An Autoethnographic Exploration of Being Human Through Teaching and Learning

by

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Abstract
This thesis is an autoethnographic account of my experiences teaching in the British Columbia public school system. Its purpose is to provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between education and humanity. To this end, I use ideas in philosophy of education as the lens through which I analyze my experiences of teaching and learning. I argue that the education and humanity are inextricably linked, and because of this, the ethical response to education is grounded in relation; thus, our sole obligation as teachers interested in education and humanity lies in a responsibility to attend to the unique subjectivity of each of our students. However, I also consider the demanding and even impossible nature of this ideal, exacerbated by the institutional nature of the public school system. I conclude that despite the many obstacles to this demand, educators have an ethical obligation to relational pedagogy that enables us to meet our students as human beings.
Lay Summary

This study makes use of personal stories of my experiences as a teacher in the British Columbia public school system to help me make sense of how education can be used to create possibilities for students to live and grow authentically. To this end, I am interested in the relationship between human living and education, which I identify as a mainly philosophical question. My study is therefore a combination of philosophical ideas and personal narratives that illustrate the ways in which these ideas help to shape and inform my day to day interactions with my students. I conclude this study with the claim that education has the potential to transform the way we live with each other, and that as an educator I have a responsibility to ensure my interactions with my students are always guided with this transformation in mind.
Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work by the author, J. Mansour.
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Dedication

For my students; past, present, and future.
Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

We must learn to meet. Why? Because we must meet to learn.

- Bingham, Sidorkin et.al., 2010

1.1. Introduction and Research Questions
As a teacher, I have had the opportunity to contribute to many students’ learning and each time I see the same thing: the experience of learning is sometimes challenging, sometimes frustrating, and sometimes leaves you forever changed. Some learning cannot be reduced to the acquisition of new information; some learning changes how we receive, and give to, the world. For this reason, learning persists throughout our lives. Reflecting on my own experiences leaves me with the realization that learning, at any age, is uncomfortable, often involving frustration, risk, and sometimes, even fear. And while I may not always appreciate the experience while it is happening, afterwards I understand that my discomfort was my emotional response to an existential transformation. Each of the stories in this thesis is intended to show how my own life has been affected by processes of transformative learning.

When I first started teaching, I described my work as a humanities teacher as, “teaching teenagers how to be human beings.” It wasn’t until recently, however, that I started to think philosophically about what that statement means. Being human is a constant negotiation of the complex relations between reason and emotion within the context of a constructed social environment; often we are caught between wanting to be individuals and not wanting to stand out. Considering this, I find myself now asking how it is that I am supposed to teach others how to “be human beings” in a world as complicated and layered as I now see it?
During my education degree, I learned about Piaget and Vygotsky’s Constructivism. While this perspective certainly addresses the social and experiential nature of learning—i.e. students do not simply receive knowledge but rather construct it based on experiences—it does not seem to adequately address the profundity of the concept of relation from a philosophical perspective. In particular, the relation between teacher and student and the enactment of humanity in that relation were missing from the constructivist view. The idea that learning, and indeed living, is not an individualistic experience is not a trivial observation to me; rather, it is a point that is challenging me to radically reevaluate my approach to teaching. Consequently, I find myself wondering about the nature and role of relation in education, especially when I understand education as “teaching to be human.” Gaining clarity around the complex nature of human existence has resulted in a shift in perspective that has helped me to become a more ethical educator, although it has not made my job any easier; locating teaching and learning within the philosophical idea of relation makes it much more difficult for me to see them as distinct experiences, adding a layer of complexity to my interactions with my students that would not otherwise be present.

As teachers we do not always feel safe to risk learning; for instance, as a relatively young teacher with less than ten years of experience, I sometimes struggle to admit that I have a lot to learn because I don’t want to come across as lacking confidence or not knowing how to do my job well. The less we are willing to risk learning alongside our students, however, the less human we can be, and this has a serious effect on the type and quality of education we can enable. Realizing this difficulty has motivated me to think more deeply about the connection between learning, teaching, education, and Humanity. In her book, *Silent Moments in Education* (2011), Colette Granger observes that, “learning about...can only ever be partial at best...[and] is
insufficient: we must also learn from” (p. 13). I plan to use this study to help me understand what it means for a teacher to risk learning alongside her students, and how this can help me to live an authentic human life.

In reflecting on the difficulty I experience in my attempts to teach in a way that feels radically different from how I was taught to teach, it is worth noting Ivan Illich’s critique of the modern school system in *Deschooling Society* (1971), in which he warns of the “institutionalization of values” (p. 1) as being the main cause of inequality and injustice in the modern world. Though Illich is interested in how one might use education in an emancipatory sense, his argument that *by design* modern schools produce individuals of a specific type is an important idea, that closely resembles Gert Biesta’s observation (2006) that when we reduce education to a process of socialization we turn it into nothing more than, “a process of the insertion of newcomers into the pre-existing order of modern reason” (p. 7), we reduce education to merely schooling. Moreover, to accept that education is much more than preparing students to insert themselves into a pre-existing order, is to understand Hannah Arendt’s (1961/2006a) observation that, “we cannot treat children as though they were grown up” (p. 192); we cannot treat children as if they were fully formed human beings. The role of the teacher then, is to model the qualities of being human for the children in her care who are simultaneously “new human being[s] and becoming human being[s]” (p. 182).

In their book, *No Education Without Relation* (2010), Charles Bingham and Alexander Sidorkin claim that an important element of education has been forgotten, namely that “schools are places where human beings get together…[and] that education is primarily about human beings who are in relation with one another” (p. 5). Because of this, they argue that “we must learn to meet…because we meet to learn” (p. 5). But what does it mean for a teacher to “meet” a
student? This question does not have a straightforward answer, and it seems to be the case that there is not one way to practice relational pedagogy. Indeed, if one accepts that human beings are unique individuals, then it must necessarily be the case that there are multiple ways to practice relation, multiple ways to meet students. Thus, rather than being prescriptive, this study aims to provide a nuanced account of one teacher’s journey to “meet” her students. By remembering as Angus Brook (2009) did that, “[human] being is intrinsically linked to that of learning” (p. 46), I hope to contribute to the reconceptualization of teaching and learning with the hope that in so doing schools become places in which there is a renewed sense of education as something deeply meaningful and valuable in our shared world.

In this study, therefore, I have carefully considered the a priori assumptions about being human that I bring into my practice as a teacher and how those assumptions work to shape enactments of human being through transformative learning. By considering the following questions through this critical but hopeful lens, I hope to understand myself better as a teacher teaching others how to “be human”:

1. What is the relationship between education, ethics, and humanity?
2. How does being a teacher help me live a fully human life?
3. How does my understanding of education help me act ethically in my relations with students so that they may live a fully human life?

1.2. Research Design
I carried out my study in a small school district in British Columbia, Canada where I work as a full-time teacher. I have been employed in this district since 2012 and, with the exception of the first narrative, the stories shared herein occurred during my first two years teaching and my most
recent two years teaching. Selecting meaningful memories on the book ends of my career provides a greater contrast, aiding in illuminating the important themes across my experiences.

Because the focus of this study was an investigation into my professional practice I have positioned myself at the center of my research. This is not to say that I have not considered my students. Indeed, as Heewon Chang (2008) points out, “culture is a web of self and others” (p. 65); to explore the idea of being human in the context of philosophies that emphasize the importance of plurality in the world necessarily involves thinking about my students. However, since I am limited in what I can know about my student’s experiences, they have mainly been considered in the ways in which our interactions helped me make sense of my own experiences.

This approach is consistent with how Carolyn Ellis (1999) describes her approach to autoethnography:

Well, I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I use what I call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I have lived through. Then I write my experience as a story. (p. 671)

To better understand my personal identity as a teacher, I start by “recalling” (Chang, 2008, p. 71) memories of myself as a student; my research, therefore, begins with a personal narrative about my experience with institutionalized education, so that I may better understand the context from which I respond to and make sense of my experiences teaching; like Ellis, I have started with my early life as a student and then move into my life as a teacher. Combined, these narrative accounts of teaching and learning provide the autoethnographic “data” required to reflect on these important philosophical questions.

1.3. Won’t Somebody Let Me In?
Meredith read the last word, sat for a moment then placed the pages on the table. “That was a really honest, and powerful essay,” she thoughtfully replied, and with a sense of finality, in her
tone, declared, “you’re either going to crucify yourself with it, or you’re going to get yourself into U of T.”

These were no ordinary pages, as this was not an ordinary university application. The pages on the table contained the story of my tumultuous young life up to that point, explaining my journey in—and out—of the public school system in Ontario.

I had already resigned myself to telling the truth in my application, no matter how distasteful my choices may seem to the entrance committee. The program I was applying to existed so that people like me, people who didn’t follow the traditional educational life path could access post-secondary education. It felt like the only place where there might be hope for me in school yet. It felt like the only place where honesty about my life would help me rather than hinder me.

“Yeah, I thought that too. I might be taking a risk, but there’s no way to really mitigate it. I just can’t get around the dirty details of my life,” I joke, making light of the situation. The truth was, I wasn’t happy in my life. I hated my job and needed a change but didn’t know what else to do. School seemed like the only option. Even though I struggled in high school, I craved intellectual stimulation. I always enjoyed that aspect of school. I didn’t drop out because I didn’t enjoy learning, or even academics. I dropped out because my life at that time made school difficult. I needed a different program, a different approach that neither the school as an institution, nor my individual teachers were able to provide.

“What I am worried about are the reference letters,” I admit. I have to get an academic reference and I have no idea who to ask. Three high schools and not a single person I feel I can turn to.”

“What are you going to do?”

That was a good question that I couldn’t answer. My plan was to ask the administrator at the last school I attended, but I knew it was a long shot.

I walked up the stairs of my former school. Nestled in the heart of a quiet, suburban, middle class neighbourhood, the forest-green doors and windows artfully contrasted the building’s pale-yellow bricks. Even as an adult, I found the building intimidating; its clean lines and modern design, indicated a school prepared to educate mainly privileged kids with bright futures, but not much else.

“Hi, how can I help you?” inquired the office manager, smiling at me from behind her long, grey desk.

“Hello. I’m here to pick up some transcripts. My name is Jennifer Mansour.”

As she hands me the envelope, I work up the courage to ask about a reference letter. “Um, I was also wanting to speak to someone about a reference letter. Maybe the Vice Principal?”
“Well, let’s see what we can do.” As she looks at her computer screen her smile fades, and with it her friendly demeanour. “It looks like you didn’t earn any credits while at the school, so I am not sure what kind of academic reference he can give you.”

“I understand that, but if I don’t get a reference letter I won’t be able to get into this program. If there is any way that could happen, I’d really appreciate it.”

“Well, Mr. Price isn’t here today anyways, but I can give you his phone number. But I wouldn’t get my hopes up if I were you.”

And she was right. The administrator was not willing to give me a reference, “based on your academic history, we simply cannot attest to your academic potential in any positive way.”

I didn’t know how to feel. On the one hand, I understood that there really was nothing to indicate that I would be successful at U of T. I had attended three high schools. I had been suspended, more than once. I had forged notes and had awful attendance; I had failed many classes. That was all true. And yet, it still felt deeply unfair that this person who had so much power over my future could cast such a judgement on me. I was also an articulate, thoughtful person who loved reading and writing. I actually excelled at school until the middle of my grade ten year. That was when life got complicated and school fell apart. There was a story there, and this administrator was definitely not interested in what it was. In who I was. In my potential. I felt my hopes of getting into the university begin to slip away. I started to think about all my former teachers. Who would be willing to help me?

I knew it was a long shot, but I decided to send a Facebook message to a former teacher from my first high school, Mr. McMullin. He was an Art and Humanities teacher and we all loved him. You got the sense from Mr. McMullin that his youth was one of boundary pushing and experimentation. His bushy grey beard and large round belly were reminiscent of Santa Claus, while his gruff voice and personality betrayed the traces of a life well lived.

Sometimes he would come to the coffee shop where we all hung out when we were supposed to be in class. Standing in line for his double-double and honey crueller, he would often engage in casual conversation with the students. Students talk to teachers all the time, but this was not that. Teachers often, whether knowingly or not, have a sense of superiority in the way they relate to students. Being the “experienced adults” their ideas and opinions are often regarded as superior to those of the naive student. But our conversations with Mr. McMullin weren’t like that; they felt more organic, like a conversation between humans where ideas were treated democratically, evaluated on their contents rather than on the age of their speaker.

Though I had such fond memories of Mr. McMullin, I wasn’t sure he would be willing to give me a reference. I was feeling vulnerable from my previous rejection, and I didn’t actually pass his class. I dropped out before I had the chance. But my desire to get into school was greater than my fear of rejection. And so I wrote:

Hi Mr. McMullin,
I am not sure if you remember me. My name is Jen Mansour and I was in your Modular Humanities class very briefly during my grade ten year at Centennial Secondary. I am writing to ask if you would be willing to write me an academic reference. I am trying to get into the University of Toronto through a program intended for people who didn’t graduate high school. If I am successful in this program, I’ll get into U of T for the following year. I know I wasn’t in your class very long, but if you would be willing to give a reference I would really appreciate it.

Thanks so much,

Jen

The next day, I found the following response in my inbox:

Hi Jen,

Yes, I remember you. I think it’s great that you’re going back to school. I would be happy to give you an honest reference. While you weren’t in my class for very long, when you were there you were engaged and made many thoughtful and intelligent contributions. If you are okay with this, please send me the details of who the letter should be addressed to.

Best of luck and take care.

I never forgot that gesture. To this day, I believe Mr. McMullin played a pivotal role in my acceptance to not only U of T, but my entrance into the world of education more generally. Unlike high school, I excelled in this pre-university program; it was filled with people who had their own stories, their own struggles, but who, nonetheless, wanted to learn. And it wasn’t always easy, but the professors there supported us, intellectually and emotionally. Never judging, understanding that the rigid structure of traditional schooling is harder for some than it is for others. They helped us find our way, to prepare us for the very rigorous and very traditional university environment—and U of T was a very rigorous and traditional environment—and while I didn’t always succeed, I had a better understanding of how to navigate the institution, so that it worked for me rather than against me.

One year later, I graduated from the Transitional Year Program (TYP) endowed with an academic confidence that would eventually carry me through three more degrees. I had such an appreciation for the program and faculty and wanted to give back. For the remainder of my time at U of T I provided peer and academic tutoring to successive generations of TYP students.

Tutoring was my first experience of formal teaching, and though it would be almost a decade before I would do my education degree, it was here that the seed was planted. It was my years at U of T where I fell in love with education. Where I learned what education was and of its transformative potential and I have devoted my life to education ever since.

When I decided to become a teacher, I sent Mr. McMullin another message:

Hi Mr. McMullin!
Jen Mansour again. I wanted to tell you that I've decided to go to teacher’s college and become a high school humanities teacher. Turns out I love teaching! Thanks again for your support and encouragement. :) 

Hi Jen, 

Thanks for the update. Good to hear you are doing well. I know you will make an excellent teacher. Your students will be lucky to know you!

1.4. Thesis Structure
This thesis is an exploration of how I understand and apply philosophical ideas about education in my life; to do this, I combine elements of theoretical analysis with creative narrative. While I have asked research questions in the introduction, I do not necessarily answer these directly. This is because I believe the questions I have asked about humanity, ethics, and education, do not have one, final answer; rather they have many possible answers depending on the context and individuals involved in any one experience. Additionally, in keeping with Ellis’ observation that analyzing stories “transforms [them] into another language” (as cited in Le Roux, 2017, p. 199), I have deliberately refrained from a structured analysis of the narratives after the fact, choosing instead to allow the reader to form their own meaning, their own learning. This might understandably prompt one to ask how this work differs from the more literary tradition of autobiography. The philosophical analysis of theory provided at the outset of each chapter represent ideas that, for me, have influenced my analysis of that experience, and therefore, the way in which I tell the story. By trying to balance the emotive power of narrative with the interpretive power of theory, this work assumes an autoethnographical, rather than simply autobiographical, character. This, moreover, is why autoethnography is important: it confronts those who wish to deny the inextricable connection between theory and life. The integration of theory with narrative, in all its creative manifestations, reminds us that life is theory lived. This thesis, therefore, describes a series of specific experiences that illuminate how I make sense of
theory in my life, while hopefully not imposing too much on the subjectivity of the reader, so that they too are able to make their own meaningful connections. It is sharing these small but important narratives that I hope to provide an opportunity for not only myself, but others, to begin to understand how to live and teach as ethically as our imperfect nature will allow for.

The introduction of this chapter provides the reader with important background context both in terms of my positionality as well as the literature that guides and informs this study. Chapter Two provides the conceptual and methodological frameworks. This chapter contains the majority of the intellectual “heavy lifting” comprising the different philosophical theories that inform this thesis, as well as how I combine them to create my own understanding of what education “is” and how to do it “ethically.” In addition, I provide an overview of the field of autoethnography in general and the use of evocative autoethnography in this study.

Chapters Three and Four contain the bulk of the creative work, comprising mainly narratives that relate to two important themes in the larger context of questions about educating ethically for and through one’s humanity; Chapter Three will explore how teaching and learning can bring about existential transformation, while Chapter Four explores one of the biggest challenges teachers face when it comes to the delicate balancing act that is educating with humanity in mind, namely, the negotiation between freedom and constraint in the classroom. Chapters Three and Four each contain two narratives, preceded by short theoretical discussions of concepts that connect well thematically to the narratives; otherwise I have left the stories open for readers to interpret and make their own meaning.

Finally, Chapter Five concludes this thesis by considering the implications of this study and other questions that have arisen for me as a result; I have chosen to write a “summary of my findings” represented as an imagined narrative between myself as a new teacher and myself now,
showing how I have learned and transformed as a teacher and human being over the course of this study; it is the advice about teaching I wish I could have given myself seven years ago, and is the closest thing to a definitive answer I felt I could provide while still honouring the mysterious nature of education.

1.5. Literature Review
This thesis aims to contribute to the broader field of education research in two distinct, but interrelated ways: the body of research that seeks to understand how education, and more specifically, relational pedagogy, can help us live a fully human life, and, secondly, to the body of research on teacher inquiry, or “self-study” (Clarke & Erickson, 2004). My review of the literature suggests that teacher inquiry has gained significant traction since the 1980s, contributing to the, “legitimacy self-study has gained within the academy” (Clarke & Erickson, 2004, p. 72). Self-study refers to the broader practice of teacher inquiry more generally, of which autoethnography is but one method. Thus, while the literature reveals an increasing trend towards teacher-inquiry, I found that autoethnographies, specifically, appear to be in the minority among teachers engaging in self-study in K-12 education.

I suspect this might be due to several factors, including the complex and sometimes difficult nature of autoethnography, which requires deep introspection analyzed through a theoretical lens. It is about understanding not just yourself, but also the human condition (Le Roux, 2017, p. 197). As Merel Visse and Alistair Niemeijer (2016) argue, not all narrative accounts are equal; there is a difference between collecting stories and creating an in-depth analysis of those stories that is meaningful. Creating this type of meaning through deep introspection takes time, however, and while teachers and other interested parties (for instance the Provincial Ministry of Education and the British Columbia Teachers Federation) promote and
Encourage reflective pedagogy, the methods tend to be on a much smaller scale, focused more on “problems of practice” rather than more complex reflections on the interactions between the self and the world.

As a teacher who has worked full-time during the entire period of my master’s program, I have a sympathetic understanding of why there are relatively few autoethnographic studies of K-12 teachers: autoethnographic writing requires an in-depth understanding of theory and literature through which the teacher-researcher analyzes their experience. This is no small undertaking, and has demanded an immense amount of emotional energy, which at times has been very difficult for me to give. That being said, in the past year I have met several teachers completing master’s degrees who are also writing autoethnographies, leaving me hopeful that over time we will see an increase in these important research projects in K-12 education. The literature reviewed includes research papers from the field of narrative inquiry—of which autoethnography is a sub-field (Leggo, 2004, p. 97)—more generally to provide a thorough and well-rounded literature review of education and those doing research in education at all levels.

As mentioned above, developing an ability to reflect deeply on one’s practice, however difficult, is crucial to meaningful professional growth (Attard & Armour, 2005). According to Karl Attard and Kathleen Armour (2005), teacher education programs should spend more time cultivating a culture of reflexive practitioners by giving teachers the tools for “learning how to learn” (p. 202). The value of reflecting on one’s experiences in the classroom emerged as the main theme in Attard and Armour’s research. Being a reflexive practitioner is best served when small groups of teachers come together to share and reflect on their experiences in the classroom, through what Fitzgerald et al. have called “professional intimacy”:
A community where we could be professional and personal…For us, professional intimacy means we have created a community where we can talk and care about teaching, and speak about our teaching lives and what they are like for us, sharing how we fail and what we struggle with in teaching. (as cited in Attard & Armour, 2005, p. 203)

This description aligns with Anne Freese’s (2006) account of her pre-service teacher’s reluctance towards reflexive vulnerability and how that reluctance stifled his professional growth. Freese uses the experience of her student Ryan as a “mirror to reflect on [her] work as a teacher educator” (p. 101). Ironically, Freese learned that Ryan’s rigid definition of the qualities and dispositions a good teacher should embody, mirrored her inflexibility towards the qualities and dispositions of a good student-teacher. She reflects:

I misinterpreted his behaviours as either stubbornness or lack of motivation. I now realize that some students are nearly paralyzed by fear…This study helped me realize that my interpretation of Ryan’s behaviour and the obstacles he faced was inaccurate. I need to find ways to help students increase their awareness about themselves and inquire into their teaching. The challenge is to do this in a way that does not result in resistance, defensiveness, and shutting down. (p. 115)

By reflecting upon herself in the context of the experience of one of her students, Freese came to identify some of her own “contradictions of practice”; adapted from Wiggins and Cliff’s “oppositional pairs,” these are moments when our practice does not align with our beliefs (Freese, 2006, p. 110). This has helped Freese to realize the importance of trying to “listen for the uniqueness of each student’s voice” (p. 116).

Similarly, the importance of listening and seeing in the process of forming humanizing teacher student-relationships formed the basis of Erika Franca de Souza Vasconcelo’s (2011) work. Here, she reflects on her experiences as both a teacher and a student to understand what has made her into the teacher she is (p. 416). Through her research she develops the understanding that, “teaching and learning are first and foremost acts borne [sic] out of humanizing relationships grounded in dialogue” (p. 433); when, as teachers, we can’t see and
can’t listen to our students, they cannot become human; perhaps most insightful in this analysis is the recognition that seeing and listening require vulnerability— the recognition that even teachers are unfinished and imperfect, but that it is through a mutual vulnerability that we will help each other become human.

In her work, *Silent Moments in Education* (2011), Granger uses “psychoanalytic autoethnography” (p. 16) to analyze her experiences as a student, teacher, and researcher to better understand the “silent moments” in her own interactions in education where, “what is supposed to happen does not happen: when curriculum or pedagogy is resisted, refused, denied; when learners become stuck, frozen, or paralyzed; when the self, as learner, or teacher, grows silent” (p. 7). Drawing on Levinas’ idea of the alterity of the Other, Granger’s work is a thoughtful reflection on what constitutes an ethical response to what we can never fully know, the implications for education which “does not proceed in a straight line” (p. 12), and the tensions that arise in an institution that tries to reconcile this obvious observation with the desire to homogenize teaching and learning. While Granger’s work is different from mine in its firm grounding in psychoanalytic theory, I am particularly interested in her idea that, “learning about is insufficient; we must also learn from” (p. 13).

The diversity of these autoethnographies provides a body of literature that captures the richness and variety of stories that depict the unique experiences of the teachers who write them. For instance, though Erika Franca de Souza Vasconcelos (2011) and Jayne Pitard (2016) both use narrative techniques to describe the events that frame their studies, they have very different topics: de Souza Vasconcelos (2011) uses what she calls “textual snapshots” of her experiences as both a student and a teacher to illustrate the importance of dialogue towards cultivating a humanizing pedagogy (in a Freirian sense of the concept), while Pitard (2016) uses a structured
vignette analysis in a phenomenological study to understand how her own cultural situatedness impacts her relationships with students from a radically different culture than hers.

Similarly, in “Learning to Become a Learning Professional” (2005) Attard and Armour use excerpts from a reflective diary that Attard kept during the year of teaching in question to help him understand what it means to be a “learning professional”. Attard’s reflective diary relies on a technique of “emotional recall” to engage in “systematic sociological introspection” (p. 195). Finally, in her collaborative self-study, “Reframing One’s Teaching: Discovering our Teacher Selves Through Reflection and Inquiry” (2006), Freese uses the “constant comparative method” (p. 103) to analyze her experience of being a teacher educator by comparing multiple sources of data from multiple perspectives. She reported her data—the experience of one of her students in a teacher education program—chronologically over the course of a two-year education program. After carefully chronicling her student’s experience, she then reflected on what she learned about her teacher-self through her student’s experience of being taught by her.

Diverging from the analytic style, the artful narrative musings of Carl Leggo provide many heartfelt stories and poetic accounts of his experiences as a teacher in both the K - 12 and university setting. For instance, “I Wear Many Masks” (1993b) describes an experience of a student who inspires both fear and curiosity among the staff; in the end, Leggo accepts he will never fully understand the complexity and depth of this particular student, who herself admits she wears many masks (p. 54), an important reminder that we are always limited in the extent to which we can know our students. Leggo’s writing is diverse, and includes autobiographical, narrative, and poetic ruminations; “Running in the World Upside Down” (1993a) is a story about a young teacher (Caleb) who takes his first job in Morrow’s Cove, a rural community in Newfoundland, Canada. As Caleb struggles with whether he wants to remain a teacher in
Morrow’s Cove, and even a teacher at all, the narrator admits what we all eventually experience as teachers, especially those of us who work in rural communities or with vulnerable students:

His teacher education program had not prepared him for the soap opera quality of school life. His teacher education program had not prepared him for the grief, the loss, the frustration, the sense of helplessness that Caleb knows intimately day after day. (p. 83)

Lastly, Leggo’s “Questions I Need to Ask Before I Advise My Students to Write in Their Own Voices” (1991), is a creative, even poetic, rumination about an English teacher’s thoughtful consideration of voice in writing. As an English teacher, I understand Leggo’s grappling with the topic and his desire to, “court contradiction and confusion and consternation in my commitment to shake up and explode the notion of voice in writing” (p. 143). True to the title of the piece, Leggo poses a series of questions—almost one hundred in total—and a brief multiple choice quiz, providing no answers. Through this unique and artful piece Leggo reminds the reader, the teacher, that the point isn’t always to have answers; false conclusions, he reminds us, are not really endings, but rather, “an absence imposed for the sake of convenience—in this case the need to impose a boundary on a project that will not cease because it is limitless and inexhaustible” (p. 150). Though Leggo has reminded us of the limitless and inexhaustible nature of the concept of voice, I can’t help but feel that his comments can be applied to education more generally, an important reminder for all teachers regardless of grade, subject, or years of experience.

As the literature has shown, the value in narrative research in education, and specifically autoethnography is precisely its murkiness; it is this murkiness, in both method and life, that provides the space for researchers to dwell in the mystery and chaos of the human experience. Leggo (2004) exemplifies this murkiness in his own experience of researching a grade 10 writing class after which he is left asking: “What do I make of what has happened?” (p. 105). As
researchers and teachers interested in understanding the complex nature of education, narrative research allows us to, “make meaning out of lived experiences…[to be an] interpreter who stands between the chaos of experience and the production of a tidy narrative that represents that experience” (p. 105).

In addition to the literature in the field of teacher inquiry, this study also contributes to research in the field of educational philosophy in that it seeks to understand how education can help us to live a fully human life. To this end, I turn to research into the concept of relational pedagogy, but first I wish to explore Brook’s (2009) analysis of teaching and learning as an act of living as an authentic human. Drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger, Brook provides a phenomenological account of education that shows, “how learning is an essential characteristic of the being of humans” (p. 47). Though this thesis will not address Heidegger’s work in detail, it is worth mentioning some basic ideas, as his work has heavily influenced the work of those theorists and philosophers who I draw from. According to Brook, Heidegger claims that our everyday human life tends towards inauthentic, rather than authentic being. Authenticity, for Heidegger, “signifies a ‘truly being-human’…[and] is constituted via the notion of being-one’s-self, or becoming truly human; of caring for the sake of others and of being directed towards the ground of the sense/meaning of our life as humans” (p. 49). In terms of education, learning is synonymous with human-being because it is in the act of learning that we confront our inauthentic self (i.e., we identify and question the assumptions that inform our living), and, through this confrontation transform our being towards one that is more, “in relation with our living” (p. 50). Moreover, once we have done this, we then turn towards others and teach them how to do the same; in this way, teaching and learning are fundamentally inseparable acts of not only human-being, but also, the relational nature of human existence.
Moving more specifically to the literature on relational pedagogy, then, there does not seem to be one definitive and universal definition; this is not surprising as the idea emerged in response to the movement away from universal claims about education and is therefore an attempt to turn towards the particular in educational contexts (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2010, p. 3). However, this is not to say that there are no shared principles by theorists interested in relational pedagogy, but that the shared principles are descriptive and foundational rather than prescriptive and normative. The collection of essays in Bingham and Sidorkin’s No Education Without Relation (2010), are grounded in the shared assumption “that relations have primacy over the isolated self” (p. 2).

For instance, Gert Biesta (2010) argues that an important aspect of relational pedagogy is the “gap” in communication between the teacher and the student; this gap, he argues, “is a necessary condition for communication—and hence education—to take place” (p. 11). Biesta is interested in the claim that, “education is the interaction between the activities of the educator and the activities of the one being educated” (p. 12); if this claim is true, and Biesta wishes to suggest it is, then, he claims, education is “basically a relationship” (p. 12), and, moreover, that the location of education is in the gap that is created when the teacher and the student interact (pp. 12-13). If this is true, Biesta argues, then theories about education, are really theories about interaction; educational theory is, “not about the “constituents” of this relationship (i.e. the teacher and the learner), but about the “relationality” of the relationship” (p. 13).

Similarly, Bingham (2010) argues for the relational nature of educational authority. He makes the claim that in addition to generic authority, there is also an element of authority in education that has important implications for how and what we choose to value and from whom. Bingham, therefore, asks: “How does the student relate to authority during the learning process?”
To help contextualize the question he recounts a story told by a former student, Julie. In it, Julie describes her instructors’ responses to an unexcused absence due to a death in her family, noting how one particularly cold response affected how she related to that professor. The consequence of this professor’s callous attitude towards her grieving student is instrumental in highlighting the relational nature of authority in education: after that interaction, Julie no longer accepted the educational authority of that teacher; in her words the professor, “lost her authority as a teacher over me” (Bingham, 2010, p. 33). Drawing on the work of Hans Gadamer, Bingham shows the reader why Julie’s experience is significant:

The act of learning depends primarily on the acceptance that the knowledge of someone else deserves a spot in one’s own scheme of things. When one learns from a teacher, for example, there must be either a conscious or an unconscious acknowledgement that the teacher has something to offer that is actually superior to that which one knows at present. (p. 31)

This example is an important anecdotal reminder that how we respond to our students has serious implications, not just in terms of whether they respect us, but—and more importantly—whether they are willing to accept our teachings as important and valuable.

1.6. Significance
This thesis resides at the intersection between teacher inquiry as professional development and educational philosophy as praxis; as such, in thinking about the contributions this thesis can make to education I have two hopes: firstly, that my thesis and the stories contained within it will serve as an example of the legitimacy of autoethnography as a viable and valuable form of educational research and teacher professional development in K-12 education, and secondly, that the discussion of the relationship between education, ethics, and humanity is seen as relevant to more than those in academia, but as crucially important to any educator who wishes to take seriously the responsibility of educating young people.
As regards my first hope, my review of the literature has left me with an understanding of the fields of teacher inquiry and narrative research more broadly as a body of work that sometimes poses more questions than answers. However, it is precisely this reversal of epistemic expectations that allows teachers to be vulnerable so that they may peel away the layers of beliefs and expectations of about education, so that we can do a better job of educating for humanity. In doing this, we not only live a more fully human life, but we also provide the potential for others to live their own fully human lives.

Finally, as regards my latter hope, I am making a rather bold claim: that the only way to educate ethically is to educate for humanity. That means as educators we have an obligation to shift our ideas about teaching and learning away from the narrow focus of prescriptive, normative ethics and towards a pedagogy of relation that is grounded in the notion of plurality. It is my hope that in doing this, we might breathe life back into education by providing space for unforeseen possibilities. An ethical framework built upon the notion of plurality has the potential to create an openness in schools that is not currently present. This openness is necessary if teachers are to become comfortable with learning-from in addition to teaching-to, in other words, to be comfortable with the risk required to transform ourselves and our world.
Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

It is often well in considering educational problems to get a start by temporarily ignoring the school and thinking of other human situations.

- John Dewey, 1938

2.1. Introduction to Theoretical Framework

I have a confession: while I am very passionate about my research, I don’t always enjoy talking about it. This is because when I am asked what my thesis is about, I don’t know how to answer. Answers over the years have included: “I’m interested in examining relationships in education,” or, “I’m writing an autoethnography about my experiences of teaching and learning,” and, most recently, “I am looking at how shifting my understanding about what it means to be human might change how I teach.”

The most common response I get to what I think are deeply interesting questions is, “Oh. Cool.” This lackluster response never fails to tug at my insecurities. I, perhaps like most scholars, feel forever at a loss as to how to make my research sound interesting to other people. So, when asked again—this time by a researcher at the BCTF—I jumped on the opportunity to gain some insight about how to improve my pitch from a researcher outside of my small academic community at UBC.

“Those don’t sound like small ideas at all,” she sarcastically remarks.

“I know, right?” I quip, excited by our shared interest in my research topic. “I think understanding this question is fundamental to education. Unfortunately, I don’t know many colleagues who are as interested in these ideas as I am, but I also get it: these are huge questions that take a lot of time and energy to think through. I guess I’m not very good at selling my research.”

“Well, maybe that is part of your work. To help other teachers see the value in asking philosophical questions about education.”

“Yes, I have thought about that, but I don’t know how to do it. I don’t know how to phrase my questions in a way that makes teachers see just how fundamental they are.”
“Well, perhaps you could frame it in the context of inclusive education, which is a hot topic right now. I mean, at the heart of the conversation around inclusive education are questions about what a worthwhile human life is. Perhaps you could start by asking your colleagues, ‘who is a worthwhile human? What is a worthwhile life?’

It is this conversation and the questions that arose from it that provide the starting point for this theoretical framework. One might raise concerns about the lack of reference to education, per se, and to this objection I can only reply that questions about education need to start with questions about our humanity, because education is first and foremost concerned with humanity. As Claudia Ruitenberg (2016) argues, drawing from Biesta (2006), “[I] believe that schooling must perform a subjectification function to claim it is educating at all and not only training or socializing” (p. 4). Bringing school—and especially the modern neo-liberal educational project—into conversations about our humanity prematurely, runs the risk of confusing the point; I believe what is missing in popular discourse in K - 12 education today is a thorough critique of the underlying philosophical ideas about what it means to be human so that we may ask ourselves if what we think aligns with what we see in the world and vice versa, especially in our schools.

I am particularly interested in how this question has been answered by existential and phenomenological theorists and philosophers. This study, therefore, draws on the work of political thinkers and philosophers of the 20th century, whose ideas examine traditionally held beliefs about what it means to be human and live a human life (Arendt, 1998, 2006a, 2006b; Biesta, 2006; Ruitenberg 2016; Rocha 2015); questioning the idea of the “ethical subject” as rational and autonomous, first posited by thinkers during the Enlightenment era of philosophy, they seek to understand how this way of thinking has influenced—and continues to influence—education and pedagogy.
2.2. Hannah Arendt and Being Human
Perhaps one of the most rigorous thinkers to provide insight into what it means to be human is Hannah Arendt. Critical of modern philosophy’s tendency to remove itself from the tangible world, her book, *The Human Condition* (1958/1998), explores the activities that make up the “*Vita Activa*”, that is, the life of human action. According to Arendt, the activities that make up a human life are labour, “the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body”, work, or the “artificial” world of things, and action, “the human condition of plurality” (p. 7).

Being human for Arendt (1958/1998) lies, fundamentally, in “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (p. 7). Arendt’s work, therefore, relies on the idea that in a world without action life ceases to be human for, “a life without speech and without action...is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men” (p. 176). Action, for Arendt, is the highest quality of the human condition and is only possible in the public sphere for it is here that our actions are given meaning by others, and in this act, they come to occupy a place in the tangible world. Without plurality, all meaning in the world would be impossible, as it is only through speech that, “men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves” (p. 4).

Action is the highest quality of being human, precisely because it is through action that human freedom is possible. Thus, for Arendt (1961/2006b), “The raison d'être of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action” (p. 145). Action is intimately connected to the concept of natality, which for Arendt is the idea, that acting, or being free, is to acknowledge the
potential for action to bring something new into the world. In her essay, *What is Freedom?*

Arendt (1961/2006b) notes:

> Man does not possess freedom so much as he, or better his coming into the world, is equated with the appearance of freedom in the universe; man is free because he is a beginning and was so created after the universe had already come into existence: [Initium] ut esset, creatus, ante quem nemo fuit. In the birth of each man this initial beginning is reaffirmed, because in each instance something new comes into an already existing world which will continue to exist after each individual’s death. Because he is a beginning, man can begin; to be human and to be free are one in the same. (p. 166)

Man’s freedom, however, is threatened when we give in to the automaticity of history, that understands historical processes, “as automatic as natural or cosmic processes, although they were started by men” (p. 167). Automatism, she points out, “is inherent in all process, no matter what their origin may be—which is why no single act, and no single event, can ever, once and for all, deliver and save a man, or a nation, or mankind” (p. 167).

Arendt's concerns about automaticity in education are apparent in her essay, “The Crisis in Education” (1961/2006a). According to Arendt, moments of crisis become truly dangerous when instead of questioning our actions, we rather, “respond to [the crisis] with preformed judgements, that is, with prejudices” (p. 171). This danger is best understood through her concept of natality. Natality—which in its simplest form is that each human being is “born into the world” (p. 171)—is a universal characteristic of all humans, and therefore is central to her concept of human being. With each birth the chance for something new is brought into the world. Responses that attempt to suppress this quality of natality—i.e. a chance for the birth of the new and unfamiliar—in ways that are automatic and devoid of thought, represents a failure of action. A failure to be human, and to let human being flourish in the world.
For instance, Arendt (1961/2006a) points to the tendency in modern education to flatten the educational landscape by replacing the idea of the child as a unique subject with the idea of a child as a generic figure. Difference is at the core of the concept of plurality, but the scientification of education theory and pedagogy tells the teacher that they do not have to treat difference as central to human relations. When we fail to approach education in this way, however, we risk, “destroy[ing] everything if we so try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look” (p. 189). Far from prescribing a list of moral axioms telling us how to act, Arendt (1958/1998) undertakes the much more arduous project of defining what a human life, *is*. She is concerned with defining the human condition, rather than simply distinguishing it from what it is not, resulting in an incredibly broad, but universally applicable paradox: human life *is* human plurality, the one thing that makes humans simultaneously equal and distinct (p. 175).

2.3. Samuel Rocha and Education as Being

In his book, *Folk Phenomenology* (2015), Samuel Rocha undertakes a phenomenological reduction of education in an attempt to describe what education *is*. Rocha is not concerned in this work with the hermeneutic approach to education; he is not interested in what education means, but in the very nature of education:

The point, here, then, is not to accomplish the analysis of the being within Being, the being of education, or the limited but real sense in which education is best understood as a descriptive analog to Being. Instead it is to begin and end with the first question [what *is* education?] and, from that point, order all other questions accordingly. (p. 48)

Rocha’s work provides a valuable backdrop to my own research as it is a reminder that perhaps I haven’t thought enough about what education *is* to responsibly explore and answer my questions about pedagogy. This is an important reminder that the connection between theory and
practice is not linear; when we apply our theoretical understanding of what education is to the world, we must also be prepared to acknowledge when there is a disconnect, and in so doing, begin to fill the artificial gap between theory and practice. My reading of Rocha’s work suggests that when we make decisions about how to do education without first considering what it is that education might be, we are stabbing in the dark, hoping to hit our mark. These well-meaning attempts fail to consider whether the extent to which our haphazard aim may actually be extinguishing our sense of curiosity and wonder about the world, fail to admit that perhaps this way of doing education may, ironically, be anti-educational, counterproductive to human flourishing.

Given this, Rocha (2015) is concerned by the alarmist rhetoric fueled by a dangerous ideology of education as the “messiah” of humanity which claims that education “is the redeemer who saves children and the nation-state from neglect and damnation, from being ‘left behind’ in the global economy” (p. 59). The resulting crisis in education, he asserts, has come about due to a “confusion of desire”: we no longer know what it is that we want and, consequently, we no longer want to want it” (p. 70). For instance, education has become synonymous with economic productivity; this ideology is so deeply entrenched, it becomes very difficult to conceive of education as anything else. Rather than question this first principle, we assume educational crises to be anywhere and everywhere else—from pedagogy, to class size, to funding, to families, the idea that the true crisis in education is something much more philosophical is not considered. In this confused state we are so far removed from the truth of what education is and what it can do, we become confused about why it is education is desirable in the first place, the unfortunate consequence being that we tune out; from students, to teachers, to parents, everyone is turning away from a love for education.
It is important to note that while Rocha’s (2015) critique of ideology raises some discouraging concerns, his phenomenology of education is not pessimistic. On the contrary, his ontological analysis of what education is, reveals that it is “wholly irreducible” (p. 68), a beautiful mystery revealing itself as frustrated desire:

In it [frustrated desire], we see the enchanting effect that mystery can have. We may even realize that a mystery lurks beneath everything. What is this effect? Mystery causes us to desire disclosure. Absence is full of erotic enchantment that frustratingly leads us to desire, with or without— and many times despite— volition, will, or intention. If we were to admit to the mystery that is education, we would find this: Education as mystery reveals education as more, not less, desirable. (p. 70)

The idea of education as mystery is a powerful reminder that the act of assuming something to be the case in advance takes us farther away from the truth of education, as it is through such assumptions that we reduce the irreducible. While Rocha gives an illuminating account, his work, perhaps intentionally, leaves me asking many questions: How can I incorporate these ideas into my practice? How can I bring education as mystery into my classroom given the many demands of my job?

2.4. Claudia Ruitenberg and Hospitality
To begin to answer these questions, I turn to the work of Claudia Ruitenberg and Gert Biesta, respectively. Starting with Ruitenberg, her book, Unlocking the World (2016), offers a more general discussion of the ethical framework that could allow for this radical opening of the question of human being and education posed by Arendt and Rocha. Drawing on the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, Ruitenberg takes up the challenge of describing what educational spaces might be like in a world where the subject is decentered from the modern conceptions of the human ideal of rational autonomy. This is not to say that subjectivity ceases to exist, but rather as others have suggested, that the self and other are inextricably connected:
The unified and autonomous subject, then, is an illusory effect of discourse, a convention by which we identify a single locus of action—but this is not to say that there is no subjectivity or agency at all...The decentered subject, the I-who-comes-after-the-subject, is not reduced to inaction but operates in a mode of response. The mode of response is predicated upon the condition of being addressed, and the decentered subject, while still able to act, is no longer the origin of their action (Ruitenberg, 2016, p. 12).

Human existence is transformed from an isolated, solitary experience to one that is unavoidably plural. Understanding how human action as a response to someone outside of one’s self helps to situate Rocha’s description of education as mystery; that I do not know who I will encounter at any given time requires an openness to the world. This openness, a willingness to respond rather than to control is what breathes a sense of wonder and mystery into the world, and education.

It is this same interconnectedness that underlies Derrida’s ethic of hospitality: “[it] is a gift given by a host who is aware of their indebtedness to the guest” (Ruitenberg, 2016, p. 14). What is perhaps most important to understand about the nature of hospitality is that it is relational without being reciprocal. It is the host’s responsibility— in the case of education, the teacher, administrator, guidance counselor, and any other person who might hold open the door to the world for the new-coming student— to enact hospitality with no expectation of reciprocity. In an ethic of hospitality, the teacher’s only responsibility is to provide a space in the world for her students who, as observed by Ruitenberg, “did not ask to be born into this world” (p. 2) so that they can come into their own unique being.

This, of course, is no easy task, especially when the teacher’s job involves so much more than simply the mysterious act of educating. In a culture of schooling, enacting hospitality is a daunting task. For this reason, Ruitenberg (2016) reminds us of the ultimate impossibility of an ethic of hospitality:

Derridean hospitality is a gift that is impossible and imperfect, as it operates in the aporetic tension between the abstract idea of absolute, unconditional hospitality and the
concrete demands of hospitality in a given place and time. Hospitality is not an ethical ideal in the sense that, while it may be difficult to achieve that ideal, achieving it is, in principle, both possible and desirable. It is not such an ideal, because achieving absolute, unconditional hospitality would actually destroy hospitality itself. Therefore, hospitality is both a necessary and an impossible demand: the hospitality one can offer will always be inadequate, “for one is always failing, lacking hospitality: one never gives enough.” One has to do the best one can, knowing that one’s best can never be enough. (p.15)

Despite the impossibility of hospitality, we need not abandon it, for it is precisely this impossibility that makes it so appealing; traditional ethical frameworks in education are centered on the idea that an ideal is attainable. This admirable, though naive, approach poses challenges for plurality because it creates a false dichotomy between human life that is worthwhile and that which is not. If one is not striving for the ideal, then one is not achieving their full human potential. Ironically, this sort of uncritical acceptance of values actually diminishes our humanity as it erodes the freedom that human existence brings into the world.

Moreover, many of the morals valued by Western society are vestiges of a once largely white, male Christian society; demanding allegiance to any set of values without consideration of differences that arise due to class, race, gender, and culture, or any difference that we might encounter, risks an automaticity of ideology that harms rather than helps. This critical awareness is especially important in the world today, and even more so when dealing with children who are new to the world. As Ruitenberg (2016) astutely observes, “those who already inhabit the world do not own it...it is a general responsibility to share the world one happens to inhabit and to pass it on to newcomers” (p. 16).

Drawing on the ideas of Arendt, Ruitenberg (2016) is concerned with the injustice that occurs when—either implicitly or explicitly—our actions communicate to newcomers that, “this world [which we already inhabit] is not for you” (p. 17). When we allow a normative set of moral principles to guide our responses to who and what is new to us, we perpetuate injustice in
the world. Rather than allowing a set of normative principles to inform our actions, Ruitenberg asks teachers to instead let an ethic of hospitality—an ethic of response to what is new and other—create a place for newness to flourish, despite its potential to change the world we inhabit, precisely because it is not “ours” to control.

Providing a space where something wholly new can come into existence requires an ethical framework that is relational without being reciprocal; that what is new and other might make us uncomfortable is, for Ruitenberg, not a justification for stopping its coming into the world. This is no simple task, and for me, is perhaps the biggest challenge I face when trying to enact an ethic of hospitality in my classroom. Spending time and building personal relationships with students is a perfect breeding ground for reciprocity; the more time I spend with students, the harder it becomes for me to not have this expectation. Given that part of teaching involves building personal relationships with specific individuals, how might we act in ways that do not demand reciprocity?

I have attempted to provide a thorough and honest summary of Ruitenberg’s ethic of hospitality even though in doing so, I may be running the risk of deterring teachers from integrating this ethical framework. But before you dismiss these ideas, I ask that you set aside your fears, your inclinations to know in advance how to act, your hope to never err in your interactions with students, and instead hold close to your heart this fundamental question posed by Ruitenberg (2016): “will my actions make it easier or harder for a newcomer to find a place in the world?” (p. 114).

2.5. Gert Biesta and Educational Relationships
To understand how we might build more openly ethical relationships with students, we must first understand what comprises a relationship that is educational in nature. In his book, *Beyond*
Biesta (2006) describes the components of educational relationships, so that we may begin to understand how to engage in a world where the subject is de-centered. He asks:

How might we understand and “do” education if we no longer assume that we can know the essence and nature of the human being— or, to put it differently, if we treat the question of what it means to be human as a radically open question, a question that can only be answered by engaging in education rather than as a question that needs to be answered before we can engage in education. (pp. 4-5)

Biesta claims that educational relationships involve trust without ground, transcendental violence, and responsibility without knowledge. According to Biesta, learning always involves risk because, “to engage in learning always entails the risk that that learning might have an impact on you, that learning might change you. This means that education only begins when the learner is willing to take on a risk” (p. 25). The concept of risk is very important to educational relationships because to risk something inherently means you do not know what the outcome will be and this, for Biesta, is why educational relationships must involve a bond of trust. The trust is “without ground”, moreover, because “if trust were grounded, that is, if one knew what was going to happen…trust would not be needed” (p. 25). To learn, Biesta argues, is to intentionally accept risk. This is impossible if one cannot trust the teacher.

The second component of educational relationships for Biesta (2006) is what he calls “transcendental violence”, which describes the experience of learning. His discussion here is in response to the argument that learning is a process by which the learner, “acquires something ‘external’, something that existed before the act of learning and that, because of learning, becomes the possession of the learner” (p. 26). Biesta challenges this linear understanding by suggesting instead that rather than an acquisition learning is a response, such that “we might see learning as a reaction to a disturbance…as a response to what is other and different, to what challenges, irritates, and even disturbs us, rather than as the acquisition of something we want to
possess” (p. 27). The difference in these two conceptions of learning, according to Biesta, is that acquisition doesn’t require interaction; to respond, however, is to bring the world into your being, and your being into the world. Each of us, does this in our own unique way.

Understanding learning as a response draws attention to the idea that learning changes us.

That this transcendent learning is “violent” for Biesta (2006) is simply to highlight that to teach is to “challenge and disturb who and where our students are” (p. 29) without regard as to whether they want to be challenged and disturbed. Education therefore, “entails a violation of the sovereignty of the student” (p. 29). To think of education as violently creating existential disturbances in the life of the learner highlights the immense responsibility of teachers. However, it should be noted that the responsibility does not lie in trying to change this aspect of educational relationships, but rather, to ensure that as teachers we engage in pedagogy that provides the safest possible environment for students to have these experiences; “safety” here does not mean the elimination of risk—as that would mean the elimination of learning—but rather the condition for living with risk.

This brings us to Biesta’s (2006) last component of educational relationships which is “responsibility without knowledge”. Biesta notes that understanding education as a “violent disturbance” means that the act of teaching involves an “immense responsibility…for the subjectivity of each student” (pp. 29–30). That is, each student will have their own unique response to the world, and the job of the teacher is to attend to that uniqueness in a radically open way. To teach with this awareness requires that teachers understand that there is no way to predict the variety of responses one might encounter; despite our best efforts to the contrary, there is no formula, no calculation, no pedagogy that can predict human being. We must, therefore, take on the responsibility of helping our students come into the world knowing that we
will never know beforehand what that will look like, even if it makes us uncomfortable or unsure. It is this willingness to risk—what Biesta calls a “commitment to education and its undoing” (p. 116)—that will enable teachers to create truly hospitable classrooms. To remain committed to this paradox, is to realize as Arendt (1961/2006a) did that:

The role played by education in all political utopias from ancient times onwards shows how natural it seems to start a new world with those who are by birth and nature new. So far as politics is concerned, this involves a course of serious misconception: instead of joining with one’s equals in assuming the effects of persuasion and running the risk of failure, there is dictatorial intervention, based upon the absolute superiority of the adult, and the attempt to produce the new as a fait accompli, that is as though the new already existed…Education [therefore] can play no part in politics, because in politics we always have to deal with those who are already educated. (p. 173)

2.6. Introduction to Methodology
This study will employ an autoethnographic method of reflexive self-inquiry so that I may better understand the relationship between education, ethics, and humanity. For teachers who are interested in understanding the relationship between the self and the world, autoethnography provides “a process of self-exploration and interrogation [that] aids individuals in locating themselves within their own history and culture [,] allowing them to broaden their understanding of their own values in relation to others” (Starr, 2010, p. 1). Through the use of autoethnographic methods of inquiry, I will identify important connections between my philosophy, my practice, and my own humanity, so that I may begin to understand the broader social and cultural values that shape my experiences (Austin & Hickey, 2007, p. 1).

2.7. Autoethnographic Methods in Education Research
There are multiple ways to conduct autoethnographic research. Cheryl Le Roux (2017) understands autoethnographic research methods as a continuum with evocative autoethnography on one end and analytic autoethnography on the other (p. 198). As the latter suggests, analytic
autoethnography tends towards more objective methods of data collection and interpretation including the use of empirical data, fieldwork, and systematic analysis, while evocative ethnography focuses on description, vulnerability, and emotional resonance, with less concern for researcher objectivity and neutrality (p. 199).

An example of analytic autoethnography can be found in Jayne Pitard’s (2016) vignette analysis; in her study, Pitard conducts a structured analysis of a series of vignettes (short, descriptive stories) to understand her experience of teaching students from a different culture. Though Pitard’s vignettes are written in a narrative style, each story undergoes the same analysis: context (of the experience), anecdote (or, vignette), emotional response, reflexivity, and finally strategies. Although she represents her process visually as a circle, her method proceeds in a linear, analytic fashion as she moves through each stage to make sense of her experience of cross-cultural teaching.

Pitard’s analytic approach is drastically different from the evocative style of Carolyn Ellis who in her keynote address, “Heartful Autoethnography” (1999), intertwines theory, dialogue, and description, using literary prose to tell the story of a PhD student learning about autoethnography and how that experience changed her, not only as a researcher, but as a human being. Through this story, Ellis shows the reader that autoethnography is “closer to art than science” and therefore the researcher’s goal is, “not so much to portray the facts of what happened to you accurately but instead to convey the meanings you attached to the experience” (p. 674).

These two styles present the opposite ends of the spectrum of autoethnographic research methods, however, there are also many examples of autoethnographies that fall somewhere in between the two. Where education research is concerned, autoethnography is still an emerging
methodology, but, it is being increasingly recognized as a valuable tool for teachers who are interested in developing a reflexive practice (for example, Freese, Pitard, de Souza Vasconcelos, Attard & Armour) since it, “opens up a wider lens on the world by avoiding rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research” (Le Roux, 2017, p.198).

2.8 Vulnerability in Autoethnographic Research
At first glance the autoethnographies explored above may seem distinct, but they share the common quality of vulnerability. This is especially true of evocative autoethnographies which Ellis (2004) has described as, “being sent into the woods without a compass” (as cited in Wall, 2005, p. 5). As a researcher, to have no clear vision of where you are going or how you will get there is intimidating. To be in that same predicament when the “stuff” that is being studied is one’s self is incomprehensible to many researchers. And rightly so. It is perhaps one of the most unstable forms of research; however, because of the instability, the uncertainty, it is also one of the most valuable forms of research I can engage with as a researcher who understands education as a series of unique and unpredictable encounters.

In her book, The Vulnerable Observer (1996) Ruth Behar muses that, “nothing is stranger than this business of humans observing other humans in order to write about them” (p. 5). I can’t help but be struck by this comment, which fully comes to life in her description of the cycle of anthropological academic research:

But when the grant money runs out, or the summer vacation is over, please stand up, dust yourself off, go to your desk, and write down what you saw and heard. Relate it to something you’ve read by Marx, Weber, Gramsci, or Geertz and you’re on your way to doing anthropology. (p. 5)

The sarcasm underlying this passage is not out of place; the more time you spend with a group of people, whether a rural tribe halfway around the world, or a group of children in a classroom, the
harder it becomes to tease apart your individual humanity. This awareness speaks to the well-meaning, but insidious nature of scientific hegemony when we forget that, simply put, not all questions about humanity are scientific questions. Some of our most important questions about humanity reside beyond the realm of scientific certainty. I agree with Behar, that it is strange that as humans we like to watch and write about other humans, but I also think that humans are peculiar creatures, and in that sense, I would expect nothing less of us. Our reasons for wanting to do this are as varied as our reasons of how we might best do this; in my attempt to observe and write about others, I will acknowledge the subjective, partial, and heartfelt way in which I exist in the world and do my best to honour the complexity of my story and those who are part of it. To this end, my study will, hopefully, align more closely with the tradition and feel of evocative autoethnography than that of its analytical counterpart. My ability to be vulnerable here requires that I admit that I sometimes err in my judgement, that I struggle with some of the choices I make in the classroom, that I don’t have a lot of the answers I wish I did. I am an emotional being who lives her life through her heart as much as her brain and for that reason, it ought also to be the lens through which I critically examine myself in the world, as a teacher, an ethical subject, a human being.

2.9. Limitations of Autoethnography
Every methodology has its limitations. In the case of autoethnography, limitations emerge due to our comfort and familiarity with traditional, scientific conceptions of research methods that generate “legitimate” knowledge with features such as reliability and validity, generalizability, and objectivity (Le Roux, 2017, p. 198). The consequence of this adherence to tradition is that “expert knowledge is socially sanctioned in a way that common sense or personal knowledge is not” (Wall, 2006, p. 8).
Autoethnography does not only result from challenges to hegemonic conceptions of knowledge production, but in the words of Le Roux (2017) it “accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and researcher influence” (p. 198); autoethnography, thus, embraces human subjectivity, providing a place for research that gets at the core of what it means to live a life that is human. Embracing subjectivities, however, requires that we rethink what counts as “good research”; this is especially true of the idea that research that is valuable is research that is generalizable. Many autoethnographers challenge the idea that generalizability is what we should aspire to when trying to understand ourselves in a contextually determined world. Granger (2011) notes that the point of subjective methodologies like autoethnography is that they are limited to the personal; for her, the value of autoethnographic research is not its scope but its depth, for both the researcher and the reader:

The moments I recall, narrate, and interpret may open up possibilities for others to think in similar ways about different moments in education, or in different ways about similar moments or even about different moments in different ways – because sometimes there are surprises. (p. 10)

A similar sentiment is echoed in Kate Reid’s (2015) master’s thesis; autoethnographic research, she writes, “requires that the audience do some work at interpreting the art and the research based on their own perspectives” (p. 94). Scholars who expect research to provide objective and true “answers” might find autoethnographic research unsettling and unsatisfying.

Connected to criticisms of objectivity and generalizability are concerns about the validity and reliability of research data that is grounded in memory. For instance, Chang (2008) notes the unreliability of memory as it, “selects, shapes, limits, and distorts the past” (p. 72). She acknowledges that despite the shakiness of memory, it can still provide a rich source of data in autoethnographic research. This sentiment is echoed in “Narrative Inquiry: Honouring the Complexity of the Stories We Live” (2004) in which Leggo acknowledges the challenges
inherent in narrative inquiries like autoethnography that “never tell the whole story” (p. 98), reminding both writers and readers of autoethnography to, “be constantly aware of the complexity of the [complete] stories we live” (p. 98).

Ellis (1999) confronts these challenges by noting that the goal of autoethnography is, “not so much about [telling] the facts of what happened to you accurately, but instead to convey the meanings you attach to the experience (p. 674). If the value in autoethnography lies in its embrace of human subjectivity, then we must accept that “facts” simply don’t carry the same epistemological weight as they do in other, more scientific, methodologies. This isn’t to say that facts never matter, but rather that the concept “fact” relies on a certain way of understanding truth that is neither natural nor always necessary, but rather, dependent on what it is we are trying to understand through our research.

Lastly, the claim has been made that autoethnographic research can too easily become self-indulgent and narcissistic (Wall, 2006, p. 8). This criticism is especially laid against evocative autoethnography; Holt criticizes evocative autoethnography as being, “self-absorbed rather than advancing knowledge” (Le Roux, 2017, p. 199). Delamont wields a truly analytic criticism against evocative autoethnography when he says, “research is by nature analytic” questioning whether evocative works even ought to be considered research at all since they, “lack analytic outcomes” (Le Roux, 2017, p. 199). This claim, however, betrays the researcher’s predilection toward scientific research. Autoethnography is not scientific and should not be measured using scientific criteria. Those who claim that it should be seem to have forgotten that even though science comprises theories, not all theories are scientific. Autoethnography is a methodology to explore those non-scientific theories. Research is “verified” not due to its analytic nature or replicability, but rather, by the extent to which it brings a deeper understanding

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of the self in the world to those who read it. The responsibility of the autoethnographer is to ensure that their work is critically examined by others, and I would agree with Delamont and others who claim anything short of this would be self-indulgent. Closetsing our work is unethical, exposing ourselves in our research is not. Our personal stories are important as they tell of our experiences of theory-as-life, and in so doing, they illuminate wisdom emitted in wavelengths imperceptible to the scientist’s eye.

2.10. Ethical Considerations of Writing About Others
Several ethical considerations arise when our personal experiences with others form the basis of our research, including the “accuracy” of the “facts” when telling stories that involve and/or implicate others without their explicit knowledge or consent. As researchers interested in narrative inquiry we must be diligent in protecting the integrity of those we write about, which can be difficult, since as Leggo (2004) notes, narrative research is less about the “straightforward telling of events…[but rather] is a sequence of events that has been arranged in order to evoke in readers a keen sense of emotional engagement (p. 99). My purpose has been to create narratives that are emotionally engaging and resonate or “ring true” to the reader; the form of the narrative has therefore been prioritized over getting the “facts” right; while the events I have depicted in this thesis are all true in the sense that I did not invent them, they are narrated recollections from my past, and as a result, some of the details – especially those of conversations – are not verbatim. What is accurate in each of the narratives are how those experiences made me feel and how they make the reader feel.

I have been careful to conceal the identity of each of the students, teachers, and colleagues I have written about by using pseudonyms. I have also been careful to generalize details about my location and the schools I have taught at to further protect the identity of those
in my stories. Lastly, I have been careful to talk about the people in my stories in ways that helps me understand myself, not them. I am not interested in, nor would it be ethical, to interpret the feelings or motivations of another outside of the context of a conversation or formal interview, and I did not conduct any interviews for this thesis. Thus, none of the stories are intended to represent the truth of what others may have thought or felt, nor to cast any sort of moral or existential judgement on any characters other than myself.
Chapter 3: Teaching, Learning, and Transformation, or, Being Human

“The relation in education is pure dialogue”

- Martin Buber (1947/1955)

3.1. The Argument for Teaching and Learning

I have come to realize that my intense focus on teaching is only one side of practicing relational pedagogy. Learning is equally important; without understanding the role of learning in educational relationships, my practice is at best, one-sided and at worst, short-sighted, severely limiting the depth and quality of the educational encounters I can participate in alongside my students. This at first, may seem to contradict Biesta’s (2006) well-warranted concern that, “the language of education has largely been replaced by a language of learning” (p. 15), but I agree with Biesta’s claim that we must “reinvent a language for education” (p. 15) that confronts and challenges neo-liberal notions of “the new language of learning” (p. 19) that reduces learners to consumers and learning to nothing more than an economic transaction (p. 19).

I believe the answer—at least in part—rests in our ability as teachers to risk learning; and not only to risk learning alongside our students, but to risk it first. Modelling is an important pedagogical tool. Teaching through acting is, in my experience, one of the most valuable and important skills in my teacher tool-belt as it does two important things: it explicitly demonstrates the behaviour, process, or product I hope to see, while implicitly communicating the reason I hope to see it, namely, that it is a behaviour, process, or product that I believe has value and use in my own life.

Modelling the value of risking trust, therefore, shows students what that process looks like and that we value this process enough to implement it in our own learning. In this way,
relational pedagogy is not only about student learning, but, and perhaps more importantly, it is about my own willingness and responsibility to model learning. In the words of Martin Buber:

In order to be and remain truly present to the child he [the teacher] must have gathered the child’s presence into his own store as one of the bearers of his communion with the world, one of the focuses of his responsibilities for the world. Of course he cannot be continually concerned with the child, either in thought or in deed, nor ought he to be. But if he has really gathered the child into his life then that subterranean dialogic, that steady potential presence of the one to the other is established and endures. Then there is reality between them, there is mutuality. (as cited in Greene, 1967, p. 49)

Mutuality here is not to be confused with reciprocity or symmetry. For instance, Ruitenbergh(2016) argues that hospitality is an “asymmetrical relationship rather than a reciprocal one” (p. 137). As a teacher with power and influence over the lives of the children I encounter, I try to keep in mind Levinas’ words: “what I permit myself to demand of myself is not comparable with what I have the right to demand of the Other” (as cited in Ruitenbergh, 2006, p. 137). What I demand of myself in my encounters with students, is to embody this asymmetry through my willingness to trust and risk first, to be open to learning about myself in the world with respect to what and who is Other to me, to redefine learning as a process of self-reflexive, existential transformation for the teacher with the hope—but never with the expectation—that her students will be inspired to do the same.

3.2. I Hear You Knocking

My movement through the classroom is slow and methodical. Shoulders back, my spine tall and straight, mimicking the neat rows of grey student desks, one after another they sit, identical and lifeless. Every movement, every word, every space in my classroom an extension of my unwavering belief that education is serious business.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is a test.” I pause just a little too long after each one of my over-enunciated sentences. Education, after all, is serious business. “Do not turn your papers over until I say so. Once the test starts there is to be no talking. Anyone who talks, for any reason, will receive a zero. Any questions?”

Half way through the test, the quiet of the room is disturbed by a slamming door. Startled from their intense focus, many students gasp, jolting their heads from their papers. One student is
particularly startled, and in his surprise exclaims the one word that, as a teacher, I am never certain how to respond to, the cardinal linguistic impropriety—fuck.

For some colleagues the answer is simple; foul language is offensive and has no place in the classroom. For me, it is less clear. I swear all the time. In fact, I have that very same expletive etched in ink on my skin. A permanent reminder to not take life too seriously. But this isn’t life, this is education, and education is serious business.

I worried that I would compromise this core belief if I didn’t react in a serious manner to this seemingly serious situation. I worried that even the slightest waver of my commitment to the seriousness of education would derail my class. Teaching this class felt to me what it must feel like to try to tame an untamable stallion; always fighting back, unwilling to submit to the pull of the reins, these students were vocal in their critique of how I ran the classroom, of myself as a teacher, of my commitment to the seriousness of education. Their critical, questioning nature made me uncomfortable because it caused me to face the conflict I felt inside: how do I honour my own critical nature, my admiration for those who questioned, when—as a symbol of the institution in question—those criticisms and questions were levelled against me?

“What the fuck!?”

John’s words hung in the air, erasing the story of my teacher self one inappropriate word at a time.

For a boy of fifteen John is small for his age, not overly tall, and definitely on the skinny side. Dark brown hair frames his face, while light brown freckles sprinkle it. He is shy and introverted. He struggles to find meaning in literature and art, to connect the past to the present. He does not enjoy writing. I assume he simply needs to work harder, to think better. Working with him in the classroom, I always find myself thinking, “if only he weren’t so unmotivated...”

“In the hall. Now.”

“What!? But, Ms. Mansour, I didn’t do anything. The door—”

“I said now.”

Annoyed, John leaves the classroom. The adrenaline in my body clouds my thinking as I quickly try to process and react to the situation. I am offended at his lack of regard for the discipline I am trying to cultivate in their young minds. I follow him into the hall. John tries to speak, but I raise the palm of my hand to his face, silencing his explanations. I am not interested.

“What you said was unacceptable. I don’t care if you were startled, pick a different word next time.”

Knowing that nothing he says will change my mind, he looks at me, frustrated and disengaged.
“I want you to go home tonight and think about what you did. I want you to write a letter explaining to me why what you said was wrong.”

Driving home I reflect again on what happened. Though the intensity of the situation had faded, I still felt deeply conflicted. I worried that not punishing John would threaten my authority over the students. Loss of control meant chaos, and I was not willing to let the potential learning succumb to disorder. But, I also deeply wanted to make space for chaos and the unknown it begets. My inner untamed stallion was banging on the door of my psyche. I wanted to challenge the weight of institutional expectation placed on me through my own experiences in school. I wished for the courage to question the norms that directed my interactions with my students. I wanted to tell John that it wasn’t a big deal, but I couldn’t. Education, after all, is serious business.

The next day the students file into the classroom. John is there, letter in hand.

“Uh, Ms. Mansour? I wrote the letter last night.”

“You did? Great. Thank you for doing that. I look forward to reading it.”

“If it’s okay with you, I would actually like to read it to the class.”

I tentatively agree to his proposition. “Ladies and gentleman, take a seat. As you know, yesterday John swore in class. I asked him to write a letter about it and he would like to share it, so let’s give him our attention.”

“Thanks,” he says, unfolding the crumpled notebook paper in his hands. “Yesterday I said a word in class that was wrong. The reason it was wrong is because every time that word is said a part of someone’s soul dies. I want to apologize to all of you, and any parts of your soul I may have killed yesterday.”

Furious I stare coldly and sternly at him from my desk. Shocked—and embarrassed—by his brazen mockery, I send him to the office.

Driving home with a colleague that day, I tell him the whole story of John, still angry. But instead of sharing my reaction, he chuckles, “man, you really need to learn how to pick your battles.”

At first I was offended by my colleague’s comment. What John did was disrespectful. He made a mockery out of my punishment. But as the years went on, and as my relationship with John grew and evolved, I realized that my actions that day were not about John, but about my need for approval from the institution that once rejected me. Becoming a teacher, in a way, meant that I succeeded in this aim, and I did not want to do anything to discredit myself as a teacher, to lose the approval of the institution. However, I also became a teacher to confront the injustice of institutionalized education and was frustrated by my fear to speak out against the dehumanizing nature of bureaucratic institutions. This internal struggle is something that I have to manage constantly in my relations with my students. Teaching forces me to confront the anxiety of my
fractured self, caused by my traumatic childhood exit from the world of education. But I wouldn’t wish for it to be any different as it is precisely this anxiety that attunes me to the humanity of the students I encounter.

Recently, John graduated. Before he left, I had the opportunity to talk again with him about that day:

“Do you remember that time you swore in class and I made you write that letter?”

He looked at me, not sure of where I was going and said, “Oh, yeah. Sorry about that.”

I laughed, “No! It’s me who should be apologizing. I look back on that situation and I can’t believe how I reacted. In retrospect the whole thing was pretty funny. I appreciate that you stood up to a punishment that never should have happened rather than submit to it.”

Laughing, I admit that I tell that story often. Grinning, John replies, “we do too, Ms. Mansour. We do too.”

3.3. Enter When Ready

“When I talk about word choice, I am literally talking about the conscious and deliberate decision to choose one word over another in your writing...”

“This is fucking stupid.”

“Excuse me?”

I stand, frozen at the front of the classroom. The light of the projector simultaneously illuminates my face while shadowing the audience. As a teacher, I have become accustomed to the authority the position affords me. Faced by the darkness in the room, I feel vulnerable.

“You know what? That was completely inappropriate, and you need to apologize.”

Silence.

“You don’t have to be interested in the topic, but it’s not okay for you to speak to me like that. I’ll wait here until you apologize. We all will.”

The vulnerability overpowers my rational, adult mind. I am locked in a public battle with a student and have no intentions of backing down. My sense of morality, which I normally struggle with, is in overdrive, justifying this very public power struggle. I am not able to admit that his words hurt me, that a thirteen-year-old boy can trigger my insecurities as a teacher in less than five words.

Sighs and grumbles emanate from the darkness. The dark faces speak, filling the room with an unbearable tension:
“Just apologize.”

“I’m sick of our lessons being hijacked by students who don’t want to be here.”

“Can we just move on please!?"

Reluctantly, shamefully, he apologizes.

The lesson carries on, but it feels awkward, forced. As my nervous system calms down I regret the way I handled the situation. He has to learn the importance of respectful dialogue, even when you disagree. At the same time, though, I feel bad. I don’t believe in public shaming or exerting my power over students unduly. Adding to the complexity, I know he misses his old teacher, that he is struggling at home (his parents will divorce a year later). I know that when he was in grade four a teacher crumpled his work in front of the class, calling it “garbage” and throwing it out. I know that experience makes him very sensitive to any learning that is difficult. As I reflect on all of these things, I can’t help but feel like an insensitive asshole.

“Hey,” I softly engage as I sit beside him. “Can we please talk about what happened earlier? I am sorry I called you out in front of the class. It could be argued that I shouldn’t have done that. But you can’t tell me my lessons are ‘fucking stupid’ in front of the whole class, either. I know swearing is ‘your thing’ and I try to be respectful of that, but in order for me to do that, you in turn, have to be respectful with how and when you choose to drop f-bombs. When you use language to insult people and put them down, I have to call you on it.”

“I fucking hate this program. I miss Rich. He was a way better teacher than you.”

His mother told me that he cried after the first day of school. Despite the fact that Rich had told the class in June that he had been promoted to the role of Vice Principal, the reality of what that meant did not fully sink in for him until September.

“I know you miss Rich. I don’t know how to fix that.”

“I’m going to transfer to Maplewood Middle.”

“Do you think that is a good choice for you?”

“It’s better than this shit hole.”

“Okay, well if that is how you really feel, I support your decision. Would you like me to help arrange a tour of the school so you can check it out?”

Silence.

“Look, I know you think I hate you, but I don’t. I want us to have a good relationship. I want you to trust me and I want to be able to trust you. I want you to be happy at school, to want to come here.”
Silence.

“Is there something I can do to make you feel better about coming to school?”

“Bring Rich back.”

I desperately want to break through to him. I want him to hear, to know, that I am not his enemy. I am consumed, perhaps selfishly so, with the goal of winning his trust. Feeling like I had nothing left to lose, I commit to a radical course of brutal honesty.

“You know, Rich told me about you. Do you want to know what he said?”

For the first time, he looked at me with hope in his eyes.

“He said you treated him like shit.”

His eyes widen...then fall. He stares at the floor, refusing to look at me. I immediately wonder if this was the right decision. I know this brutally honest blow will ultimately decide the fate of this relationship. The pain in his eyes is difficult for me to endure. Slowly, softly, I explain what he has not yet grasped.

“I am sorry if that was difficult for you to hear. I didn’t tell you that because I want you to think that Rich doesn’t care— he does, and I do too. I told you that because you need to understand that people care about you in spite of how you treat them. So, while I would prefer if you didn’t tell me my lessons are fucking stupid, I want you to know that saying those things in no way changes the fact that I will always be here to support you. That you will always have a safe space in this classroom.”

Silence.

“This was a heavy conversation and I can tell you need some space. Take some time to process all of this. I’m here when you’re ready.” Still refusing to acknowledge me, I smile at him as I stand up and walk away.

“Alright crew” I announce to the class after lunch. “You have to finish your artist statements by the end of the block. Your pieces will be going out to the coffee shop to be put on display after school today. I want to make sure you understand that there is no time left after today, so use this time well!”

I really want his art work to be displayed in the coffee shop. The day before he painstakingly worked to create a piece of string art. It was one of the first times I had ever seen him try at anything related to school. I sensed he was proud of his efforts but was too scared to show it. Watching him now, sitting in the corner playing video games, I can see he has checked out of school yet again. Once again, I approach. Once again, I gently take a seat beside him.
“Hey. I’d love for you to have an artist’s statement to go with your work. Do you want me to type it out for you? All you have to do is talk.”

He looks at me, his innocent eyes wide, but says nothing. I smile at him. He slides the laptop towards me. I ready my fingers. He begins to speak. I type his words.
Chapter 4: The Ethical Classroom

_The moral self is always haunted by the suspicion that it is not moral enough._

- Zygmunt Bauman (1993)

4.1. Creating Ethical Spaces

In unpacking the notion of “educational responsibility” Biesta (2014) asks two important questions: “What is the role of education today? And what is there to do for educators—for teachers, parents, and all those who have an educational responsibility toward “newcomers”? (p. 97). It is difficult to understand our responsibility to “newcomers” in the context of education without a closer look at the role of education today. Not only is Biesta concerned with neoliberal ideas about education that help to “secure a country’s competitiveness in the global economy” (p. 98), but he is also concerned with our “common sense” ideas about what education can achieve in the first place, namely, those ideas that see the purpose of education as consisting of creating, “the lifelong learner, the good citizen, [or] the high achieving student”. While I am concerned about the effects of neoliberalism on education, I am more concerned about the insidious nature of ideas that claim the value of education is in its ability to “[create] particular identities and...a stable, and successful social order” (p. 99).

One of the ways we can counter this tendency is in practicing what Ruitenberg (2016) calls, “hospitable pedagogy,” in which it is crucial to understand that, “there are no teaching approaches that can be said to be more or less hospitable _in general_. Only in particular contexts, with particular students, can a certain teaching approach be said to be more or less hospitable” (p. 90). Similarly, Arendt (1961/2006a) argues that modern education is in crisis, not because of standardized test scores, underfunding, overcrowded classrooms, or any of the myriad arguments that circulate in educational discourse today, but because modern education is grounded in the
notion of the “absolute superiority of the adult, and the attempt to produce the new...as if it already existed” (p. 173). This is not to say, however, that children should be able to do whatever they want in school, but rather taking on the responsibility of educating children, turns in a certain sense against the world: the child requires special protection and care so that nothing destructive may happen to him from the world. But the world, too, needs protection to keep it from being overrun and destroyed by the onslaught of the new that bursts upon it with each new generation. (p. 182)

Both Biesta and Arendt seem to be tasking teachers with the impossible: that we educate children in such a way that they are free to change the world, while at the same time protecting the world from being changed too radically by the children that we educate. This task is challenging, to say the least, but it is not irreconcilable if, as Biesta (2006) suggests, we use the notion of Bildung to guide the creation of a “worldly space” (p. 105). The term Bildung is best understood as, “the cultivation of the inner life, the cultivation of the human mind or the human soul” (p. 101); in other words, Bildung is intimately tied to the concept of subjectivity. Enacting Bildung in the modern classroom is not simply about providing a space for students “to let it all hang out”, so to speak, but it also is not simply continuing to do things how they have always been done, because “that’s how it’s always been done”.

The creation of a “worldly space” that tries to reconcile the paradoxical nature of education is, for Biesta (2014), a deconstructive, “combination of education and its undoing” (p. 116); it is neither letting children run rampant, nor is it suffocating their coming into the world, but rather, the responsibility of the educator for her students lies in understanding that sometimes education requires that teachers intentionally disturb the status quo, that education in the sense of bildung, that is education of the human soul, arises as a result of uncomfortable disturbances in one’s existence and can neither be predicted nor controlled.
4.2. Death at the River

The smell of rotting salmon fills the crisp October air. I am standing on the river bank with my students. We come here almost every morning; a slow walk down to the river. We stand at the edge of the pebbled waterway, watching the dying salmon swimming their last mile, breathing their last breath. Their decaying and deformed bodies rise out of the shallow river returning to die in the same pools that just a few years earlier gave them life.

I walk down river with one of my students. His tall and muscular body towers alongside mine as we walk. The wind blows his long black hair. Though I wish it was different, our relationship is tumultuous. He sees himself as a man, an independent adult who can do what he wants. I see him on the verge of adulthood, not yet a man, struggling to bear the weight of his sense of responsibility to his community. We can’t agree on who is right.

A dying salmon, more out of the water than in, struggles to breathe. It writhes on the cold, wet rocks deprived of oxygen.

“Jen, I am going to kill this salmon. It’s suffering. I’m going to put it out of its misery.”

Before I have a chance to think through the conflicting feelings Alex’s words bring to the surface, he picks up a rock and throws it on the salmon, narrowly missing the center of its head; now its writhing is surely the result of the pain and shock caused by the experience of having only half its brain crushed by this heavy object.

Watching Alex, I feel nauseous. I am not used to the sight of animals being killed. Unable to look, I shut my eyes tight, turning my head into the comfort of my shoulder.

“I think the rock you used was too small. The fish isn’t dead.”

As it lay, half crushed under the small rock, Alex find an even larger rock and with both hands he slams it down on the flopping body. This time he was successful. The body of the fish, what little of it we could still see, was no longer moving.

“There. Now it’s dead,” Alex proclaims, with a valiant smile on his face. He is proud of this manly act of benevolence. I think Alex is growing up faster than he can keep pace.

“Alex, can you do me a favour? I understand why you killed the fish, and you’re right that sometimes it is better to put suffering animals out of their misery, but can you please not kill anymore while we are down at the river today?”

“It’s fine, Jen. I do this with my uncle all the time when we go fishing.”
Pleadingly, I ask again, “Alex, please. The truth is, I am fine with it when it’s you and I walking along the river, but right now I am very worried that the other students will see what you are doing and will either follow your lead or will be very disturbed by your actions. I just don’t want to have to deal with that right now. Can you please do me this favour today?”

Alex rolls his eyes, throws his hand in the air, but finally agrees to stop killing fish for the remainder of the river walk.

“Thanks, Alex. I really appreciate it. I’m going to check on the rest of the class. If you want to explore for a bit that’s fine, just come back in twenty minutes...hey, thanks for the good chat today. I really value our conversations.”

As I get closer to the rest of the group two female students approach me looking worried, “Jen, Zac is freaking out because some of the boys are throwing rocks at the fish.”

Zac is very passionate about the environment and animal rights. He is also a student with autism, and, like some students with autism, has difficulty processing and responding to social interactions. I see him, about fifteen meters away, pacing along the river bank with rocks in his hands, yelling at the boys to stop their behaviour. I know he means well, but his outbursts have started to become violent; they scare me, Zac scares me.

Now, truly worried, I calmly approach Zac, pretending that nothing is wrong.

“Hey, Zac. How’s it going?”

Pacing, his face red, tears welling in his eyes, he looks at me and pleads, “They’re throwing rocks at the fish! They don’t, they don’t understand that that’s not what you do. If you care about animals like I do, that’s not what you’re supposed to do. No one is listening to me!”

I try to identify with his feelings, and remind him that as the teacher, I am in charge of managing other students’ behaviour, “Zac, I can see that you’re upset. And, as someone who cares about animals as much as you do, I can see why you are upset by their behaviour. But, I need you to remember that I am the teacher and it’s my job to tell students what to do, not yours. Why don’t you go sit on the log and I’ll go over and have a chat with the boys?”

Still angry, he cries, “But no one is listening to me! And they don’t get it. That’s not how you treat animals. No one is listening to me because they think I am dumb.”
Worried that Zac’s emotions will escalate to an unsafe level, I take a firmer tone, “Zac, no one thinks your dumb. I need you to sit on the log and wait for me. I will handle the boys.”

Zac looks at me, throws the rocks in his hands towards the pebbled river bank and walks away. I know I have to get back to the school before the situation worsens.

Exhausted by the multiplicity of interactions over the last thirty minutes, I march towards the group of boys, “Gentleman” I say in my unfortunately all too familiar Jen-means-business tone, “do not throw rocks at the fish. When you are down here you are representing our school, and at our school we have respect for the natural environment. These fish are tired and dying. Do not stress them out unnecessarily.”

“Jen, we’re not. We’re throwing rocks in the water, but we aren’t hitting the fish. Zac just thought we were and started freaking out.”

Upon hearing their version of events, the truth of which usually lies somewhere in the middle, I feel frustration. Frustration at myself for presuming guilt, and frustration at them for not trying to understand Zac.

“Okay, well either way, you know how easily upset Zac gets, and I need you to be more sensitive.”

“So, what, we aren’t allowed to have any fun because it might upset Zac?”

“Guys, seriously? You know that Zac struggles with interpreting social situations, and you also know that he can get very emotional, and that sometimes those big emotions can be overwhelming for the group. I am trying to make sure that no one gets hurt here. You need to help me by helping Zac, and you can help Zac by stepping up when and where he can’t.”

Exhausted and worried, I no longer have the energy to be at the river. Feeling defeated, I gather my students and make our way up the hill towards the safety of the school.

4.3. Stepping In and Letting Go:
“Hello” The friendly British accent beaming through my phone. Mina, the teacher-on-call coordinator has a booking for me.

“Hi Mina. What can I do for you?”

“James Roberts is taking a three week leave for a small surgical procedure. I think you would be a great fit in his class. He has two blocks of English 10 and one block of English 11. Can I book you for the job?”
I eagerly accepted; it had been a few months since leaving what I thought would be my “forever” job, and I was missing the consistency and fulfillment that comes along with teaching the same students day after day.

The next day James and I connected over lunch to talk about what I would teach in his absence. “So, I was thinking, since you’re in my class for three weeks, would you like to just plan something and teach it? It makes more sense rather than me putting something together.”

“Sure. That would be awesome. What are you teaching right now?”

“Well, we just finished a short story unit.”

“Okay. Maybe I’ll do a short novel? Or a play?”

“Sure, that works. Or, what do you like teaching the best?”

“Honestly? I love teaching writing. Maybe I could do a creative writing workshop with them?”

“That sounds great. We will just be finishing reading some short stories. I’m sure they’d like a break from all the reading to do something fun and creative.”

“Okay, sweet. I’ll put something together and we can chat again in a few weeks.”

The conversation leaves me feeling energized. I love planning; it’s the place where my passion for philosophy and creation come together, a continual back and forth between my philosophical beliefs about education and the actions that will bring those beliefs to life. This is especially true when I think about assessment, about how it is I plan to judge and evaluate student learning. I have always regarded assessment as a delicate balance between institutional expectation and existential individuality; both serve useful purposes in the right context, but in the wrong context, can be damaging to both society and the individual.

I wanted to create a project where students could experience taking creative risks, to understand that writing is a process, but I was also aware that the students might be reluctant to take such risks, especially with someone they didn’t know or trust. Wondering just how I was going to pull this off as a substitute teacher, the idea struck me, suddenly, like the apple falling on Newton’s head, and like that apple, it would dramatically affect my understanding of my practice.

“Hey guys. My name is Ms. Mansour and I’m so excited to be here with you for the next three weeks. I’m pretty stoked about what I have planned, and hope you will be too.”

The students’ friendly faces look at me with eager anticipation, and I feel immediately welcomed.

“Word on the street is that you just finished a short story unit, so I thought we would switch gears from reading to writing. For the next three weeks we are going to be doing a creative writing unit. I love teaching writing and I’m super excited to see what you come up with.”

I continue my pitch to the young students, many of whom have never done any creative writing before. “My hope for this unit is twofold: that you take creative risks and that you, hopefully, begin to understand that writing is a process. To facilitate these goals, we are going to do things a bit differently.” The students look around, unsure of where I am going.

“If you look at the assignment handout, you will see I have asked you kind of a weird question: ‘what does your creative work teach the world about you?’ I believe that any form of creativity is
an extension of your unique self in the world. It is you putting a piece of yourself out in the world for others to experience.”

The students look at me, confused, unsure of how to process my philosophical musings. “Because I think of creativity in this way, I have never been comfortable assessing it top-down. I want you to take risks and I don’t think you will if you are worried about how I will react or mark you, so for this assignment you will determine your final grade.”

The students looked at each other with a mix of excitement, confusion, and fear.

“Wait a minute,” a young girl asks from the second row. “You mean we give ourselves our own grade?”

“Yes. But,” I continued, “I do have a few stipulations. You have to hand in three drafts of your story and with the final draft you have to complete a reflective self-assessment that focuses on three areas: effort, growth as a writer, and an answer to the overarching question about what your creation shows the world about you. As long as you answer each of these questions thoughtfully, I will approve whatever number grade you feel you earned. Make sense? Any questions?”

The students exchange skeptical glances and excited whispers. I think they felt relief from the weight of the grade, but also skeptical about my promise. In the age of data-driven pedagogy, I understood this mix of emotions, because I felt the same. Would I really be able to follow through with my promise?

Over the next few days, typical teenage questions emerged:

“Can we swear in our stories?”

“Can we write about violence and drugs?”

“I want to write about a transgender student who is coming out.”

“I’m not sure what I want to write about,” a girl in the class lamented. “I think I want to write a children’s book. Do you have advice on how to do that?”

“Well, I would suggest two things: first, read a bunch of children’s books to help inspire you and second, think about something important you think children should know. Most children’s books have a moral or a lesson. What is it that you think children should know?”

Another student, a boy, sitting in the front row, his basketball between his legs, scrolled through his phone.

“Hey Mark. How’s it going? Do you have an idea for a story?”

“I don’t know what to write about. I’m not a good writer.”

“Hmmmm. Well, what are you interested in? What about writing a story about basketball?” I asked, pointing to the orange ball between his well-worn shoes.

Reluctantly, he agrees to try my suggestion. I am worried this assignment will be very difficult for Mark. And I was right. It wouldn’t be easy, but by the end of the three weeks, with the help of
his friends, he would write a story. Working with Mark was one of the most rewarding experiences of my three weeks with this group of young people.

By the end of the first week I had sixty first drafts of stories ranging from one page to ten. Not one story was identical. Feverishly I read through all their stories, getting them back in hand with feedback by the following Monday. I was exhausted.

I taught very few lessons over our three weeks together. Instead our class time was spent with me talking one-on-one with students about their writing. Giving them feedback, making suggestions, brainstorming ideas.

At the end of the second week, stories are once again turned in for me to read. I see some improvement, but not much. While diverse and imaginative, the stories are long and often drag on. Some are disorganized. Some are just painful to read. I begin to feel uncomfortable. I worry that the project is going to be a disaster. I start to question what exactly they are learning? I wonder if I should have done more traditional, whole class teaching instead of the one-on-one collaborative sessions?

I sit at the desk in my colleague’s classroom, and remind myself of my goal: wait and see where this goes. Don’t freak out because it’s not meeting your expectations. Take a risk and trust, just like you have asked them. I am comforted by my conscious reminder to let go of the control, to honour my promise. The students were all working very hard on their stories. They were alive in the classroom. If I tried to clamp down now to assuage my own insecurities I would surely stall the creative energy.

Ignoring my discomfort, I continue to encourage them.

“Okay guys, this is the last week. You have until Thursday to finish your stories and Friday we will do our self-assessments.”

“Ms. Mansour?” a student approached, looking stressed. “What if we don’t finish our stories by Friday? Will we get a bad mark?”

I didn’t know how to answer that question. What if they didn’t finish? The thought never crossed my mind, and initially I didn’t know how to respond. We are so accustomed to collecting “finished products”.

Then it hit me, and the answer was nothing short of freeing.

“Okay guys, can I get your attention because Harjot just asked a really good question.” The voices quiet and eyes focus on me. “She asked what would happen if you don’t finish the story by the end of the week.”

“Yeah. Are we going to fail if we don’t finish?” A student asked.

“Well, remember guys, you are giving yourselves a mark and I have asked you mostly to think about your total level of effort. It doesn’t matter to me if you don’t finish. Maybe you are writing a longer story and want to just turn in the first chapter. Maybe you’re doing a children’s book and you finished the story, but not the illustrations. Don’t worry about what I think. Worry about what you think.”

I look out to a sea of confused expressions.
“Look. Hands up of you have ever tried hard at something.”

Slowly, their outstretched fingers reach towards the ceiling.

“Okay, you know that feeling you get that comes along with that sense of effort? That sense of accomplishment when you know you’ve tried your hardest? Hands up if you know what that feels like.”

More outstretched fingers join the others, while some fingers begin to point straighter, with more purpose, and confidence, as if reliving past moments of triumph.

“That feeling is all that matters here. When you complete your self-assessment, don’t ask yourself how much you finished, or if your work is “perfect”, instead see if you have that same feeling. That feeling you get when you know you’ve worked hard. That’s what you’re going for here. Don’t worry about if you have finished, and certainly don’t worry about what I think of your story. Don’t worry if I approve or don’t, if I think it’s good or it’s not. I am not thinking about that. I am not even marking these, so what I think has no bearing here.”

In the days that followed, the students worked harder than I have ever seen. They pushed themselves in ways I didn’t know teenagers would. One student sat with me, at his request, for almost two complete classes, painstakingly editing and formatting his work. Line by line we added periods, quotation marks and new paragraphs. We were both exhausted, and to be honest, if he had of given up, I wouldn’t have encouraged him to go on. He had no idea the extent to which his enthusiasm to get his story about his hockey team finished inspired me to carry on.

Mark and I would also spend hours together. We would sit at his computer while his friends would log into Google drive to help him write his story. In no way could I have re-created this truly collaborative effort. The support and camaraderie that resulted was unlike anything I could have ever hoped to design. In a more traditional setting, one might even have called their co-writing “cheating”. Mark would later tell me that he stayed up until midnight, with his friends alongside him online, working to finish his story. What started out as writer’s block, a student who I worried would not be able to write a story, turned into an experience of perseverance, triumph, and camaraderie. In his self-assessment he revealed: “[I didn’t know] how hard it is to write a story. It’s kind of fun once you start writing.”

The student’s reflective self-assessments reaffirmed my decision that this experimental project was worth the discomfort:

“Dialogue is extremely effective. Adding dialogue to a story can make it go from 0 to 100. It adds so much power and helps you understand the story better.”

“My creative writing teaches me that I am a very creative and imaginative person. Also, that even if you don’t like doing something you can still do a great job if you try.”

“On my short story I have worked very hard on getting it down and making corrections, making it have meaning. I have grown as a writer tremendously. I have become more confident in my writing, my vocabulary has expanded, and I can organize my writing better. I’ve learned how to structure my writing and use more emotion within my story. My writing has taught me a lot. I have been bullied and had very bad days, but now I am better at not letting it get to me and putting my day down. I also have learned its not my fault people bully others, its their own. They
might have something going on at home or with themselves. But they have no right to do that so I am going to work on standing up for myself and speaking up.”

“I learned that whenever I write, I like to spill out all of the emotions and bring the audience to tears and that possibly these emotions that I find inside and I find that writing helps me escape...I usually don’t let people read my writing but u can tell that I may not be the brightest kid but when it comes to story’s I definitely like to sit down and just start writing whatever comes to mind. I learned that English maybe helps me free my mind.”
Chapter 5: Some Not-So-Final Thoughts

Prometheus taught us to shape iron. Epimetheus has but to learn to let his heart speak.

- Ivan Illich (1971)

5.1. Hospitality in Complex Environments

It is impossible to properly analyze the challenges relational pedagogy poses for teachers without noting one very important fact of classroom environments: rarely, if ever, are teachers with one student at a time. As a high school teacher, I am lucky if I have a class of twenty students. More commonly, classrooms in British Columbia have closer to thirty students for every one teacher.

As Ruitenberg (2016) points out, this ratio adds an extra layer of complexity to any ethical relationship; drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, she notes, “the fact that ‘there are not only two of us in the world’ compromises ethics, because in a relation of three or more, one person’s needs and demands are necessarily weighed against another’s” (p. 112). Given this consideration, Ruitenberg further acknowledges that, “it is often the case that the hospitality offered to one person imperils the hospitality that can be offered to another” (p. 112). Given this, I am left wondering how to respond ethically in diverse classroom environments?

In trying to answer this question, it is helpful to keep in mind Ruitenberg’s reminder that hospitality is an imperfect ethical ideal: we will never get it right, and as Ruitenberg (2016) also argues, nor should we:

Absolute hospitality annihilates itself: it is a gesture in which the host surrenders the home to the guest and is effectively no longer host, hence no longer in a position to offer hospitality. Therefore, hospitality is necessarily a self-limiting and imperfect gesture, and not an ideal that can be achieved. The host expects certain things from the guest, so that the space into which the guest is welcomed is preserved, and the host can continue to extend hospitality. Expectations placed on the guest, however, limit the hospitality extended to the guest. (p. 25)
As this passage makes clear, one of the challenges of hospitality is, “the tension between conditionality and unconditionality” (p. 21); from here it is easy to understand how the bigger the gathering, the more pronounced this tension becomes. Levinas suggests that the addition of the third (or thirty in the case of the traditional classroom) compromises ethical relationships, but Ruitenberg departs from this idea, reminding us instead that Levinas’, “situation of two” is inadequate as, “there are never just two of us, since each of the parties already brings many traces of others from the past, and the interactions will affect many others in the future” (p. 113). Ruitenberg’s idea serves to not only add depth to Levinas’ ethics, but also to point out the role that history and politics plays in our experiences and identities. In particular, she notes that, “the systematic inequality of our political arrangements speaks through individuals…[all] are marked by their social locations” (p. 112).

Hospitality is characterized by three aporias: that we can never know or fully address the guest, that we must simultaneously provide and limit hospitality, and that we must suspend expectations of reciprocity (Ruitenberg, 2016, p. 21). As we move towards more inclusive classrooms, acknowledging these challenges grow increasingly more relevant in the modern school environment. In considering the increasing diversity in our classrooms it is important to ask when is it okay to limit enactments of hospitality towards a particular guest or groups of guests? In this regard, Ruitenberg advises that we look to Boler’s “affirmative action pedagogy” (p. 114); in short, Ruitenberg says that as teachers we should act, “in order to leave a place for the other” (p. 114); this translates in a practical sense to a very basic idea: if a student or a group of students’ actions make it difficult for another student or group of students to find a place in the world, the ethical response would be to limit the inhospitable and unjust actions of the dominant group or person. It is important to note that as the host, your discomfort does not count, and this
is due to the nature of power relations in the classroom and the world. As the teacher, and adult, I already occupy my own space in the world (i.e. the classroom) the student is trying to access; I am always the most dominant person in the space, and, as a result, I must endure my own discomfort.

5.2. Ethical Reciprocity?
Immediately, I can imagine many teachers feeling very overwhelmed at the prospect of having to be the sole host all the time. Most teachers have fallen back on notions of reciprocity more than once, myself included. In fact, reciprocity is encouraged in most school settings: ideas of “paying it forward”, or the golden mean of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” abound in classrooms. Given this, it is perhaps fair to question Ruitenberg’s insistence that we abandon reciprocity. Is reciprocity really that bad?

In answering this question, we can again look to Ruitenberg (2016) who says, “hospitable pedagogy should leave room for the student to be a host but without an expectation that the student take on this role” (p. 114). I have seen my students take on the role of host when they are able to, and guest when they aren’t. This comes with a subtle but important distinction: we can request hospitality from our students, but we cannot command it. In the words of Martin Buber, as teachers we should always be mindful that:

since the educator has to such an extent replaced the Master, the danger has arisen that the new phenomenon, the will to educate, may degenerate into arbitrariness, and that the educator may carry out his selection and his influence from himself and his idea of the pupil, not from the pupil’s own reality…. (as cited in Greene, 1967, p. 50)

In commanding reciprocity, we run the risk of alienating students who may not be able to occupy that role for reasons that we may not be able to see, but in providing opportunities for students to become hosts if they are ready and choose to do so is to normalize the practice of helping others find their way in the world when you are able to. While I don’t have “evidence” to support this
claim, experience has taught me that students who are able to host others, will. Moreover, I
can’t help but think that, *all other things being equal*, it may at times be appropriate to expect
another individual to reciprocate an acknowledgement of another’s humanity. Perhaps then, part
of enacting a hospitable pedagogy is to enable one’s students to occupy the role of host more,
rather than less often?

5.3. Responsibility In the School
Most people would not dispute the claim that being a teacher comes with great responsibility.
What is less clear is exactly what or who teachers are responsible for? There are many answers
to this question, but I am most interested in Biesta’s (2006) notion of “responsibility without
knowledge” (p. 29). Biesta points out teaching involves an “immense responsibility…for the
*subjectivity* of each student” (pp. 29–30). That is, each student will have their own unique
response to the world, their own experience of being human, and the job of the teacher is to
attend to the uniqueness of each of their students. To teach with this awareness requires that
teachers understand that there is no way to predict the variety of responses one might encounter.
We must, therefore, take on the responsibility of helping our students come into the world
knowing that we will never know beforehand what that will look like.

As Rocha (2015) and others have observed, modern-day educational institutions do not
only “educate” in the traditional sense of the word (i.e. as a practice of learning and teaching that
has been around as long as humans, and certainly before the creation of the modern school
system), they also “school” children into behaving in certain ways and valuing certain things to
prepare students to be successful in the world and for this reason, schools often serve
contradictory purposes. In her essay, *Crisis in Education* (1961/2006a), Arendt makes the
following observation:
Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands the chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world. (p. 193)

The paradox described by Arendt can also be seen in Ruitenberg’s (2016) second aporia of hospitality previously mentioned, that teachers must simultaneously provide and limit hospitality (p. 21). In other words, teachers must simultaneously balance competing demands of conditionality and unconditionality in response to students’ actions. At the heart of Arendt’s observation of education, therefore, is this: the responsibility of the teacher is to permit children the freedom to create a world unknown to adults, but not at the cost of the integrity of our responsibility to the subjective humanity of each person and the common world we create through living and being together. This is no easy task as it requires teachers to sometimes suspend their own judgements and beliefs about the world and to sometimes not, but without having the luxury of knowing in advance which is the best course of action. The point however is not to resolve this tension, but to acknowledge that this tension is the space in which education resides, and therefore, is not something we should seek to resolve. Educating for the subjective humanity of another is only ever partial; it is not something that can be coaxed into existence, but rather is something that is already present. Education as a response, therefore, is simultaneously active and passive. It requires that I listen and look, actively, for who you are, while at the same time requires that I passively accept this, understanding that your humanity will always be existentially distinct from mine. The responsible teacher therefore, is one who assumes a constant state of existential liminality in her dealings with her students, made even more difficult in the context of a world that values clarity and consistency over murkiness and mystery.
5.4. Responsibility Beyond the School

I want to take a moment to step outside of the world of the school and talk more broadly about the world in general. The questions I posed at the start of this paper – What is the relationship between education, ethics, and humanity? How does being a teacher help me understand my humanity and the humanity of others? How does my understanding of humanity help me act ethically in my relations with students so that they may come to understand their own humanity? – have led me to many different realizations, but the most important of these is this: that the value of relational pedagogy extends far beyond the walls of the school. If we hope to create a world that is more open, more diverse, more just, we must change how we relate to each other. This is what it means to take responsibility for the world; to teach children the importance of relation to humanity per se so that when they enter the world outside of the school they are prepared to enact that responsibility with those they encounter.

To illustrate my point, I turn to Arendt’s notion of freedom as described in her essay, *What is Freedom?* (1961/2006b). For Arendt, freedom is not simply a function of the “will”, it is the reason for politics because it is in the public sphere with others that we first experience freedom (or a lack thereof). For this reason, Arendt criticizes modern philosophy for obscuring the concept of freedom by relocating it to the inner workings of the human mind, detaching it from the world, and its rightful place of, “politics and human affairs in general” (p. 144). As Arendt clearly states, “Freedom as related to politics is not a phenomenon of the will. We deal here not with...a freedom of choice that arbitrates and decides between two given things… (p. 150), but rather it is:

...the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known. Action, to be free, must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other. This is not to say that motive
and aims are not important actors in every single act, but they are its determining factors, and action is free to the extent that it is able to transcend them. (p. 150)

To express freedom in the classroom, is in this sense of the word, to take responsibility for a world we do not know in advance. In the classroom, this can be as simple as creating the conditions for students to create their own stories without the external and constricting pressure of graded assessments. To let their hearts and minds “run wild” and accept the outcomes beforehand. This is precisely what Biesta (2014) means when he says that, “educators carry an immense responsibility....for the subjectivity of the student, for that which allows the student to be a unique singular being [and that] is not something that has to do with calculation” (p. 30).

My undergraduate degree in Education left me well prepared for didactic teaching; I learned how to make unit and lesson plans, to create and assess prescribed learning outcomes, to create rubrics, and to “manage” classrooms. What I was not taught, or asked to consider, was the relationship between education and human being; I will never forget the time I was told that I “wasted instructional time” by ending the lesson early so my students and I could enjoy some time to simply talk to and be with one another. Comments like this one have left a strong impression on me in terms of what I should and shouldn’t be doing as a teacher; it has taken my entire career to start to unlearn these kinds of ideas about teaching, to cultivate a different sense of “educational responsibility” (Biesta, 2014).

5.5. Questions That Linger
This Master’s thesis started with some very big questions inspired by comments from my earlier teacher-self about my desire to, “teach students how to be human beings”. I once considered this sentiment to be the utmost important part of my job as a teacher, and—to at least some extent—I still believe this to be the case: as teachers we have a responsibility to the humanity of those we teach, and by extension a responsibility for a world that is constituted by the humanity of those
that inhabit it. Where I have changed in my understanding of this sentiment is in accepting that I can’t define ‘humanity’. I don’t know what it means in advance, what to look out for, what to avoid, but I understand now that is the point. My responsibility is precisely to resist having an ‘answer’ in the strict sense, and instead, to have an awareness of and an openness to the infinite manifestations of humanity I will encounter through my interactions with others. This responsibility, therefore, is at the heart of my question about the relationship between ethics, education, and humanity; if, by education, we mean Biesta’s function of subjectification—which in my opinion is the only truly educational aspect of the modern school system—the relationship between education and humanity becomes clear: to become educated is to come to know one’s humanity. What is the difference, then, between education and humanity? If we accept the inseparability of these two concepts, would we still feel comfortable with the current structure and underlying values of institutionalized education?

For instance, I once had an interview for a teaching position in which the interviewer kept pressing me to tell them how it was I knew what my students were learning: *But how do you know exactly what they are learning?* The question made me uncomfortable. I knew what he was asking, but I didn’t know how to answer it. What I wanted to say was, *I don’t always know exactly what students are learning.* Another time, a well-meaning administrator told me I should write the learning intentions for my lessons on the board so students knew exactly what they were supposed to be learning. I am not highlighting these experiences to paint these individuals in a bad light; like me, they are passionate educators who care about student learning and education. What these short anecdotes do illustrate, however, is the irony underlying attempts to institutionalization education-as-human-being.
As I have argued, the distinction between education and humanity is misleading; education does not exist separate and apart from humanity, nor does a fully human life exist outside of or separate from education. Like Rocha (2015), I have come to believe that, “what is education?” and ‘who am I?’ are not entirely different from or unrelated to each other” (p. 49). I believe this idea is part of why Rocha hopes to, “re-enchant education with mystery” (p. 52). Modern schooling has turned drastically towards eliminating mystery, to controlling all aspects of student learning. My concern with this is that conflates education with schooling, the consequence being that we over-emphasize the more paternalistic elements of the modern school system. For instance, socialization can lead to what Illich has termed the “institutionalization of values” (1970, p. 1). Classroom management is an example of this phenomenon at work in the classroom; when students don’t respond in ways we consider acceptable, we “manage” their encounters with the world (i.e. the curriculum, other students, the classroom) in an attempt to produce a more “appropriate” response. Sometimes, this is a good idea. For instance, a student who has violent outbursts in school will likely benefit from a more scaffolded environment to keep themselves and others safe. However, we also manage students for much smaller “transgressions” that need not be conceived of in this way. Group work, for example, is an attribute that schools and educators view as highly valuable. How then, ought we respond to the child who prefers to work alone? My point is not that group work is inherently better or worse than independent work, but that when choosing how best to respond to each of our students, we must critically examine why it is we value some things more than others.

5.6. The Ethical Educator
If one accepts the inseparable nature of education and human being, the ethical implications become clear; human action should be guided by the principle that Humanity (in the universal
sense of the word) is nothing more (or less) than the conglomerate of the subjective humanity of each individual. From this position, definitions of humanity laden with specific behaviours, traits, and characteristics become antithetical to human being. We must resist the urge to classify humanity because, as Arendt observes, it is precisely the human capacity for newness that makes us human at all:

In the birth of each man this initial beginning is reaffirmed, because in each instance [of birth] something new comes into an already existing world which will continue to exist after each individual’s death. Because he is a beginning, man can begin. (Arendt, 1961/2006b, p. 166)

The profundity of birth is put into context in Ruitenberg’s (2016) simple yet powerful point that no one asks to be born into the world (p. 2); at the moment of birth each individual is bestowed with an infinite number of existential possibilities, and almost immediately our being, to various degrees, is either affirmed or denied, depending on any number of arbitrary preconditions. Nowhere is this more evident in the lives of young people than in the modern institutionalized school:

Our political life...takes place in the midst of processes which we call historical and which tend to become as automatic as natural or cosmic process, although they were started by men. The truth is that automatism is inherent in all processes, no matter what their origin may be -- which is why no single act, and no single event, can ever, once and for all, deliver and save man, or a nation, or mankind. It is in the nature of the automatic process to which man is subject, but within and against which he can assert himself through action, that they can only spell ruin to human life. Once man-made, historical processes have become automatic, they are no less ruinous than the natural life process that drives our organism and which in its own terms, that is, biologically, leads from being to nonbeing, from birth to death. (Arendt, 1961/2006b, p. 167)

The ethical responsibility of the teacher lies in her ability to become the intermediary between the automaticity of the institutional processes of schooling and the education of the individual. This job is not for the faint of heart. Nor is it for those who are interested in living any less than a fully human life, for those who choose to teach ethically in the context of the modern school
must be willing to embody both the past and the future, to know that doing what is right for our
students is sometimes guided less by reason than it is passion (Arendt, 1961/2006b, p. 158); that
education entails a certain amount of hope for the future of what might be, of the mystery of
human being and its infinite possibilities.

5.7. The Anxiety of Responding Ethically

“Tonya. I need you to wake up.”

I gently shake her bony shoulder attempting to wake my sleeping student. For the third day in a
row, Tonya is deeply asleep in class.

“Tonya! Wake up,” her best friend, Hazel, echoes my request, but with the teasing vigor only a
friend should deliver.

“What? I’m sleeping. Leave me alone.”

I crouch beside her semi-conscious body, “Hey Tonya, its Jen. You slept through the entire
lesson. Is everything oaky?”

Lifting her head, she looks at me with her sleep-filled eyes, “Hey. Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just tired.
Stayed up too late last night.”

Sitting up, she appears to be ready for class. I know she’s not, but I ignore it, taking a seat
beside her to re-teach the content from the last half hour. I like Tonya. She is a rebel with a
disdain for school that I admire. She is also a really cool kid who I like talking to. We have
developed a mutual respect for our respective roles and I am not upset at having to re-teach her;
as a student who needs a lot of one-on-one support I know that even if she was awake for the
lesson I’d still be sitting here with her now.

But Tonya has been sleeping like this for weeks, and it is something I can no longer ignore.
Despite our good relationship, she keeps telling me that she’s simply staying up too late. My
instincts tell me that there’s more to her story than she is letting on.

“Hey Hazel. I want to ask you a question about Tonya, but don’t feel you have to answer it. Why
is she sleeping all the time? What’s going on with her?”
“Tonya takes pretty heavy sleeping medication for her insomnia. She’s got major anxiety and doesn’t like to talk about it, even with me. She can’t sleep at night because of it. I mean she is also probably staying out too late, but the sleeping pills are the reason she sleeps in class all the time.”

“Thanks for telling me. Do you think she would be upset if she knew you told me? Would you be okay with me telling her I know? I need to figure something out for her. She can’t keep sleeping in class.”

“Nah”, Hazel waves her hand in the air, “Tonya thinks your chill. I don’t think she’ll care that I told you, but she also won’t want to talk about it very much.”

I’m grateful for Hazel’s insight, but I’m not sure what to do. Tonya’s not had an easy life either inside or outside of the school walls. Forcing her to wake up seems silly; she’s too tired to be awake and learn. As a human being responding to another human being, I want her to sleep, to take care of her health. As a teacher responsible for her education, I know if I let her sleep away my class she will have a difficult time passing the course. English is a subject she needs a lot of help with and I know there is no way she will do any work outside of class. I am caught between my responsibility to the humanity of this individual and my institutional obligation to ensure student learning.

“Hey Tonya, can we chat for a minute?”

“Yeah, Jen. What’s up?”

“So, Hazel told me about the sleeping pills…”

“Yeah, she told me.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, that’s fine. But, from now on when you’re tired come find me and I’ll set you up in the medical room. I don’t want you sleeping in class anymore. It looks bad to others, and it’s not a nice place to sleep.” Knowing there are no nice places in the school to sleep, but trying to make light of the situation, I playfully continue, “we’ll get you set up on the hard, tiny bed with no pillows in the medical room instead. That seems like a better option, right?”
By the end of that month, Tonya was sleeping for almost two hours every morning, and sometimes even longer. When she woke up, she’d wander down to my classroom and I would do my best to get her caught up with what she missed, often she would use the time in class to socialize with her friends rather than work on her school work. I used to secretly appreciate her lackadaisical attitude, but now it intensified the anxiety I felt about my decision. Was my heartfelt response to the humanity of this young teen the right choice? As much as I wanted to believe it was, I knew at some point I would have to confront the inevitable consequence of the modern school system: my choice to support her, to give her being a place in the world, would come at the cost of her success at school. Was I failing this student, and in doing so, was I also failing myself?

As the saying goes, “all good things must come to an end” and this was true of our arrangement. Other students needed to use the medical room and there was no denying that it had become Tonya’s de facto bedroom.

One of my colleagues eventually confronted me about the situation, “Jen, I went to let a student lie down in the medical room today and Tonya was in there sleeping.”

“Ah. She came in to the classroom today a bit grumpy and I was wondering why, but that probably explains it. Sorry about that. Definitely ask her to leave any time she is in there sleeping and you need to use it.”

“I know that you’re trying to help her” my colleague continued, “but the medical room isn’t for students to sleep because they stay up too late. Even if it were, we just don’t have the space. We need the medical room for medical issues. Maybe if Tonya is that tired she should stay home? I mean, school is a place for learning...”

With that I knew I had to figure out something else for Tonya. I understood my colleague’s concerns. It really was a tiny school with not enough space or resources to go around, but I also knew asking Tonya to stay home would mean that she would be at school less. No one would be able to drive her and as someone who didn’t like school in the first place, it was unlikely she would put in the extra work to get to school outside of the convenience of the school bus.

I told Tonya that we couldn’t use the medical room on a daily basis anymore. “It needs to be open for other students,” I explained. “I think, for now at least, if you’re that tired you should sleep at home and come in later in the day.”

But Tonya didn’t understand. She was frustrated with me for not sticking up for her, and with the school for a lot of things that her young self could not fully articulate, “Whatever, Jen. We both know if I miss the bus I just won’t come to school.”
“I do know that. I’m worried that you won’t pass your classes. You owe me a lot of stuff for English. What about your other classes?”

“I don’t care. I hate Mr. Smith and refuse to go to his class. Foods is okay though.”

“Okay so Math and English are not in good shape, but you’ll get your Foods credit? At least that’s something. If you’re open to it, I can give you smaller assignments to complete at home and I can talk to Mr. Smith about doing the same?”

“Nah, its fine. I won’t do them anyways. I don’t have a computer at home and I hate writing.”

“Tonya, what about graduating? Math and English are required courses.”

“Honestly, not really. I just want to get a job and make money. I’m not good at school and it’s not like I’m going to go to college or university.”

“I get it. You need to live your life. But also know that post-secondary is not like high school. If something happens and you don’t end up graduating, just know there are ways around that. That’s the one good thing about school, and learning – it’s always there when you’re ready for it.”

With that there was nothing left to say. I saw less and less of Tonya as the school year went on. When she was in school, she was inattentive and defiant. Her rebellious but good-hearted nature was replaced with a decided resentment for school and everyone connected to it. School was a place for learning, and only learning: a place for those who wanted to learn, who were “ready” to learn. Despite my best efforts to shield her from the harsh reality of the school environment, Tonya got the message loud and clear.

By the end of the semester, Tonya’s academics were in despair. She had handed in some small assignments and one or two short pieces of writing and that was it. There simply wasn’t enough completed for me to give her passing credit for English 11. Tonya never returned to our school. I heard she ended up in an outreach program that could better support the complex dynamics of her life. I’m not sure if she ever graduated. I did what I felt was right, but in so doing I precipitated her exit from the school. Perhaps, however, that was the right thing....
References


