from the narrative? (p. 200)

- Does the narrative contribute to scholarly enquiry and the academic discipline? (p. 200)

This framework aligns with Creswell (2013) in terms of validity and verification. Therefore, I

used these criteria to assess my progress as I moved forward to create my evocative

autoethnography. The creative aspects of evocative autoethnography lend to arts research by

allowing researchers to be innovative in their mode of delivery.

Research Design

My research design is planned as an integrated conversation of images and short stories. I

feel the power of a punctuated telling of a moment from a teacher's life; in this case, my life

offers a pedagogic position from which we may further deliberate on burnout. I have always

found short stories to be profoundly impactful. Many short stories affected me deeply because of

the questions they left me with. Questioning is an integral part of narrative research in social

sciences because it leads to further exploration (Leggo, 2004, p. 110).

To give an overview of my research process, the flow chart in figure 2 below shows the

steps taken as I conducted this research. There was an initial phase as I gathered personal notes

and photographs to stimulate ideas for the stories (Creswell, 2013). From this, I created a list of

ideas for the stories and then began writing. After I finished the rough draft of the stories, I

visited the sites to photograph. From this experience, I was able to inform my stories further,

adding details and events stimulated during the photography. This step was photo-elicitation

(Creswell, 2013; Mitchell, 2011) and response art (Fish, 2011; Miller, 2007). I then completed

the stories and analyzed the data within the stories using inductive thematic coding (Creswell,

2013; Yi, 2018). The arrows in the diagram show that the photos lead back to the stories

demonstrating that they informed the writing. Finally, both the stories and photos were rendered

for presentation.

Figure 2

Research Process Flow Chart
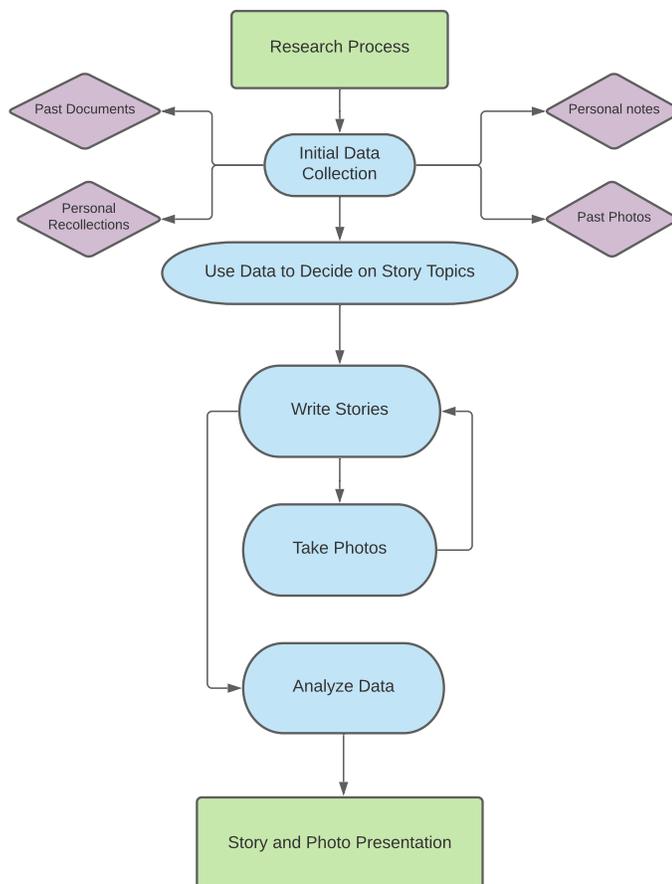
Next, I will describe how I carried out my research in terms of data collection, data analysis, and data presentation.

Data Collection

I employ arts-based autoethnography to conduct my research and followed the processes to gather data that aligns with this research style (Creswell, 2013). I applied the following forms of data in the initial stages of my research:

- Personal narratives through recollections of personal experiences.

- Past photographs taken by myself and others in the school environment.

- Past documents (ensuring privacy for the correspondents to ensure that ethics approval is not required). These documents included cards, letters, newsletters, and professional development handouts.

Since the majority of this initial data phase is private, may contain personal information pertaining to others, or has information that discloses specific locations, this data has not been included in the appendix.

The purpose of this data was to bring forth memories and understandings of my life as a teacher as it happened across thirteen years of teaching. This initial gathering of data was intended to stimulate my memories and bring forth possible ideas, details, and inspiration for the stories.

Great care was taken to ensure privacy within the stories. I discuss the techniques that I have used to maintain privacy for individuals I have encountered in my teaching career.

Composite Characters. Fiction-based research has the ability to communicate truths about real-life experiences without revealing the specifics (Ellis, 2007). Researchers of this genre have an obligation to ensure that people in the story are "sensitively, compassionately, and responsibly

portray[ed]" (Leavy, 2016, p. 66). It is for this reason that I have decided to use composite

characters in all accounts besides myself. Each character in the stories was adapted and compiled

based on a series of different people that I encountered in my teaching career. Protecting the

individuals I encountered throughout my teaching is an ethical responsibility that I take very

seriously.

Considering this research is an autoethnography, and therefore my personal stories, I note

why I have still included other characters, besides myself, in the stories. My autoethnographic

research is based on personal encounters, which are framed within my encounter with other

people. Autoethnography analyzes personal experience to further understand cultural experience

(Ellis et al., 2011). Culture is understood to be "the customs, norms, beliefs, and experiences of a

group of people" (Merriam-Webster, 2021). Therefore, to gain the full understanding of my

experience within teacher culture, I must write about my experiences in relation to others and

will use composite characters to keep their identity anonymous.

Willis (2019) discusses the importance of creating a methodology for composite

narratives to relay opaque data. When using a clear and communicated method for the composite

aspects of a research story, the process of narrative inquiry is more transparent. Therefore, I have

put forth the guidelines that I have used to keep my narrative confidential for the sake of candour

and integrity. I used the following regulations to create the story composition:

- Characters in the story (besides myself) are always a combination of two or more
  individuals.
- The appearance of characters has been altered from what exists in my memory. While I
  did not go into great detail with appearances in the stories, when I described a character

in this way, I took components of other teachers and administrators and combined them. The appearance of the characters are therefore composite.

- The dialogue is not direct quotations from any of the composite characters, but instead, the dialogue is constructed to relay the meaning of the event.

To address the common concern of fictional aspects of research, I have deliberated how fictional elements play into research. Ellis and Davis (2008) put forth the debate of fiction in autoethnographic inquiry, indicating three main reasons for incorporating such elements into autoethnography:

- Support anonymity for those involved (p. 104).

- To add literary style to the writing (p. 104).

- To analyze the content at a deeper level (p. 104).

They also state that:

> The distinction between novelist and ethnographer is blurred more than you might anticipate. I would argue that the stories we write as ethnographers do not have to be factual to be true; actually, they're not factual and the "accurate representational" sense of the word. Ethnographers select and omit, often creating composites and typical representations that may describe behavioural means rather than specific actions. (Ellis & Davis, 2008, p. 107)

This quote is profound for me because it shows the relevance and importance of fictional research as well as ethnographic research. There appears to be a misconception that research must be *truthful* to be beneficial, when in fact, that may be far from accurate. Ellis and Davis (2008) show how artist and researcher are synonymous in many accounts and that 'truth' is often

individually understood (my truth is different than your truth on the same event); however, the "behavioural means" that is represented in this work has great significance.

I am also careful to avoid stereotypes and clichés within my characters and the story in general. Although this can be a challenge at times (as clichés are so apparent within our everyday interactions that they may become unnoticed). As Leavy (2016) asserts, in fiction research, stereotypes are particularly problematic. Researchers have a duty to portray people and "types" of people in a perceptive manner. To add to this, clichés and stereotypes can flatten characters and distance readers from believability which is a literary concern (Leavy, 2016).

In order to avoid stereotypes, I wrote a list of all of my characters. I listed the traits of each character and analyzed if there were any potential stereotypes apparent. Due to my own bias, my analysis may not be exhaustive, but this did help to reassure me that there were no glaring stereotypes present. Another step that I took to avoid clichés in the stories was to go through each sentence carefully and observe if there were any clichéd phrases. I wanted to avoid phrases that are used too often. This was helpful as I found a number of phrases that needed to be re-written. Some clichés do still remain in these stories intentionally when they moved the story forward in the way I sought.

Locations. The aspect of locations was one of the more difficult points to alter. In order to maintain a stronger sense of privacy, I did not want to disclose the locations that I was working at as the events played out in the stories. I wanted to give readers a strong sense of where the heart of the story took place without revealing the actual school locations and only identify the geographic region in Canada because the region is key to localized cultural context. This required me to maintain the aspects necessary to the storyline and theme while adapting the visual component of the settings of the schools to maintain disclosure. The description of the

schools was always fictional. Grade levels were occasionally altered when I was able to do so without compromising the quality of the theme. Using literary techniques, I avoid mentioning the names of the schools entirely.

The photographs were original compositions based on allusions that related to my stories. As I moved around the school spaces, I began to notice details that fit with the narrative, symbolism, and events within my stories. I photographed these details based on instinct, and these works have elements of symbolism within their compositions. Within the photographs, to maintain anonymity, I relied on details and short depth of field in order for the locations to remain anonymous and instead draw out aspects of visual culture to bring greater emphasis alongside the stories. The shallow depth of field blurs items that are in the background of the photograph's composition to generate a stronger impact and to activate visual references to the lives of teachers and school culture. The details prevalent in the photos are details that could be noticed at any school within my district. The photographs were edited in Photoshop (Adobe Photoshop CS, 2004) for colour correction and further blurring to keep locations discreet.

Events. The events are factual in the stories. However, some subsidiary details have been elaborated on to give the stories a stronger sense of believability. For instance, conversations are told not word for word but instead reiterated as a general understanding of what had taken place during that time to relay information essential to the story. Creative details about actual events are occasionally constructed for the purpose of filling in the gaps. For example, the number of people at a meeting may be estimated, or the type of food that was out at a social gathering would be crafted as a creative detail since I do not recall the actual meal, and this detail is not essential to the meaning of the story.

Writing Stories as Data Collection

As I moved through the initial data collection steps and then began writing my stories, it became apparent that the story writing itself was the most imperative form of data collection and data rendering. As Leavy (2016) explains, there are multiple ways to collect data when engaging in fiction-based research such as traditional modes including interviews, field research, and document analysis, can be used as well as the stories themselves. De Freitas (2003) states:

> [My] stories are not based on traditional data in the qualitative sense. As a fiction writer, I am always already writing; there is no collecting data before my act of interpretation. There is no temporal lag between event and story. My life experiences as a teacher and a researcher inform my writing, but they are not the "indubitable facts" to which my narrative must correspond... My imagination is immediately engaged in the construction of our shared reality... Honour the ways in which my imagination might furnish a form of rigorous research. (p. 1)

My process was slightly different than de Freitas (2003) explains, as I did implement an initial research gathering stage. However, I relate to their process because it is my life experiences that have informed the main source of data and my imagination that has fill in the gaps.

I initially wrote a list of possible experiences that I could write stories about. I then used this list to begin the telling. At times, I used the voice-to-type feature on my computer as I found that verbalizing the situations helped initiate the storying process. By telling events, ideas, or thoughts, I get these concepts out quickly without forgetting my inspiration in the process of typing.

I also used an iPhone app called Speechy (version 3.20.0, 2018) if I did not have quick access to my computer. With Speechy, I could speak into my phone and record the ideas as text

quickly and efficiently. I then transfer these passages of text to a Google Doc, where the writing would begin. I edit, add on, change words and terms, and continue the writing process on my computer.

Some of the stories began as small excerpts that did not initially qualify as a story on their own. Quite remarkably, most of the pieces of writing came together like puzzle pieces. I believe these six final stories document the main stages of my teaching career from the first year to the final moment where I made the decision to leave the profession (see chapter 4: Spilt Milk).

The writing and speaking of the stories happened quite intuitively at first. I wrote and spoke what came to mind whenever the inspiration sparked. In many instances, it was very much "stream-of-consciousness" writing (Bowling, 1950; Dobie, 1971). My goal was to record my thoughts before my mind had a chance to move my thoughts along to something else. The speaking of stories into the application or voice-to-type features felt more utilitarian because it was done as a necessity to put down ideas rather than feeling like a creative process. When I wrote in the traditional sense (typed on the computer), the process seemed much more as a creative endeavour, and the artistic component appeared more evident.

I have told the stories from a first-person perspective and given the main character less description than the other characters in the story. You may notice that the main character is not given a name but written from the autoethnographic "I." This technique was approached with the intention of inviting readers to visualize themselves as the main character. With fewer details about whom this narrator is, I attempt to encourage the reader to visualize themselves in this role. There are intentional personality traits of this main character/narrator made apparent, and if this is so, it is because this particular personality trait was essential to the story. Since the story is so often focused on the theme of identity, it was necessary to include essential traits that made the

exploration of identity accessible (i.e., the common personality trait of the main character feeling insecure with themselves). Although this trait is specific to certain individuals, it is a state of mind that is very familiar to most people.

In writing stories, it can be critical to show and not tell. As I worked through these stories, I found myself "telling" in many instances. I was reassured to read Leavy (2016) posits that research fiction should be separated into two categories of storytelling—scenes and narration. Leavy explains that scenes are stories told as action. In this writing form, I "show" and induce readers to feel as though they are in the moment. This attempt is meant to make the reader feel as though they are present in the scene itself. This writing is done with active verbs and embodies a strong sense of realism (Leavy, 2016). In narrative-style writing, my goal is more concerned with telling and less with showing. I invite the reader to experience the information that they need and also summarize parts of the story. In fiction research, this type of storytelling may be necessary even though I have found that it may not be encouraged in the everyday world of literature and writing.

It should also be noted that gaps in the narration occur. This technique is employed intentionally to leave space for readers to make assumptions, question, and perhaps develop their own personal narrative within the story (Abbott, 2008; Leavy, 2016). There are expectations that readers will create as they take in a story. These gaps allow for the reader to develop a more intimate relationship with the characters as they imagine and insert their own experiences into these spaces (de Frietas, 2003). Writers are not required to grant readers their expectations even though readers will often judge a "good ending" by the success in accomplishing their expectations (Abbott, 2008). Though the endings of the stories I have written are carefully considered, they often conclude abruptly, intentionally asking the reader to fill in many of the

gaps and also begin to question the themes and events within the story. Leavy (2016) explains

that these gaps are

> particularly salient in fiction-based research, in which our goals may be to disrupt
>
> readers' commonly held assumptions. Of course, as we write fiction, we need to be
>
> mindful of how the text will be read and the extent to which we are producing a good
>
> story (judging not necessarily by whether it fulfills expectations instead according to
>
> literary traditions). This can be a balancing act between understanding the expectations
>
> readers are likely to develop and deciding when it is appropriate to fulfill them and what
>
> it is appropriate to violate them. (p. 63)

This thesis employs both the techniques of fiction as research as well as traditional literary

methods to craft stories. This is done to draw out the data related to the research questions

presented, as well as be engaging and relatable for the reader.

Photography

Taking the photos while the stories were being written had a three-fold purpose. Initially,

the photos were created as a memory stimulating activity (Mitchell, 2011) and also a form of

response art (Miller, 2007). I visited the location and photographed objects around the school to

help elicit a memory response and also to respond emotionally to the stories I was writing. This

activity then informed my writing (see figure 2 for the research flow chart). The act of taking

photos was intended to activate memories and details no longer fresh in my mind. The photos

were also intended as visual stimulation for my reader/viewer. The photos situate themselves

amongst my stories as visual bookends or punctuation of sorts. They are meant to set the

mood/tone or elicit an emotion prior to, during, or at the end of the story for my readers. I do so

to be in line with Sontag's (1977) point of view:

In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar, and even more importantly, an ethics of seeing. (p. 3)

As such, I use the photographs to give my readers and viewers more information to draw from as they form their point-of-view of my stories. The photographs are not intended to be considered as separate pieces of work but rather as an interconnected and holistic component of the stories. I composed photos of and around the schools without the location being recognizable. These photos became expressions of my teaching stories, ways to stimulate memories, and were intended to be visual components to "set the scene" of my stories.

I made plans to visit the three key locations from my stories in one day. What I had not expected was the difference in how I felt at each place. There was a definite unique emotional response in each location. At the first school I taught at, I had anticipated a strong feeling of anxiety or sadness because it was where I struggled the most. However, as I photographed, I noticed that I felt fairly disconnected from that school. While there was a minor sense of being uncomfortable, there was enough distance from the memories that my emotional response was milder. Many areas of this schoolyard and neighbourhood had changed. I wondered if memories would have been more prevalent if the school was visually more like it was when I worked there. I found myself trying to recall the past. For instance, if new trees had been planted—it looked different. The structure of the building was the same, and the parking lot (where a great deal of my anxiety reached its heights) was an emotionally painful space to revisit. I was relieved when it was time to leave the school.

The second location was the most nostalgic for me. I believe this was because I had many devoted friends and wonderful memories at that school. It was the easiest to photograph. All

around the property, I identified potential compositions and items that provoked memories. I felt

most at home in this location and spent the most time photographing there. I had a strong

inclination to go inside the school. I sat on the bleachers in the field and read much of the graffiti

on the walls of the building. I wished to spend the whole afternoon in this location if I had not

been on a timeline.

The third location was the most difficult to visit and also the hardest to photograph. This

was the place where I eventually made the decision to leave my teaching career behind. I had not

anticipated it to be so unsettling to be in this space. I made some great friends and have very

positive memories from that job but also many negative ones. I attribute my strong emotional

response to the fact that there was the least distance between now and the time when I had

worked there, and as such, the memories were much fresher. I felt exposed being at that

location—as if there was nowhere to hide and feel safe. Interestingly enough, that mirrors how I

felt when I taught at this school as well. I spent the least amount of time photographing at this

location. It was the most difficult to photograph. Inspiration did not seem to spark.

Data Analysis

I analyzed my data using thematic coding, which I will detail later in this chapter.

Quirkos (Version 2.4.2, 2021) is the computer software that allowed me to upload data and code

the data in a visual graph. Once I had uploaded my stories into Quirkos, I highlighted text

excerpts from the stories and applied them to categories (called Quirks) that I created as I read.

These categories are entered into the program and shown as bubbles in the graph. The bubbles

grow larger as more sections of text are added to them. I could add notes and specify the colours

of the bubbles to differentiate information within each quirk/category (see Appendix A).

When all the stories were coded, I could then look at the visual graph to determine the most prevalent areas of data. The visual bubbles that were the largest showed me which categories had been addressed most throughout my stories. I was then able to group the categories into four main themes (see Appendix A). The visual graph is interactive and allows each bubble to be clicked on to see the quotes assigned to the selected area, thereby giving further insight into the themes that were coded.

Quirkos supported my discretionary decision-making and the informed rendering of my data. Quirkos does not create categories or themes for me; however, it did give me a simple platform to organize the categories that I had chosen, move them around if needed and show the prevalence of data in each category. This option was more efficient than coding the data using pen and paper. The program gave me the freedom and flexibility to quickly adapt and change the coding of data if needed but allowed me to be in control entirely of decisions around the thematic coding.

I would like to further explain how I used thematic coding to analyze the data sources (Creswell, 2013). I developed the categories using inductive coding (Yi, 2018) and selected recurring subjects that occurred within my stories. In this instance, I was very familiar with the data because I had written and engaged with the stories deeply over many months. Still, I began from the ground up to develop the initial categories. I read through each story and looked at the text line by line (Gibbs, 2007). I assessed the meaning of each sentence and created and assigned a category that felt relevant. As I proceeded, more and more areas of text fit into already developed categories, with the occasional text excerpt requiring a new category to be created. When I had finished the initial coding for the stories, I went through a second time to ensure that

each excerpt of text was properly assigned to all of the categories that had been created throughout the process.

In assessing the text, I coded based on what felt profound to me about the statement or situation. Much of this was based on emotion or recurring situations. I used Affective Coding, which "investigate[s] participant emotions, values, conflicts, and other subjective qualities of human experience" (Saldana, 2016, p. 291). Saldana also explains that "affective qualities are core motives for human action, reaction, and interaction" (p. 124). The framework gave me a strong sense of what to look for in the text as I read and coded.

Next, I looked at each category and the relationships among them. At this point, I was able to group the categories into themes related to my research questions. I merged the categories in Quirkos and renamed the bubbles as the research themes that emerged when combining the categories based on similarities. Appendix B shows the list of categories under each theme.

Coding the data into themes was an essential step of the process because looking at an experience analytically provides validity. Ellis et al. (2011) explains:

> When researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from or are made possible by being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity. However, in addition to telling about experiences, autoethnographers are often required by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences. (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 4)

This quote necessitates the requirements for research to be regarded as valid within the academic social sciences community. While coding is not done in every research study, it does provide validity, structure, and clarity to research (Yi, 2018).

Data Presentation

I decided to create a collection of short stories and images for this arts-based thesis. Guyas and Keys (2009) state that an art-based educational research dissertation "aims at constant renewal. No specific endpoints from our research were formulated in advance; rather, findings, recommendations, affirmations, and a gradual solidifying of pedagogical constructs confirming a constantly emergent and evolving process were discovered in process" (p. 25). I relate and respect this take on the process of arts-based research, as it is through exploration that questions will begin to be answered and further questions posed. The most relevant data presentation format for this thesis emerged as I was researching.

I have started each short story with an image that I have created. It is a metaphor to introduce the story—a visual epigraph aims to give the viewer/reader an image to ponder as they make their way through the story. I plan to eventually present the information in a public manner since this aligns with my goal of opening up conversations about teacher burnout through arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2011).

Presentation of the Stories

I carefully considered how to present the stories within this thesis. I decided to compile the stories as their own chapter in the centre, or "at the heart", of this thesis. This thesis cannot exist without the stories, and therefore I wanted them to be the highlight of this thesis and not simply a piece of background data within the appendix. It is essential to note that the stories are a key component of this paper. After reading *Boundary Bay: A Novel as Educational Research* (Dunlop, 1999) and *Sketches of a Salvaged Soul* (O'Brien, 2014), which are both based on social fiction, I decided to have the stories be the body of this research as the aforementioned works also have.

You will notice some text in the stories will be in italics. This is a literary technique I have employed to show the main character's thoughts. This technique gives further transparency to the main character's inner dialogue throughout the stories.

Presentation of the Photographs

The photographs have two modes of presentation. They are presented at the beginning and end of each story, while others are in a virtual exhibit. I will further explain the decision-making process around these two modes of presentation. It needs to be noted that the stories and photographs exist to be presented together and have their fullest sense of meaning when taken in as one work of art.

Many of the photos were relevant and important pieces of the whole story. As there are only six stories, there were too many photos available to accompany the stories. Thus, I decided on another method of presentation that permits me to exhibit all the photos that I wanted to put forward—I chose to create an online exhibit using the computer software called KUNSTMATRIX (2021). This software allows artists to create and display three-dimensional exhibits for online viewing. Viewers are able to appreciate the works of art as though they are walking through an art gallery, using the mouse to navigate through the gallery space, approaching each individual artwork, and seeing the titles, media, dates, and other relevant information by clicking on the work. Using this tool, I was able to exhibit all my chosen photos, besides the ones chosen to bookend the stories told.

It is necessary to note that initially I had intended on hosting an actual exhibit in a space for this art show. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has made an in-person art exhibition extremely challenging, if not possible at all. KUNSTMATRIX has made an exhibition possible from the comfort and safety of people's homes.

Limitations

I understand that one of the main benefits of autoethnography is the ability to become involved in a world that we may not otherwise have the opportunity to experience. As such, the emotions that readers and writers feel and any ideas invoked cannot be solely objective. Autoethnography offers insight into the researcher's inner feelings and thoughts, which can be limited by what the researcher feels comfortable sharing. In the past, there have been ethical questions put forth about autoethnography because it is a research method based on personal insight (Mendez, 2013). These concerns mainly surround the idea of validity. As Forber-Pratt (2015) states, "Some believe that an autoethnographic story is valid in its own right and that we need not be concerned with defending its validity" (p. 11). Forber-Pratt (2015) is confident that the researcher's stories are relevant and beneficial; he also uses the following questions to validate his own presented information:

1. Does it make sense to me?

2. Does it make sense to someone who knows me really well?

3. Does it make sense to someone in my family?

4. Does it make sense to an academic both in and outside of social sciences?

5. Does it make sense to a non-academic?

6. Does it make sense to someone who does not know me well? (p. 11)

These are questions that I have continually asked myself as I worked through my research. I have ensured the validity of my stories through the method that Forber-Pratt (2015) uses. Furthermore, I also ensured that the data used to inform my memory is relevant and appropriate.

Chapter 4: Stories

I will now introduce six short stories about my teaching career. These stories range from my first year of teaching to the last year. Stories were chosen on the basis of defining moments in the development of my teacher self. While these stories are not exhaustive, the stories chosen all represent moments in time that I believe were crucial to my growth as a teacher. The stories document moments of joy, tragedy, confusion, change, and connections. I am confident that the events which I have documented inform the questions I have put forth in the introduction of this thesis. I also use the data collected from these stories to create discussion around my proposed thesis questions. With this information to preface my stories, I invite you to enjoy the telling of these tales.

Ready for Print

Figure 3

Morning Sun, Shannon Roy (2021)

As a first-year teacher, there must be a million new lessons to learn. Approaching the writing of my first round of report cards, I was apprehensive yet charged with eager energy. Teaching all subjects at a school that integrates the arts into the curriculum had posed its own challenges. It had begun to appear that instead of art being at the forefront of these student's education, it was taking a backseat to subjects like math and social studies. I wasn't feeling like much of an art teacher those days.

I didn't learn to do report cards when I got my Bachelor of Education. Coming straight into the classroom as a first-year teacher, I had never even seen one of the most important

documents we used to formally assess students. I had never opened the computer software we were expected to use to create them. There was no in-service to show you how it all worked. I had, however, received advice in passing to speak kindly to a colleague seasoned in this endeavour and convince them to guide you through it. Probably more than once. Because it's not a simple process. Bring them coffee. Hot coffee was practically legal tender among teachers. Being soft-spoken and uneasy made reaching out difficult for me.

My innate desire for my principal's approval resulted in me spending a ridiculous amount of time working on the first draft of report card comments that year. I had 27 students in my class and assigned a grade for each of the 42 outcomes and wrote comments for each of the seven subjects. There were guidelines as to how long the comments should be, and upon hearing this in a staff meeting, I was shocked at how lengthy the requirement. I had no tips or tricks up my sleeve at this point in my career, no shortcuts or clever ways around typing each comment out individually. I did have a great deal of drive and just a little enthusiasm, because I was approaching a new task. I've always been somebody who looks at a challenge and wants to tackle it head-on. Challenges motivated me.

During that first report card period, there were many long nights at school sitting at the desktop computer tucked away in the muggy corner of my classroom. A cozy corner beside the whiteboard with a student's chair where I spent too much time. Any moment I had a chance to sneak away when the students were working, I did so to get some additional report card writing work done. This was highly frowned upon. Your students need you, so being on the computer when you should be interacting with them was highly discouraged. There are unwritten rules and also written ones. We all broke them surreptitiously.

I felt I could focus better at school, but there were evenings where I decided to go home after the bell rang instead. I could sit on the couch and write comments while my husband watched TV. We were newlyweds, but that was not evident when I was engrossed in work. Even he was beginning to acquire frustrations. My career was taking a great deal of my time and our quality time together became sparse. My stress wore on him as well, yet youthful motivation kept me afloat during these times. However, I still had many moments of being overwhelmed by report card writing.

How do teachers do this four times a year?

I sat with each student's name on the spreadsheet in front of me and looked at their work. I gave them a mark on each outcome and commented in paragraphs for each subject. It was pages and pages of writing. We were not given any additional time to complete it. You're still teaching your class for six hours a day, and you're still planning for all seven subjects when you were done teaching at the end of each day. The report card software was clunky and glitched often. Sometimes the program would shut down in the middle of entering grades, or when the system was being used by many teachers at once, it wouldn't open.

During report card time, I worked from the moment I woke until I went to bed. By the second week of this routine, my eyes were bloodshot, my shoulders knotted and tense, and the sight of a computer screen or marking spreadsheet caused me legitimate angst. I needed a break. I missed painting and photographing. I hadn't picked up a paintbrush in months. I wanted some time to myself, but I wanted to meet the deadline more, so I kept pushing myself.

My reward was a handsome stack of printed paper with all of my grades and comments ready to submit to my principal. I handed my printed report cards to the school secretary on Friday morning. I was so proud of that stack of paper. It appeared to be a flat bundle of white

pages from the outside, but to me, it was a labour of love. I felt I had accomplished the impossible. And with this task finished, I could rest my mind for a moment. But that moment didn't last. Over the weekend, I fretted. I wondered how I had fared on my completion of them. I had put forth my best effort. I hoped this was enough.

Three days later, I opened my email upon arrival, and a message from the principal was ominous: "Please come see me at the end of the day."

From what I could envision, there were three ways it could go. Perhaps, I had done fine, but I sensed this felt unlikely. Why would I be asked to come if it were all fine? There was the possibility that I did an excellent job on my first ever round of report cards, and I imagined a congratulatory exchange. I also conceived that I had missed the purpose completely, and I was about to be guided through my errors, and maybe I'd get help to revise and prepare the report cards in ways expected at the school. I would do whatever I needed to get them where they needed to be.

But I wasn't prepared for the actual response. Walking into the administration office, the stack of papers was waiting on her table. I could see dozens and dozens of coloured post-it notes stuck between the pages. I wasn't greeted with a hello.

"Have you never done report cards before?" the principal asked.

My stomach sank. I blinked hard, swallowed and shook my head. "This is the first time I have done them."

"Did you not learn how to write report card comments in school?" looking up over her glasses. "This isn't what we're looking for." Her annoyance was evident.

I stepped in to get a closer look at her notes.

"This student here, you gave them a two. Do you have solid evidence that they are not meeting grade level because you haven't noted it?"

I stuttered. "Yes. I mean, I think so."

"If you give a student a 2, you need to be absolutely sure. And you must have ample evidence at hand." Her voice got deeper. "And if they did get a 2, what have you as the teacher done to try and rectify it?" She looked at me again, waiting for an answer. An answer I didn't have.

"What about this student that you gave a 5 to in verbal communication? That leaves this student with no room for growth. What can they do with this information?"

I sat pondering, confused.

"The way these are written does not directly address the outcome and explain how this student has achieved what you assigned them. We need concrete examples." She looked at me, waiting for the response. "Most of these need to be redone." She stated flatly.

I nodded. I said little and tried to understand what she was wanting, but mostly, I felt lost. I was uncomfortable and didn't want to seem incompetent, so I agreed to fix them without fully understanding what was incorrect. I was so humiliated by my failure, and I just wanted to get out of the room. I felt the walls closing in on me. My face fiery and my eyes stinging.

They hadn't taught us in university how to complete report cards. I learned educational theory and trends, reflected on observations and experiences in the classroom, discussed what it meant to be a professional, and read books about having the 'the heart of a teacher'. We were never shown how to do the actual day-to-day, behind-the-scenes work of a teacher. We learned to plan and teach lessons in our practical classroom work, but there was so much more to teaching than that.

With my head hung low, I brought the stack of papers back to my desk and looked through them as I focused on my breath. Over my inner dialogue's attempts to ease the blow to my ego, I hadn't addressed the logistics of this failure. The panic set in as I realized that the deadline for printing was tomorrow. They all needed to be redone by the following day. Carol hadn't extended my deadline and wanted me to redo an entire set of assessments that had taken me weeks to do, all in one night. I wept quietly at my desk, staring down at my day planner. I tried to be quiet, not wanting anyone to see me, to hear me, and be seen as that new teacher who was clueless and now emotional because I couldn't handle the situation. But that was exactly who I was at that moment.

Michelle, my colleague from down the hall, walked in the door with her set of report cards in hand. My emotions were evident. Michelle and I didn't know each other well so I felt slightly embarrassed. That day her curly black hair was tucked back, and she wore a stylish pantsuit. She always dressed so very teacher-like, which was a quality I had struggled to adapt to. She was frowning. Within her stack of report cards, I could see the post-it notes peeking out. She looked at me and down at my papers. Her eyes showed a measure of empathy. "You got your edits too."

I looked at her blankly. "Almost all of mine need to be redone."

"It's your first time. I've done this before. I did them last year. I shouldn't have so many edits either."

I could see she also had a lot to do. We were both in for a long night.

Michelle had tried to make her way into my life as a friend since the beginning of September. She was a music specialist, and I was a visual art specialist, so it would have been a keen match. Likely, we had much in common. She visited my classroom regularly, offered to

help me, texted on the weekends, and had asked me to go for drinks on a couple of occasions. I had been distant because I was trying to find my way as a teacher, and I didn't want to lose focus. In my mind, there was no time for new friends. I also didn't know who I should trust and how much. That afternoon Michelle and I made a vow to sit down in my classroom and each work on our edits together until we finished fixing our report cards. Just having another person present while I worked would make the task less daunting. We decided to stay with each other until the job was done. Granted, she less work to do than me, so it was a gracious commitment. We ordered a pizza to the classroom for dinner, and I called my husband to tell him I would be home late. Very late.

I sat at the cramped computer table in the corner of my classroom. It didn't feel cozy any longer. Michelle sat at my desk. We worked our way through the corrections silently as the hours went by. We did play music. Michelle chose some excellent classical that was supposed to help us focus. There were brief breaks for venting, moments of hopelessness where we had to cheer each other on, and the occasional tear, but we kept going.

"I'm never going to get this done," I told Michelle.

"You'll get it done. We will get them done together. I'll try and help you if I get mine done first." she assured me.

"I can't believe I have been so stupid. I should have handed them in earlier. I should have asked for some samples. I don't know." My voice trembled, and I put my head in my hands.

"It's okay. It will be a lesson for next time. Teaching isn't easy. We are constantly learning. Constantly being critiqued." Michelle pressed her lips together like she was breaking bad news to me.

I pondered the idea of being critiqued. It was frightening to me, a perfectionist who wanted to get everything right the first time.

I need to learn to deal with criticism.

The room was quiet. Schools are eerily hushed after about seven in the evening. The hallways were unfamiliar and ominous when dark. Usually booming with noise and energy, those halls became dim shells of a million stories when students were gone. Stories of students. Stories of teachers. I considered how many other teacher's tears had been brushed away in the corners of these classrooms.

As we worked, the most apparent sound was the frantic clicking of keyboards. We were in our own worlds, focused on completion. I glanced over and felt a twinge in my chest as I caught sight of the paintbrushes beside the sink. I loved watching the students paint, but I missed painting for myself. I had told myself that I would start a new canvas this week, and now I was sure I wouldn't have it in me.

The work I was doing that night was not my finest. Whatever would be submitted to parents as a report card would be subpar because there was no way to complete the task well in the time I had. Working with what you are given is the life of a teacher and something I would need to learn to be okay with.

When the time approached 11:45 p.m., Michelle and I consulted with each other. We knew that if we stayed at school past midnight, we needed to contact the school board security and let them know that we were there. This was policy because the alarm picks up movement in the hallways. Michelle was done with her report cards at this point, and she had graciously stayed back with me until I finished. It was a testament to her dedication as a friend and maybe also her dedication to her job as a teacher.

Exhaustion had set in, and by that point, I was losing the ability to care about the quality of my reports. At 1:45 that morning, I finished. It was the best they would get. Michelle and I packed up our stuff and locked up the classroom. Looking out into the nearly pitch black halls my heart skipped a beat. She looked at me, and I could tell she felt nervous too. She smiled, held out her arm, and I took it. Snuggled together, we shuffled down the dark hallways arm in arm. Friends were made that evening.

In the morning, I came in just before the bell and handed the new stack of report cards to the school secretary. I taught that day...sort of. I often wondered if the students learned much on days when my head was fuzzy from a lack of sleep. The day passed, and although I maintained a consistent level of anxiety about the response to my second set of report cards, something in me had changed. The feeling of defeat had brought my enthusiasm for my job down a notch. There was nothing more I could do; I let it be what it would be. The reports were scheduled to go out the next day, so even if Carol hated them, nothing could be done.

That afternoon after the bell rang and the last student had made his way out the door, I headed down to the office to check my mailbox. The stack of paper had been placed in the wooden cubby that was my mailbox. I slid the papers out to see a single post-it note stuck to the top. It read, "They are fine. Ready for print."

Figure 4
Sigh of Relief, Shannon Roy (2021)

The Pedestal Crumbles

Figure 5

Ghostly Memory, Shannon Roy, (2021)

The cellophane crinkled in her hands as she approached, prompting me to peer up from the mark book on my desk. Student's parents didn't visit this classroom very often after school, so I was curious. Andrea wore a modest smile as she placed the gift-wrapped basket on the desk in front of me. There was an envelope with my name written in cursive taped to the outside of the gift.

"We wanted to thank you for everything you've done for Chloe this year. She's made real progress, and it's been so wonderful to watch her grow." She paused. "She has had trouble

connecting with teachers in the past. I know she's not an easy student to get along with. So, thank you ….and Merry Christmas!"

Slightly puzzled, I paused. The moments of Chloe and I arguing suddenly at the forefront of my mind, those times peering out from around the bend for just long enough to incite a twinge of guilt in me. I hadn't realized that I had an impact on Chloe-let alone a positive one. Chloe and I had our share of struggles together in the classroom. We butted heads, yet we had shared significant positive interactions too. She was an argumentative grade six girl, and I struggled to avoid conflict with her. Andrea would call her a Rubiks cube of a kid, which was the perfect description of her since she always had a Rubik's cube in hand. She could solve the puzzle in under three minutes at every attempt. It was her claim to fame in the classroom. And she was complex. Mathematical. Logical. A puzzle of sorts and a tough one to work out, sometimes. As we were in an arts integration school, our regular classwork wove in the arts to teach concepts from other subjects. Being so mathematical, Chloe disliked this approach, and therefore many of our struggles stemmed from her disdain for the arts-based work.

I unwrapped the gift, curious to know what was inside. Reaching my hand into the basket, the paper rustled, adding to my anticipation. I pulled out a bottle of wine and smirked. I had never received wine from a family before, but it was my favourite indulgent beverage. I then spotted a box of chocolates. Chloe and I had discussed M&M's being both of our favourite sweet treats. I would reward her with a small package of M&M's to encourage her to do her creative writing. I chuckled to myself as I placed the giant box of M&M's back in the basket. I could see a package of popcorn near the bottom and beside it a movie. Taking the DVD out of the basket, my eyes focused on the title, *The Labyrinth*. A flash of my grade school years came rushing back.

I pulled open the envelope and slid the card out of its sleeve. The cover had a family of dogs all snuggled together and a cheerful font that read "Thank you, *Fur* Everything." I wondered if Chloe had picked it out. I talked about my love of dogs in class regularly. Inside the card read:

Dear Mrs. Roy,

Thank you for all of your thoughtfulness and support over the past year. Chloe's growth is evident, and we firmly believe that it is your teaching and care that have gotten her here. Please enjoy a movie night on us. This is one of our favourites! We hope you like it too."

It was the most thoughtful gift I'd ever received as a teacher. My heart was exploding with equal amounts of pride and love. At that moment, I felt that I was exactly where I should be.

This is what teaching is all about.

I really do love this job.

****

A year later, I found myself with Chloe's brother in my classroom. Lucas's head hung low as he entered inside from recess. I made a note to myself to check in with him. He was nothing like Chloe, despite them being siblings. Lucas had been in regular confrontations with another student in the class. He and Sam had argued endlessly that year. Andrea had contacted me on a couple of occasions to express her concern. Several times I had attempted to smooth things over with the boys. I had even talked to Sam's mother. The situation had appeared to be remedied from what I could see, but I never knew what was taking place outside of class time.

I scrambled to put away my IPP's as the students made their way in. The IPP special needs assessments were due at the end of the week. These were reports for students who had

learning, emotional, or mental health struggles. The reports indicated the student's diagnosis, their accommodations, and the goals we set for them over the year. Each student on that list with a code beside their name. I still found myself paralyzed when I saw those five bold 42's on the page. This was the fear instilled in me in teacher training: code 42 was a behaviourally complex student that requires a great deal of support. We had been told that they would rarely be in a typical elementary classroom. Yet here I was with five students with a code 42 in a single class. I also had other codes in my class to handle as well – learning disability codes and mental health codes. All in all, there were13 students in the class with special needs.

As I put my paperwork away, I heard a scuffle. Looking up, two students were pushing each other and shouting. I rushed over and stepped in - trying to act fast to separate the confrontation.

"Don't touch me!" Lucas shouted to Sam.

Sam pushed Lucas.

My first instinct was to yell, "Stop! That's enough!" Lucas pushed Sam back, and I had to step between them. "Enough!" I shouted louder this time which seemed enough to break them out of their aggressive trance. Lucas frowned with tears forming in his eyes.

It wasn't the first time I had to break up a fight in my class, and I knew the most important thing was to get them away from each other to cool down. I also knew that sending students to the office was not encouraged. We were told that as professionals, behaviour issues were up to us to remedy. I sent Lucas to his desk and Sam to wait in the hall until I could get to them. I hoped they would be okay until I could sort this out. I needed to properly deal with the situation, but 25 other students would be waiting for instructions in mere moments. I wanted the

time to sit with each student separately and discuss the issue. I also wanted to sit down with the

boys together and have them work through things. It just wasn't possible.

I need an education assistant here to help. I need help.

There were days when the students with behaviour struggles could complete none of the

work we set out to do. And days when I spent what felt like the entire day giving my attention to

these students - attempting to get them to do any learning activities. On those days, when the bell

rang, I felt like I had neglected the rest of the class. All students have unique learning needs, and

it was important to interact with all of them. Sometimes the rest of the class seemed to miss out

on individual attention when behaviour problems from the more complex students arose.

Had I checked in on Sara?

Did I sign Daniel's agenda?

Was Jess even present last class?

The day went on as all of the days had - all of my energy attending to the students with

behavioural struggles and the other eight students with learning disabilities. It was a whirlwind

day that sucked my energy dry during a fatal attempt to give everyone what they needed to

succeed. When the bell rang, I was just glad the day was done. All of the pressure of trying to

manage a classroom of students who were struggling immensely wore me down. The exhaustion

was heavy, like lead in my chest. I longed for a rest and some quiet by the time class was over. I

could forget coming home to draw as I had used to. I wouldn't have the energy for that. Hearing

the bell ring was the best part of my day.

What was happening to my love for this work?

Getting the students ready for the bus, I heard my principal call my name over the intercom—my first name. I was being called down to the office. Patricia's voice was firm and annoyed over the school intercom.

I felt my body freeze. When I snapped back, I was standing in my classroom, and there were still students getting ready to go home. Putting their shoes and backpacks on and chatting with each other. Patricia had spoken my *first name* over the intercom. We always address staff using their teacher's name. I had never heard a teacher's first name called over the intercom before. My shoulders slumped, and I suddenly felt small amongst my class of students. Pulling myself back into the role of teacher, I scooted the students out to make the trek down the hallway. My legs felt like boulders, heavy, immovable, but my heart was racing.

A slew of thoughts ran through my head as I walked to the office. The things I knew that I was doing wrong every day. I wondered if she would address why I wasn't coming in early every morning, like most other teachers. Or why I was still offering daily silent reading when it was pointed out in the staff meeting this passive instruction was not an effective use of students' time. Or maybe, there were more issues on the playground with my students. Had I said something negative about a student that had gotten back to Patricia? Perfection was an impossible feat, but I always strived for it. The possibility that I had made a mistake washed over me like a tidal wave. My breath felt shallow suddenly, and my throat dry. Nerves made my legs feel weak – like they were dissolving underneath me. I wanted to sit, but I had to move towards the office.

The door was already open when I approached. She glanced up from her papers, her clear eyes on me and I could sense disapproval. "Come in and sit down, please," she said. "Close the door."

Close the door? Oh no.

I sat down at Patricia's desk and looked across at the assistant principal. I didn't understand why she was there, but I could see that this was now serious.

Setting down a stack of papers, she said, "I had a conversation with a parent of a child in your class. There are problems in your classroom." Patricia folded her arms in front of her and leaned back in her chair.

"It's been hard," I agreed. "That's why I have asked for help - suggestions, a support worker, an assistant - anything."

Nancy, the assistant principal, was silent. Holding a notebook and a pen, she showed her uncomfortable state by glancing down at the page every so often to jot down a note.

What is she writing?

"No. We have been through this. You are a professional. You are the teacher. It is your job to manage your classroom effectively."

I nodded and looked down. I could feel the lump in my throat forming making it hard to speak with confidence. I wanted so badly to be a professional to Patricia. I looked up to her as a leader and wanted to be the teacher she wanted me to be. "I'm trying...but I will do better".

"Andrea has asked that Lucas be pulled from your class. She does not feel that you are the right teacher for him." Patricia's voice did not show a hint of empathy. There was no compassion in the statement. Her voice was blunt with disappointment. I felt my heart crumbling.

"Andrea? Are you sure? Why wouldn't she come to me?"

"She is angry. She shouldn't have had to come to me." Patricia shook her head.

Nancy pursed her lips and looked at me.

I felt a storm rising up in my body, a mixture of anger, frustration, and even betrayal. Every insecurity, every ounce of stress, every morsel of lack that was residing in me was surfacing and was rushing to my head where the performance of conforming could no longer be upheld. This act I put on every time I walked in the door to the school. The professional front where I pretended I was strong, commanding the teacher space. The act where I was trying to convince everyone that I could handle it all. The show where I impersonated a teacher with everything under control. It was all crumbling furiously in that tiny room in front of these administrators I wanted so badly to please. I felt this disintegration of my facade happening without choice. The devastation was rising in me with a vigour that I could not halt.

Fight or flight mode ensued as I stood quickly yet silently. I could not allow them to see me break down. I stood up and rushed out the door with more haste than I had ever shown in my brief career as a teacher. Looking for a place to hide, the staff bathroom became my haven. I locked the door and released sobs in heavy waves. I don't know how long I stayed in that bathroom. Every hint of frustration, fear, sadness and feeling of shortcoming had finally let loose.

When I emerged, day had turned to night. The school was empty. Patricia and Nancy were gone. I left the school alone, feeling broken. Looking at the student artwork on the walls through puffy eyes, I felt a twinge of guilt, realizing my lesson lacked an arts integration component for the next day.

They never addressed the situation again after that. I returned the following day. My eyes were still swollen and red from emotion. Despite feeling crushed, I continued to try and teach. I felt determined to keep going. Taking time off didn't feel warranted to me. In my family, we were taught to keep pushing through when times get rough. Not to mention that taking time off

to feel better would further exasperate my embarrassment of the situation. I didn't want Patricia to become even angrier.

The hardest part about the situation was that it felt like a failure. I was pouring everything I had into my students, into this job, into my classroom, and I wasn't succeeding. I was working day in and day out. There were no more hours to do more. I had struggling students, parents who were upset, and leaders who were losing trust in me. Meanwhile, I had nothing else to give. All of my time, energy, and emotion was going into this. My marriage was hanging on by a thread, my friendships dwindling, my artistic practice was non-existent, and the health of my body was declining. I wasn't feeling well, and I could not explain the continuous headaches, dizzy spells, and stomach aches plaguing me nearly daily.

The criticisms and repeated failures were like cuts. Unlike physical wounds, there is no hiding the blood dripping from your body. When depressed, there is rarely a bold visceral shout of help that compares. The damage was oozing from every pore, and I could no longer conceal it. I was bleeding out, and there was no way to make it stop. My life became automated. I was a robot going through the motions. My heart had calcified, my motivation and passion for teaching retreated. I was not a good teacher.

One morning as I drove to school with the familiar knot in my stomach, a wave of anxiety rose over me. I reached the school, and I drove past the parking lot entrance and past the school itself. I drove up in the street and parked in front of a house. I looked up at the clock on the dashboard of my car. I had ten minutes before I needed to be in class. The tears started, and I couldn't get them to stop. They flowed with ease even though I tried to put them to a halt. I couldn't walk into the school like that, but more worrisome, I couldn't walk into the school and put on a brave face one more time. I was done, and I knew it. It was a performance in front of

those 27 children, and I cared so much for them, but I didn't have enough time or energy to give them what they deserved. I hung my head, and I cried in my car for myself and for my students. My spirit broke in that moment.

I need help.

<center>*****</center>

The paper was cool and rigid underneath me as I waited for Dr. Penton. I had been seeing her since I was eight years old. She knew me well. She had helped me through other hard times, but I knew this was different. For the first time in over 20 years, when Dr. Penton walked in the door, my face was wet with tears.

My emotion was raw and vulnerable, spilling out of me in front of the trusted doctor. It was utterly uncontainable and unavoidable. While I usually tried to maintain my composure in public, at that moment, there was no other way to be. When she saw my state, I watched her face change. I saw concern in her eyes.

When I could get the words out, I shared in broken phrases what had led to my visit. I was struggling not only with my depression but now with my job: my boss, my students, the relentless workload. I was worried I would lose my job because I couldn't get control of my grief. I was in a state of mourning the loss of my ideal teacher-self. And mostly, I wasn't sure I could handle another criticism from my supervisor about all that I was lacking.

"I feel like a failure. I just don't know how to keep going." I said through the tears.

She nodded and listened. Leaning in and offering me a box of tissues.

"I want to die," escaped my lips. I shocked myself.

Dr. Penton thought I should have taken some time off to rest and get my depression under control. I would start therapy and medication, take care of myself and rest. I ended up on stress-induced medical leave. I felt ashamed and didn't want to tell Patricia I was ill.

I took a month off of work to get myself back on track. I slept a lot during those three weeks. It was like I was making up for the hours of sleep lost that whole year.

Upon breaking out of my hibernation, I prepared to return. I didn't feel ready to go back, but I missed my students terribly. I did feel a bit better. My heart still hurt, and I was anxious, but I wanted to tackle this work again. I knew that I would have to go back eventually, and the longer I was away, the more difficult it would be to come back. Upon my return, the kids were delighted to see me, and that felt great. I received many hugs that day.

At the end of the day, I worked my way around the room tidying up, getting myself reacquainted, and getting the classroom ready for the next day. Andrea walked through the door. I stopped in my tracks, unsure of what to expect. She gave me a warm greeting.

"We are so glad that you are back! I hope you're feeling better!"

I wondered if she knew why I had taken medical leave. Rumours do get around. "Yes, much better! Thank you."

"I'm so glad. Hey, I didn't get a chance to talk to you about Lucas's move to the other class," she shifted, slightly uncomfortable. "In all honesty, it just happened so fast. I made the appointment to talk to Patricia about Lucas and Sam, and she suggested switching him over. I was really unsure, because I know how much he likes you, and you have been such a beacon of light for both of the boys. After much deliberation, we decided that it was a viable solution and that we should give it a try."

I stood, trying not to show my bewilderment and working through the events in my head.

Did I hear her right? "You didn't go to Patricia to ask to take Lucas out of my class?"

"Not at all," she assured me.

I was dumbfounded. I wanted to ask more questions.

Was she sincere? Was Patricia not honest with me?

The pedestal I had put the teaching profession on was crumbling into a million pieces.

"I understand. We are all just trying to do what's best."

As a second-year teacher with that many severe behaviour and learning codes in my classroom, I could have, I should have, but I did not speak up. I didn't object. I didn't dare to stand up for myself or have the experience to know how to handle this situation. I accepted what an administrator gave me. I should have had support all the way along, like a classroom assistant. Every day I went in and got the kids to engage; Attempting to manage an entire class alongside students struggling immensely. It wasn't working. It could never have worked. It wouldn't have worked for anybody. It was an impossible task I was given. But I kept trying, and I kept failing. That continual failure was exhausting.

Figure 6

Footsteps, Shannon Roy (2021)
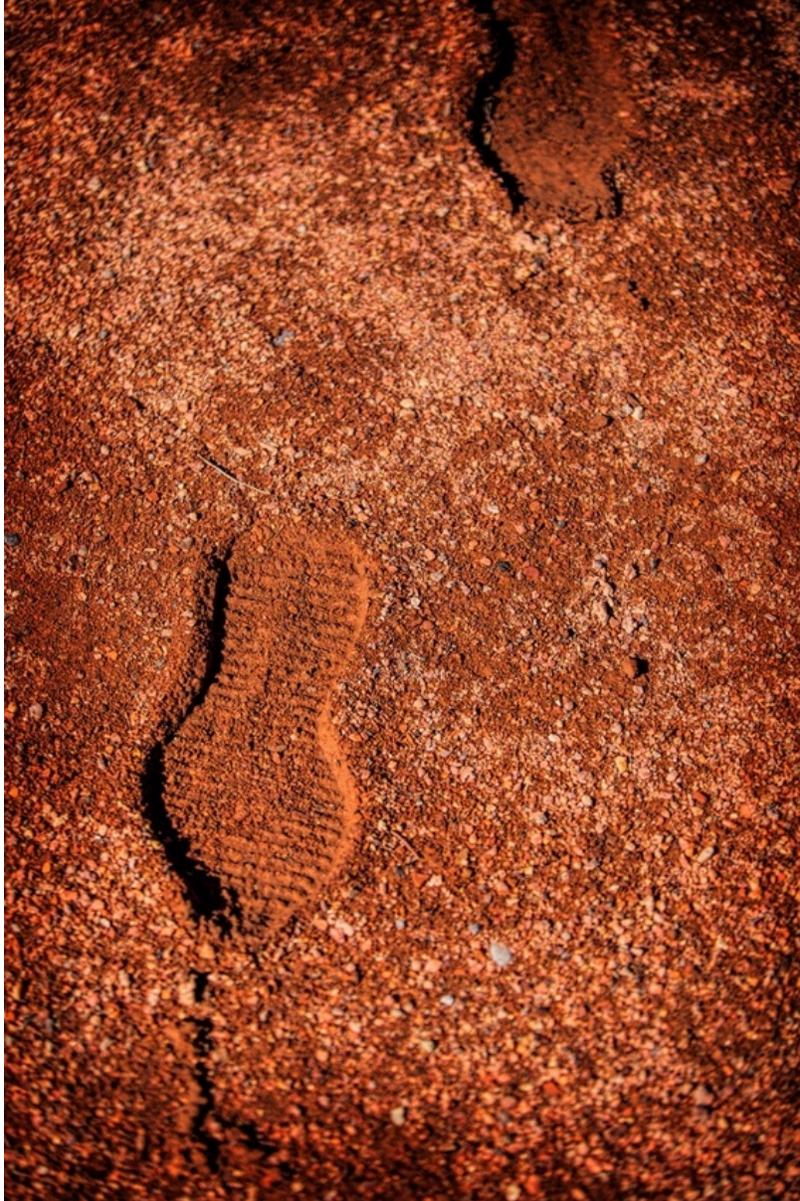
At Arm's Length

Figure 7

Partially Clear, Shannon Roy, (2021)

My hand clutched the leather coat. I put on my boots. Lifting my head caused a wave of dizziness, but I brushed it off and shuffled out the back door. I can't be late. There were essential tasks ahead. There always were. No rest for the wicked, as my mother would say.

The drive was always long and onerous. The looming ride was filled with the concern of what the day at work had in store. Each stoplight prompted thoughts of a demanding day, and every twist and turn in the road was a reminder of the challenges ahead. Teaching in an arts-based school held promise for creative and exciting interactions with students, but my artist self had begun fading away with the demands of the job. Even watching the students engage in their

creative endeavours had started to become less interesting. There were too many other considerations. It wasn't that I was bored - teaching was never dull. One positive about this job was that even though there was a focus on routine, no two days were ever the same, and I was never one to appreciate lacklustre routines.

As it had for the past six months, there was a twinge of nausea as I walked up the concrete walkway and into the school. Morning nerves often got to me and settled in my stomach. The sun was beaming brightly in the way it does when it greets us in the early morning, and the warmth was piercing, glinting off metal playground equipment and the glass windows of classrooms.

Voices of other teachers were quiet and whisper-like in the morning. Even those with usual booming cheerful voices seemed to talk under their breath before the bell rang. There is a fuzzy feeling in the air in the mornings at school. A fuzz that buzzes over all of your senses. The remnant energy of 600 school-aged children still lingering in the air from the day before. Energy I wanted to quell when it wasn't necessary because it could be too much. Children's energy is a beautiful thing but can become overwhelming at times for those that need to oversee it on a daily basis.

The day plan peered out from the clutter on my desk, and I sighed. It was only three quarters done. I stayed at the school until seven the night before preparing the lessons, until my stomach ached with hunger, so I left the plan undone and decided to come in early to finish it. I had forgotten.

Looks like I will be winging the last quarter of the day again.

As it was my first time teaching grade six, I was still creating all my teaching materials from scratch. I knew no other teachers who had grade six materials to help me. Focusing on

inquiry-based learning, textbooks and worksheets were discouraged. I did my best to avoid them, but today I would have to resort to these trusty last-minute tools. Planning took so much time and energy. I was an arts specialist, but with so few jobs related to art alone, I found myself teaching at an arts-integration school where I taught all subjects through the lens of art. Each day I taught language arts, math, physical education, science, social studies, and French.

I caught sight of a stack of student work on my desk, taller than I wanted it to be. I should have done some of the marking after planning last night, and I regretted my hunger. The pile got larger and lonelier by the day. Should ... Should ... Should.

My classroom was big and bright with 25 desks, all lined up in rows and a space to meet on the rug for stories and demonstrations. I knew these rows of desks were frowned upon by the administration. The trend in education encouraged groupings of desks to foster collaboration. This year's class was challenging, and the cluster of desks together posed behaviour challenges that could be subdued when students sat on their own and had their own space. But one desk sat further away from the others, all on its own.

Matthew was a deeply troubled twelve-year-old boy, and that was evident within moments of meeting him. He didn't like making eye contact, and he fidgeted constantly fixating on small objects in his fingers. His mind was somewhere else when you spoke to him.

Matthew would interrupt my teaching constantly. He talked to other students as I attempted to give instructions and often refused the work I gave him. He insulted other students and seemed to always be in conflict. He routinely swore in class. Students reported his aggressive behaviour on the playground. Every recess, I had to keep my eye on him. I had requested support from the administration and also called home several times. No one seemed

able to help. We put him on a behaviour support plan, but this endeavour seemed to make him angry, only exasperating the problem.

One exhausting afternoon, to keep Mathew from upsetting the other students, I had placed his desk away from everyone on the other side of the bookshelf. It wasn't meant to be a permanent solution, and it was far from a perfect solution. It was an act of desperation. I felt at the same time punitive and guilty, failing as a good teacher. I wasn't proud of it. It was survival. Teachers are often put in untenable positions when it comes to managing our classrooms. In helpless situations, I had made decisions that I normally would not want to enact.

The seating arrangement ultimately backfired because Matthew became content with the spot and refused to return to the group. Every time I saw that desk moved far away from the others it was like a boat lost at sea, just within reach of safety but slipping from my grasp every time I tried to reach out. The desk became a sad symbol of where this twelve-year-old boy was within the classroom community, and I had created this state of solitary confinement.

There were moments with Matthew when I felt like I was getting through to him. He drew cartoon characters on his notebooks' covers; in fact, he was quite accomplished in his expression and technical skills. The arts-based work kept him focused, and when I praised him for his creativity and talent, I saw a boy aching for approval. His hunger for love and compassion was so discernible that praise changed his entire energy. Matthew morphed from a rough, angry boy to a gentle, eager naive child. This realization broke my heart.

In response, he kept drawing and drew all day, so much, that I worried he was not making progress on his classwork. At what point was drawing a remedial solution? Was I just avoiding the glaring issues because it was easier? Was my teaching practice, in turn, lacking rigour and

standards? If I asked him to stop, a stand-off ensued, and we were back where we started, a

perpetual circle that never seemed to end.

"You're a terrible teacher!" Matthew declared. "I hate you! You're a bitch!"

It hurt but deep down, I knew his anger came from somewhere far beyond me.

It started to come together the day I met his parents. His parents reminded me of

teenagers themselves. They could have been Mathew's siblings. His father explained that he had

been diagnosed with cancer and didn't have long to live. This surely affected Matthew's

behaviour at school. It wasn't just his fathers' health. Matthew's school file told a story of

sadness and neglect. His psychological assessment indicated that he not only struggled with

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and learning disabilities but possible FASD as well—

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder. His mother had admitted to using cocaine and alcohol while

pregnant with him. Matthew seemed to have everything going against him.

Though we weren't to drive students home for concern of legalities, on a particularly

rainy afternoon, I offered to drive Matthew since he had boxes of plants for a school fundraiser

to get home, and he was just around the corner. We knocked on the locked door, and his mother

opened it, somewhat surprised.

"Oh, come in."

The hazy air and the smell of cigarette smoke and marijuana obscured the room. The

floor of the home was barely visible, with clothes, toys, and movies scattered about. A baby cried

from upstairs. It was the kind of disarray that felt deeply concerning.

In the classroom, we continued our frantic dance of chaos and fondness simultaneously.

When I gave him his space and encouraged his art, we got along well. When I worked on

integrating other learning outcomes into his day, all hell broke loose. I was never successful in

securing additional help for him. He was just another student failing in the system. Sometimes I just hoped he would be absent. I was just too tired and too worn down to cope with him alongside 26 more students. Then there was guilt for making that wish. I was tired, and I am sure he was too.

When the end of the school year finally arrived, it was a genuine celebration, with an outdoor fair where students and teachers all played games, laughed with each other and completely forgot about the difficult moments. Students had packed up and were getting ready to go when the bell rang. Many students gave me hugs, thanked me and told me to have a great summer.

As a new teacher, saying goodbye to my students was something that I couldn't quite fully comprehend. These children had become such an immense part of my life, and I wished to be impactful to them as well. When it came time to say goodbye to Matthew, I awaited a grand exit. I had played over the goodbye in my head many times over.

 "Have a great summer, Matthew," I began.

Barely mouthing the words, "see ya," he walked out the door without making eye contact. And he was gone. I didn't even have a chance to say good-bye. He had hopped out the door so fast that there was no chance for anything more.

This boy who had affected me so profoundly on every level, every day, tested my endurance, my ability to respond in the moment, pushed my capacities to the limit, negatively and positively, and ultimately brought forth so much growth in me as a teacher, walked out of my life without a second thought. He had taught me in ways I was only just beginning to appreciate as a teacher, and I felt a sudden moment of emptiness that remains hard to reconcile. I would feel this emptiness again and again as I watched my students leave each year.

*****

It was 4:30, and my students had all gone home. I was setting up a gallery show for fine arts night in two days. It was crunch time. I opened my email and glanced at the long list that required attention. One email stuck out in the list of unopened messages because it wasn't a school board email. The title read 'Past Student'. I was intrigued and clicked it open.

The email introduced the writer as a therapist who supports young adults struggling with the transition from school to adulthood. The writer explained she was working with one of my previous students - Sarah. She didn't elaborate on specifics. The email explained that one activity her clients do in the program was to list adults that positively affected their lives. Sarah had listed me. They wanted to reconnect me with her.

I had taught Sarah in grades five and six. I remembered her from a decade ago. It had been my first years of teaching. Sarah was a bright and motivated student. She had difficulty interacting with the other girls in the class and, in turn, had befriended some of the more behaviourally complex boys in the class. She and Matthew had been great friends. She had a sparkle in her eyes that told me she was driven, dynamic and full of vibrancy in life. I felt a kinship with her. She reminded me a lot of myself at that age, and I was deeply struck by the news of her struggles. It was not a future I had imagined for her. She came back in my thoughts on occasion over the years. I wanted her to thrive, as we do all our students.

I felt pleased by the email and then strangely confounded. I was surprised that I'd had an impact on Sarah's life. As a teacher, hundreds, even thousands of students walk in and out of your life seemingly without significant impact. This movement of children begins to feel factory-like and, at the same time, quite the opposite of that. You bring the students into your life, into your heart, and they become an immense part of your life for a year or more. And then they're

gone, and you continue on with your career. It is inevitable for teachers to experience this cumulative sense of loss year after year. For me, it was an absence, almost like grieving. There is emptiness, but then you become numb to it because you have to.

I remember Sarah as somebody who was smart but a little insecure as a child. She lived with her dad, who was a young artist. There were notes in her file about a mom addicted to drugs and no longer in her life. I recall Sarah coming to me on more than one occasion about girlhood struggles. Things I'm sure her dad would have had a hard time addressing with a young girl. All this came back to me as I sat before the computer. I didn't know how to respond to the email. I was anxious but also pleased. I wanted to reconnect with her, but I wasn't sure what school board regulations would allow now that she was no longer a student. I knew that I would need to speak with my administration and ask about the implications. I emailed and waited for a reply. When I received it, the assistant principal asked me to come down to the office to further discuss the issue.

He asked more questions, and I showed him the email. He informed me under professional practice, I ought not to respond. The organization contacting me was not a board-approved organization, so I was to disregard the email and not make further contact. Normally, I would have heard what my administrator said and done it. However, the directive just did not sit right with me. The email tugged at my heart for a week. I ached to respond. As a teacher, my purpose is also to help. What kind of profession encourages teachers to form bonds and working relationships, then ceases to maintain those same spaces over time?

Was I expecting too much of teaching?

Of myself?

Ignoring the email went against everything that I believed I represented as a teacher in the community and everything I believed as a person.

I edited, revised, rewrote and fretted. Finally, I hit send. I had responded. The long-awaited email ended up being only a few sentences. I asked the therapist to send Sarah my email to contact me, despite the fear that what I was doing could be reprimanded.

To this day, I have still never heard from her.

Figure 8

Hiding in Plain Sight, Shannon Roy, (2021)

Turning The Page

Figure 9

Open It, Shannon Roy, (2021)
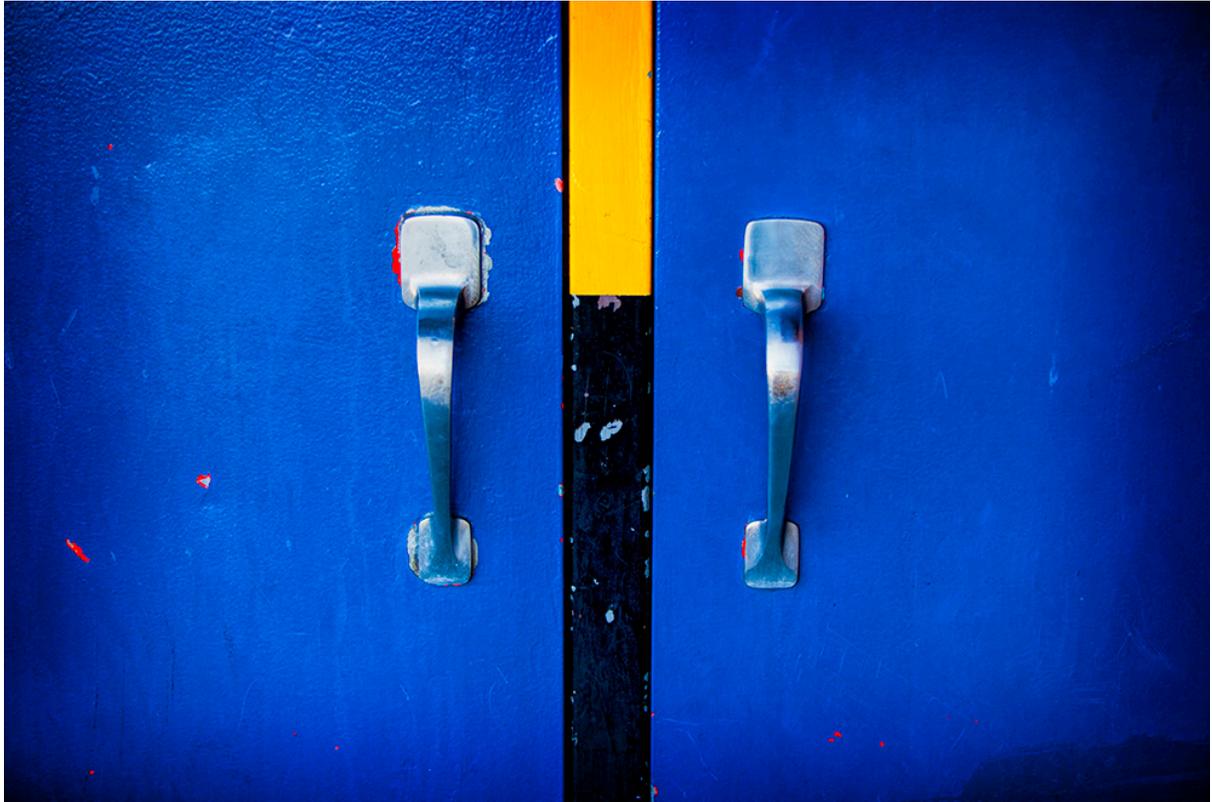
When I opened the door to the cafeteria, I hadn't expected to see such a large group of people. I scanned the faces; they were eating, but many still looked up at me. I had been invited to the school's year-end barbeque so that they could welcome me to the school starting in the fall. A tall, lanky blond woman walked over and stretched out her hand.

"It's nice to meet you," her smile was warm and inviting, which put me at ease slightly. "I'm the Principal." My heart sunk to hear her role. I hadn't had much luck with administration in the past, and I hoped to introduce myself slowly to this new school. My tattooed arms revealed themselves just slightly out of the sleeve of my shirt and caused me to be even more self-conscious.

I was invited to get a burger and was surprised to notice a cooler with beer on ice at the side of the table. A man with dark hair and glasses pointed towards the beverages, "Grab a drink," he said. Vincent was the heart of the school with his stories and jokes. An English teacher beloved by many.

I nodded, perplexed. Alcohol would have never been permitted at any of our staff get-togethers previously.

I had felt nervous about this transition. Moving from elementary to junior high school was a big step. Elementary was demanding, and the struggles had left me depleted. This next step was my attempt at trying to love teaching again, to trying something new, a new start with older students.

I sat and ate my food and drank my beer, listening to the end-of-year speeches. I was bewildered but also delighted to hear the comradery amongst the staff. The jokes, the stories, the laughs and even tears as they said goodbye to each other. I sat quietly, feeling out of place and unsure of this next move. I wasn't ready to become a part of a community that was this bonded, and yet I did not want to be an outsider anymore. Regardless, I would start at this school in the fall.

My life had begun to unravel this last year. This change attempted to shake things up. My husband and I were separated two months prior. I had gotten my own apartment, and Marcus was staying in the house with the dog. I was lonely but relieved to be out of the place where conflict and frustration had continued to grow between us. There were various reasons that our relationship had wasted away. I could see my part in it, and I knew that the stress I was feeling from my career and the depression that enveloped me had changed the way I interacted with Marcus. I no longer felt that I could be a good partner. On the contrary, I was unhappy with how

he dealt with the tired, sad, and stressed me. It had all become very clear that we were not meant for each other. I felt like a shell of who I once was before the marriage. It was nobody's fault. The relationship disintegrated because we had to struggle through some trying times together and simply were not strong enough to withstand it. We stopped enjoying each other's company. We had stopped communicating. We had stopped touching. Eventually, I think we both stopped loving. Even though the fundamental components of the relationship had crashed down right before our eyes, walking away was encased in uncertainty. I needed to rebuild myself. Maybe not from scratch, but a new beginning.

A new school, a new apartment, and life alone. It felt like a perilous mountain to climb. There was no choice to stop halfway up. I had to keep going. There were choices I made during that time that I'm not proud of. Self-destructive choices, self-indulgent choices, and everything between. Sometimes I became selfish when the depression hit the hardest. I did any and everything to feel better. In the moment, easing the pain was the most critical concern. The detrimental choices I made to feel better often had devastating consequences down the line. I was eight months into the new job, and I was lonely and separated. A date couldn't hurt, and Thomas was so different. He picked me up from school one day for lunch. My new colleagues and friends met him in the foyer. I could sense the apprehension in Vincent's eyes, but he never spoke of it. Thomas had a fancy car, expensive clothes and a cold demeanour. My colleagues were quick to assess everything they needed to know about the new man in my life.

Soon, I became distracted and distant at school, and they could see this new addition was pulling me away from where I needed to be. The morning I arrived at school with a swollen cheekbone, and a bruise under my eye was the day they began to question me.

I had considered how I would address the situation and decided the excuse of falling off my bike was the best way to defuse any inquisition. I would not see Thomas anymore, that I knew. I was strong enough to walk away from that situation, but there were remnants of shame all over my face as I walked into school on Monday. I was hiding behind more than the visible injuries. I was hiding behind the embarrassment of the results of my poor choice.

By the afternoon, "the troops had rallied," as we used to say. When one teacher decided they wanted to have a drink at the pub after school, there was an informal procedure to ensure everyone knew and was invited. Each teacher informed the next until everyone was invited. Sometimes there were 20 of us, sometimes only two, but it always felt collegial and inclusive to me.

We were all at our typical spot in the bar, and I ordered my regular glass of white wine. There ended up being only four of us, likely because it was Monday. It turned out to be a standard afternoon visit: comfortable, chatting about teaching, and lots of jokes.

When Sal got up to go to the bathroom, Vincent and Charlie were studying me. I could feel their concern and curiosity.

 "I didn't know that you had a bike," Vincent posed innocently.

The fact had slipped my mind that Vincent was an avid bike rider himself. He had asked me to join his group on multiple occasions, and I had told him I didn't have a bike. It was easy to deduce this inconsistency in my story.

"Yeah... well... I borrowed a bike... from a friend…and well…" I stopped myself. I looked at him. I couldn't lie to his face, not to somebody so genuine and kind. I stopped, my eyes tearing slightly. I smiled while I spoke, though, hoping to make light of the situation, "Things got heated and well…. I'm not gonna see him anymore. It's over."

Vincent sat quietly. Both hands on his beer. He looked down and shook his head. When he glanced back up, his face was heavy with emotion, "I'm so glad you're okay."

Charlie had been listening. She put her hand on my shoulder. "Do you need anything? Can we help at all?" she asked.

"No. No, thank you. That's so kind. I just want to pretend like it never happened. Can we just make sure this stays between us? I fell off my bike, alright?"

Charlie nodded and flagged down the waitress, "We will take one more round on me, please," she said.

<div align="center">*****</div>

There's something about shame that begins to dissipate when you're no longer holding onto it yourself. It's not gone. It hasn't left you, but it loses its vigour (Brown, 2017). And while initially I was humiliated to let my friends know this man had hurt me, the shame I felt had eased. They helped me to pull out of this void. There was insecurity and pain from the divorce, but my people, my fellow teachers, helped me through the personal struggle.

Over the next four years, I rebuilt myself. I picked myself up, dusted myself off and worked on creating a new life. There were slip-ups, and I fell down sometimes. But the most beautiful thing was that I had found myself in a community of colleagues, teachers, and friends who cared about me. These people looked after me, and we took care of each other. They were understanding and encouraging, and they saw me for who I was and appreciated me. I wasn't afraid to be me anymore. I had the space to heal. To peel away the layers of hurt, put them forth, and know I had a support system to listen, respond, and validate those emotions. It had been so long since I'd had support like that. We laughed, we joked, and we worked too. Helping each

other through teaching woes and student obstacles. I moved on and put the pieces back together because I had these remarkable friends in my life.

Teaching junior high was not without its complications. Teaching preteens was the most demanding age group for me. I struggled with the students' behaviour. Often, they were emotional, and they were at one of the most vulnerable times in their lives. They were growing into who they were, and I was doing it alongside them as a teacher maturing in my career.

Despite the challenges, my confidence as an art teacher was being renewed. After coming from a school where I struggled immensely, this new school was my refuge. The students and teachers praised the work happening in my classroom. Eventually, this confidence inspired me, and I wanted to grow further. I wanted to push myself beyond what I knew, and I wanted to teach something fresh and different.

A brand-new high school was opening up. A high school art teacher was a coveted position on the school board. So many teachers I knew wanted to teach high school, and I had my sights set on this position. I had taught special education, elementary, junior high, and now I wanted the experience of teaching high school. I presumed that's where my passion would lie.

When I got an interview, I was stunned. I had heard there were hundreds of applicants. How did I find myself in that board room in front of three principals? I was terribly nervous in the interview. They asked me questions that made my head spin. "What is your take on the Entrepreneurial Artist program?" "How are you willing to be active in our extracurricular community at the school?" "What do you know about the High School Redesign Initiative?" I wondered if they could see me sweating. The lights were too bright in that room. *Was I squinting?*

<p align="center">*****</p>

It was nutrition break at school. I was prepping for my next class when my name was called to the office over the intercom. Being called down always seemed strange. There was the idea of being in trouble when you were called to the office, as a kid and now, again, as an adult. Flashbacks ensued.

"Line one," Candace motioned to the telephone.

"Who is it?"

The school secretary shrugged, and my stomach flipped. Usually only emergencies were put through to us via phone lines, and it was never good news.

I could barely hear the voice on the other end over the squeals of preteens on their break in the room beside me.

Through the noise, an authoritative voice spoke, " I'm calling to welcome you as the art teacher to our new high school. We feel you are the best candidate for the job."

I couldn't move.

Did I hear that correctly? `

I was silent for a moment. I attempted to remain professional through my astonishment. Quickly I grabbed a pen from the desk beside me and scribbled down the information she was relaying.

I hung up the phone, hands shaking. I doubt the receiver was placed down properly. As I stepped out of the office and into the foyer, I felt like people were looking at me differently. I must have been exuding my elated energy.

I remember that feeling well. A moment I wish I could bottle up and keep with me forever—a feeling I could store in a pouch in my bag and open anytime I needed encouragement.

The emotion has no one word. Joy, hope, success and pride took over my body in one strong wave, and it was euphoric.

Charlie walked up to me smiling, "You got it, didn't you?"

I laughed, and my happiness told her all she needed to know. We hugged. She cried.

News spread quickly, and congratulations were in order. We met at the pub that night. There were laughs, there were stories, and there were, of course, tears.

This time in my life could be equated to finishing a great novel, the kind that leaves one feeling hopeful for tomorrow. The school was like a chance discovery in a dark corner of a musty bookshop. Maybe I took a chance to pick it up and open its cover. The spine cracking and the dust thick. I chose it because something about it intrigued me. Maybe it's the title or image on the front, or maybe I am just drawn to this story. So, I take it home, and perhaps it sits for a while before I have the motivation to begin. And when I do, there is still doubt, but each page contributes to the story that has drawn me in. As the writing goes on, it begins to prompt feelings of comfort. That old book smell and the feel of the fragile, sandy pages elicit feelings of home. This pursuit of reading now happens with ease, and just as the story takes hold of your heart, the last words are in front of me. The book is done even though I was not ready for it to be finished. I must close the pages and move on to another, although my heart is still tied to this novel.

I was leaving the school that helped me build back my confidence and sense of self after my life had fallen to pieces. After I had picked up those pieces and started new, these teachers were the people who had been there for me. This school became my home. My memories were the pages of a soothing book. Although I still sought comfort in the halls of that place, the last words had appeared in front of me, and it was time to move onto the next story.

Figure 10

Peeking, Shannon Roy, (2021)

They Wanted to Say Something

Figure 11

Open Skies, Shannon Roy, 2021
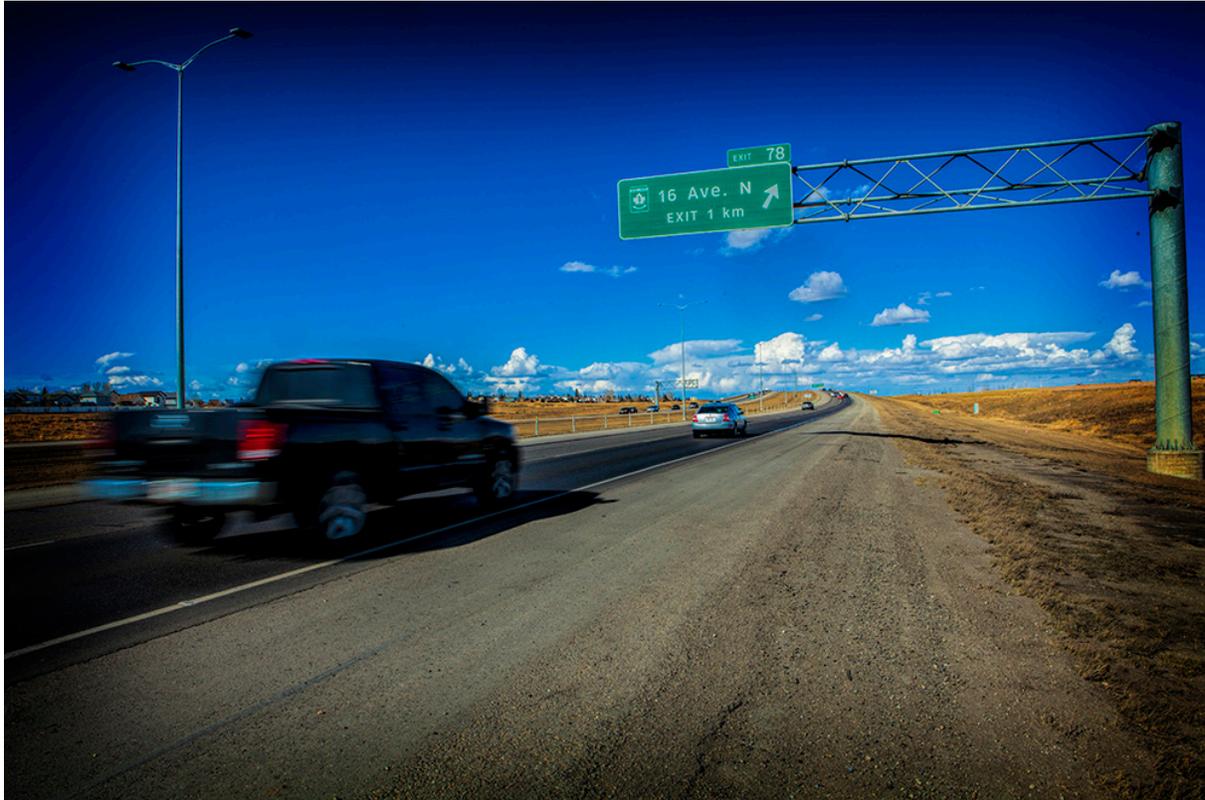
It was time for my fireside chat with the new principal. I imagine it as a warmly lit room. An oversized couch with too many pillows and a cashmere blanket invitingly strewn over the arm of the sofa, ready to drape over you, and maybe even a hot mug of herbal tea on the table. The warmth of a fire roaring from inside a stone fireplace heats the room to just the perfect temperature, just warm enough. The wood crackles and the smell of fire is nostalgic and comforting.

A fireside chat is not that.

I couldn't help but laugh at the naming of our meeting. It implied a sort of cozy visit with a friend or a romantic date with a lover. But that was far from what a fireside chat was in practice

in my new school district. The intention was to sit down with administrators and tell them what my thoughts were about the current teaching year and what I had hoped for the upcoming year. I was to explain where I had grown and what I still wanted to accomplish. All of the teachers knew these conversations were discretionary. The unwritten rule was that honesty was not encouraged. If I said what I should say to keep my job and please the person sitting in front of me, a.k.a if I played the game, I might be fine to continue next year. If there were surplus teachers this year, I didn't want to be one of them, so I rarely said what I needed to say. There was nothing fireside about it. It always felt cold in that room.

 I walked into the principal's office, my hands shaking as they usually did anytime I had approached administration. She was so much taller than me, which was intimidating. A heavier set woman with dark eyes and dark hair. She was always wearing a smart suit and heels, a typical administration cliché. I came in dressed more professionally than usual, and that was deliberate on my part. As an art teacher, it's never a great idea to wear your best clothes day-to-day. I had a notebook in hand and a list of points to talk about because I didn't want there to be any awkward silences or moments where I didn't know what to say. I would often struggle to get the words out around her.

I had been getting to know everyone at this new school. She had hired me, and we spoke in passing a few times. She was a busy person; managing over 100 staff members and 1200 students was not an easy job. Still, I struggled to maintain my confidence in front of people with authority over me.

The meeting started with the basics. She asked how I was doing and what learning was happening in my classroom. I embellished on my successes and diminished my struggles. Once I resisted. Now I was becoming part of the problem.

"Are you an artist?" she asked me.

"Pardon me?" The question shook me. A whirlwind of thoughts rushed through my head at once.

Am I an artist?

I am a teacher.

I am an art teacher.

Doesn't that make me an artist?

I hadn't created art in months, years maybe. I hadn't had time. This job had left me with no time. I usually had no space emotionally to create anymore. Am I an artist? Or am I an educator? What did she want me to say? I stuttered. I attempted to explain the best I could.

"I am still a practicing photographer," I continued to explain. "But I don't paint or draw much anymore unless I am showing the students a new skill."

"The best art teachers I've known have all been practising artists," she pointed out.

I had to wonder if she was implying that I was a not a good art teacher, or that maybe I would be a better one if I had a more prevalent art practice. Having a more extensive art practice would leave me less time for my career, less time for my students.

What answer is she looking for?

This question left me feeling confused and distracted. I was sitting in front of my boss, trying to be confident and not show weakness. Suddenly, I was questioning my own identity.

Who did I want to be?

Who did she expect me to be?

Who did my students expect me to be?

Who did I expect myself to be?

Who was this job making me?

The question had thrown me off track. The rest of the meeting was less than mediocre, I am sure. My head was elsewhere, and I had lost my focus. After a few more questions and a review of my teacher's professional growth plan, we finished, and relieved, I headed back to my classroom.

I sat at my desk trying to work, but her question had initiated a mess of existential disorientation. I felt disappointed in myself. I thought she knew I was an artist, but I wondered if I actually was one anymore. I felt that being an artist would have been one reason I got the job. Why would a non-artist be teaching art?

Maybe I didn't fit the mould. This was a pattern I had lived repeatedly in my life. When I came into this job, I tried my best to look and act like a teacher even though it didn't come naturally. Being an artist came much more instinctively, but I had pushed that part of myself aside to act the role of a teacher. The identity of an artist didn't seem to mesh well with the expectations of being a teacher. I wanted to fit in with my colleagues and be respected. I didn't wear suits or collared shirts and pumps. I didn't keep my hair perfectly styled or maintain a flawless air of professionalism. I liked to be comfortable. I wanted to feel like me. I hated hiding behind a front, but I often felt like that was what I was doing. When I started teaching, I questioned if I should get rid of the red colour in my hair, hide my tattoos, or the piercings that I'd had for so many years. Would I be taken more seriously if I looked more like the other teachers? These were the thoughts I wrestled with as I settled into the day of teaching. Slowly so many pieces of myself that I took pride in, and that made me feel like me, fell away.

There was a knock on the frame of the open door. Mira was sheepish as she entered the classroom. Lowering her eyes and fidgeting. I taught her photography but had never seen her in

the art room. Over the past month, she was shifting. I could see it. She stopped wearing her

hijab. This was a symbol of her religion and meaningful to many, but I heard students talk about

the fact that Mira was no longer wearing hers. Students inferred as to why she stopped coming to

school with her hair covered. Students at this age change often. They are discovering themselves.

"How was your day?" I asked.

She shrugged. I could tell she had something to say, but it wasn't coming out. I didn't

want to force it.

"You had a good day?" I repeated. She shrugged again, and I continued on to break the

silence. "Well, my day was fine. It was busy, and two of my classes started new art projects. The

classroom seems to get so messy when we paint," I added to hopefully get the conversation

rolling.

She smiled at me. "I had a science test today," Mira finally spoke.

"Oh yeah, how did that go?" I asked.

She shrugged again. It didn't seem that we were getting anywhere. I knew she was there

for a reason. Did she want to talk about something? Maybe she didn't. Perhaps she just wanted

the company of another person. I'd certainly been in that situation before. If we weren't going to

talk, I needed to get back to my marking.

"Do you want to draw or paint?" I asked, making my way over the cupboard to get an

extra sketchbook.

"I'm not very good at it!" she chuckled.

"That's not important," I assured her. "You don't have to be good. Anyway, how do you

suppose somebody gets good at drawing? Artists definitely don't get good by not doing it."

She giggled again nervously, "Okay, I'll try to draw."

I pulled out a set of drawing pencils and briefly explained the different lead grades and for what they could be used.

"I don't know what to draw," she said.

"Most people don't know what to draw when they first start. It can be anything you want. You could find something in the classroom. You could draw some designs. Or something from your imagination. I also have some books you could search through." I pulled a basket of drawing books and put them beside her. She flipped through them. I went back to my desk and continued working on my plan for the next day's class. If Myra didn't want to talk, perhaps after drawing, she would feel more relaxed.

She didn't speak much that day.

There were other days she showed up after school with that look in her eye like she wanted to say something, but no words were coming out of her mouth. I tried to be there for her. I handed off the sketchbook and the pencils. Sometimes she would test out some paint. I worked at my desk and also waited patiently for the words, unsure what they would be. I knew they had to be important. I was noticing gradual changes in her over the months. She cut her hair. She changed the way she dressed.

One day she lifted her head from the sketchbook and asked, "What kinds of things do you like to draw, Miss?"

"Oh! Well... it has actually been quite a while since I have drawn or painted." I stared into space for a moment, "I do miss it a lot, actually."

"How come you don't then?" She asked very matter-of-factly like it was really so simple. You enjoy something, you miss it, why not do it?

"I'm too busy. Too tired most of the time. Teaching takes a lot out of a person," I explained, laughing.

"But you can't work all the time. You have to do things that make you happy, sometimes too, right?" She looked at me in a way that told me she was looking for reassurance. She wanted to know it was okay to spend your time doing hobbies. How could I suggest that work wasn't all there was to life? She was looking to me, an art teacher, wanting me to give permission to live.

"Of course...yes. You are correct. I need to make more time for art again."

*****

Mira never told me. Instead, I heard rumours from the other students in class about a transition. Mira was transitioning from female to male. He called himself Miles and changed the female pronouns to he/him. Things made sense. Shortly after Miles announced his desire to change his name and pronouns, he stopped coming to my classroom.

*****

I came home drained. I wanted to sit in front of the TV and fall asleep watching a mindless sitcom, but I forced myself to pull out my paints and a canvas. I set up the tabletop easel and put down some newspaper. I got a cup of water and pulled out the brushes. I stared at the blank canvas. Nothing. There was nothing to paint. Moments from my day were asking me to pay attention to them – screaming loudly at me.

Are my lessons planned for tomorrow?

Will I be ready to present at the staff meeting?

I didn't finish that marking. I told the students it would be done.

I debated abandoning painting and came close to standing up and simply walking away. Instead, I picked up the brush and placed it into the black paint. Putting the brush to the canvas, I

let my hand move, not knowing where it would take me. I tried not to care where it would take me. Investing in the process like I would encourage my students to do. I had music on in the background as I attempted to get lost in this space. It didn't happen that night. The flow state never visited. I wanted it to. I needed it to.

I am an artist. Aren't I?

The next night was more manageable because everything was already laid out for me. I hadn't put the supplies away, and so they were sitting and waiting when I got home that night. I ate my dinner at the kitchen counter, and then I sat down. I studied the canvas sitting in front of me. Only the background was completed, and an outline of my positive space. I didn't like what I saw, but I recall the advice I would give my students when they found themselves annoyed at their progress.

You're rarely going to be pleased with your creation as you work through it. If you did, there would be no need to keep going, and you would be done with the first brushstroke, pencil mark, or manipulation of the clay! Creating a work of art is a process, and there are going to be times along the way where you are not happy with what you see in front of you. But you have to keep going. This process takes courage and perseverance, and you can do it!

As I applied the paint to the canvas, I attempted some new mark-making techniques and a colour I rarely use. I added in the mossy green highlights and liked what I saw. My hand flowed, and I lost myself in the movements of the brush to paint, paint to canvas. I didn't finish the painting that night, but I left the table feeling lighter and excited about what was to come.

There were moments of ups and downs in this artist's journey. It felt like my creativity was a wild beast to tame, usually in hibernation but coming out to visit only when I teased it with a new and naive idea. My creativity was a living, breathing thing that called only when it wanted

to be seen and even then wasn't usually an agreeable pet. Sometimes there were flashes of great triumphs where I felt like I had defeated its push against me, and other times it would not come out at all, and I was left feeling frustrated and empty.

A week of wrestling my creative impulses had resulted in significant anguish but also a finished painting. As I put the finishing touches on the canvas, I began thinking about my work. I crossed my arms and stared at it. I could see the flaws in the painting. My inclination was to fix them immediately; however, I had told myself it was time to stop two minutes prior.

You are done.

There have been many times when I had told myself that a painting was done and continued to pick at it and ended up making a mistake that upset my sense of the potential in the work. I knew better than to bandage imperfections. I was trying to learn to trust my intuition once again, and now I was learning when to know to let it go. It's never going to be perfect. Perfection doesn't exist.

I stood back from the painting a little further and looked at it again. This time I saw it a little differently. The wings had impressive balance and texture. The way they merged into the black background like a Vanitas. The flower's shading and colour lent so much depth it appeared almost hyper-real. I stood back just a little bit further and began to see it even more distinctively. The colour scheme was striking. I felt pride in what I had completed. I had painted butterflies before, but this might have been my favourite. At that moment, I had forgotten about the stress of the day. I felt like an artist. It felt good to have painted again. Taking one last glance at the canvas, I decided to bring the painting in to show my students for the next day. I think Miles would like to see it.

Miles was still not coming into the class for visits. I had hoped it was because he was contented and not because he was uncomfortable. I noticed he was spending a lot more time in a social circle I'd never seen him engage with before. Miles had always been so quiet. I could tell he had found his place within the school drama club. In the halls after school, I would see him playing the guitar with other students in the hallway, smiling, laughing, and singing. He would smile at me as I walked by, and I would smile back, hoping that one day he would knock on the door again, wanting to draw in the sketchbook.

I visualize him entering the room - quiet still but smiling. I would ask how he is doing, and he would answer briefly. I would pull out the supplies and encourage him to begin, giving him pointers along the way. I would be there for him if he wanted to talk. He probably wouldn't, but I would let him know that I was ready with a listening ear. I would show him my new painting, and maybe this time I would emerge from behind my desk, from behind that computer, and I would draw with him. Yes, I would do that. I think we would both like that. Maybe Miles would want to talk then.

Figure 12

The Cage, Shannon Roy, (2021)
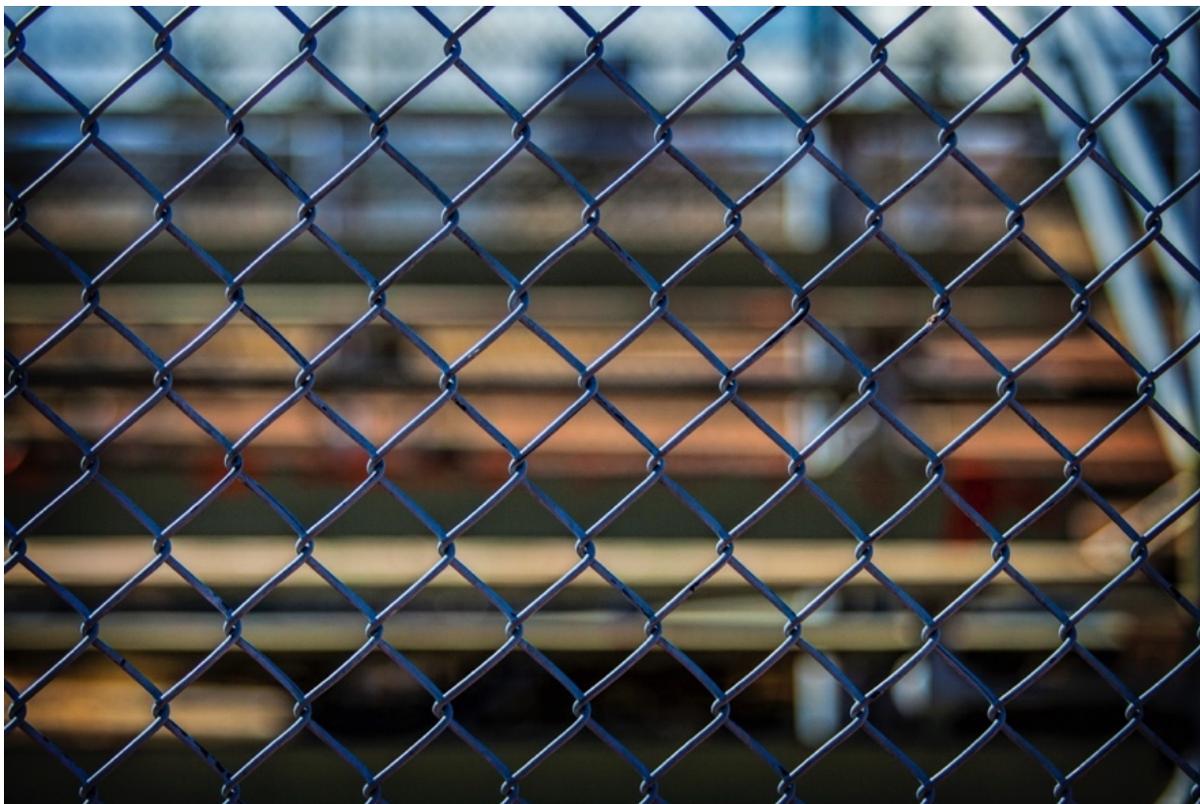
Spilt Milk

Figure 13

In the Foreground, Shannon Roy, (2021)

My mom enjoys telling the stories of the quirky things I would do as a child. One of her

preferred anecdotes is about my inclination to spill the contents of my cup. I would often upset

my drink, and then I would break out into hysterics. We have laughed about this often. The fact

that my clumsy fumble would elicit so much guilt that tears would ensue. Our jokes about this

were innocent and frankly justified, considering a toddler becoming unreasonable like clockwork over a minor spill. Looking back upon this now as an adult, this harmless tale is no longer amusing to me. What has become clear is that the fear of making mistakes plagued me even as a child. There's an innate part of me that wants desperately to please and that also fears disappointing others. The spilt milk and the seemingly unnecessary tears were early symbols of anxiety and perfectionism that would only worsen as I got older. I would face mistakes much bigger than spilling a cup of milk along the way. Ten years into my career, I had wondered if becoming a teacher was the biggest cup of milk I had spilt yet.

Despite my teaching struggles, I had enjoyed teaching high school students. I enjoyed the conversation I could have with teenagers and the complexity of the content I taught them. I loved that they were reasonably independent and more like adults. Teaching high school art was my favourite assignment, and simultaneously, the pressure of getting these students through their last years of school weighed on me.

I felt exhausted from my regular school day yet built such wonderful connections with students and teachers. We needed to stay after school most days of the week and even come in on Saturdays and Sundays for extracurricular activities. Making a set for the school play was one of our grandest tasks. We built three moveable sets on wheels, and the set crew painted them to look like a futuristic cityscape. Hours and hours were put into creating the playsets. A strong sense of community was built as we worked on this project together. We would stay late on school nights and order pizza. Students would tell school gossip, and we would joke together. Jack, the drama teacher, and I became close as we mentored students through this creative process.

Jack and I also bonded over several similarities. We talked about our identity as teachers. We both felt like that was all we sometimes had. Since we devoted so much time, energy, and emotion, so much of ourselves into our career, considering not being a teacher was unfathomable. To not be a teacher would feel as though you had lost yourself. Where do you rebuild that sense of self if you are no longer a teacher?

Jack had been teaching for 20 years and myself 10. We had conversations about our insecurities. Neither of us felt good enough as teachers. Remnant feelings that we were letting people down were readily understood, and our efforts to force our success in a job that takes and takes but seldom gives back was common ground. Like me, he felt the heavyweight of a teacher's heart as he watched some students slip through the cracks.

As a teacher, you are a giver. When you're standing in front of a room of students, and they're expecting you to teach, it doesn't matter if you fell asleep on the couch the night before while trying to plan for the next day. It doesn't matter if the photocopier had broken down and so printing your handouts wasn't possible. It didn't matter if you were feeling ill that day or if there were problems at home. When the students are sitting in front of you, you have to teach them. It often felt like a performance. When you weren't adequately prepared or weren't feeling well, performing seemed like an impossible feat. However, there was no choice, and you took what was left in you, and you put it forward. Of late, I was feeling empty.

One afternoon when I walked into Jack's room after class to vent. I could sense he was lighter.

"I have something to tell you," he stated.

"Of course. You can tell me anything." I pulled a chair up to his desk. Leaning in, I waited to hear what was next.

"I'm looking at a small property north of here," he explained. "I am listing my house for sale, and I'm resigning from the board."

I tried not to let my jaw drop, and instead, I nodded, listening more carefully to his following words.

Was I secretly envious?

Jack continued to elaborate, telling me this was a difficult decision for him to make. He had given this career so much of himself, but it wasn't working for him anymore. Jack needed to know if leaving teaching would help him to revive his joy for life once again.

"I'm so happy for you, Jack! I'm proud of you for being so brave."

"Thank you," Jack smiled nervously. "I told you because we are friends, but I haven't told anyone else yet, so please keep it quiet for now."

"I'm gonna miss you!" I told him. I was sad to see a friend go, but I was also used to these goodbyes. I had seen many teachers and friends walk in the door and back out again. Leaving because they were moving to another school, a different city, or even possibly being surplus to requirements when the school budget couldn't afford another teacher.

I felt a twinge of jealousy with Jack's confession. Not because I no longer wanted to be a teacher, but because I also wanted to escape the strain of the job.

*****

The light was bright and shining in the windows of the room. It was always hot in that room, sweltering actually, especially when it sat 40 bodies all crammed into a classroom that should fit ten comfortably. As a class, we didn't have the space to move, let alone create art. We didn't have the room to store our supplies or to dry our paintings. We had no place to be artists.

We were done classes for the year and completing the cleaning and organizing tasks we needed to get done before heading on holidays for the summer. Jack and another colleague, Bailey, had offered to help me since there was a lot to be sorted for an art room in June.

There was an air of excitement because tremendous pride comes with finishing a school year. Moving students through the curriculum and the trials and tribulations of being teenagers done for one more stint. There's also anticipation because we knew that a two-month break was upon us: a well-deserved, well-needed break. I often wondered if the job of being a teacher would be doable if that break didn't exist.

Ending a school year was difficult: the goodbyes, the workload, the transitions. The first week or two of summer break was complex. I felt confused and out of place. I seemed unsure what to do with myself when there weren't 40 students sitting in front of me, needing me. When no one needed me, it was a strange feeling. The sense of emptiness, absence, and loss returned.

Jack and Bailey cleaned paint palettes. I had a significant amount of coffee that morning, trying to keep myself energized and alert. I was feeling jittery, and I attributed it to the caffeine and kept on moving. I had eaten little that day also. There wasn't time. I wondered, were the large cup of coffee and the lack of food causing me to feel strange?

Stopping for a minute, I felt feverish. I could feel beads of sweat begin to form on my face. I took off my cardigan, revealing a tank top, which is strictly against the dress code. I felt exposed and embarrassed.

Bailey noticed my discomfort. "Are you okay?" she asked.

I was trying to regain my focus, but things began to go blurry. My lips went numb, and it became harder to take a breath in. I shook my head, indicating that I was not okay.

"Have you eaten anything today?" she asked.

"A little," I squeaked.

"I'm gonna go get you an energy bar. I have some in the drawer of my desk."

I sat down on the floor, and Jack came to sit down beside me. He passed me a bottle of water.

I struggled just to drink, and that's when the realization hit me: This is a panic attack. The swift and vicious wave of physical sensation was no stranger. The paralyzed state of my fingers and my lips were clear indications of this familiar episode. My breathing was shallow but rapid, and I knew I had to get control of it if I wanted this to pass.

I laid down on the floor and closed my eyes, trying to concentrate on my breathing. One breath in....let it all out. Next breath in...let it out completely. This simple act becomes so much more difficult during anxiety. Repeating the mantra in my head, all I need to do is tolerate this moment.

I counted the breaths. When I reached 50, I had felt slightly calmer. I was regaining the feeling in my face. It would be at least ten more minutes until the bulk of the symptoms subsided, but the worst of it was passing. I sat up slowly and took another swig of water. I looked at Jack. The concern in his eyes was telling.

******

There were seven of us sitting in the library waiting for a few more people. The fine arts team had to meet to tie up any loose ends before the end of the year. The rumours of my panic attack had gotten around, and everyone in the room knew what had happened. It didn't matter that people knew. It was expected that we all felt overwhelmed at times.

Sasha spoke up, "Have you seen your doctor about your panic attacks?"

 I nodded, "Many times. I need to learn to manage my anxiety better when stress is high. I forget to take care of myself."

Sasha agreed. "Medication has helped me a lot."

"Which med do you take?" Bailey asked her.

Sasha answered and stated that she had tried several before she found one that worked for her. Bailey agreed and casually noted that she was taking the same medication.

Katie, a first-year teacher, spoke up quietly, "I recently started taking one this year too."

They nodded in agreement. It appeared to be no big deal to anyone. Looking around the table, I could see that five teachers out of seven were taking medication for various mental health issues. And the truth of it was, I had another four teacher friends at the school I knew were also taking an antidepressant. I had taken antidepressants myself many years ago. The gears began to turn.

I pondered this conversation for weeks. It was like an annoying salesperson that wouldn't stop knocking on my door. Every moment I had free, I thought about the health implications of the education system on its teachers. How is the lack of resources and long work hours affecting our lives? Our health? Out of the ten teachers from this school with whom I had a friendship, 8 of us were taking medication for a mental health issue. Was this a coincidence, or was this a disturbing pattern? I felt sick about this realization. My struggles teaching had been profound over the past ten years. Still, I had usually attributed it to my own sensitivity, the 'spilt milk' theory. I was a sensitive person. When I struggled with depression and anxiety, I would question whether I was merely not cut out for teaching. But now, seeing how deeply many of my colleagues were also struggling, I wondered how much this system was contributing to our

mental health issues. I felt angry. The frustration and stress of this job weren't just personal issues. Many other teachers were struggling like I was.

This series of events changed something in me. I felt like my situation was becoming clearer, and I didn't like what I was seeing. My frequent panic attacks, the longing for school to be complete at the end of the year, dreading work in the morning, and now seeing many of the teachers around me struggling to the point of requiring medication. The signs couldn't have been more apparent that it was time for me to make a change.

I was ready to leave, and I wanted to start talking about these issues. I wanted to pull them out of the dark. I was going to resign. Watching Jack, a teacher I respected and related to so much, leave the career to follow his dreams had a massive impact on me. I vowed to make a plan to move forward. I had two months to focus on how I would try and make a difference for myself and perhaps for other teachers in the process.

How could I make a difference?

The fullness of a day often elicits tiredness that sometimes forcibly pushes peace onto us. That night was different. The sun set slowly, bringing a veil of dark into my bedroom, which helped to put racing thoughts to a crawl. Although those thoughts still existed and would rise with fury in the morning with the sun, there was time to let them go. In that peace, in that moment, I made one of the most significant decisions of my life, and I sensed earnest comfort. A million thoughts swimming through my head like minnows in a lukewarm pond finally slowed when I shut my eyes. I took a deep breath and let it out, knowing that tomorrow I would be on a new path. It would take time to get there, and I wasn't sure of the steps along the way, but the decision had been made. I would be leaving the classroom.

Figure 14

Growth, Shannon Roy, (2021)

Chapter 5: Findings & Discussion

This chapter will discuss both the intended literary themes that each of the six stories encompasses and the recurring themes, which emerged from the data analysis stage of the research. I also further elaborate on the research findings in this chapter. Along with each story and accompanying photos, I will also discuss the art gallery show I have prepared.

https://artspaces.kunstmatrix.com/en/exhibition/5937765/an-art-teacher-autoethnography

Literary Story Themes

Within each story, literary themes emerged, which encompass the main or central component to each story and are important elements of the research. I have identified patterns within the literary themes, and these themes are pathways forward when deliberating upon teacher stress and burnout. Next, I describe the overarching theme of each of the six stories as literary themes, which present "interpretive intentionality" and "intrinsic congruency" within the stories (Seigneuret, 1988, p. xv).

Ready for Print

This is a story about uncertainty, new friendship, and the desire to please. *Ready for Print* presents a story about a new teacher who is ill-prepared for the job of an educator. She struggles with the workload and wants desperately to be a devoted teacher and please her administration. When she fails to do so and needs to rewrite an entire set of report card comments, she leans on another new teacher to help with the emotional struggles of her failure. The main character eventually can complete the report cards, but the reader is left to wonder if she has done so successfully or if the rewrite was only "good enough." The story shows how lack of proper training in teacher education and on the job, and insufficient administrative support, resulting in situations that can be terribly detrimental to the well-being of a new teacher.

The Pedestal Crumbles

This story presents the reader with the themes of fear of failure, deceit, and the fall of ideals. The main character, a new teacher, feels intimidated by her school administration when her nerves impede her from saying what she needs to say to them. She has a highly complex class, and she is not provided with the necessary support to deal with this challenge, even after asking for help. When she feels that she has failed as a teacher, her mental health disintegrates, leading to an inability to do her job. She eventually discovers that she has been let down by the person she trusted, looked up to, and admired, shifting her perspective. The continual struggle and lack of success while working to be a "good teacher" contributes to emotional struggle her eventual burnout. (Karsenti & Collins, 2013).

At Arm's Length

As the teacher struggles to deal with the challenging behaviour of a student, she questions herself and her teaching methods. She understands the student more as the year progresses and is ultimately disappointed with the way they said goodbye. Years later, she receives an email regarding a student in the same class, which suggests that she has had a significant impact on a student's life. Goodbyes and trauma are the themes that guide this story's plot to the end, where the main character gets some peace realizing that she has made some difference in the lives of others. This story reflects on the emotional complexities that teachers face as they work through the relational aspect of the work. This story also speaks the impact that teachers have on students even when it is not always apparent.

Turning the Page

The themes within this story are change, growth, and the power of community. This story has both traumatic and joyful elements. When the main character has her life turned upside down

after getting a divorce and moving schools, she finds peace and confidence in a new school community. Ultimately, this school gives the teacher the strength to move forward and grow, which is bitter-sweet. She decides that she wants to progress in her career and is forced to say goodbye to the friends that helped her get there. Connection is highlighted in this story, demonstrating how community and friendship can assist a teacher in healing and success.

They Wanted to Say Something

Identity, change, and growth are the themes in this story. After being presented with the question, "Are you an artist?" this now veteran teacher struggles with an identity crisis. She wonders who she is, what she actually desires to be, and how she presents herself to the world. As she works through this conundrum, a student finds their way to her classroom for reprieve. Like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, this student uncovers their own identity amidst the process of art-making. The teacher finds her way as well alongside this student. It is a journey they silently take beside each other, with art being the spark for the bravery that comes with the monumental changes. We see how connection can be a catalyst for positive movement forward.

Spilt Milk

This story begins with a metaphor that helps guide the story's plot. The initial metaphor gives background into some events and decisions the main character makes along the way. Mental health, courage, and change are the main themes within this story. After the main character suffers a severe panic attack amidst her colleagues, she learns that most teachers whom she knows are struggling with mental health issues, which causes the main character to question her career choice and the system in which teachers are employed. The teacher decides to leave her career based on the events that preceded. The main character begins to reflect on how teaching may be affecting her body and mind negatively.

Research Themes

Using the process of thematic analysis discussed in the Research Design and Methodology chapter, I will discuss five main themes that emerged from the data. Using Quirkos to organize and code my data, I categorized the text and then grouped them into themes. The five themes I created are:

- Insufficient teacher preparation (see Appendix C for a sample of the coding)

- Lack of teacher support, with secondary themes of insufficient administrative support and for complex students (see Appendix D for a sample of the coding)

- Excessive workload (see Appendix E for a sample of the coding)

- Breakdown of identity (see Appendix F for a sample of the coding)

The final theme which I present as a concept that helped my struggles along the way:

- Connection (see Appendix G for a sample of the coding)

The five themes I created can be seen in the Quirkos interface (see figure 2). Each category shows the rate of occurrence as a number in the bubble. Lack of support had 58 sections of text assigned to it, breakdown of identity had 54 sections of text, Connection 49 sections of text, insufficient teacher preparation had 41 sections of text, and excessive workload had 37 areas of text assigned to it.

Theme: Insufficient Teacher Preparation.

There were signs I had not been sufficiently prepared for the job of being a teacher throughout my teaching career. The gaps in my teacher training were evident as I took on my own classroom, and weaknesses emerged in several critical areas such as formal assessment, classroom management techniques, dealing with behaviourally complex students, effective

communication with parents, and dealing with the emotional complexities of the job. However, I did not anticipate this to come through in the stories for this thesis as prevalently as it did.

To build on this through my personal experience, I recall many students in my cohort feeling as though they were not prepared to begin teaching as we finished university. I shared this concern, but it caused me much less anxiety than others. I am uncertain as to why I did not feel stressed about the aspects of teaching I did not know how to approach confidently. I felt I would take the uncertainty as it came, and although I did do that, the lack of experience caused definite issues.

As I coded the data within the theme of Insufficient Teacher Preparation, the categories that encompassed it were the 'state of uncertainty' and 'lack of experience.' Both categories demonstrate the need for a teacher to feel prepared at their job (see Appendix C for a sample of the coding). As an example, there is a point in the story *Ready for Print* where the main character is asked by her principal if she had ever done report cards before. With shame, the teacher replies she had not. It was indeed true that I was not taught how to create these documents in university teacher preparation. Granted, the principal's response is less than ideal for mentoring a new teacher through this process for the first time. It could be expected that one of the most important documents that a teacher needs to create should be a substantial component of teacher preparation. However, it was not, and it is gaps such as this that represent a significant challenge to sustaining a career, and I believe this lack of experience in new teachers is a contributing factor to teacher stress and burnout.

It was a goal of the Bachelor Education program I completed to put forth teachers prepared for 21st-century learning. A great deal of the program focused on reflection, teaching educators to reflect on their practice to learn, grow, and continually improve their teaching.

While I agree this is an essential component of being a successful educator, in my opinion, the program was unbalanced because it spent too little time on the hands-on aspects of teaching and too much time reflecting on the theoretical components.

Much of the research about teacher preparation addresses how well teachers are prepared to address student success, behaviour, classroom management, and curriculum delivery (Flower et al., 2017; Cochran-Smith, Maria Villegas, 2015; Koedel et al., 2015). It appears that more exploration of how teacher preparation affects teacher retention, particularly in Canada, is needed. Foremost, if teachers are unwell or not staying in the career, student's performance is affected because of the high turnover rate (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011; Laurie & Larson, 2020). Also, much of the conversations about teacher retention focuses on this being an issue of teacher shortage (Ingersoll et al., 2019; McCreight, 2000; Swanson & Mason, 2018) rather than the way it is negatively affecting those who embark on this career, only to realize that the job is too emotionally involved to maintain. At what point do we start taking care of our teachers, and how?

This thesis has allowed me to further reflect on how my own account of unpreparedness as a novice educator affected my personal life, mental health, and career in a way I never considered before. I validated this discovery (Creswell, 2013) by finding multiple sources of evidence within my stories that I was not sufficiently prepared to begin my career as a teacher. Along with not knowing how to write report card comments, I also struggled to deal with students who had trauma. In *At Arm's Length*, I explain how the main character sits a troubled student away from the rest of the class in desperation. Not knowing how this isolation could be further damaging the student's perception of himself, his self-esteem, and his sense within the classroom community, she makes this decision and then regrets it.

One could argue that my uncertainty about handling an extremely difficult class was also evidence of insufficient preparedness. As I look back on the class I was given in the story *The Pedestal Crumbles* with no additional support, it seems absurd, unfair, and irresponsible to not only hand over this situation to a first-year teacher but to any teacher for that matter. Even the most experienced educator cannot effectively manage and properly teach a large class with several behavioural issues and students with learning disabilities. However, instead of blaming myself for what I was told I should be able to handle, I now see the wider context of the institution.

Sinner (2010, 2013) tells the stories of pre-service educators and describes their journeys of becoming teachers. Sinner's research verifies that the voices of new teachers are often concealed regarding where they feel gaps exist in their teacher education. This becomes apparent as we hear the stories of teachers and note the continual difficulties that new teachers continue to face as they approach the profession. I also felt the overwhelm of becoming a teacher and the fact that I was unprepared, as demonstrated in my stories.

"As a first-year teacher, there must be a million new lessons to learn" is the way *Ready for Print* begins. It was the first sentence I chose for the first story I wrote, and this is telling. I pondered this line as a starting point and whether to include it at all. It sounded bland and even somewhat cliché. In the end, I decided it was the best and most direct way to get my point across. The point being that there is no way to know everything that you need to know when you first enter the classroom. However, from my personal experience and the teachers who I have mentored and known, there were massive gaps in knowledge when they began. Is it possible that teacher education programs need to reassess what and how they are teaching educators to ensure that they are mentally and emotionally prepared for the job?

Karsenti and Collins (2013) investigated the alarmingly high rate of Canadian teachers leaving the profession within the first five years. The most prominent reasons teachers noted for leaving were excessive workloads, lack of time, challenging students, and classroom management issues. Struggles with parental relationships, lack of respect, and support from administration and colleagues were also repeatedly mentioned by these new teachers. This study mirrors my own teaching background with an exactness that both reinforces my experience and also concerns me. The fact that new teachers tend to be the ones leaving at such a concerning rate could be telling us a great deal about how effective universities have been at preparing them for the career and also how school boards are onboarding new teachers.

Theme: Lack of Teacher Support

This is a vast category that could essentially be a thesis or dissertation. Even the subcategories of this theme each deserve individual attention. I will be addressing this theme in the broad sense first, and then more specifically.

Within the stories I have presented in this thesis, there is ample evidence that more needs to be done to support teachers in the work they do. Through coding the stories, the categories that lent themselves to this theme were: lack of administrative support, insufficient support for complex students, signs of distress, sadness/trauma, job overwhelm, exhaustion, and unrealistic job expectations (see Appendix D for a sample of the coding).

My experience is that teachers are not sufficiently supported in the classroom and in work outside the classroom to do their job adequately. There is evidence that teachers are leaving the field due to a lack of administrative support (Cancio et al., 2013). As I have stated in this thesis, the immensity of the job requires a great deal of brainpower, emotional energy, time, and physical stamina. From what I have seen, many new teachers are excited about giving their all to

the job and come in feeling like they understand that long work hours are indeed what they signed up for. The long work hours as a teacher are not kept a secret. What is not talked about enough is the emotional energy required for the job. Long hours alongside emotional experiences and the secondary trauma transmitted from students' distress becomes substantive. There is no way to prepare student teachers for this when even veteran teachers are struggling with it.

For this theme, two specific sub-themes fit well under this grouping: lack of administrative support and insufficient support for complex students. In these two sections, I would like to discuss these subcategories. I will address each sub-theme separately and explain how I derived it.

Sub-theme: Lack of Administrative Support. I feel I must "tread lightly" or be cautious in approaching this topic, yet it is imperative it is discussed, as this was one of the main concerns I had when I was teaching. While I encountered some very supportive administration when I taught, I also often grappled with getting what I required to do my job well despite asking for it. Sometimes, I infer that this falls back on not necessarily the administration's desire to provide me with what I needed but instead due to a lack of resources, whether financial, time-, or knowledge-based.

Talley (2017) explains that in the study of ten novice teachers, their perception of what constitutes lack of administrative support was,

> Lack of support with student discipline, not being able to trust the administration to be fair, lack of administrative consistency, lack of respect shown by the administration, lack of modelling by the administration, lack of administrators being considered approachable, and lack of building confidence or self-esteem among participants (p. ii).

There are many aspects of my stories that point to these classifications as well. For example, in *The Pedestal Crumbles*, the main character has asked her principal for help to handle the severe behavioural issues in her classroom. In the meeting with administration, the principal redirects the problems back onto the main character, giving her no suggestions or support.

As a veteran teacher looking back at the situation, I am dismayed at the fact that I was denied support for my predicament. Not only should a teacher never be forced to deal with a class so complex, for their sake and the students, but the shout for help was denied on several occasions and put back on the fault of the educator. There are too many instances where I have seen this take place, not only on my own accord but also with other educators. Instead of being given suggestions and additional supervision in the classroom, I began to feel that I was incapable of handling the job of a teacher. When I was told this was something that I should handle independently, I believed this and felt disappointed with myself and tried to push myself harder, ultimately ending up unhealthy.

McMahon et al. (2017) studied the prevalence and effect of teacher-directed violence, and one of the key factors that arose as the main problem was the lack of administrator support following these incidents. It was found that the lack of support after a verbal or physical attack from a student was the most upsetting factor for many teachers. McMahon et al. found that this particular type of incident makes it much more likely for teachers to have reoccurring negative emotions, reoccurring violent incidents, and a higher likelihood of leaving the school where the incident took place. While the stories I tell in this thesis do not tell of physical attacks, as a teacher, I, as well as many of my colleagues, have experienced threats and verbal attacks from students frequently that are usually taken lightly by the administration. McMahon et al. stated that "at the individual level, teachers' descriptions of lack of support included themes of feeling

blamed, unsafe, and disempowered. Teachers reported feeling powerless, forgotten, or scapegoated victims" (p. 511). This study found that "teachers frequently reported complaints regarding lack of administrative support including practices that make them feel disempowered, ineffective discipline, and problematic school policies" (pp. 512-513). This reinforces my findings that administrative support is essential when dealing with complex students and that lack of support can create immense issues in the well-being of teachers.

From my teaching experience, as demonstrated in *The Pedestal Crumbles*, there seemed to be an unwritten rule not to send students to the office to see administration. At some schools, this "rule" was more pronounced than at others. School culture communicated that the more students we sent down to see administration, the more likely it was to reflect poorly on our classroom management skills. If you were a teacher who sent students to the office regularly, then other teachers and administrators viewed you as a teacher unable to handle your class independently. At the other end of the spectrum, some teachers take pride in the fact that they never sent students to the office. These educators were perceived as more competent and skilled at their job. In my experience, at some schools, teachers are told not to send students to the office at all by the administration themselves. If educators are struggling to handle a behaviour concern, they are on their own. Unless drugs, extreme violence, or other illegal activities were taking place, I did not rely on the administration for help.

I would like to clarify that I do not consider sending students to the office as a punishment or an effective solution to behaviour issues; however, when dealing with a class of 20 or more students and behaviour issues arise, there is often not enough time or resources to appropriately deal with the situation. This is the reality of teaching. Appropriate behaviour management takes time, discussion, and often one-on-one support that educators rarely have,

particularly at the moment. A practical solution could be that schools have resources on hand in trained staff available to help deal with these situations. Instead, teachers are usually left on their own to manage behaviour issues.

The administration is the stronghold of the school. In the *Calgary Board of Education: Administrative Regulation, Role of the Principal* (2003) document, there is a lengthy and robust list of duties assigned to the role of the school principal. The list states these duties, which specifically apply to supporting teachers and students:

1. To fulfil the role of instructional leader, the principal shall:

   a. Promote positive attitudes in students and staff toward self, others, school, education, and the school community (2003, p. 1).

   b. Be responsible for inviting supervisory and consultative staff to assist staff members as required (2003, p. 1).

2. In attending to the organization of human and material resources in the school, the principal shall:

   a. Identify the general and special needs of the school population (2003, p. 1).

   b. In consultation with the Area Superintendent, determine an organizational structure which utilizes effectively the capabilities of the staff and meets the needs of students (2003, p. 1).

3. In performing the management function in the school, the principal shall:

   a. Be responsible for safety, welfare, and conduct of students while participating in school programs (2003, p. 2).

The degree, scope and expectation outlined reflects a profound responsibility of these duties alone reflects an immense workload. Are our principals and other administrators struggling with

burnout themselves? DeMatthews et al. (2021) describe the prevalence of burnout among principals and the factors that play into this. They suggest that principals should self-educate regarding self-care and create a leadership delegation plan and detailed annual plans to lessen the effects of burnout (DeMatthews et al., 2021). I find these strategies are ways to deal with the symptomatic results of a heavy workload rather than a systematic solution to improve the root problem.

From my experience, having solid leadership in a school can make a world of difference in the success of the classrooms within that community. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) explain that school staff's trust in their principal has a direct effect on student achievement and on the climate of the school. They state that principals set the tone for the school, and trustworthy administrators impact how educators interact with students and the community. Their study confirms that ethical principles, core values, and the skills and knowledge needed to perform these values are essential to building trust in a school community, essential to a thriving school environment (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015).

To further reiterate the importance of administrative support for maintaining healthy students, teachers, and classrooms, Fox et al. (2015) explains that,

> a positive and trusting didactic relationship between principal and teacher is essential for schools to fulfill their primary purpose of educating students. A few factors culminate to support the premise a) the cultural milieu, b) a call for effective leadership, and c) the demand for viable working relationship" (p. 6).

From my experience, the schools where administrators are actively working towards these goals presents in a positive manner and benefits the entire school community.

Sub-theme: Lack of Support for Complex Students. The stories I have included in this thesis provide a small sample of the complexity of students whom I have taught. It has been inferred that children and teens are increasingly struggling with traditional classroom environments due to our ever-changing world. According to Statistics Canada (2019), over 1.3 million children struggle with functional difficulty. These include mental health disorders, learning disabilities, social disorders, and physical disabilities. This indicates the immense concerns that teachers are posed within their classrooms as they work to address a range of difficulties that make learning for their students complex. Large class sizes leave educators less time to support struggling students. In my personal experience, this strain is detrimental to students and teachers who become exhausted, frustrated, and disheartened at their inability to help in the way students require.

In the story *The Pedestal Crumbles,* the main character handles the complex behaviour and learning struggles demonstrated by her students. In one particular instance, she attempts to break up a fight that has broken out in her classroom and becomes concerned about handling the situation, considering that the rest of her class also requires her attention. She must attempt to keep the two students away from each other to stop them from harming each other, deal with working the situation out between them, and also handle the rest of the students' learning and response to the situation. Without additional support, there is no way to complete all these responsibilities effectively. The stress is a great deal to handle and leaves the teacher drained and frustrated, contributing to burnout. These situations, although not always to this severity, are daily happenings in a teacher's world. There is an alarming increase in negative behaviour from students over the past two decades, and a study out of Ontario found that 72% of educators experienced a verbal assault from a student in the years 2017-2018 (Santor et al., 2019).

Additionally, 54% of teachers experienced student-initiated physical violence in these years. While it remains difficult to find data on the prevalence of severe behaviour issues in the typical Canadian classroom, these statistics give us insight into the complex behaviour that teachers like myself and my colleagues are regularly experiencing.

We also recognize individual students dealing with multiple learning disabilities, Attention Deficit Disorder, mental health issues, and trauma altogether being taught in a full-size class with no additional support. In the story *At Arm's Length*, the teacher is faced with a student whom she cannot seem to fully support in the classroom environment due to his complex behaviour. This clearly causes a great deal of stress for both the student and the teacher and has profound impacts on the other individuals in the class as well because the teacher does not feel she has enough time to support them all to the degree they would need. This obstacle pushes the educator to make decisions that do not align with her beliefs, values, and teaching philosophy. We can see she decides to move the student's desk away from the others. She realizes this is not an ideal solution, but desperation drives her to make this decision. When I was teaching, the decisions I made out of desperation were plenty. This act had a direct impact on my self-esteem. It was not who I was or who I wanted to be. When I made choices that did not align with my values out of necessity, I became resentful and frustrated.

To understand the choices teachers make out of desperation, I look to Britzman (2003), who explains the dichotomy of identities that teachers are expected to adopt. Learning to become a teacher is full of negotiations between self and societal expectations. Brtizman posits that teachers are,

> negotiating among what may seem to be conflicting visions, disparaging considerations,
>
> and contesting interpretations about social practice and the teacher's identity is part of the

hidden work of learning to teach. This unmapped territory, then, must be charted in ways

that can permit a double consciousness of how systemic constraints become lived as

individual dilemmas. (pg. 26)

This continual polarisation of identity contributed to my case of teacher burnout. While there is

growth that happens in this journey of finding yourself as an educator, it can become too

convoluted at times, leading to exhaustion. There were inordinate instances where I was forced

to enact choices I did not feel corresponded with my beliefs as an educator. Bodenheimer and

Shuster (2020) assert that "ambiguity permeates the conflicting interaction norms that teachers

are expected to balance daily, which may make teachers particularly prone to experiencing

burnout" (p. 72). This statement encapsulates my point precisely, putting forth the often-

underestimated fact that internal emotional conflicts impact a teacher's mental health.

The final example of lack of support with complex students within the data (noting the

examples in this section are not exhaustive) is in the story *They Wanted to Say Something*, which

depicts a student working through their gender identity. The educator can clearly see that the

student has something on their mind, but the student never actually comes out and tells the

teacher. Instead, the teacher discovers through other students. We can guarantee that students

dealing with complex emotional changes are present in our classes. While this example evokes

no negativity for the educator, the profound complexity of a student dealing with a change in

gender identity demonstrates the level of emotional circumstance educators handle daily. So

often, teachers are the foundation of security for students dealing with complex emotional issues,

which necessitates the need for teachers to be healthy and available. If educators are exhausted,

burnt out, or dealing with their own emotional issues, they can struggle to be present for these

students as the teacher in the story did. She questions whether she was there for the student in the

way she should have been, considering that she was so often working instead of engaging with the student.

The complexity of students in the classroom is an immense factor in the workload of teachers from my personal experience and that of teachers I have discussed this matter with. The complexity of a classroom can overwhelm a teacher quickly, leading well into the next theme—excessive workload.

Theme: Excessive Workload

Under the theme of excessive workload, the categories of exhaustion, job overwhelm, and disintegration of personal life were present (see Appendix E for a sample of the coding). A key realization I came to as a teacher was that the job is not done adequately without profound sacrifices. Sometimes these sacrifices are made by the teachers, and sometimes they end up being to the detriment of the students. There are aspects of the job that are asked of teachers that are simply impossible to achieve realistically. It appears that teachers continue to attempt these feats either to try to partially reach the goal or by making profound sacrifices to their lives and health.

An example of this from the data would be in the story *Ready for Print* when I discuss the immense work that is entailed in drafting report cards. My first attempt at them did not go well in this story, but even ten years into my career, I still found the task daunting. The fact is that teachers are not given any additional time for this immense task. There are precise guidelines for report cards at each school, and usually, this task is too larger to do alongside continuing to teach classes.

Also, in *Ready for Print*, the teacher ends up being asked to completely redo all of her report card comments in one evening. The initial writing took the character two weeks and many

hours, but a considerable portion needed to be rewritten. Although this is a very specific instance where unrealistic expectations were asked of a teacher, in my experience, this situation is not rare. Being asked to do tasks that are "too much" is common in teaching, and this contributes greatly to teachers' workload. Studies across Canada have consistently shown the excessive hours that teachers are working (Alberta Teachers Association, 2013; Ferguson, 2012; Naylor, 2001, 2010). Naylor and White (2010) explain that, teachers are working 10-20 additional hours a week outside of their regular work hours which has implications for absenteeism and burnout.

In the story *Spilt Milk*, the main character explains how they stay after school and came in on weekends to get the set ready for the school play. While this task is not necessarily unrealistic, to frame it around the other duties of a teacher that require out of class time (i.e., marking, phone calls, meetings, planning, report cards, and other paperwork), extracurricular activities on top of it all can become quite unreasonable. When this occurs, some tasks are dropped or done only halfway. The number of times I was insufficiently prepared for class is embarrassing to admit. The incomplete lesson planning was often due to staying at work late for other school tasks or complete exhaustion from activities completed the day prior. Often, sleep or meals were neglected due to an overabundance of duties. It is not rare for a teacher to miss lunch because they are assisting a student, executing an extracurricular activity, or in a meeting. Very often, teachers do not have enough time in a day to take care of themselves.

There are always new trends and initiatives coming your way as a teacher. They come from higher up, from the leaders who believe they know what is best for our students, and they are passed onto the teachers to implement. Within the school board I worked for, these initiatives are changed frequently, and from my experience, they were often poorly presented or presented in an already established system that did not correlate well with the new way. Since teachers are

the ones in the classroom who know what is best for the students they teach, this disconnect can become highly frustrating for the teacher and also the students. An example of this would be a push to do cross-curricular work between subjects in high school when a typical high school schedule is not properly set up to allow for the intermingling of subjects, such as in the story *At Arm's Length*, when the main character expresses her concern with not having time to implement an entirely project-based program with everything else she has on her plate. As a teacher, I experienced stress and guilt when resorting to the traditional methods or procedures because time had not allowed me to plan an exceptional lesson. The shame of this happening continually did weigh on me. I so often felt I should be doing more, working harder, and sacrificing more of myself to teach the way I was being told is the best way for the students. Hargreaves (1998) explains that,

> Educational change initiatives do not just affect teachers' knowledge, skill and problem-
> solving capacity. They affect a whole web of significant and meaningful relationships
> that make up the work of schools and that are at the very heart of the teaching and
> learning process (p. 838).

While Hargreaves seems to approach the initiatives as a positive, they also highlight the emotional impact of these changes and this demonstrates how important it is for new initiatives to support teachers instead of making teaching more difficult. I have seen education initiatives run through our schools like clockwork. While many of these initiatives have great merit, educators begin to lack trust in educational leadership when they are continually being instructed to change their teaching. I have seen teachers also become disheartened when what they are being asked to do by leadership does not mesh well with their classroom needs or when the new ways require even more time from teachers.

Class size is another aspect of excessive workload that teachers deal with daily. The Alberta Government has been unsuccessful in reducing class sizes despite claimed efforts (Alberta Education, 2019). In their 2019 Class Size Initiative Reports, Alberta Education states that,

> A review of class size funding shows that while funding has been directed towards the classroom, class size funding has been ineffective in reaching desired results. In spite of government providing significant funding to school jurisdictions and a focus on reducing class sizes for the kindergarten to grade three cohort, the class size averages have continued to increase" (p. 22).

In high school classes, I was teaching classes of up to 40 students in one single art class. On top of this, the classroom was so small that we barely had any space to move. In the story *Spilt Milk*, the main character states,

> The light was bright and shining in the windows of the room. It was always hot in that room—sweltering—especially when 40 bodies were all crammed into a classroom that should fit only ten comfortably. As a class, we didn't have the space to move, let alone create art. We didn't have the room to store our supplies or to dry our paintings. We had no place to be artists.

The truth was that not only did we not have room to be artists, but we also struggled to get around each other to get out of the room. It felt unsafe. In the summer months, it was extremely hot. These are not healthy conditions for teachers or students.

Huyghebaert et al. (2018) conducted a study exploring teacher workload, over-commitment, and its effect on teachers' well-being. It was found that,

Teachers' excessive workload not only affects their psychological health (i.e., emotional

exhaustion) but also negatively impacts their attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction) and

behaviours (i.e., performance and presenteeism). Our findings, therefore, confirm that

workload to be a serious issue to be considered to protect and promote teachers' general

functioning. (p. 608)

This study followed 884 teachers and these teachers reported increasing levels of exhaustion,

sleeping problems, presenteeism, and low job satisfaction. This study is another example of how

excessive workload affects teachers' health, performance, and, in turn, their students' success.

While these results are not surprising in the least, they are additional reasons for making changes

for teachers in the education system.

Theme: Breakdown of Personal Identity

A common theme that appeared in the stories was identity. The categories that

contributed to this theme were facades, wanting approval, teacher identity, and disintegration of

personal life. All of these categories have data from the stories that correlate to them, and the

most prevalent theme that appears to fit these categories is Breakdown of Personal Identity (see

Appendix F for a sample of the coding).

Mostly, the main character struggled with a loss of personal identity and confusion

around her identity as an artist versus a teacher. As she watched her personal life slowly

disintegrate, she no longer knew who she was outside of being a teacher. The saturation of the

job into her life was apparent as the work became almost all that she did and all she was. This

caused a breakdown of her actual identity. Britzman (2003) describes the sexist societal

expectations that come along with being a teacher. I also wrestled with myself to "fit the mould"

of being a "good" teacher. There is a particularly strong expectation that comes along with being a female teacher, as they explain here:

> Likewise, the backhanded compliment of "Funny, you don't look like a teacher," attempts to disassociate the individual from a social caricature. Many of these stereotypes, commonly associated with women teachers, are profoundly sexist and reveal a disdain for the teaching profession's female roots. In the dominant society, so-called favourable images that characterize the teacher as selfless also mirrors the stereotypes associated with women. Like the "good" woman, the "good" teacher is positioned as self-sacrificing, kind, overworked, underpaid, and holding an unlimited reservoir of patience. (pg. 28)

This feminine profile resonated with my experience which can be seen in my stories as the young teacher struggles to speak up for herself out of fear of seeming incompetent or aggressive. Fitting the mould of the "good teacher" becomes an exhausting feat often leading to burnout.

In *Spilt Milk*, as the main character considers leaving the profession, she faces a real identity crisis. I had wrestled with identity confusion for years prior to leaving teaching. I cannot say at what point I realized my identity was almost entirely wrapped up in the role of teacher, but once I comprehended it, I felt frightened by this idea. Attempting to remedy the breakdown of my personal life, I sacrificed my work's quality or let go of hobbies. Often, I was too tired to paint, so I let it go. I put the artist side of myself to the side to make room for my career. Despite it being frustrating to me, my career seemed like all that I had.

With that in mind, I would like to address the *She Wanted to Say Something* story further. This story is almost entirely about the idea of identity. The teacher grapples with her own identity alongside one of her students. When asked by her principal, "Are you an artist?" she is

immediately taken back. This question initiates a tangle of questions and confusion as she wonders who she is and who she is perceived to be. This moment was also significant because it initiated a desire to seek who I was and find the life path that aligned with my goals and that I wished for myself. This question ended up being the catalyst for further change. The reflection launched me into a journey to figure myself out and ultimately brought me to Montreal to study for my master's degree.

From the research that has been done on teacher identity, we can see that identity is a common concern for teachers and particularly art teachers (Anderson, 1981; Blair & Fitch, 2015; Hall, 2010; Sinner, 2010; Zwirn, 2002). I am interested in artist-teacher identity because I feel there are specific nuances that come along with being an artist and a teacher, which become increasingly complex. The contrasting societal expectations of who we should be are abundant with pressure. Art teachers are expected to maintain an active art practice, but many struggle with finding the time and the energy to continue once they begin teaching (Hammer, 1984). For myself, I had stopped creating art because I was tired, busy, and depressed. Therefore, the artist part of my identity began to feel as though it was fading away. I lost it somewhere along the line, and when I realized it was gone, I knew that I had to reclaim that piece of myself.

I was not only unable to create art, but my personal life was no longer active because I didn't have space in my life to foster it. Further research on how time constraints play into the breakdown of a teacher's identity is needed to make solutions. The breakdown of identity is a serious issue that further contributes to teacher burnout.

Theme: Connection

The final theme from the stories I would like to discuss is the theme of connection. I am approaching this particular theme from a different perspective than the previous four. The theme

of connection is not a concept that appears to have caused or exacerbated stress levels; rather, from analyzing the data, it appears that connection is a concept that helped me move forward. Multiple examples within the story demonstrate how connection improved my life as I struggled through my career. I have identified four main ways that connection has supported me, and these were identified from the thematic analysis categories (see Appendix G for a sample of the coding). I made connections through a community of people, during individual friendships, with students, and through art-making.

The first type of connection I would like to address is connection through community. This example is demonstrated in the story *A New Door*. The connections I gained within a community of teachers helped me to heal, grow, mature, and move forward in my career, and without that, I am confident that I would not have moved forward with the success I had. I felt taken care of and looked after. I felt responsible for caring for others as well. Filstad et al. (2019) describe belonging as "a situated and dynamic experience. It is about belonging here and now, through activities, common goals, achieving something together, being proud of the workplace and being part of something on equal terms" (p. 129). It is clear from the quote, particularly when framing it within the story itself, that what I experienced was a true sense of belonging within the school staff. Filstad et al. (2019) further explains that,

> Belonging is critical for understanding individuals and the processes of inhabiting and contributing to the workplace. Belonging to the workplace, and belonging at work, is linked to the possibility of sharing practices in the community, creating meanings, participating in common goals, learning through participation, grasping new shapes of identity through relationships with others, and changing personal investments, representations, and growth (p. 117).

This quote encapsulates the importance of a sense of belonging in the workplace. This sense of belonging was not present at every school I worked at, but the one school where I sensed I truly belonged was most definitely the place I flourished. In schools where the sense of community was strong, my personal experience was that I grew and moved forward.

The main character also found solace in friendships during her teaching career. As an example, in the story *Spilt Milk*, her friendship with Jack made staying long nights and weekends easier. Jack was someone she could talk to and relay her concerns about being a teacher. The main character identified with Jack as they were both struggling with burnout as teachers. When she sees Jack decide to resign from teaching and move away to follow his dreams, she is inspired by his bravery. Seeing someone she cares about making a difficult decision, ad follow-through makes her believe she could do so herself.

In *Ready for Print,* the main character has a friendship with a character named Michelle, and this relationship is another example of a friendship connection that helps this character get through trying times. Although initially, the teacher was reluctant to begin a friendship with Michelle, in the end, Michelle ended up being the person there for her through the grim evening of the report card rewrite. The main character became trusting of another person, which was key to building a new friendship.

There are numerous examples of how friendships were a saving grace for the main character in the stories. As a final example of how friendship connections were beneficial, readers see the main character in *The Next Story* allow friends into her life, including Vincent and Charlie, who help build her up during hard times. It was ultimately these friendships that encouraged the teacher to move forward with her career goals. Without these people, the divorce, abusive relationship, and stress from her career may have been too much to take. The absence of

these people in her life and in the stories would have made for much bleaker tales. These friendships provide a beacon of hope within the tellings. With these additional characters, the reader may perceive how there is promise within all the main characters' struggles. The friendships the teacher forms along the way are the ray of light that gives hope during the strain she is working through.

Much of the research regarding collegiality and community looks at these relationships through the lens of how it benefits teacher's professional growth or what effect it has on students. Hargreaves (2001) explores how the staff relationships in a school affect the teacher's emotional experience. They explain that "although classroom responsibilities are at the core of teachers' work, it is teachers' relations with other adults that seem to generate the most heightened expressions of emotionality among them" (p. 506). This confirms that these relationships would have a great effect on the well-being of a teacher. Shah (2012) found that "strong and healthy collegial relationships among school teachers is regarded as an essential component of school effectiveness and teacher enhancement" (p. 1242). They continue to explain that school leaders should work to create and help maintain these connections to benefit the school and the teachers.

The main character also finds solace in connection with students. While I have considered these stories may not give students enough credit for the joy they brought into my life, I also feel the wonderful ways students contribute to teacher's lives have been written about a great deal in literature. Perhaps, it goes without saying that students are the most prevalent reason educators teach. We have all been privy to the common understanding that teachers do not teach for the money. They do not teach for the holidays. They do not teach for the title. Teachers teach because they are drawn to the profession due to a love of students and a passion

for nurturing knowledge. I am no exception to this. My stories do give insight into a limited sample of how student connections have enriched my life. Spilt et al. (2011) states that "teachers' relationships with specific students can be primary sources of teachers' everyday emotional experiences and well-being because teacher–student relationships contribute to a basic need for relatedness" (p. 473). There is a validation that the work we do as teachers matters when it is possible to see the positive connections with students, as I demonstrate in my stories.

The story of *At Arm's Length* shows a dichotomy of two contrasting student situations. Both students addressed in this story had a profound impact on the teacher. She feels great sorrow to say goodbye to Mathew even though her relationship with him was full of frustration. The fact that he walks out of her life so easily has an impact on her view of her teaching relationships. As it is one of her first years' teaching, she is only learning how difficult saying goodbye to students year after year is and has not yet comprehended its implications. However, many years later, she is presented with information that a student in the same class as Mathew had thought of her as an adult that had a positive impact. This realization is a relief and yet also difficult to hear because this student, Sarah, is also struggling. She is left to ponder if Sarah is okay and hopes to reconnect with her one day. Although she worries about Sarah's well-being, she also feels relief knowing she has had a positive impact on some students she has taught.

Another example of the positive influence students had on my teaching career is demonstrated in the story *They Wanted to Say Something*. The student that visits the main character's classroom is a welcomed visitor as the teacher has the opportunity to nurture the student's newfound art hobby. The teacher explores her own artist/teacher identity alongside the student's quiet gender identity transformation. Although they do so silently, they both are subtle participants in nurturing each other's journey. In the end, the teacher feels confident in her

identity as an artist and teacher, and the student has gained the confidence to transition her gender publicly. This story is an example of how I not only taught my students but also how, along the way, they also taught me a great deal.

In the story *The Pedestal Crumbles*, we see another example of how a student and their family positively impact the main character. She can build a relationship with the two siblings after teaching them both in different years. Through this, she forms a bond with the family. She receives a considerate gift from them, and this gift solidifies her confidence she is on the correct path. Although these relationships are far from perfect, and there are hardships in the connection, we can discern through her inner dialogue that the journey is worth the connections she makes. Hargreaves (1998) studied the emotional relationships that teachers have with their students and how these connections impact them personally and professionally. They found that,

> Teachers' emotional connections to students and the social and emotional goals they wanted to achieve as they taught those students shaped and influenced almost everything they did, along with how they responded to changes that affected what they did. Teachers wanted to become better so they could help their students more effectively. The emotional bond that teachers had with their students was central to how they taught them. (p. 845)

This finding solidifies my belief that a teacher's connections with their students are immensely important to their well-being. While these relationships can be complex and require effort, it is the connection with students that motivates educators and makes the hard work worth the challenge.

Finally, I would like to discuss art-making as a connection. Creating art allows me to connect with myself. Writing, photographing, painting, and drawing are all methods I used to

connect my mind, body, and soul. Through these art mediums, I can reflect more fully on my thoughts, ideas, and emotions. This art-making process is a way of processing the contemplations that go on in my mind, which helps me connect to myself. As an art teacher, I found it nearly impossible to continue my art practice when I was exhausted, burnt out, or stressed. However, conversely, the art-making process helps to heal and rejuvenate me. At the worst point of my burnout, I stopped feeling joy and benefit from creating art. This was another sign that showed me it was time for a change. In the story, *They Wanted to Say Something*, the main character pushes herself to begin a painting after a conversation with a student. Beginning the painting was extremely difficult for her because she was so tired, but once the painting was complete, the teacher took great pride in the work she had produced. This painting was also a way for her to connect to her students because she decided to bring the newly created art into the classroom to share with them.

Hammer (1984) asserts that while we believe that teaching art and making art should fit together quite expectedly, this becomes a challenge due to the teacher's energy going towards nurturing our students' creative talents instead of our own. They propose institutions doing more to nurture teacher's art practice. This proposed solution could be effective as intuitions fostering teachers' art practice could benefit the art teachers' health and well-being, but as the teacher grows artistically, they also have more to offer their students.

From the data that has come forth through my stories, I can clearly see that connection through community, friendships, students, and art creation were key to maintaining my career through my years of teaching. Before this research, I had not realized how significant these components of my teaching career were. This new understanding has me considering how connection needs to be a stronger focus in schools moving forward. As Hargreaves states,

"Teaching cannot be reduced to technical competence or clinical standards. It involves significant emotional understanding and emotional labour as well. It is an emotional practice" (p. 850). The connections we make as teachers, in our classrooms and outside of it, nurture these emotional connections.

Online Art Exhibition: An Art Teacher Autoethnography

To show all the work I have produced for this research project, I have created an online gallery exhibition titled *An Art Teacher Autoethnography, see*

https://artspaces.kunstmatrix.com/node/5937749

There are components to the photographs and also to the exhibition that are contextual to this study:

The photographs were a method I applied to set a mood for my stories, and they were also response art. Being in these locations allowed me to process my experiences as response art does (Miller, 2007; Fish, 2012). These photos were also taken so I could stimulate my memory and respond to my past experiences as a teacher. They succeeded with this purpose. Visiting the sites and taking in a multitude of details to create art has forced me to deliberate, relive, and remember so much of my life as a teacher. The stories and the photos exist as one work of art to be viewed together.

The way I have taken the photos is not only to secure the anonymity of the sites, but it is also a symbolic representation of many aspects of my life as a teacher. The shallow depth of field in most photos represents a world behind me now. Certain aspects of my life as a teacher remain clear, but there is still so much that memory keeps from me, and the blur of the photos' backgrounds symbolizes this. While many photos represent this, the photo *In the Foreground* is

the perfect example of how shallow depth of field has blurred out the background details, which, as I am well aware, my memory has done as well.

You will also notice unique light effects within the photos. *Morning Sun, Is This My Spot?* and *Through the Looking Glass* are all examples that demonstrate this. I have used a clear prism in front of my camera lens to bend and distort the light. While I have often done this in my photography in the past for aesthetic effects, it has a more robust meaning in this work. At the height of my depression and burnout, noises and lights became difficult for me to handle. I learned later that this sensory overload is common in people with severe anxiety and depression (Bakker & Moulding, 2012; Brown, 2018). The glaring light distortion was an effective symbol of how abundant sensory overload had become at the height of my burnout. The reader of the stories may notice some subtle comments made by the main character referring to lights that are too bright. This reference is deliberate.

I have also had an infinity to juxtaposition within my photography. These paradoxes have often been presented as grunge or decay amidst the grace of nature or human-made creations against natural elements. My viewer may continue to notice this aesthetic in my work. What I did wish to become apparent was some of the decay prevalent in the foreground of the photos, such as rust, rotting wood, and other components of the school property that require attention. This intends to communicate the attention that the school board needs to put towards the care of their properties and their students and teachers. The rust and decaying property is a metaphor for a body of people—a community—that needs more tending to.

The titles of the photography all have prevalent meanings I intend the viewer to use as clues to the broader meanings of the works. While I want to avoid "putting words in the viewer's mouth," I wish for my viewer to understand some nuances of this body of work and also employ

their own personal understanding of the work. I believe when we have room to interpret art on

our own terms, this work becomes a piece of the viewer. The viewer may own the work in the

way they have interpreted it. I want the viewer to connect to the pieces and find entry points that

allow them to connect with the photography on their own terms. For this reason, I will not

discuss each photograph individually.

Chapter 6: Educational Significance

In this chapter, I discuss the data I have collected and the themes I have put forth and connected these findings to the research questions presented in the introduction of this thesis. I also discuss why this research is important to education and put forth possible areas for future research.

Research Questions

Question 1

Why are so few art teachers able to dedicate time to their creative practices?

While some answers to this question seemed fairly apparent to me even before beginning this research, the reasons I had difficulty maintaining an art practice while teaching has become clearer now that I have done this self-study. Stress and burnout were prevalent in teaching throughout various times of my career.

While I have discussed that art-making was a valuable method to connect with myself, time, exhaustion, and a breakdown of personal identity all played a factor in why I could not find time for my art practice. Despite knowing that art helped renew and restore me, there came a time when creating art had stopped being beneficial because I was burnt out and struggling with my mental health. When we no longer derive pleasure from what once brought us joy, there is a reason to be concerned about depression (Tolentino & Schmidt, 2018), which occurred in my account. Educators teaching in poor conditions are at high risk for mental health disorders (Borrelli et al., 2014) which I saw was prevalent amongst the teachers I worked with.

Before leaving teaching for further study, and even for a great deal of time after leaving, I struggled to gain happiness and enjoyment out of producing art due to depression. This makes me wonder how many other art teachers are going through the same thing. In discussions with

fellow art teachers throughout my career, it seems that time remains the most noted reason for insufficient art practice. While I can see this as an immense factor, I am now concerned with the possibility that burnout and mental health struggles are contributing to the lack of art creation for art teachers.

Although there was the expectation for me to have an active art practice, the career demands do not lend themselves to this expectation. I have seen that many art teachers struggle to meet the requirements of being a good teacher, let alone being a regularly practicing artist. This feels it is a negotiation of identity versus roles for teachers. Shreeve (2009) asserts that "identity is a complex issue of structuring and restructuring a sense of self in response to the world around us" (p. 152). Art teacher identity is a complex negotiation at the best of times (Anderson, 1981; Blair & Fitch, 2015; Hall, 2010; Sinner, 2010; Zwirn, 2002). The holding of both artist and teacher roles can pose significant challenges, and I have found this a contributing factor to my case of teacher burnout. Anderson (1981) sees the roles of teacher and artist as an infusion of two fairly opposing states of being. I have begun to consider the best way to move forward, knowing that identity may contribute so immensely to an art teacher's stress.

Blair and Fitch (2015) conducted a study with 25 art education students and 11 instructors to explore the dichotomy of being both an artist and a teacher. Using focus group interviews with the students, they found these students were discouraged by the difficulty of maintaining the dual role of artist and teacher. Blair and Fitch (2015) also found that,

> "[a] major theme was the shared belief that art education students did not seem to be taken seriously by members of either the Art or the Education communities. One stated, 'You're not artsy enough to be in the fine arts, and you're not education enough to be in the education classes'. Another added, 'At the beginning of the year when we introduce

ourselves as art ed. students, we have to prove ourselves. We have to prove that we're as

good …'" (p. 93).

As an art educator and art education student, I can empathize with this sentiment. This

dichotomy is also evident in the story, *They Wanted to Say Something,* when the main character

explains that she never quite felt she fit in as a teacher and believed that she had to shift her

appearance to appear more "teacher-like". In the same sense, she also felt she no longer

resonated with her artist self as teaching had enveloped her life. I relate with the pre-service art

educators in Blair and Fitch's (2015) study. Thus, while insufficient time is definitely a factor

that affects an art educator's art practice, I would also infer that this identity conflict impacts a

lack of artistic output when we become teachers. Future studies would explore how teachers find

the space within their lives and amongst their "teacher selves" to continue their artistic practice.

It would also be intriguing to explore the lives of teachers maintaining an active artistic practice

and how this affects their teacher and artist identities.

We can determine from the research that art educators struggle to maintain their practice

and artist identities as they enter the teaching field. Going forward it is imperative that we will

see pre-service art education programs address this problem and potentially prepare future art

teachers for this situation (Blair & Fitch, 2015). It also should be said that the education system

we embark on requires a greater understanding of the dichotomy art teachers face. Perhaps in the

future, there can exist further space within an educator's world for creative practice. Ideally,

teachers of all subjects would have the time to engage in the passions and hobbies that keep them

healthy and happy.

Question 2

Why are stories and photography as methods of inquiry suitable when investigating burnout in the lives of art teachers?

Initially, I chose the method of stories, life writing, and photography for this self-study because it felt "right." Intuitively, photos and stories seemed like effective methods to explore my account of burnout as an art teacher. Stories not only allow people to express themselves and process life situations but also communicate information to others. Since writing and photography are both passions of mine, it was natural for me to choose these methods for self-study.

Furthermore, I also learned how effective stories are for relaying the information I wanted to explore. Leavy (2012) states that social fiction is often chosen as a method of inquiry among social researchers for its ability to "rais[e] critical consciousness, [access] hard-to-get-at dimensions of social life, [extend] public scholarship, [open] up a multiplicity of meanings, [build] bridges across differences, unsettl[e] stereotypes, and [develop] empathy and resonance as a way of knowing" (p. 254). For these reasons, social fiction resonates with me, particularly the areas of extending public scholarship and building bridges across differences. I have hope this work I engage in will reach others beyond the world of scholarship. I want this research and the stories I write to be accessible. I want people to read my stories and have a stronger understanding of what it is like to be a teacher. I believe that when we are able to understand someone else's perspective further, it bridges the gap between people. The more of the public this work can reach, the more likely there is for change to come forth. Even though people cannot possibly fully understand what it is to be a teacher without actually engaging in the work itself, stories are a way to help reach others and give them insight into a teacher's world. Many

friends and family have stated that they had no idea how much work a teacher does until they were privy to my life as a teacher. Until we can see an experience firsthand, we often cannot understand what it is like to be in the shoes of another person. I believe that stories can give others a small taste of another person's world, and thus, stories are an effective way to give the public a more robust understanding of the complexities of a teacher's role. The natural progression forward is to verify and explore the stories of art teachers further as this is a step to create solutions to the issues we face.

I am pleased with what I could communicate about my life as a teacher and about burnout using the stories and images I have included in this thesis. As discussed in the literature review of this research, I anticipated this being a healing experience for me (Leggo, 2005). There were times during this project when the emotional impact of recalling these times was extremely difficult. Recounting some traumatic events was rigorous and taxing, which was expected (Strong-Wilson, 2006). There were times when I did not think I had the energy to keep reliving these moments. Looking back, I now feel that I have had the opportunity to process the difficulty I encountered more deeply, and as such, this project has given me the chance to heal on a deeper level. To add to this, as I enter into my Ph.D., the experience of telling my stories and using these stories as research will be invaluable as I look to keep life writing at the core of my future studies.

After engaging in this research, I feel confident that life writing and social fiction were the most productive and effective ways to explore the factors that contributed to my case of stress and teacher burnout as an art teacher. To my knowledge, there is no other method that could more thoroughly explore my teacher experiences. As a creative person and someone whose passion is to create art and write, not only was this an effective way to do this work, but it was

also the most enjoyable method as well. This exploration has been a labour of love, and although it was exhausting and emotionally draining, I am proud of this work and confident to put it forth into the world.

That being said, I would like to leave this section with the words of Sinner (2013) as they explain why life writing is the ideal method for the research I wish to do. They explain that teacher stories "have the potential to change structures of learning and teaching, and in the process, provide a suitable method to write contemporary teacher stories." (p. 9)

Question 3

How did teaching conditions in schools contribute to my personal account of burnout and stress, and, in turn, how might that experience inform the field of art education?

The self-study, writing the stories, visiting the sites, and photography were all activities that helped me further explore how school conditions contributed to my account of burnout. While there were components of the school system I already knew had contributed to the stress level when I was teaching, autoethnography has helped me to unpack and unfold other nuances that clearly contributed to my case of burnout. The themes I have explored in this thesis present an in-depth look at some of the school conditions that contributed to my career struggles. The themes of insufficient teacher preparation, lack of support (i.e., lack of support from administration and insufficient support for complex students), breakdown of identity, and excessive workload were all factors that played into my account of teacher stress and burnout.

My research also further delves into the often confusing dichotomy of artist/teacher identity. The exploration of stories of art teachers outside of myself would provide further insight into the complexity of these two components of self that often battle each other.

I also found that connection was a theme within the stories that helped alleviate some pressures of the school system I was working through. These connections made being a teacher easier and brought joy to my life. I have observed that schools tend to limit the time and opportunity given to teachers for these connections. Endless new initiatives, paperwork, meetings, and increasing expectations make maintaining a work-life balance a genuine problem for teachers. Conditions, including large class sizes, also diminish our ability to make connections. With classes of 20 to 40 students, it becomes much more difficult to construct meaningful and lasting connections with students, contributing to less opportunity for connections, which negatively impacts teachers and students (Chapman & Ludlow, 2010; Finn et al., 2003; Mathis, 2017). The lack of opportunity for teachers to make connections further diminishes their health and wellness, and they struggle through the complex aspects of the job.

The excessive workload of being a teacher also makes maintaining a full and enjoyable personal life challenging. Therefore, establishing connections with friends, family, and through creating art felt like a burden. I did find that my personal relationships suffered due to the exhaustion I felt from teaching. After time in the classroom teaching large classes and implementing extracurricular activities, when I did have time off, my preference was to stay home alone where I could rest. From my experience, too many teachers are sadly declining social activities because of exhaustion from the job.

This work in relation to art teachers has brought to light interesting components of identity and subject workload. Societal expectations often infer that because art is usually a hobby or optional course for students and therefore deemed less serious, that teaching this subject is less demanding than teaching an "academic" subject. The reality is that every subject comes with its own set of challenges. Preparing art shows and displays, setting out and cleaning

up supplies, supplementing the visuals for much of the extracurricular activity within the school, ordering and managing art materials for hundreds of students, and even the emotional complexity that comes with teaching a personal subject such as art, are all massive tasks in the world of an art teacher that often get overlooked. These components of teaching art in a public school are rarely mentioned yet extremely immense tasks. Although they appear to be mundane parts of the job, they should also be considered in future research on art teachers.

My experience is important to the field of education because it is not rare. From discussion with other art teachers, I realized that I was not alone in my dilemma. Being an art teacher is a wonderful and rewarding experience; there are many aspects to the job and within the school system that makes the career prone to burnout. In an attempt to establish healthy boundaries for myself, I attempted to decline the extra school projects I was asked to take on. I was told my job as an art teacher is so sought after that if I would refuse extra work, then another person could do the work and would gladly take my job. This is an unhealthy precedent to set, but it is happening in the school system from what I have seen.

As discussed in this thesis, I have also found various opposing roles and emotions that a teacher is required to uphold, which contribute to stress and burnout. To build and have positive relationships with students, teachers need to get to know their students. They develop relationships, and then these students have put much time and effort into getting to know come into their lives for a year (sometimes three if you are so fortunate), understandably, leave to move on with their lives. I found this circumstance emotionally taxing, and after a few years, I distanced myself from students to avoid the pain of saying goodbye. McCarthy et al. (2006) explain that teachers depersonalize to put distance between themselves and their students, which can cause teachers to disregard characteristics that make students individuals. This distressing

thought resonated with me. To consider that teachers are purposefully putting distance between themselves and students to avoid further discomfort hit me hard as I realized the truth of this for myself. What is less clear is the solution for avoiding this defence mechanism. Saying goodbye to students is an emotionally laborious reality that is overlooked as a factor for teacher burnout.

Considering the variety of emotions that teachers experience while on the job, we can see how burnout would be prevalent in this occupation. The stories I have presented show how complex these emotions can be. Bodenheimer and Shuster (2020) explain this further by providing the following example:

> In their relationships with students, [teachers] are expected to demonstrate warmth on the one hand (e.g., showing encouragement and empathy to promote student learning and well-being), and an objective emotional neutrality on the other (e.g., impartiality in terms of assessment and evaluation). (p. 64)

This dichotomy once again demonstrates the job's difficulty and adds another factor playing into the burnout of teachers.

Next Steps

There are many ways this research could move forward, and I have many ideas about how this work will proceed. I have considered further exploring how other art teachers have experienced stress and burnout and their account of the factors that play into this. I believe it imperative we continue to explore why this is happening. To bring in further perspectives would help strengthen the research and verify the points I have put forth. I have become fascinated with how stories speak volumes about the lives of teachers, and I am now interested in exploring other teachers' stories as well. The challenge of attempting to tell another teacher's story has captivated me.

I am also interested in extending this research beyond the province of Alberta. I would be curious to understand how other school boards are approaching the issue of teacher burnout—if they even have recognized it at all. Pretending that teachers are not exhausted and burnt out is not a solution. I have seen school boards attempt to reconcile the mental health issues prevalent in school staff by creating more work for teachers, for example, by adding a "wellness" component to staff meetings or having teachers plan a health and wellness day, which was the case at one school I worked in. This endeavour results in a superficial and even contradictory effect where more work is placed on the teacher's plate to appear as though the issue is being addressed. Teachers' voices appear to be absent from this discussion as administration and school boards attend to issues of teacher burnout. Exploring teachers' stories in relation to mental health and wellness and continuing the exploration through more comprehensive studies would further move this advocacy forward.

Ultimately, finding solutions to this issue would be the ideal next step. I had little success in remedying my struggle with teacher burnout- my solution was deciding to leave the profession. This research exploration has pushed me to look further into the solutions employed by the school board to maintain teacher wellness. Lever et al. (2017) say wellness programs for high-stress careers involve multi-dimensional components, including the consideration of medical, emotional, environmental, occupational, physical, intellectual, spiritual, social, and financial elements. With this in mind, the multitude of considerations for keeping people well is very involved. Unfortunately, most wellness programs in the workplace at this time seem to focus mainly on physical and medical dimensions instead of a well-rounded approach (Lever et al.).

Health and wellness research for teachers is a reasonably new area being explored. However, I find the focus on these wellness programs relies on educating teachers on taking care of themselves in terms of overall lifestyle, which does not seem to solve the root of the problem- the systematic problems within our education system. Large class sizes, lack of administrator support, complex behavior within classrooms, lack of time, and insufficient teacher preparation programs all come from the systemic problems which appear to be at the core of these issues. Further exploration on the root of the problem is needed – why are schools unable to provide the resources teachers and students need?

Smaller class sizes are important to improve the function and success of classes (Chapman & Ludlow 2010; Finn et al., 2003; Harfitt, 2015). I believe that this inherently impacts the well-being of a teacher. If teachers have fewer students to be concerned for, more time to devote to their students, the resulting success of both groups would be positively impacted. More specifically, art creation requires the space to move and interact with materials to learn and create. Students also should be comfortable in their space to be fully expressive. Smaller class sizes often correlates to more space to learn as there are fewer bodies in a small area. In my experience, the smaller classes also give an educator the time and space to interact and assess students in an authentic way without needing to rush to connect with each student. Chapman and Ludlow (2010) state that smaller classes "may facilitate 'personalized educational' opportunities for students that, in turn, lead to further 'action and practice' such as becoming involved in faculty research outside of class" (p. 120). My thesis stories also reaffirm their findings, demonstrating the necessity of keeping class sizes reasonable.

Moving forward, I assert that further behaviour support for classrooms and schools is required. Närhi et al. (2017) state that behaviour disruptions in the classroom can have

significant impacts on students' success and is a great source of stress for teachers. Their study shows that clear behaviour expectations and frequent and consistent feedback to students on expectations are helpful in managing behaviour issues. While I agree this is imperative to behaviour management, this technique is not effective enough for managing severe behaviour issues that can present with disorders such as oppositional defiant disorder. From my experience, more adult support is very effective in helping to manage behaviour issues in the classroom. Having staff available to support if need be or in the class working with students is essential to the smooth operation of a classroom. I often did not have adequate support for teachers when struggling with students' emotional or behavioural problems in the schools in which I worked. In their study, Littlecott et al. (2018) found that support staff can contribute significantly to a school system's well-being due to the time and space they can contribute to students and teachers. Multiple studies like this support the need for sufficient support staff in schools (Alborz et al., 2009; Blatchford et al., 2009; Howes, 2003). While most of these studies show how support staff can improve the achievement and success of students, I would infer this also translates to an improvement in the well-being of teachers. This knowledge demonstrates the importance of ensuring that schools are adequately staffed to support the school community.

In terms of teachers being sufficiently prepared for the career, teacher preparation programs are critical in ensuring that new educators have solid experience and knowledge base to begin. I would also add that I believe it would be essential for school boards to have adequate practical training for newly hired educators to teach the hands-on work and expectations specific to the board's regulations. Reflecting upon this, I am surprised this is not the case more often. Assigning new teachers mentors within a new school could also help to alleviate some of the

pressure of starting. Providing new teachers with a volunteer they can approach if they need assistance would set them up for success.

Last, I would like to address what I can see as a potential starting point for a solution to the struggles of identity that impact art teachers specifically, such as the perplexing polarity of the roles of artist and teacher. Hall (2010) believes that an integrated approach to the dichotomy of artist/teacher is beneficial. Instead of keeping the roles separate, they see the unification of two roles into a single role, each informing the other. While this may seem ideal, I see the systemic issues that make teaching overwhelming being a problem with this principle. Teaching duties usually end up overriding teacher's opportunity to engage in personal art practice. Schools not funded appropriately to support teachers and students creates an imbalance that further leads to art teacher burnout.

A potential starting point to improve this situation would be integrating more professional development for art teachers centred around art practice. Allison (2013) looks at professional development for art teachers in their research. They explain that "the goals and practices of [current] professional development are often disconnected, and this misalignment affects art teachers in unique ways. Art teachers are often "left behind," without the opportunity for content-specific professional development experiences" (p. 178). My experience as an art teacher aligns with this statement. I have found that many fine arts educators become frustrated as their professional development time becomes dedicated to topics irrelevant to their teaching practice.

The need for professional development that centres around artistic practice could have beneficial effects on teachers and their art and teaching practice (Conway et al., 2005; Lind, 2007). Lind (2007) studied the effect of 'high quality' arts professional development for art teachers and found that

there was a transformation in the beliefs and behaviours of these teachers as they worked collaboratively to impact arts education positively. The teachers reported a better understanding of their discipline, the content standards, student learning, and planning. While their teaching continued to be fairly directed, there was a change in how they planned and how they sequenced instruction. (p. 14)

While it is easy to see the positive effects that relevant professional development has on art teachers, I would also infer that it would also lessen teacher's stress and burnout, leading to more productive art practice and more effective teaching.

While we research the extent to which burnout is happening, there is no doubt that it is a problem, but how do we correct it? This is a complex issue that will take a great deal of time, effort, and analysis to begin to find solutions, but it is apparent to me that we can no longer ignore this issue. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching has become even more complex, and teachers are burning out at a much higher rate due to an increase in workplace demands (Pressley, 2021). As such, research is required to inform and create solutions. Sharing these stories publicly is a goal I set out to achieve. This is one of the most imperative parts of why I want to do this work. As we move these stories from the privacy of our artist/teacher selves, we bring to light the further needed explorations and changes. The more teachers who come forth to talk about these issues, the closer we come to closing the gaps in the system and improving the community of practice within the profession.

Conclusion

The physical and mental health of our teachers needs our attention. Research has shown a profound impact on public education and students' success if we have a culture of burnout in our schools (Kyriacou, 1987). Jensen (2019) uses the metaphor of a paper chain, which she, as a

teacher, creates at the beginning of each school year to place around her classroom to show students they are a community of links that hold each other together. Each link has a student's name on it and a phrase about their identity. The chain is reflective of the classroom as a community. Jensen prefaces her message by asking, "What happens when one of those links weaken? Furthermore, what happens when the one who becomes weak is the one holding the stapler?" (Jensen, 1:33). Jensen is referencing the teacher as the one who holds the stapler. This is a powerful metaphor for the stronghold of a classroom. Its significance is that the teacher keeps the classroom community together, and without that teacher, the chain never comes together at all. Jensen (2019) demonstrates how important it is to take care of our teachers through our continued sharing of our stories.

When the research shows there is an issue with how such an important profession operates, and when those operations are making their employees ill, it is time for a change. Overall, it is perhaps the general level of alertness and vigilance required by teachers to meet the variety of demands made upon them that constitutes the essence of why the experience of stress and burnout is so prevalent (Kyriacou, 1987). This vigilance and alertness are essential to perform to one's best ability and to maintain a safe learning environment. However, what happens when the class is too large, the behaviours get so complicated, and the demands so high that the teacher can no longer be fully vigilant and alert to what is vital? The educational significance is evident: Keeping our teachers healthy by providing them with the support they need to do their job is necessary and should be our primary imperative.

Research shows that teachers who are happy, healthy and have the tools they need to do their job well become better teachers for their students (Laurie & Larson, 2020). Students benefit directly from teachers being in healthy school environments. Yet, I find that this is often

forgotten at numerous levels, including administration, parents, students, the community, and sometimes the teachers themselves. In this thesis, I have compiled this information to make it available, accessible, and poignant to the lives of teachers. I have chosen an arts-based research design so my findings will come into the hands of those who need to hear it. After all, we are touchstones for one another.

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Appendix A: Quirkos interface with themes
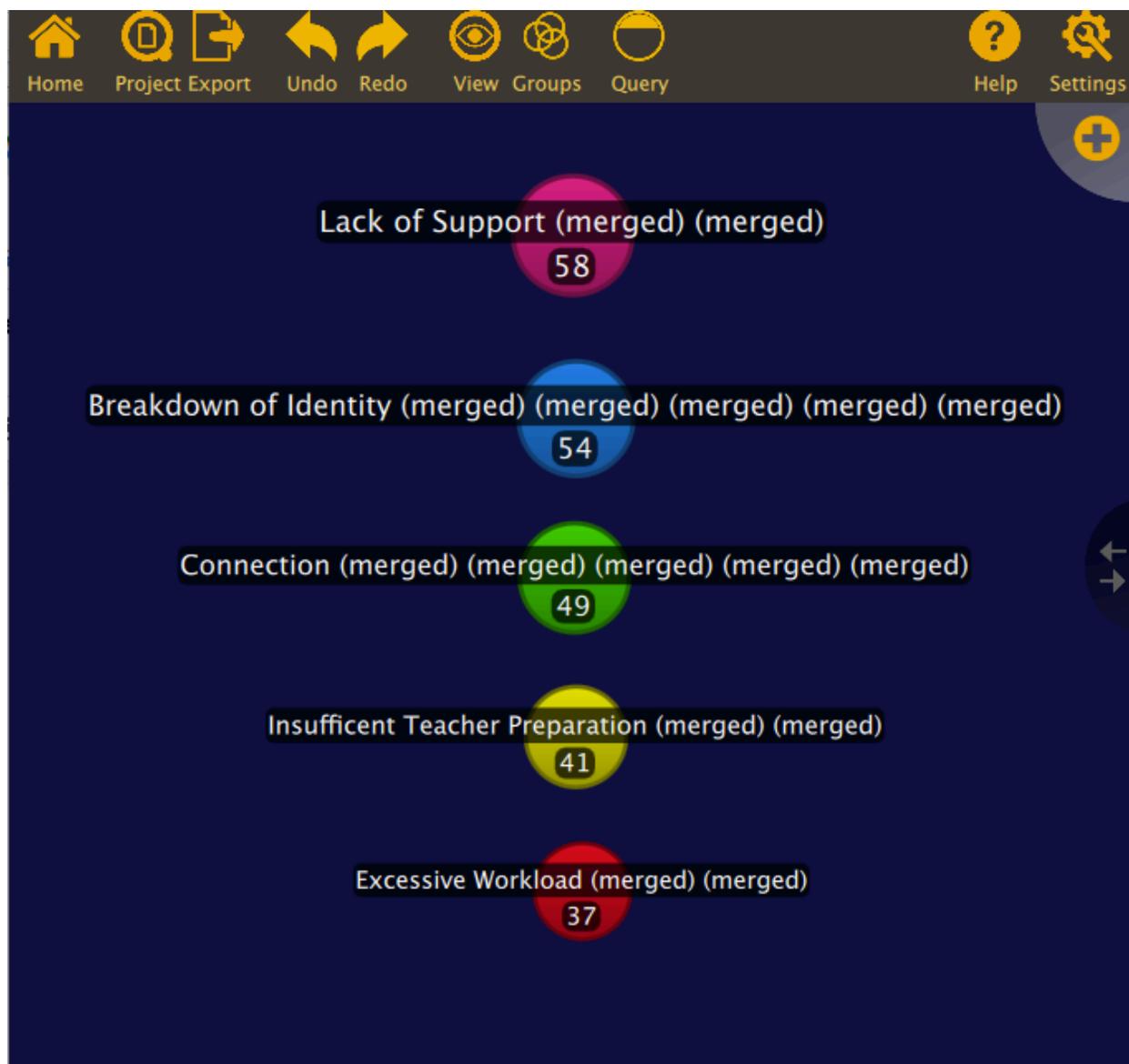
Appendix B: Summary chart of themes and codes

Insufficient Teacher Preparation	Lack of Teacher Support	Excessive Workload	Personal Identity	Making Connections
Feeling Uncertain Lack of Experience	Lack of admin support Complex students Unrealistic expectations	Exhaustion Job overwhelm The disintegration of personal life	Facades Wanting approval Teacher identity * The disintegration of personal life	Community Building relationships with staff Positive interactions with students Making art

Appendix C: Coding Sample for Theme: Insufficient Teacher Preparation

> My innate desire for my principal's approval resulted in me ending up spending a ridiculous amount of time working on the first draft of report card comments that year.
>
> Source: *Ready for Print - Final*

> But just a moment because over the weekend, I had begun to wonder how I had fared on my completion of them. I had put forth my best effort. I had hoped this was enough.
>
> Source: *Ready for Print - Final*

> Approaching the writing of my first round of report cards, I was apprehensive yet charged with eager energy. Surprisingly, they don't teach you how to do report cards when you get a Bachelor of Education.
>
> Source: *Ready for Print - Final*

> Coming straight into the classroom as a first-year teacher, I had never even seen one of the most important documents that we use to formally assess students.
>
> Source: *Ready for Print - Final*

> I had no tips or tricks up my sleeve at this point in my career, no shortcuts or clever ways around typing each comment out individually.
>
> Source: *Ready for Print - Final*

> My stomach sank. I blinked hard, swallowed and shook my head. "This is the first time I have done them."
>
> Source: *Ready for Print - Final*

Appendix D: Coding Sample for Theme: Lack of Teacher Support

> " I heard a scuffle. Looking up, I saw two students pushing each other and shouting. I rushed over and stepped in. Trying to act fast to separate the confrontation. It wasn't the first time I had to break up a fight in my class, and I knew the most important thing was to get them away from each other to cool down.
>
> Source: *The Pedestal Crumbles - Final*

> " When I could get the words out, I told her what was happening. I told her I was struggling not only with my depression but now with work - my boss, the students, the workload. I was worried I would lose my job because I couldn't get control of my grief. And mostly, I wasn't sure I could handle another criticism from my supervisor.
>
> Source: *The Pedestal Crumbles - Final*

> " . "It's been hard," I agreed, "That's why I have asked for help - suggestions, a support worker, an assistant - anything."
>
> Source: *The Pedestal Crumbles - Final*

> " The IPP special needs assessments were
>
> due at the end of the week. Each student on that list with a code beside their name. I still found myself paralyzed when I saw those 5 bold 42's on the page. A fear instilled in me in universitywhen we learned that the code 42 cv was a behaviourally complex student that requires a great deal of support. We had been told that they would rarely be in a typical elementary classroom. Yet here I was with five students with a code 42.
>
> Source: *The Pedestal Crumbles - Final*

> " The panic began to set in as I realized that the deadline for printing was tomorrow. They all needed to be redone by the following day. Carol hadn't extended my deadline and wanted me to redo an entire set of assessments that had taken me weeks to do - In one night.
>
> Source: *Ready for Print - Final*

Appendix E: Coding Sample for Theme: Excessive Workload

> **"** With the new focus on inquiry-based learning, textbooks and worksheets were discouraged. I did my best to avoid them, but today I would have to resort to these trusty tools. Planning took so much time and energy. Language Arts, Math, Physed, Science, Social, Art, and French - I taught them all to my students.
>
> Source: *Walking in, and then Back out Again - final*

> **"** My classroom was big and bright. 25 desks, all lined up in rows and a space to meet on the rug for stories and demos. The rows of desks were frowned upon by the administration. The trend in education encouraged groupings of desks in order to foster collaboration. My class this year was challenging, and the cluster of desks together posed behaviour challenges that could be subdued when students sat on their own.
>
> Source: *Walking in, and then Back out Again - final*

> **"** I felt exhausted from my regular school day yet was able to build such wonderful connections with students and teachers
>
> Source: *Spilt Milk - Final*

> **"** My frequent panic attacks, the longing for school to be complete at the end of the year, dreading work in the morning, and now seeing that so many
>
> Source: *Spilt Milk - Final*

> **"** The fullness of a day often elicits tiredness that sometimes forcibly pushes peace onto us.
>
> Source: *Spilt Milk - Final*

Appendix F: Coding Sample for Theme: Breakdown of Identity

> " I walked into Iris's office, my hands shaking as they usually did anytime I had approached her. She was so much taller than me, which was intimidating in itself.
>
> Source: *They Wanted to Say Something - Final*

> " . I told lies about how I was doing and about where I wanted to go. I embellished on my successes and diminished my struggles. I was clearly part of the problem.
>
> Source: *They Wanted to Say Something - Final*

> " I came in dressed more professionally than usual. As an art teacher, it's never a great idea to wear your best clothes on a day-to-day basis. I had a notebook in hand - a list of points to talk about because I didn't want there to be any awkward silences or moments where I didn't know what to say. I would often find myself struggling to get the words out around her.
>
> Source: *They Wanted to Say Something - Final*

> " One day she lifted her head from the sketchbook and asked, "What kinds of things do you like to draw, Miss?"
> "Oh! Well... it's actually been quite a while since I have drawn or painted." I stared into space for a moment, "I do miss it a lot, actually."
> "How come you don't then?" She asked very matter of factly - like it was really so simple. You enjoy something, you miss it, why not do it?
> "I'm too busy. Too tired most of the time. Teaching takes a lot out of a person," I explained, chuckling.
> "But you can't work all the time. You have to do things that make you happy, sometimes too, right?" She looked at me in a way that told me she was looking for reassurance. She wanted to know it was okay to spend your time doing hobbies. That work wasn't all there was to life. She was looking to me, an art teacher, wanting me to give permission to live.
> "Of Course...yes. You are correct. I need to make more time for art again."
>
> Source: *They Wanted to Say Something - Final*

Appendix G: Coding Sample for Theme: Connection

> " I sat at the cramped computer table in the corner of my classroom, and Michelle sat at my desk. We worked our way through the corrections as the hours went by. There were brief breaks for venting, moments of hopelessness where we had to cheer each other on, and the occasional tear, but we kept going.
>
> Source: *Ready for Print - Final*

> " That afternoon Michelle and I made a vow to sit down in my classroom and work together until we finished fixing our report cards. We would stay with each other until the job was done - granted, she had a lot less work to do than me. It was a gracious commitment. We ordered a pizza to the classroom for dinner,
>
> Source: *Ready for Print - Final*

> " It's your first time - don't worry. I've done this before. I did them last year - I shouldn't have so many edits."
>
> Source: *Ready for Print - Final*

> " One of the activities her clients were required to do in the program was to make a list of adults that positively impacted their lives. Sarah had listed me. They sought out my email to contact me. They wanted to reconnect me with her.
>
> Source: *Walking in, and then Back out Again - final*

> " When I gave him his space and encouraged his art, we got along as well as can be.
>
> Source: *Walking in, and then Back out Again - final*

> " I recall Sarah coming to me on more than one occasion about girlhood struggles.
>
> Source: *Walking in, and then Back out Again - final*